

The Beginnings of The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy

by Opal Louis Nations

The genesis of the world-renowned Mighty Clouds of Joy can be traced back to the group's founder, the charismatic and reservedly shy Bedile Goldsmith, current manager and tenor singer of The Angels of Joy Quartet out of South-Central Los Angeles. Goldsmith was born in 1918 in Montgomery, Alabama. With his mother Fannie Perdue, and father Jim Goldsmith, an accomplished guitarist, the young Bedile attended The Beautiful Zion Church at Sandy Ridge. It was at Beautiful Zion that Bedile

himself a few rudimentary chords. In 1949 Goldsmith organized the first in a string of "Joy"-tagged quartets called The Flowers of Joy who waxed one record for the minuscule Octive label. This came about near the end of their career in 1951. The songs on the release were "All of my appointed time" and "Near the cross." The Flowers of Joy were composed of Goldsmith and his son Bedile Junior, Arthur Buckholder, Johnny L. White, James Campbell, and Rubin (whose last name has escaped memory.) Among temporary residents in The Flowers of Joy was one Clay Hammond from Fort Worth, Texas, who had warbled in gospel quartets since the age of ten. Hammond switched to soul music in late 1958 and wrote "Part time love" for Little Johnnie Taylor who comes into the picture a little later on. Hammond cut many fine soul records for Galaxy, Liberty, Duo Disc, Kent, Ronn, Mercury, and Versepto before taking on lead chores in The



Goldsmith picked up the singing bug. In the late 1930s, Bedile along with brothers Joe, Early B., James, and Willis, formed a spiritual singing quartet called The Nightingales, but the onset of World War II forced the group to split up.

Some brothers chose to stay in Alabama, others left for Michigan, and Bedile preferred the sunny climes of Southern California. Shortly after taking up residence in LA., Goldsmith hooked up with The Los Angeles Spiritual Singers, then comprised of Alabama-born tenor and manager Ed Gammon, Elvin Hunt, Charles Bodsford, Pete ?, and Marvin Buford. The young Tony Harris, a life-long friend of Goldsmith's, served in The LA. Spiritual Singers for a while before making a name for himself in The Traveling Four who recorded for Score Records in 1953. The LA. Spiritual Singers cut a slew of songs for John Dolphin who owned and operated Dolphin's of Hollywood Records whose slogan was "if it goes around and makes a sound, you'll find it at Dolphin's."

Recordings by The LA. Spirituals on Dolphin's of Hollywood are extremely rare, but in 1950, four Dolphin titles were leased and reissued on the tiny Phoenix label, and it is these that devoted collectors have been able to find more easily. Like his father, Goldsmith acquired a guitar and taught

Rare first known picture of The Mighty Clouds of Joy. Left to right: Little Willie Joe Ligon, Jerome Brown, Johnnie Martin (top row), Bedile Goldsmith, Freddie Johnson, Johnnie Wesley & Johnnie Gibson (bottom row)

(Photo: Opal Louis Nations Collection)

Rivingtons after Carl White's death in 1981.

"All of my appointed time" is conveyed in a fine, soul-stirring manner--the hard-singing lead is a telling of things to come. The Flowers of Joy were aurally a prototype of The Mighty Clouds of Joy. "Near the cross" is sung with equal wild abandon. A floating tenor supports the lead as he preaches strongly and firmly throughout. Some time towards the close of 1953, Clay Hammond in a meeting with Goldsmith mentioned that a bunch of local gospel singing kids he knew (some still in junior high) needed advice, guidance, and a manager and asked if Goldsmith could go out and hear them, perhaps give a few pointers.

The kids rehearsed regularly at Little Willie Joe Ligon's parents' house. The Ligon had moved to Los Angeles from Troy, Alabama situated some fifty miles south of where Goldsmith was raised. Goldsmith, guitar in

hand, took a trip out to the Ligon residence on rehearsal night. Standing in the Ligon living room with Jerome Brown, Johnnie Gibson, Freddie Johnson and his brother, was a little guy way in back, they called Little Willie Joe Ligon. Goldsmith took a seat, picked up his guitar, and strummed a few chords so that he could hear how well the boys blended in harmony.

Freddie Johnson's brother was the elected lead singer at that time. When Goldsmith heard the group sing, he figured something was not right. The song they had chosen to sing did not sound the way it should be sung. From the back of the room came the voice of Little Willie Joe. "Let me have a try!" he pleaded. When Goldsmith heard Little Willie Joe sing he knew he could make something happen with the boys. This did not sit too well with Freddie Johnson's brother who stormed out of rehearsal and was rarely ever seen again.

During the period the group took shape, Tony Harris, Clay Hammond, and Johnny Martin all sang as members but only Johnny Martin became a permanent fixture. Christened by Goldsmith "The Mighty Clouds of Joy," the quartet played local venues, catching the attention of record spinners like Thomas Wells, Hunter Hancock, Joe White, and Joe Matthews.

In 1954 the group signed with the fledgling Proverb Records on South Central Avenue. Proverb's offices were situated in Pacoima, and were owned and operated by Milton Rose and Brother Duke Henderson. While Rose took a back seat in dealing with gospel music talent, vice president Henderson took full care of the artists. Brother Henderson rechristened the group The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy to add more thunder to an already hard, loud singing group.

Brother Duke Henderson has a long and impressive career in show business. Henderson waxed as a blues crooner for the Apollo label out of Harlem in the mid-forties. Then as part of the L.A. Central Avenue club singer scene, he recorded for Globe, United Artists, Swingtime, Specialty, Modern, Imperial, London, and Flair Records.

In 1953, under the moniker Big Duke, he cut the R & B classic "Hey Doctor Kinsey," a musical narrative celebrating the controversial sex researcher. In the early fifties, Henderson became a disc jockey and hosted a back-to-back gospel and R & B show over KPOP. It was during his tenure at KPOP that The Mighty Clouds of Joy were brought to his attention. Henderson later became a man of the cloth and pastored The Bethany Apostle Community Church at 8438 South Hoover Street. Henderson delivered rousing sermons on the social ills of the day from the back of a pick-up truck.

In the 1960s Henderson became the most influential gospel disc jockey in Los Angeles, broadcasting over both KGFJ as well the megapowered XERB of Rosarita Beach, Baja California. In 1954, The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy consisted of Goldsmith, Little Willie Joe Ligon, Freddie Jackson, Jerome Brown (who is now an ordained minister and whose son Dennis currently plays in the San Francisco Forty-Niners), Johnny Wesley, Johnnie Gibson (also now a minister), and the late Johnny Martin. Goldsmith's guitar picking was the quartet's only accompaniment. Brother Henderson first recorded The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy in a church environment in 1956. The name of the church is long forgotten but its location was at Eighty-Seventh and Broadway, and the pastor's name was The Rev. T.M. Chambers.

The Sensational Wonders out of The New Kingdom Baptist Church (of whom we shall talk about later) shared billing. Two, possibly three, songs were taped, "Amazing Grace," lead by the power-packed pipes of Little Willie Joe Ligon, "Take me to the water," again lead by Little Willie Joe in sanctified fashion, plus a straight reading of "Old time religion" lead by the formal Brother Henderson himself. All three songs were issued on the "Let's have church" Proverb album of 1959. "Amazing Grace" and "Old time religion" were recorded by radio station XERB. "Old time religion" was also released on the GPA label. All were reissued by Hob Records (a Scepter subsidiary) in 1968 on an album entitled "The Mighty Clouds of Joy Sing 'Live' Zion Songs" produced by John Bowden. Bowden virtually ruined the material with out of sync piano, bass, and drum overdubs.

In 1957 The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy were recorded at a church in Riverside. Both Tony Harris and Little Willie Joe Ligon shared leads during the program. Only one song was recorded at the service, "A Christian's Plea" ("Amazing Grace,") lead by guest soloist Tony Harris who was at that time on the brink of crossing over into R & B as a single on Ebb Records. A shorter version of "Christian's Plea" appears on the group's 45 release (Proverb 100) and is included on the Proverb album as well as the Hob collection with overdubs. A mystery recording appears on both albums. The singer sounds remarkably like Tony Harris performing a traditional reading of "Old time religion" backed by an unidentified congregation. The Hob release of this song of course contains piano and drum overdubbing. Goldsmith is sure that Harris never recorded "Old time religion" in the presence of The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy.

In 1958 Proverb released "You woke me up this morning" backed with the aforementioned "A Christian's Plea" accompanied only by the guitar figures of Bedile Goldsmith. The record became a tremendous success on Brother Henderson's KPOP radio show.

Some time around this period The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy played Reverend Wesley's church in Watts at Eighty-eighth and Bandera. A live version of "Lord you woke me up this morning" led by the fiery Little Willie Joe was recorded by sound engineers from XERB. The song became the group's most popular chart and was issued a total of five times. Aside from the one release previously mentioned, the song came out on GPA, the two album collections (the Hob release with overdubs), plus on The Clouds' second single release (Proverb 1023), pressed after the group was enjoying phenomenal success on the Peacock label in the mid-Sixties. The flip side featured a fine audience-dubbed rendition of "Jesus is real" led by Little Willie Joe, a song remembered only as being recorded at a studio in Inglewood.

In 1959 The Mighty Mighty Clouds played Will Rogers park in Watts, a neighborhood the group was living in at the time. Only one song from the concert "(My) Jesus, (My) Jesus" ever saw release. The song was featured on both the Proverb and Hob albums (the latter of course with overdubs.)

To continue our saga, we have to go back to 1954 and a gospel quartet called The Stars of Bethel out of Memphis, Tennessee. In the fall of 1954 The Stars of Bethel cut one single for the R & B record company, the same label that issued the chart-busting "Hearts of stone" by The Jewels that very same year. The top side of The Stars of Bethel release was "There is a fountain filled with blood" lead by one Johnny Young, the birth name of Memphis-born Little Johnny Taylor, who recorded and enjoyed a monster number one hit with Clay Hammond's song "Part time love" on Galaxy Records in 1963.

According to guitarist Richard Wallace, who served for a spell in The Stars of Bethel, Young changed his name to Taylor in 1960 when he crossed over to soul/blues music to cash in on Oklahoma-born Ted Taylor's popularity. Ted Taylor himself is rumored to have played a couple of live engagements with The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy before moving on to form The Santa Monica Soul Seekers and success in soul music land with a song he recorded for Okeh in 1965 entitled "Stay away from my baby."

Somewhere in the late Fifties, The Stars of Bethel moved to Los Angeles and were absorbed into a group called The Sensational Wonders who recorded for Fable Records after Little Johnny Taylor's departure. The Fable release of The Sensational Wonders contains an express train rendition of "Somebody touched me," a call, or better still, howl and response reading that burns up the turntable. "Walk around my Lord," the flip side, is a mid-tempo screamer with pleasing walking bass and guitar fills.

By the spring of 1960 The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy had broadened their popularity considerably. Travel became more and more a necessity as the group found itself working almost constantly. The majority of the group's original members, with the exception of Little Willie Joe Ligon and Johnny Martin, found it impossible to travel. Family commitments came before the uncertainties of being a professional gospel minstrel out on the highways and byways.

Goldsmith needed a group willing to travel and handle commitments out of state and hurriedly made a deal with The Sensational Wonders. Five of the group's members agreed to join the freshly reconstructed Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy. They were Ermant Franklin Junior from Austin, Texas who would eventually assume management, Elmer Franklin, the son of a minister from Oakland, California, Leon Polk, also from Austin, Texas, David Walker, and guitarist Richard Wallace, also from Austin who played guitar on the Alpha-Omega Singers' 1958 Peacock session.

Goldsmith asserts that the new aggregation recorded "Swing down chariot" at this time with Little Willie Joe assuming lead to tambourine and guitar accompaniment, but apart from appearing on both the Proverb and Hob albums, little is remembered of the session. During the summer of 1960, Goldsmith took The Mighty Mighty Clouds of Joy to Ted Brinson's recording studio and the group cut a demo remake of "Sinner's confession" with Goldsmith himself filling in on the baritone part. "Sinner's confession" was rushed off to Don Robey at Peacock Records in Houston, who had caught wind of the group's potential. Robey liked what he heard and signed the group to a long-term contract. Goldsmith gave Little Willie Joe Ligon the rights to The Clouds' name and the group headed for Houston where they found world-wide fame and fortune.
