Disc One

MAHALIA JACKSON

How I Got Over

THE APOLLO SESSIONS
1946-1954

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How does one begin to write an essay about a woman considered The Queen of Gospel Singers, who inspired and indeed guided legions of aspiring songsters from all parts of the world down through the years and in partnership with the father of gospel music, Thomas A. Dorsey, helped create a whole new musical genre, an expression referred to day as "Black Gospel"? Surely a daunting task. In her day, only Mdm. Ernestine Washington and Bessie Griffin matched Jackson's vocal dynamics.

In Great Britain, music critics at one time seemed baffled over how to compartmentalize her. Consequently, she was labeled a "jazz singer," a tag that did not sit too well among the British jazz community. Her first trip to England came during her immense success in the U.S. with Lucie Campbell's "In the upper room" (Parts 1 & 2) in November 1952. The visit did not go as well as expected. Brian Nicholls, critic for "Jazz News," in his article about Mahalia Jackson stated that she arrived in London to appear at The Royal Albert Hall (a venue she insisted upon) after battling with influenza that almost stopped her European tour in Paris.

Her two-year old recording of "Silent Night, Holy Night" had reached popular recognition on the Continent. The Paris concerts were sell-outs. Because of poor promotion, her Albert Hall performance was only moderately attended. At billings in Cambridge, Oxford, Hanley, and Cheltenham, rows of empty seats marched almost to the platform. Unsympathetic presentation was blamed. The inclusion of a jazz band opener at the Albert Hall and shared concerts with Big Bill Broonzy at three other locations did not help matters. The December issue of Billboard stated that Jackson collapsed in London and was rushed to Billings Hospital in Chicago.

In 1952, Jackson lacked name recognition in Great Britain. This was partly due to the fact that she was recording for Apollo Records who licensed to Vogue Records, a small, specialized label, sold mainly at eclectic record outlets. Vogue could not afford the nationwide promotion Jackson so rightly deserved. But in 1952 her days with Apollo Records were coming to an end. Jules Schwerin in his book "Got to tell it - Mahalia Jackson Queen of Gospel" (Oxford University Press, 1992) states that in early 1952, John Hammond, on behalf of Mitch Miller and Columbia Records, made Jackson an offer and a five-year contract. Bess Berman at Apollo guaranteed her a yearly sum of $10,000, but Hammond offered at least $25,000.

The trust between Jackson and Berman no longer existed at this point. Jackson charged that Berman short-changed her royalty payments. She demanded that her accountant go over the books. Berman threatened court action, and Jackson backed down. Suspicion and mistrust shrouded the final two years of Jackson's Apollo tenure.

Things changed in Great Britain when Jackson signed with Columbia in late 1954. Mahalia's Columbia albums were being made easily available in England through the considerable might of Philips Records. As a teenager, yours truly picked up all the small ensemble records I could find (but the Percy Faith Orchestra and Chorus sides left me cold.) After catching Jackson's breathtaking appearance in Bert Stern's 1960 movie "Jazz on a Summer's Day," I longed for the time when Jackson would once again venture to British shores.

The momentous event finally came about when Norman Granz brought Jackson back to The Royal Albert Hall on Friday April 7, 1961. Rushing to Brighton railway station after my day job to catch a train to Victoria, I just made it by the skin of my teeth for the start of the 7:30 p.m. performance. Jackson, backed by her long-time sidekick Mildred Falls at the piano, kept the close-to-capacity crowd spellbound with the sheer majesty of her magnificent contralto. Poised, a meter behind her microphone stand, Jackson fired her big, fat, well-rounded notes so that they spun around the inner walls of The Albert Hall rotunda like atoms in a cyclotron. Standing like a mountain, four-square, eyes glazed, hands clasped over her abdomen, Jackson electrified the place with soul, grace and compassion.

Mahalia Jackson came from a city renowned for its great gospel singers. Artists such as the late, great Bessie Griffin, The Humming Four, Zion Harmonizers and Alberta Johnson hailed from the Crescent City. Mahalia was born in 1912 in a "shotgun shack" between Water and Audubon Streets near the old railroad tracks. Although the third of six offspring, she was the only child born to

Chicago, November 19, 1952

CAUGHT AT CARNEGIE during her sensationally successful appearance there, Mahalia Jackson chats backstage with author-poet Langston Hughes.

Gospel Singers' Progress— From Churches To Carnegie

By JOHN HAMMOND

The kind of singing that was once confined to the storefront church in Negro ghettos has now become an established institution at Carnegie Hall.

On Columbus Day a group of gospel singers headed by Mahalia Jackson packed that auditorium to overflowing. The artists were all virtually unknown to Broadway or conservative church members of all races; yet more than 3000 people paid up to $4.80 a ticket to hear music that has always been scorned in respectable circles.

It took a very great artist to bring this music to the general public, and Mahalia Jackson is her name. Her power stems from a profound religious conviction, overwhelming rhythmic vitality, and a voice capable of projecting every emotion. If the vocal chords can withstand the tremendous strain to which they are subjected, Mahalia will be the most successful folk singer of our time.

Great Showmanship

A very bad cold forced Miss Jackson to limit herself to but four numbers. Her showmanship, and an explanatory speech from promoter Joe Bostic, averted disaster, for her voice was in wretched condition. But the audience responded as if she were in top form.

Among the eight supporting groups were several deserving of stellar billing. The Ward Singers of Philadelphia, with Clara Ward, whose Savoy and Gotham records vie with Mahalia's in popularity, were tremendously effective in *Need Thee Every Hour* and *Come In The Room*. A 16-voice choir from Bellville, Virginia, sang a *capella* with perfect intonation, discipline, and verve. The Davis Singers, five very show-wise girls from Philadelphia, sang with an abandon unusual even in the gospel field.

Individual Star

But the individual star of the evening was Norsalus McKissick, a young man featured with the Gospelaires. His baritone has a vibrato that would put Eckstine's to shame, and he has the same overpowering effect on a feminine audience. He was the one literal show-stopper of the evening, and could have a tremendous career as a popular singer if he chose to switch.

On October 17, Miss Jackson left for a three-month tour of Europe. Her first concerts will be in Denmark, where her record of *Silent Night* is the biggest-selling disc of the year. Just as improvised jazz first attained critical approval away from these shores, gospel singing is traveling the same route.

Charity Clark in a tryst with Johnny Jackson Jr. Christened Mahala, she spent her infant years in a tightly knit family of devout Baptists. The Plymouth Rock was the family church. According to the words of Jackson's biographer Laurraine Goreau in his book "Just Mahalia Baby" (Pelican Books, 1975), "at four, with a voice twice as big as she was, Halie ranged before the Plymouth Rock pulpit in its children's choir singing low and clear - "Jesus loves me"."

Jackson's mother died when she was five, and Aunt Duke, a stern-minded woman, took care of raising her. According to Prof. Horace Clarence Boyer in his book "How Sweet The Sound" (Elliott & Clark, 1995), by twelve she was a member of the junior choir at the Mount Moriah Baptist Church whose members regularly requested her to sing "Hand me down my silver trumpet, Gabriel." Growing up poor on the banks of the levee, Jackson absorbed the sounds around her. Her voice changed from soprano to contralto as she spent hours listening to Ma Rainey, Mamie and Bessie Smith, the latter introduced by a young cousin named Fred. Anthony Heilbut asserts in his book "The Gospel Sound" (Limelight Editions, 1985) that Jackson idolized Bessie Smith, whose open-voiced belting and chilling blue notes she incorporated in her own style. This is certainly made manifest on the four songs from her one and only Decca session of May 21, 1937.

Jackson learned the horrors of slavery from her mother's older brother, Uncle Porter, himself a slave who instilled in her a spirit of

mistrust. This inspired in her a shrewdness which carried over into her many business enterprises over the years. Later in her professional capacity, writes Jules Schwerin, whenever she sang for money she demanded her fee or a share of the "take" even before the close of the concert. Aunt Duke made sure her charge was installed as secretary for many social clubs, as she thought it of great importance to know everybody's business. The music of the sanctified church brought solace to Jackson's soul. In the fall of 1927, Aunt Hannah, who lived on Chicago's South Side, made her annual pilgrimage to the Duke residence. Hannah invited Jackson up to Chicago to live with her for awhile. Jackson was more than ready to go.

Life on Chicago's South Side differed little from back home. Jackson found herself working "wash jobs" at laundries and doing for rich, white folks on the North Side. She dreamed of becoming a nurse. Her aunts took her to the Greater Salem Baptist Church where she joined the choir. Jackson, like everyone else, suffered during the Great Depression and often thought of moving back to New Orleans where she felt folks were better off, being able to fish streams and plant turnip greens.

The son of the pastor at the Greater Salem Baptist, Robert Johnson, had formed a little singing group called The Johnson Gospel Singers. The Johnsons were composed of Robert, his brothers Prince and Wilbur, plus a young soprano

Mahalia Shows Profs Her 'Bounce'

(Photo by Clemens Kalischer)

New York—Mahalia Jackson, whose gospel singing stimulates religious enthusiasm in churches all over the country, has long been a favorite of jazz fanciers and musicologists. With a voice in the shoutin' tradition, Mahalia says shyly that "All I do is to add a little bounce." Here she does it for some friends, including four professors, at a recent jazz roundtable in Lenox, Mass. The man closest to Mahalia is unidentified, but the others, left to right, are John Mehegan of Juilliard; Richard Waterman of Northwestern; Marshall Stearns of Hunter; jazz writer John Hammond, and Willis James of Spelman college.

by the name of Louise Barry Lemon. Jackson was invited to join the outfit. Although other small aggregations formed from church choirs had recorded during the 1920s, The Johnsons may have been the first professional gospel group, although they never touted themselves as a gospel group. But at least they were the first to double as a theatrical assemblage.

Schwerin asserts that The Johnson Singers sang in neighborhood churches for as little as $1.50 a night. The group's theatrical bent demonstrated itself in a series of plays, "Hellbound," "From Earth to Glory," and "The Fatal Wedding," penned by Robert Johnson and performed by Jackson and himself in leading roles. Musically their style was loose and easy. Prince Johnson played a pretty forceful boogie-woogie piano. The outfit wound up touring churches in downstate Indiana earning $8.00 a night before splitting up, with each member bent on solo careers.

Jackson took only one music lesson during her entire career. This was at a South

Side music school run by Prof. Du Bois who reprimanded Jackson for sounding loud and undignified. Accused of "hollering," Jackson never went back. She travelled up to New York with a trio, giving church concerts for a nickel admission plus a free meal in the minister's kitchen. She worked factory jobs off and on. She tried to avoid this kind of hard, menial labor whenever she could but she did work as a chamber maid in hotels or rooming houses for $12.00 a week. Then she would go off church singing the gospel on weekends.

In 1936, Jackson married Isaac Hackenhull, a graduate of Fisk and Tuskegee. Reduced by The Depression, Hackenhull worked as a bookie. Hackenhull wanted Jackson trained by Mdm. Anita Patty Brown, a celebrated voice coach, to sing jazz and serious music, to go where the money was. Jackson would have none of it and even less of Hackenhull. They divorced soon thereafter.

Jackson was blessed with a gift for understanding mathematics. Having picked up a cosmetics formula from her ex-husband's mother and undergoing special training at the Scott Institute of Beauty Culture, she opened her own salon, Mahalia's Beauty Salon. Her self-styled potions and beauty creams were marketed under the name "Madam Walker." Her entrepreneurial skills did not stop there. She dabbled in hair dressing and a few years later started a small florist shop. All this activity lifted her from revival-tent shows and shambling storefront churches into the more lucrative realm of major ballrooms and New York's Golden Gate Auditorium.

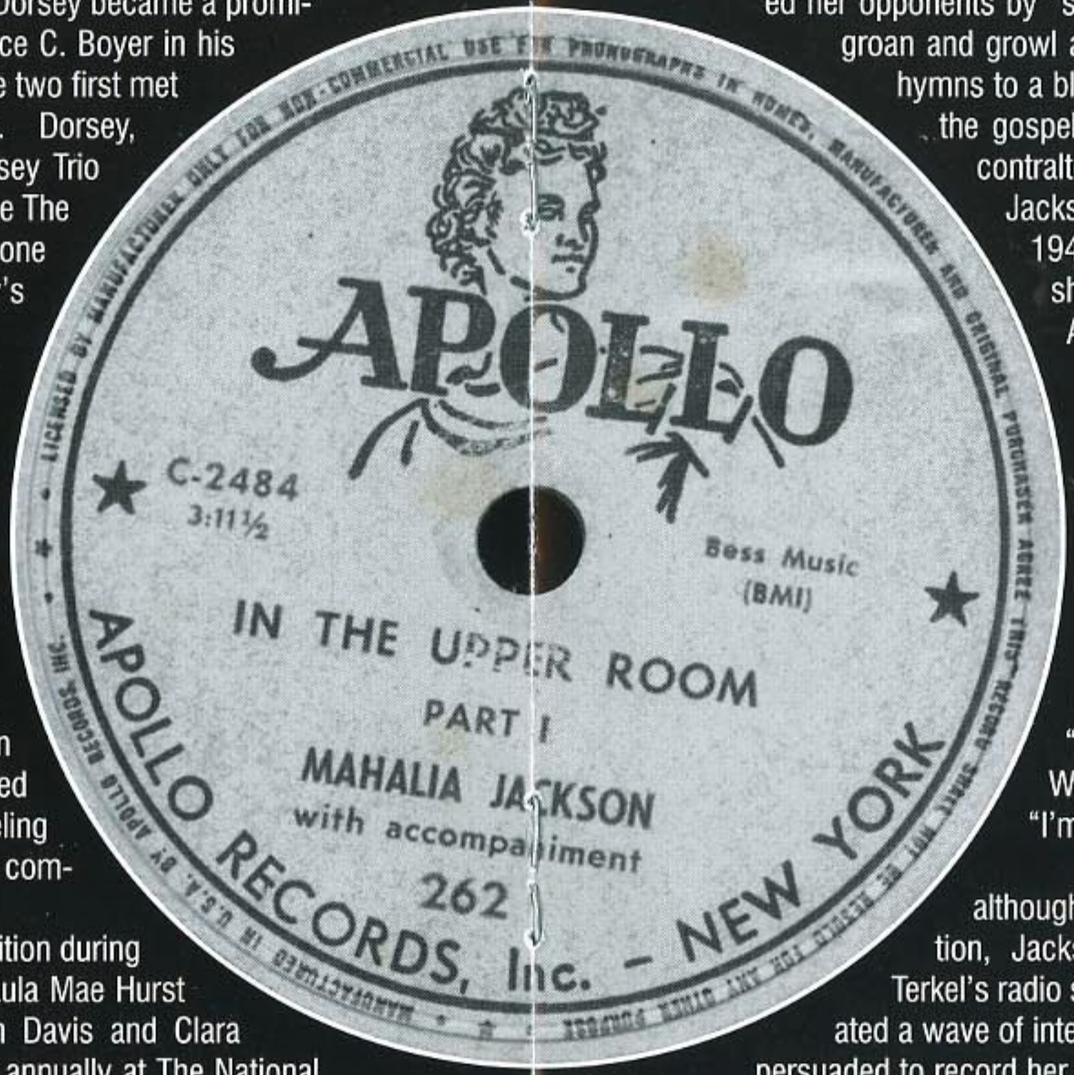
In early 1937, just before closing operations in Chicago, J. Mayo "Ink" Williams of Decca Records asked Jackson to cut a four-song session for his 7000 race series. The going rate for black artists at that time was approximately $10.00 a song. The 7000 series included such odd and notable gospel luminaries as Smith's Burning Bush Sunday School Pupils and The Spartanburg Famous Four. Jackson's four selections were "God's gonna separate the wheat from the tares" sung in labored nuances reminiscent of Bessie Smith, the beautiful Baptist hymn "Keep me every day," the perky "Oh, my Lord" and Prof. Antonio Haskells' sanctified "God shall wash all tears away." Anthony Heilbut claims that "God's gonna separate the wheat from the tares" was a hit in the Southlands. Despite pleas from

Williams, Jackson never waxed for Decca again.

It was about this time that Prof. Thomas A. Dorsey became a prominent figure in Jackson's life. According to Prof. Horace C. Boyer in his article on Dorsey entitled "Father of Gospel Music," the two first met in 1929, shortly after Jackson's arrival in Chicago. Dorsey, inspired by The Johnson Singers, organized The Dorsey Trio and took the group on the road. Large choral outfits like The Fisk Jubilee Singers were touring at the time, but none called themselves "gospel singers" except Dorsey's group.

Around 1935, Dorsey began a significant association with Jackson. In 1937, Dorsey wrote "Peace in the valley" for Jackson, but for reasons unknown she never sung the song. In Alfred Duckett's interview with Dorsey for Black World Magazine (July, 1974), Dorsey described Jackson as "a self-made person with an unusual voice, and even more unusual was the way she handled it. She could throw her voice where she wanted, any way she wanted - at will. There were lots of ups and downs in Mahalia's life. Although we had trials when we traveled together (in the early 1940s), we also did a lot of traveling in style." All the while Dorsey coached, mentored, composed and played piano accompaniment.

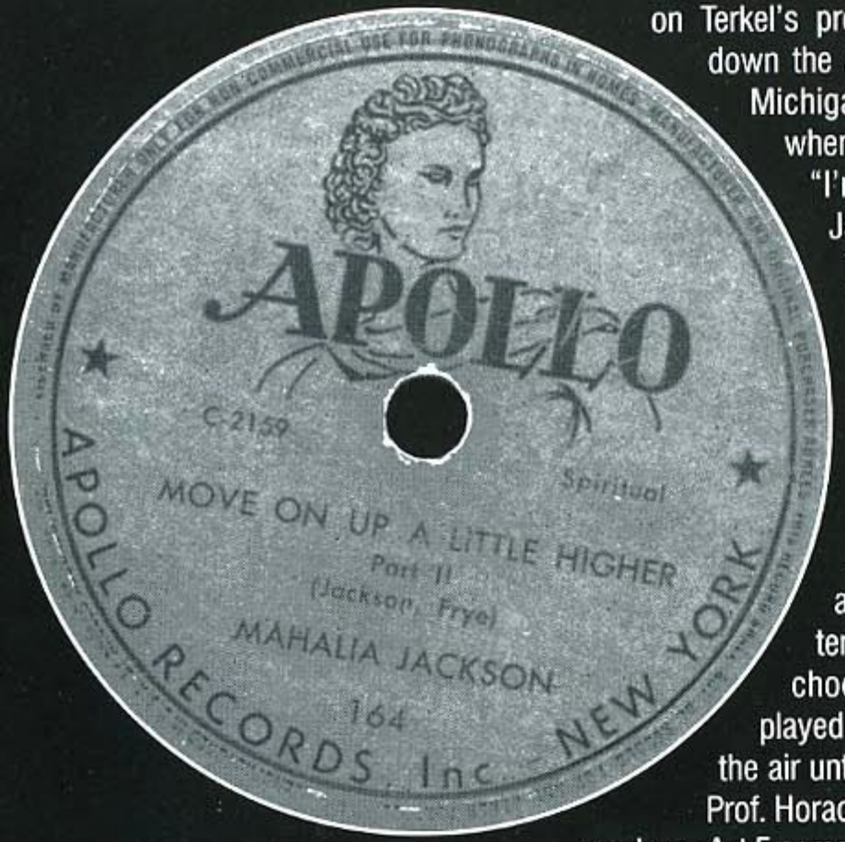
Jackson encountered a lot of strong competition during the late 1930s or early 1940s. Concert artist Mdm Lula Mae Hurst was a formidable challenge, as was Mary Johnson Davis and Clara Gholston Brock. Jackson continued to tour and sang annually at The National



Baptist Convention. In the words of gospel singer Robert Anderson, Jackson confounded her opponents by "stretching out," changing melody and meter at whim, groan and growl and strut like a sanctified preacher. She sang Watts hymns to a blues-colored refrain. By 1945, with Dorsey's help, all the gospel churches knew Jackson for her glorious, vigorous contralto, flirtatious manner and fiery spirit. The Dorsey-Jackson partnership lasted fourteen years. In the fall of 1946, Jackson and her pianist Rosalie McKenny signed a short-term recording contract with Bess Berman of Apollo Records at 457 West 45th Street in New York.

Apollo Records was founded in 1943 by Sam Schneider, Ike and Bess Berman and Hy Siegal. Their first place of business was The Rainbow Music Shop in Harlem. At first the company specialized in race and jazz material but later expanded its operation to include international and popular music. The Bermans took control of the company in 1948. On October 3, 1946, Jackson and McKenny recorded four folk-colored songs: "I want to rest," "He knows my heart," the dual tempoed "(I'm goin' to) Wait until my charge comes" and the soulfully moaned "I'm going to tell God."

Prof. Horace Clarence Boyer points out that although these recordings did not garner much public attention, Jackson's interview on author/actor J. Louis "Studs" Terkel's radio show "The Wax Museum" over WENR in Chicago created a wave of interest and, because of this publicity, Bess Berman was persuaded to record her again. Schwerin describes how Jackson came to be



on Terkel's program. He was dawdling down the aisles of a record store on Michigan Blvd. one lunch hour when he heard Mahalia singing "I'm going to tell God." Jackson was unknown to Terkel, but her mournfully labored voice floored him. He did a bit of detective work and eventually, through various ministers, was able to track her down. Terkel offered Jackson the opportunity to appear on his show and, better still, gave her the right to choose her material. Terkel played "I'm going to tell God" over the air until the grooves wore thin.

Prof. Horace Clarence Boyer writes that producer Art Freeman was dispatched to contact Jackson. Schwerin writes that back in the 1930s, Rev. Herbert Brewster in Memphis wrote a gospel song called "Move on up a little higher." Freeman was played Herbert Brewster's arrangement of Queen Candice Anderson's version of the song and hit upon the idea of having Jackson record a six- or seven-minute cover in two parts on one 78 rpm record. With Herbert James "Blind" Francis on organ and James Lee on piano, Jackson cut "Move on up a little higher" (Parts 1 & 2) on September 12, 1947. The record became the first of six hits for Jackson on Apollo Records. Both sides of the follow-up release from the same session,

"What could I do" and "Ever me," also sold in large quantities. A fifth song, "I have a friend," did not fare so well.

"Move on up a little higher, Parts 1 & 2," released during the 1947 Christmas season, demonstrated for the first time on wax not only the depth and breadth of Jackson's mighty voice but also her clever use of subtle, almost meditative nuances. The record broke new territory and placed Jackson squarely on the path to global recognition. the irony is that both Jackson and Anderson had appeared on a gospel program together before Jackson's sessions date. Only Brother Joe May's currently available live Specialty recording, cut in 1952, comes anywhere close to the atmosphere created on the Jackson version. "What could I do" is sung in a tough and convincingly inspired manner. A softer, more prayerful approach is given to Jackson's rendition of Roberta Martin's "Even me."

Both the aforementioned sold heavily but could not eclipse the runaway success of "Move on up a little higher." The lesser acclaimed, slow-paced version of B. Smith's "I have a friend" is in every way as glorious a song as others from the session and is certainly laden with more soulfully sung innuendoes. Somehow it did not click. Space does not permit a review of all the released Apollo songs, cut during fifteen sessions and spanning nine years. I have elected to discuss Jackson's hits and those particular sides which I consider to be her finest efforts. Her voice would never again sound as full, rich and grainy as it did during this period.

"Dig a little deeper," from the December 1947 session, "Just over the hill, Parts 1 &2" from January 1950 and the moving and memorable "In the upper room, Parts 1 &2, " recorded just over two years later, sold in vast quantities and would have fared better had Berman had the money to grease the appropriate palms. However, Jackson continually insisted that the company was withholding her royalties.

By December 1947 and the cutting of "Dig a little deeper," pianist James Lee had been replaced by the loyal, long-serving Mildred Falls, and guitarist Samuel Patterson was added. Patterson, a strong spiritual singer in his own right, was later bestowed a contract to record his own material for Apollo. However, his initial release in August 1949 met with

poor reception, and he was promptly struck from the artists roster.

Kenneth Morris's "Dig a little deeper" is a foot-tapping, hand-clapping vehicle that finds Mildred all over the keys and Jackson hollering as if back at the little Southern clapboard church of her childhood, raising souls and dirt from the dampened floor. "Just over the hill, Parts 1 & 2" is full of heartbreak, melismatic grace and that trademark Jackson squall. Her early live performances of this chart must have been a sight to behold. "Just over the hill, Parts 1 & 2" was from the January 1950 session. By now the studio accompaniment had expanded, and in the name of continuing experimentation, a bass fiddle, drums and a full choir had been added to some of the mastered recordings.

By the time "In the upper room, Parts 1 & 2" was set to wax in March 1952, the male vocal quartet phenomenon was increasingly becoming a tour-de-force in gospel music. Its popularity ran parallel to its prominence in rhythm & blues. Indeed, Berman chose a leading quartet, one with experience in both sacred and secular fields, to background on three of the five numbers recorded at the March 1952 sessions date. This group was The Southern Harmonaires of New York, a.k.a. The Selah Jubilee Six, Selah Jubilee Singers or Quartet, Ruth of Angelus Quartet, Cleartones, Sons of Heaven, Jubilators and the secular 4 Barons. The Southern Harmonaires later became many other sacred and secular entities, but at this point the group was composed of the great tenor lead Eugene Mumford, the legendary guitarist and lead tenor singer Alden "Allen" Bunn, founder, tenor and Apollo Theatre gospel program M.C. Thermon Ruth (about whom a book could be written), Raymond "Pee-Wee" Barnes, baritone, and David McNeil, bass.

The sometimes rough, sometimes polished Southern Harmonaires were basically a jubilee quartet who were under contract with Berman in their own right, both as The Southern Harmonaires and secular Larks. In fact, their recording of "Shadrack" and as The Larks their compelling "Eyesight to the blind" had sold really well for Berman. [For more on The Selahs, see the notes to our Jubilee Gospel Collection, "Heaven Belongs To You."(WESM 588)]

Supported by The Southern Harmonaires, Jackson's rendition of Lucie Campbell's "In the upper room, Parts 1 &2" is sheer mastery. McNeil's spine-tingling supportive bass singing and the quartet's up close cadences behind Jackson's uplifting, sometimes resplendent, sometimes tear-stained phrasings make this the diva's finest piece of art on the label.

For the January 1953 session at which Jackson took a stab at Al Stillman's schmaltzy 1952 chestnut "I believe" (issued on Lloyd's, Apollo's pop-oriented subsidiary), a different, less recognizable collection of supporting musicians were hired: The Belleville Choir, about whom little is know and a male gospel quartet called The Melody Echoes who could quite possibly be Earl "Ricky" Wells and the Harlem-based Mel-o-dots, a black pop-sounding outfit who waxed one single for Apollo in 1952.

My personal favorites from this session are the slickly worked ballad "Consider me" with its strong R & B feel, the soulfully touching "What then" and the drifting, choral harmonies of the choir on the prettily demonstrated "No matter how you pray." The fervor generated on "Walking to Jerusalem" from October 1953 drives away the cloud

Columbia To Sign Mahalia Jackson

New York — Despite a hassel with Apollo Records, it looks at presstime as if Columbia will succeed in its efforts to sign Mahalia Jackson, "Queen of the Gospel Singers," to an exclusive, long term contract. Miss Jackson has recorded for Apollo for the last five years and Bess Berman, head of the label, claims that Apollo picked up Miss Jackson's option in time so that the gospel singer is still contracted to that label. Columbia legal experts differ, but indications are there will be some kind of a settlement to avoid prolonged debate.

If the signing is completed, Mahalia Jackson will soon record under the supervision of Mitch Miller. She also begins a weekly network show for CBS-radio Sept. 26 (Sundays, 10:05-10:30 p.m.).

National recognition of Mahalia Jackson's ability came with her 1946 recording of *Move Up A Little Higher*. She has since concertized across the country, appeared at schools and churches as well as on radio and TV. Miss Jackson toured Europe several years ago and during the last five years, has filled Carnegie Hall for six concerts. Deeply religious, Miss Jackson will not perform in theaters or night clubs.

and puts the sun in the sky, but the doom-laden "I wonder if I will ever rest" (from the same date) puts one back in a worrying mind.

Billboard reported in their June 1953 issue that Jackson was in negotiation with ABC over hosting a fifteen minute t.v. program entitled "Mahalia's House," a world-of-music show, but terms were never ironed out. Two days before her "Walking in Jerusalem" session, Jackson appeared at Carnegie Hall in Joe Bostic's Gospel Jubilee, billed as the Fourth Annual Negro Gospel & Music Festival. As headliner, Jackson brought the house down when she rendered selections in a traditional, spiritual vein. The Dixie Hummingbirds and Davis Sisters, among others, shared the footlights.

In January 1954, Billboard added fuel to the rumor that Jackson turned down a second European tour. The February issue reports Jackson hosting a "Gumbo Party" at The New York Room of the Sutherland Hotel. Noted as an excellent cook, Jackson might have prepared the dishes herself. Constantly an item in the trade papers in March, she was reported to have slain everyone in performance at The Music Operators' Association Banquet in Chicago.

Jackson's last official Apollo session was held June 10, 1954, although note has been made of the song "Closer to Thee" and of it being from a later time. To my ears, the delicately rendered "Closer toThee"

sounds as if recorded at an earlier session, perhaps on the September 1950 date. By now, exotic instruments like bongos, maracas, and saxophone were added, perhaps to keep in step with the mambo craze that was sweeping the nation. Of the four numbers recorded in June 1954, only "Willing To Run" with its blue-shaded sax and busy organ seems to make a lasting impression, although the remaining cuts demonstrate an interesting departure from the norm. It was quite clear by this point that Jackson had outgrown Apollo Records.

By September 11, a settlement was about to be reached between Jackson's lawyers and Berman, to allow Jackson to sign with Columbia. By late September, Jackson was taping radio shows to air on the CBS network Sunday evenings between 9:35 and 10 p.m. The program was to be called "The Mahalia Jackson Show," and the first of twenty such programs went on the air beginning September 26. Her initial Columbia recording session was conducted on November 22. Indeed, she speedily moved on up a little higher.

As a postscript, I would like to quote her closest friend Thomas A. Dorsey from his thoughts taken down by Alfred Duckett on the Queen of Gospel Music. "I was so glad when success happened for Halie" (that was the nickname Dorsey had given her.) "But what hurt me was that after she got fame and money, she couldn't live to enjoy it. She let herself be pushed too hard. She allowed people to talk her into feeling it was her obligation to just keep going and going, even when her health was failing. She became tired and overworked but wouldn't give up. You can't make it like that. She had so many problems. Had to carry so many people's load."

Mahalia Jackson died of a heart seizure at Chicago's Little Company of Mary Hospital in Evergreen Park on January 27, 1972. Thomas A. Dorsey passed in Chicago twenty-one years and one day later.

OPAL LOUIS NATIONS, JULY 1998