



The O'Neal Twins

by Opal Louis Nations

The O'Neal Twins hailed from a long-established family out of central St. Louis. Their grandparents belonged to the Pentecostal movement headquartered at the All Saints Holiness Church, which later became associated with The Church of God in Christ denomination of Missouri, under the guidance of the late bishop Daniel Bostic. Twins Edgar and Edward were born in 1938 to Rowena and Edward O'Neal III. Early vocal endeavors were encouraged by their pastor, Elder James Ward Senior. However, the lads did not take singing seriously until they were well into their teens. Fooling around on piano and knowing little about harmony, the boys fudged around with a few songs for awhile. The O'Neals were hampered by the fact that they came from a non-musical family. But the boys persevered and by the late fifties were singing at storefront churches, prayer meetings, and occasional trips to guest on programs out of town.

St. Louis, of course, is home to The Greater Bethlehem Baptist Church on Washington Street, pastored by the Rev. Cleophus Robinson. The O'Neals became featured guests on Robinson's church programs. In 1962, the twins were introduced by Robinson to Don Robey, head of Peacock Records in Houston, who signed the pair to a five-year contract. The twins' first single, topped with the song "Every day with Jesus," yielded promising sales figures.

The O'Neals were fortunate enough to appear on Peter Brysac's "TV Gospel time" over the spring of 1965. On the program, hosted by Georgia Lewis with Professor Alfred Miller handling the musical arrangements, the duo sang three selections, "Power in the blood," the twosome's then current release, plus rapturous renditions of "Prayer is the key" and "Keep in touch with Jesus" from a single put out a year earlier.

It was not until the release of their sixth Peacock single entitled "I'll trade a lifetime" in September 1966 that things started to take off. "I'll trade a lifetime" was written by Clyde Bradley, who went on to write other songs for the twins. The twins recorded seven singles and two albums for Peacock Records. Up to this point, the twins had only adopted the music business on a semi-professional basis. In late 1968, the Reverend James Cleveland, long time friend and admirer, persuaded the twins to turn professional and go out on the road with him. The O'Neals toured for two years with the Reverend James Cleveland, after this they headlined at Carnegie Hall, Madison Square Garden, and The Kennedy Center in Washington. Edgar asserts that The O'Neals' strongest influences were the Reverend James Cleveland and the late Reverend Charles Watkins, an immensely underrated soloist out of New York, who like the O'Neal Twins had worked with Pentecostal choirs.

Also in 1968, The O'Neal Twins recorded with The James Cleveland Singers on Herman Lubinsky's Savoy Records. That same year they were back on Peacock recording an album with The Missouri State Choir. After a second album with The Missouri State Choir on Savoy in 1969, The National Association of Television and Radio Arts voted the pair "the world's greatest gospel duo." The twins started to record for Savoy with The Interfaith Choir of St. Louis. While playing on a bill for The Gospel Music Workshop of America in Los Angeles in 1972, The O'Neals were noticed by a deeply impressed Leon Russell who was currently enjoying considerable success with the release of "Tight rope" issued on his own Shelter record label. The O'Neals met Russell through producer Patrick Henderson, and a working relationship was set up between them.

Leon Russell produced The O'Neal Twins' album simply entitled "The O'Neal Twins" for Shelter Records in 1974 but this author has never been able to trace a copy and it is unsure whether it was actually released. A year later, Henderson and Russell tied up a deal with Shannon Williams at Nashboro Records, and three album collections were released over the course of as many years. "Our first collection, *The Silver Anniversary Concert*, (Creed 3065), was our most successful. Peoples were always asking us to sing "It's gonna rain" from off of that album," states Edgar.

The O'Neal Twins' *In Concert* with The Interfaith Choir of St. Louis (Creed 3074) surfaced in 1976. Edgar swears that the sound on these two albums was way ahead of its time. *Storm in troubled times* was the twins' third and last collection released in 1977. By then Leon Russell was out of the picture.

For our musical selections, we have chosen *The Silver Anniversary Concert* album with The Interfaith Choir of St. Louis in its entirety plus two bonus cuts from the *In Concert* collection. After Reverend Jerome Chambers' wildly enthusiastic introduction, The O'Neals plow into "Don't worry about tomorrow" as if they were singing it for the last time. A solid rhythm section with a Latin tinge (Harry Scott punishes the congo drums) lends a carnival dance atmosphere to the proceedings.

The live audience is soon out of their seats and getting happy. The twins familiarize themselves with the crowd by way of introduction, then move into a soul-stirring "Redemption draweth nigh" bathed in support from the enthralling voices of The Interfaith chorus. "I'd [I'll] trade a lifetime" is dusted off and given a rejuvenating transfusion. A medley of "Sinner man" / "When we all get to heaven" brings us back into bossa nova land.

The choir appends festive joy to an already revelous situation. Renewed vigor is given a retooling of "Keep in touch [with Jesus]," everlasting favorite with fans of the twins. "That's the way God planned it" is the Billy Preston hit first waxed for Apple Records in 1969. Samona Cooke also garnered considerable sales with her cover of the song issued just one year after The O'Neal Twins' frantic and zesty version. The O'Neals excel and give their all on "God has smiled on me," a moving heart song written by Isiah Jones of The Violinaires. *The Silver Anniversary Concert* album reaches a tremendous climax with a gutsy reading of the Charles Johnson arrangement of "It's gonna rain," and as with "That's the way God planned it," the twins perform at double the tempo and awaken all the spirits.

(Bonus cuts)

We end out with two selections from the *In Concert* album recorded live at the Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis in 1976. "Golden dreams" is a gos-soul ballad sung in the usual hurricane force fashion. "When we all get to heaven" (Parts 1 and 2) comes at you like a raging storm and quickly goes into revival meeting mode. Oh how the walls of the Kiel Auditorium must have trembled.

By 1980, The O'Neal Twins were back on Savoy. Supported by The Corinthian Temple Church of God in Christ Radio Choir of Chicago under the direction of Luvonia Whitley, the twins now billed as "The Ambassadors of Gospel," make a strong comeback.

In 1982, The O'Neals appeared in a major role in George T. Nierenberg's gospel movie documentary, "Say, Amen Somebody," with the late Thomas A. Dorsey, Sallie Martin, and The Barrett Sisters. The film gave the twins an opportunity to star alongside their beloved friend and mentor "Mother" Willie Mae Ford Smith, the great gospel pioneer from The Windy City.

In 1985, The O'Neals took their first trip to Bermuda and on the strength of this were invited back on an extensive tour of The Bahamas in 1989. A journey to England with Mattie Moss Clark and The Clark Sisters came about that very same year.

The death of Edward O'Neal in 1990 almost paralyzed Edgar with grief. The brothers had been very close. After wounds began to heal, Edgar started going out as a solo singing the songs he had earlier performed with his beloved brother. In 1992, Edgar met Lillian and the couple was married last year. In 1993, Edgar and Lillian, performing as a double act, cut an album for the St. Louis-based Encore label entitled "Another Chance." The couple is currently working on a follow-up. Besides singing, Edgar and Lillian own and operate two daycare centers (The Bingham Daycare Centers of St. Louis) and have their hands full taking care of children.

– Opal Louis Nations, August, 1995

The O'Neal Twins proposed playlist

**From: *The Silver Anniversary Concert* album with The Interfaith Choir of St. Louis
Creed 3065 (1975):**

1. Introduction by The Reverend Jerome Chambers
2. "Don't worry about tomorrow"
3. Remarks by The O'Neals
4. "Redemption draweth nigh"
5. "I'd trade a lifetime"
6. "Sinner man" / "When we all get to heaven" - a medley
7. "Keep in touch"
8. "That's the way God planned it"
9. Remarks by The O'Neals
10. "God has smiled on me"
11. "It's gonna rain"

**Bonus cuts from the *In Concert* album recorded at the Kiel Auditorium, Creed
3074 (1976):**

12. "Golden dreams"
13. "When we all get to heaven" - Parts 1 & 2