

MACEO WOODS

The Vee Jay Years

by Opal Louis Nations

Gospel organist, preacher, singer, arranger Rev. Maceo Woods is probably the most overlooked key figure in the development of post-war gospel choral and instrumental organ music. Not only did his organ arrangements of standard spiritual charts influence the works of Jimmy Smith, Prof. Herman Stevens, and Billy Preston (the latter having served as the late Rev. James Cleveland's keyboardist at The First Baptist Church in Nutley, New Jersey in 1962 and 1963), as Chicago's Vee Jay Records' in-house organist he supported The Highway QC's (1955 and 1959), The Argo Singers (1956 and 1961), The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi (1956 through 1958), The Jesse Martin Singers (1957), The Harmonizing Four (1961, 1962, and 1964), and The Five Blind Boys of Alabama (1963.)

Orrin Keepnews hired Woods when he recorded The Staple Singers (for Riverside) and Rev. Cleophus Robinson Sr. (for the Battle subsidiary) in 1962. Woods formed an all male teenage quartet, some of whose members sang harmony in high soprano, a balance of sound never tried but often copied later on by the likes of The Gospel Clefs and Roger Roberts with The Cleveland Singers. Woods' unique organ style was made up of rich sustained chording, swelling timbres, and dramatic use of loud and soft passages. All of these qualities are best illustrated on the opening passages to "Let's have church," an open-studio session with the late, great Archie Brownlee and The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi.

Woods remembers Brownlee as possessing a measure of extra-sensory perception which would more than compensate for his absolute blindness. Woods was also responsible for a handful of "firsts" in gospel music. He was the first African American performer ever to enjoy a runaway best selling organ instrumental. Woods' tender funereal arrangement of "Amazing Grace" (an English hymn dating back to 1791) was released almost two years before Bill Doggett's "Honky Tonk" Parts 1 and 2.

Woods was the first to take a gospel package show (Gospel Supreme) into Chicago's Crown Theater and the first to organize a similar venue in the city's Civic Opera House (an extravaganza called Gospel at The Opera) in 1966. Woods has spent most of his life in Chicago. In fact, he was born in South Chicago's Morgan Park area near the military academy. Woods refuses to fess up to his actual birth date, but by following his history, we can surmise that it would be around 1935. Woods' parents had migrated north from Oxford, Mississippi. His father was an entrepreneur who built up a sizable wholesale trucking business. Woods grew up surrounded by seven surviving brothers and sisters. Others had died in childbirth. All attended The Morgan Park Mt. Calvary Baptist Church.

Woods' first introduction to the organ was at Lyon & Healey's Music Store in Chicago. Woods became one of the youngest choir masters ever in Chicago when he formed The Maceo Woods Male chorus, an aggregation of thirty male parishioners between the ages of twelve and eighteen. Out of this chorus, Woods hand-picked the original Maceo Woods Singers -- Norman Murchison, Donald Smith, Thomas Parker, Clarence Tate, Cleodorus Kimbrough, and Rev. Billy Kyles (the minister at Dr. Martin Luther King's side at the time he was assassinated by James Earl Ray in Memphis on April 4, 1968.)

Rev. Alex Bonds and his brothers also served time in the original Maceo Woods Singers. Woods was fourteen years of age at the time and by then had pretty well mastered the organ. Initial rehearsals took place at the Woods family home, but as things progressed, the location switched to the

church basement. Woods befriended Alex Bradford. At the time, Bradford was singing alongside the great Imogene Greene (who later built a formidable reputation for herself in The Caravans and Davis Sisters) in The Willie Webb Singers.

Bradford introduced The Maceo Woods Singers to Bess Berman of Apollo Records and even lent out his own pianist--Joe Washington--for the one and only session Woods cut a deal to wax for the label in October 1952. The result was the release of "Witness" backed with "He brought joy to my soul" in February 1953. "Witness" grew extremely popular through its performance at The National Baptist Convention and garnered a great deal of air play. One dee-jay much impressed by The Maceo Woods Singers was Vivian Carter, host of The Vivian Carter Gospel Show over WGRY in Gary, Indiana. Vivian Carter and Jimmy Bracken had been partners in a record store in Gary at 1155 East 47th Street. Bracken had started out as a parking attendant at the Harlem Inn. Both Vivian and Jimmy wanted to start up a record company and call it Vee Jay (after Vivian and Jimmy.)

By June 1953, the couple was holding auditions for recordings.

Having opened offices at 412 East 47th Street in Chicago, the Carters signed their first gospel act, The Maceo Woods Singers, utilizing the services of Dave Clark as liaison. The singers became the third artists to join the label, after Jimmy Reed and The Spaniels. Although Mahalia Jackson had said good things about Woods to Bess Berman at Apollo and had encouraged Woods to stay with the company, Woods felt it more important to build a reputation in his own home town among the people he knew and regarded to be his friends. Woods remembers signing the V.J. contract at the Record Store in Gary.

In October 1953, The Maceo Woods Singers cut their first session at Universal Studios on Ontario Street. Of the four songs later issued on two singles, the prayerful "Garden of Prayer," led by soloist Donald Smith, drew the most air time. "Garden of Prayer" later became the title of Woods fourth album collection on Vee Jay. A second

session was conducted at Universal in April 1954 from which James C. Moore's "Never grow old" was released. Joseph P. Webster's "Sweet by & by" graced the reverse side, but neither song caught much public notice.

By the summer of 1954, Vivian Carter had quit WGRY and was holding forth at WWCA where the flamboyant Al Benson's urban R & B programming was being syndicated. "I'll never forget how "Amazing Grace" came about," says Woods. "Vivian had just started her gospel program on WWCA and needed an appropriate signature tune. We were both down at the radio station one day. Vivian had finished her show and it was getting close to three in the morning. In a casual way, Vivian suggested I try come up with an organ instrumental to open her program. I fooled around with a few spiritual standards including "Amazing Grace." Unbeknownst to me, Vivian had passed word to the engineer to tape my impromptu session. Vivian took to my on-the-spot, ad-lib, once-through version of "Amazing Grace" and wanted to try it on her audience on her next program. That was it. The hymn clicked immediately. It was this rough, unpolished version of the hymn that got released in January 1955."

Vivian Carter never wanted to have the song done over with a little more finesse. She preferred spontaneity above all. Sales of "Amazing Grace" brought flurries of engagements involving extensive travel throughout the United States for The Maceo Woods Singers. For a brief time, the group recorded with Delores Washington of The Caravans. Woods was instrumental in introducing The Staple Singers to Vee Jay Records in October 1955. In 1956, tenor Archie Dennis joined the group. Two years later, through an initial introduction from Rev. Billy Kyles, Dennis was taken into the famous Roberta Martin Singers where he stayed until the group disbanded.

"I would do a lot of overnight sessions with other Vee Jay artists down at Universal Studio on Ontario Street," said Woods. "it was much cheaper to record at night, and we'd try to cram in as many acts as possible into one all-night session. On one of these overnight sessions we recorded Sid McCoy, actor and host of the nationally syndicated "Sunday Morning"



The Maceo Woods Singers circa 1954 (Maceo center-bottom row)
(Photo: Opal Louis Nations Collection)

gospel radio program sponsored by The Pet Milk Company." Pet Milk helped finance a session whereon Woods played organ accompaniment behind the recitation of four spiritually motivated poems. Woods' soft, delicate passages can be heard quite engagingly behind McCoy's sensual reflections. The four poems were only ever issued on a various gospel artists collection labeled appropriately enough "Sunday Morning" (Vee Jay 5016, 1961.)

In April 1957, The Maceo Woods Singers alongside The Staple Singers, Sam Evans and The Roberta Martin Singers played the chapel at The Cook County Jail. That same month, Woods turned to concert promotion and organized "The Spiritual Cavalcade of Stars," soliciting the services of The Gospel Harmonettes and The Davis Sisters to play alongside his own group. A year later, he m.c.ed a gospel concert at Chicago's Du Sable High. Both The Maceo Woods Singers and The Gospel Cleffs shared billing. The group played Harlem's famous Apollo Theater for the first of many engagements.

1959 was a year of much change and upheaval for Woods who had been recording steadily both with and without his singers throughout the Fifties. The Maceo Woods Singers, who had grown from teenagers into manhood while on the road with Woods, had by now all settled down and had taken to marriage and raising families.

Around this time, Vee Jay chose to issue gospel albums and kicked off their 5000 series with the first of five releases by Woods, the all instrumental "Amazing Grace" collection. A serious bout of gastritis had proven a traumatic experience for Woods. It was during his illness that he received the divine calling. After two years of preparation at The Universal Bible Institute, Woods was ordained by his pastor, the late Dr. A.C. Mitchell and Dr. A. Edward Davis. An outgrowth of organized bible study among Christian friends took place over the course of this time. Classes were first conducted at people's homes, but soon the doors of Rev. D.F. Paxton's True Light Baptist Church were opened to embrace the swelling congregation who would eventually become the founding flock of The Christian Tabernacle Baptist Church, now currently located at 47th and Prairie Streets.

In 1961, Woods organized The Christian Tabernacle Ensemble who included Melvin Smothers, Doris Sykes, the late Pearl McCombs, and Lawrence Esther. Woods played organ and the late Rev. James Cleveland occasionally sat in on piano. An album entitled "The Lord will make a way"

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Period Vee-Jay ad (Opal Louis Nations Collection)

Woods and The Christian Tabernacle Baptist Choir signed with Star Records in 1969 where they continued to record. A final collection of early Maceo Woods previously unissued Vee Jay sides surfaced on an album entitled "Seeking Salvation," a collection put out by Vee Jay International of Los Angeles in the mid 1980s.

Woods is today as active in gospel as he ever was and continues to conduct musical and administrative affairs at The Christian Tabernacle Church in Chicago. It is a shame that without a long overdue reissue of his excellent early Vee Jay sides, even the Miller-Freeman All-Music Guide fails to give the artist a cursory mention. Some day, somewhere, you can be sure someone will rediscover Maceo Woods, and the magic of his music will enrich our lives once again.

(LP-sleeves: Robert Sacré Collection)

