CD 1

FRENCH VOGUE LP 28007

1 GIVE ME THAT OLD TIME RELIGION (Jackson)
2 HE'S SWEET I KNOW (Jackson)
3 HOLD ME (Jackson)
4 I ASKED THE LORD (Duncan)
5 LEANING ON THE EVERLASTING ARM (Jackson)
6 ONLY BELIEVE (Jackson)
7 SOMEBODY BIGGER THAN YOU (Jackson)
8 SOMEBODY TOUCHED ME (Reedy)
9 TELL IT SING IT SHOUT IT (Jackson)
10 THE ONLY HOPE WE HAVE (Jackson)
11 THERE IS POWER IN THE BLOOD (Jackson)
12 TO ME ITS SO WONDERFUL (Jackson)

FRENCH VOGUE LP 28008

13 HALLELUJAH TIS DONE (Cleveland)
14 HE KNOWS HOW MUCH WE CAN BEAR (May)
15 HIGHWAY UP TO HEAVEN (Jackson)
16 I TRUST IN GOD (Grace-Smith)
17 I'LL NEVER TURN BACK NO MORE (Clark)
18 IT'S MY DESIRE (Jones)

CD 2

FRENCH VOGUE LP 28008

1 LORD SEARCH MY HEART (Knight)
2 MY LORD (Jackson)
3 NEVER LOOK DOWN (Jackson)
4 THANK YOU JESUS (Jackson)
5 WHERE HE LEADS ME (Jackson)
6 YOU CAN'T HURRY GOD (Cox)

FRENCH VOGUE LP 28042

7 BLESSED QUIETNESS (Jackson)
8 GOD BE WITH YOU (Jackson)
9 GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU (Jackson)
10 HAVE THINE OWN WAY LORD (Jackson)
11 I AM HEALED BY THE WOUND IN HIS SIDE (Jackson)
12 I SEE GOD (Jackson)
13 I SURRENDER ALL (Jackson)
14 JUST TELL JESUS (Jackson)
15 LORD DON'T MOVE THE MOUNTAIN (Jackson)
16 STEAL AWAY (Jackson)
17 THERE IS A FOUNTAIN (Jackson)
18 THROW OUT THE LIFELINE (Jackson)

Mahalia Jackson

The Forgotten Recordings

It is always a challenge for me to write briefly and succinctly about a woman who was not only considered the queen of black gospel music but possibly the most widely admired and broadly accepted African American church singer in the history of the genre. One can start with brief quotes by those who had either known or had written in some depth about her. Michael Singh, writer for Jeff Scheftel's fine film documentary biographical study, "The Power and The Glory" (1997) says "one is taken to a sacred place by the sheer power of her voice", by the rapturous, transcendent nature of the experience. Prof. Clarence Boyer in his book "How Sweet The Sound" (Elliott & Clark, 1995) describes Mahalia's vocal techniques as "scooping" - no movement exists from one note to the next. Instead she often connects each note to the other by sliding through all the notes of the melody.

Clara Ward describes her lifelong friend as beautiful and able to roll her belly in a way few could move to the spirit of the music. Tony Heilbut in his book "The Gospel Sound" (Limelight Editions, 1971) describes Mahalia as the vocal, physical and spiritual symbol of Post-War gospel music, with her large, noble proportions, her contorted face in song resembling a mad duchess, her soft speaking voice, and her huge, rich contralto making her a gospel superstar. Yet, despite Mahalia's all-inspiring, magical power and grace, she came - as Laurraine Goreau describes in her book "Just Mahalia, Baby" (Pelican Publishing, 1984) -- from a place in New Orleans six feet below sea level where the hungry fingers of the Mississippi reached for land. From humble, poor folk

Mahalia (nicknamed Mahala or Halie) was born October 26, 1911 on Water Street in a cottage along the levee batture to Charity Clark, a maid, and Johnny Jackson Jnr., a longshoreman.

Charity and Johnny were joined in common-law marriage. Mahala was the only child. She grew up in a tightly knit family of devout, God-fearing Baptists. Charity had six sisters. Thirteen souls in all shared three rooms and a kitchen. On Sundays the family attended Plymouth Rock Baptist in New Orleans where they sang lining and standard Protestant hymns and Negro spirituals. None of the family elders took any interest in joining the choir. Mahala's vocal ability developed rapidly. By the age of four Mahala was out in front of the children's choir singing loudly and clearly William B. Bradbury's "Jesus loves me."

By the age of twelve she had graduated to featured soloist with the Mount Moriah Missionary Baptist Church in Pinching Town. The family had moved to Pinching Town after Charity's death in 1918. Aunt "Duke" took over the "raising." On her way through the neighbourhood, Mahala often passed sanctified churches from which loud singing and rhythmic stomping issued on weeknights. Mahala found the music (which dated back to the early days of slavery) strong, infectious and expressive, often bringing tears to her eyes. Unaware of this sanctified influence, Mahala continued to sing with spirit-grabbing abandon. As Mahala's voice changed from soprano to contralto she listened to records on the family Victrola of the old blues singers. She enjoyed such performers as Mamie and Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey.

From them she borrowed timbres and resonances to add to her own means of expression. She took the moaning, "worrying" and note-bending from the Baptist tradition. A recognizable gospel music singing style had not yet made its way to New Orleans. Although a solo technique had not emerged, Mahala heard and was influenced by early quartets like The Norfolk Jubilees. From the early 1920s on, certain members of Mahala's family had moved north for a better life in Chicago where well-paid work and a better living could be found. Aunt Hannah had moved to Chicago in 1922. At the close of a family visit back home at Thanksgiving in 1927, Aunt Hannah took the enthralled Mahala back with her by train to Chicago. Hannah lived at 3256 Prairie Street.

On her first Sunday in Chicago Hannah took Mahala to her Baptist church, a large, formal and dignified place. Being moved by the spirit and unable to control the temptation, Mahala leapt from her pew in the congregation and sang an unsolicited solo. Although Mahala sang with great warmth and sincerity, the church members disapproved of her performance. Mahala repeatedly tried to sing in public but was met with disdain. In 1929 she joined the Greater Salem Baptist, a more progressive church.

She moved to Smoky Town, rented a room, worked as a housekeeper by day and attended school at night. At Salem Baptist she joined the Johnson Brothers singing and acting group. Robert, Prince and Wilbur Johnson plus Louise Barry Lemon were pleased to find a second female actress lead, and Mahala gladly accepted her roles. Mahala and the Johnson Brothers Quartet with Prince on piano rehearsed at Aunt Hannah's.

The Johnson Brothers were managed by the pastor at Salem Baptist, who was also their father. The Johnson Brothers were the first organized gospel quartet in Chicago. With the Johnsons Mahala (who now called herself Mahalia) learned how to ornament her phrasing and, like a jazz singer, freely confuse her timing. But Mahalia knew that it was her solo work that moved her spirit most and soon quit the quartet.

A year earlier, Thomas A. Dorsey, who had recently turned his back on blues singing as "Georgia Tom" to devote himself fully to the composition of what he called "gospel songs," caught Mahalia singing solo at the Pilgrim Baptist Church. Mahalia and Thomas A. Dorsey were a musical match made in heaven--Mahalia for her devotion and adoption of certain shading of blues singing and Dorsey for incorporating blues signatures into his gospel compositions. Dorsey attempted to secure Mahalia's singing talents for the purpose of demonstrating his songs.

The lithesome Mahalia sang Dorsey's songs aggressively but formally with improvisationary restraint and was taught professional discipline. Mahalia took Dorsey's ten-cent sheet music and sang his songs out on the street. Dorsey also, through voice coach Mrs. Dennis, had his songs demonstrated all over the Mid-West by The Sallie Martin Singers, composed of Sallie, Bertha Armstrong, Dettie Gay and Mattie Wilson.

In 1930 Mahalia helped form Dorsey's first gospel chorus at The Pilgrim Baptist and a year later sang send-offs at a funeral home, earning two dollars a corpse. The Depression brought tough times. Realizing she would broaden her chance of finding singing jobs if she took formal voice training and music reading classes, she studied under Prof. Kendricks. But this did not last long as Kendricks accused Mahalia of "hollering" too much. The strong-willed Mahalia would not have anyone tell her how to sing any other way.

But she did find firm support from an influential church deacon by the name of Frank J. Hawkins whose daytime profession was dentistry. Hawkins had sung Mahalia's praises to M. Mayo "Ink" Williams, A & R director for Decca's Race Records Division. With Estelle Allen, Mahalia's pianist for the last two years, Decca recorded four songs, the strongest of which was Lillian Bowles' "God's goin' to separate the wheat from the tare," sung in the style of the great Bessie Smith. But the record, except for heavy play in the South, sold little.

A second release, Antonio Hashell's "God shall wipe all tears away," drew scant attention and Decca dropped Mahalia. She then realized that in order to sustain a national career, she must travel throughout the country to bring her music to all those who would go out and listen. This she accomplished by setting out on annual tours of the South and North East, appearing on tent shows with her constant companion, Brother John Sellers, and others. In addition, she appeared every year at the National Baptist Convention founded by Dorsey and Theodore R. Frye, an organization set up to train and direct voices and musicians for the Baptist Church.

Mahalia had a talent for entrepreneurial ventures that she used to supplement her income. She enrolled in Madame C.J. Walker's reputable beauty school where she took a diploma on cosmetics. Armed with this and her husband's mother's secret beauty formulas, she set up shop at Mrs. Thorne's apartment at 3305 South Michigan and transformed the kitchenette into a skin cream manufacturing shop. Mahalia had little bags made up inside which her skin creams, oils and powders would be packed when she canvassed the South side from door to door. She also opened a beauty shop. Mahalia continued to travel with Dorsey and appear on the revival tent circuit.

In 1942 Mahalia bought the adjacent apartment building to hers on Prairie and rented out most of it to pay off the mortgage. Gospel diva Ernestine Washington, Mahalia's closest rival, brought her to New Jersey to sing in 1943. This was the first time Mahalia had travelled east. That same year she was blackballed by the Baptist Church for supposedly performing in a nightclub with her friend Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Of course, Mahalia did not play nightclubs. She was unfortunate enough to have had her photo taken alongside Rosetta outside a restaurant where they had eaten, next door to the "sinful" Rum Boogie Club where only Rosetta had performed. Being denied engagements at local Baptist venues only multiplied the number of weeks she had to be away on revival.

In late 1945, after having given a devastating concert with Rev. James Cleveland in Detroit, she was approached by Johnny Meyers, the most famous promoter of black gospel music at the time. Meyers was from New York and was putting together programs for the Golden Gate auditorium, a gospel Mecca. Meyers offered Mahalia a thousand dollars cash to play one concert in the early fall of 1946. Mahalia was overwhelmed with joy. Meyers was so impressed with Mahalia's performance that he called Bess Berman at Apollo Records on New York's Tenth Avenue after the show. Mahalia had heard about the tough, enterprising Bess Berman who headed up one of New York's most impressive independent gospel and R & B labels.

Through Clara Hudman ("The Georgia Peach") and The Dixie Hummingbirds who were already recording for Berman, Mahalia had been warned about Berman's shoddy business practices and the lack of royalty payments. Mahalia and Bess, two strong-willed women, fought over the terms of a recording contract and in the end, after coming to some sort of an agreement, a four-song session was set up for October 3rd, 1946.

Out of the mix came the perky "I want to rest," a Kenneth Morris chart, a rather well-mannered but blues-colored reading of Dorsey's (I'm going to) "wait until my change comes," "He knows my heart" plus a high-spirited and certainly soul-inspiring version of Rosalie McKenny's "I'm going to tell God." All four songs were accompanied by Mildred Carter Falls on piano. Mildred had been strongly recommended to Mahalia by Rev. James Lee, a preacher pianist Mahalia had known from the pre-Chicago days. Mildred suited Mahalia perfectly. She never argued or made demands, she would simply do what she was told.

The release of "I'm gonna tell God" did not draw people into the record stores when it was released in November 1946. Unfortunately, this was also the case with "I want to rest" when it hit the streets the following June. Disappointed with less than encouraging sales, Bess Berman chose not to release new titles.

It is my contention that over the summer of 1947, Mahalia, alongside Mildred or Rosalie McKenny on piano and Blind J. Herbert Francis on organ, recorded the sides you now hold in your hands. Why these excellent recordings were never issued anywhere until after Mahalia's demise when they appeared in France on a popular French label, is beyond my comprehension. A second theory holds that Mahalia recorded this material during her first trip to Paris in 1952.

To sweeten the sound, guitar and drums were added by someone to many of the tracks at a later date. Rosalie was Mahalia's touring pianist after the War. "Blind" Francis had played for Bishop A.A. Childs who Mahalia remembers from the old Johnson Brothers days when Francis and Childs pitched tent shows close to the Pilgrim Baptist Church.

Reissued here for the first time are priceless interpretations of the lyrical "Hold me," a well-tempered but majestically conveyed "Only

believe," the exquisite reading of "Somebody bigger than you and I" (which Mahalia re-recorded in 1954), a sanctified "Somebody touched me," the liltingly beautiful "The only hope we have," a full-throated "He knows how much we can bear," the gloriously belted "I'll never turn back no more," the moaning enthrallment of "It's my desire" and a truly tear-stained reading of "Lord don't move the mountain."

The third French album release seems to be made up of many heart-aching, slow gospels, the kind Mahalia threw herself into so completely. Note that by this time all aspects of Mahalia's vocal style had fallen into place. Little did she know that all the years she had hitherto spent in the "wilderness" were about to pay off.

"I'm going to tell God" had caught the ear of noted author/ commentator J. Louis "Studs" Terkel. Studs, before going into T.V. and becoming a noted storyteller in 1949, hosted a radio show over WENR called "The Wax Museum." Studs was bowled over by the honest purity of Mahalia's pipes. Studs tracked her down and had her guest on his program. Mahalia's appearance created favourable publicity, and Bess Berman was persuaded to give her another chance. On September 12, 1947,under producer Art Freeman's guidance, Mahalia recorded perhaps her best remembered and certainly most widely acclaimed Apollo recording, "Move on up a little higher," a Theodore Frye composition.

"Move on up a little higher" established Mahalia as a major gospel singing talent. She recorded for Bess Berman into 1953, all the while resenting that she could have achieved even greater acclaim had she signed with a larger and more resourceful record company. Her chance came in late 1954 when she signed a fair and lengthy contract with Mitch Miller at Columbia through advice given by John Hammond and her lawyer, Robert Ming. Radio, T.V., film, civil rights activity, and global concertizing followed, coupled with a never-ending interest in retail enterprises like a chicken franchise she entered into called "The Mahalia Jackson Chicken System."

On January 27, 1972 Mahalia Jackson died of heart seizure. She had burned herself out at the age of sixty. Ten thousand mourners attended a memorial at Arie Crown Theatre on Lakeshore Drive in Chicago. Her body was flown from O'Hare Airport to New Orleans where she was laid to rest at the Providence Memorial park Cemetery in Metaire. A Mardi-Gras funeral band played Dixieland songs in a joyous farewell to a great lady.

-- Opal Louis Nations May 2004

Principal Sources:
1. Just Mahalia, Baby - Laurraine Goreau - Pelican Publishing (1975)
2. Got To Tell It - Jules Schwerin - Oxford University Press (1992)
3. Liner notes to "How I Got Over," a 3-CD box set of Mahalia Jackson's Apollo Recordings - West Side Records WESX 303 (1998)