



Photo/Karen Puffer Focht

The Gospel Soul of Otis Clay

BY OPAL LOUIS NATIONS

Otis Clay, often described as one of the Windy City's most admired soul-blues singers, is proud of roots deeply embedded in the Post-War shout-gospel tradition. Ask him where his chief sources of musical inspiration come from and he will readily recall the Soul Stirrers, the Highway Q C's, or the Pilgrim Jubilee Singers. The youngest of ten children, born in the little rural junction of Waxhaw near Rosedale, Mississippi (Otis describes the place as little more than a country general store) on February 11, 1942, he grew up with the sounds of gospel music being played all around him. Various members of

his family sang in church quartets, and of course the young Otis was invited to sing along with them.

Even today Otis finds inspiration in Waxhaw whenever he returns to visit his mother's grave. As a child he would tune into the two most predominant black radio stations—WDIA out of Memphis during the daytime and WLAC out of Nashville at night. Although he listened regularly to Sonny Boy Williamson's King Biscuit Time over KFFA, his favorite show was the "Hallelujah Jubilee" hosted by Theo "Bless My Bones" Wade.

In 1953 the eleven-year-old lad moved to Chicago, where, with members of his family, he

sang in the Golden Jubilaires made up of Howard Scott, Otis Yearby, Odell Carter, J.C. Stanstall and Charles Bridges. Bridges had sung tenor and managed the Famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, Alabama throughout the '40s and into the early 1950s. The Blue Jays had moved to Chicago some time during World War II and had made it their base of operations. In 1960 Bridges reconstructed the Famous Blue Jay Singers by drawing from members of the Golden Jubilaires. Otis toured with the Blue Jays and learned quite a bit from them. "We did all kinds of music," says Otis. "The original group had been on Broadway with the Golden Gate Quartet. They were known

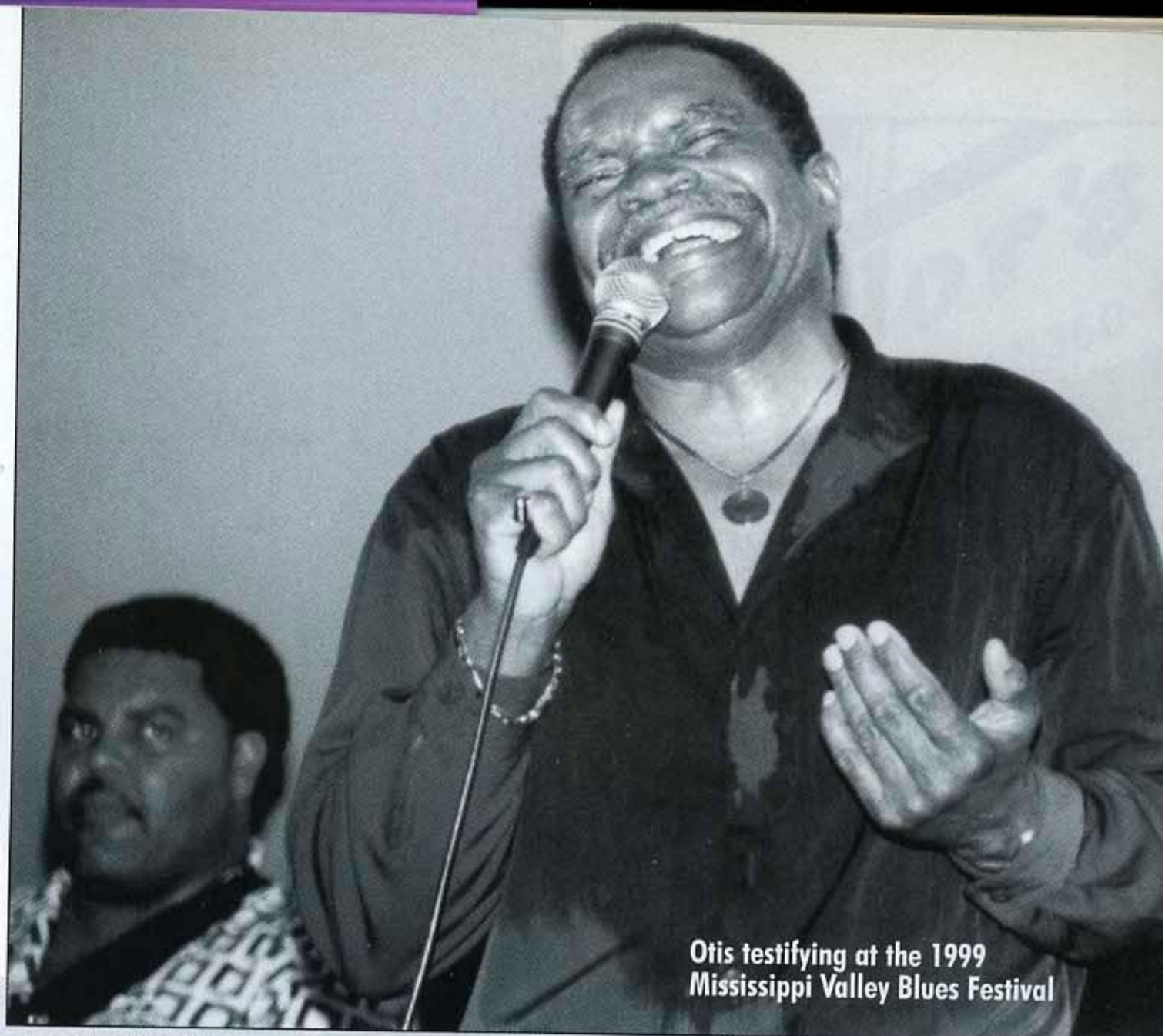
as variety singers. The Blue Jays kind of broadened my approach to music. We did Broadway songs like 'Not a Soul' and 'Old Gang of Mine.' We sang at hotels. We would even do songs like 'Old McDonald Had a Farm,' because sometimes we were singing for kindergartners."

From the Blue Jays Otis joined the Holy Wonders out of Newark, New Jersey. The Holy Wonders, with whom Lou Rawls had once warbled, were originally out of Chicago and because of ties would often stay awhile in the Windy City. The Holy Wonders, who at the time recorded for Bobby Robinson's Harlem-based Revelation gospel label subsidiary, were composed of Abraham Mack, Jerry Erby, Leon Williams and Alonzo Price. This was where Otis first met Cash McCall (Maurice Dollison), who now and again played guitar with the group.

In 1961 Otis joined forces with Joe Johnson and the Pilgrim Harmonizers. Johnson had sung beside Lou Rawls in the Chosen Gospel Singers during the latter part of the 1950s. Robert Pruter states in his book *Chicago Soul* (University of Illinois Press, 1991) that Otis, while with the Pilgrim Harmonizers, was lured away by Carl Davis at Columbia Records to record four secular sides for them. The songs, says Pruter, sounded closer to uptown singer Chuck Jackson in style than to Clay's later gospelized recordings. Columbia chose not to issue the tunes. "I kept the session a secret," confessed Otis, "because of what gospel people might say if they knew I was singing blues."

In late 1963 Otis joined the Gospel Songbirds. The Chicago-based Gospel Songbirds were founded in the mid-'50s. The group's first notable lead soloist was James Phelps from Shreveport LA. Phelps recorded the achingly beautiful "God's Creation" with the group on the tiny C.H. Brewer label. Phelps quit to join the Clefs of Calvary in 1960, then ascended to even greater heights when he took the place of Jimmy Outler in the Soul Stirrers in 1964. Otis joined the Gospel Songbirds around the time fellow Gospel Wonder Cash McCall was taken on as second lead tenor and guitar accompanist. McCall, who recorded with the group under his real name of Maurice Dollison, was from New Madrid, Missouri. McCall sang, wrote and arranged material for the group for about a year before becoming a crossover success with "When You Wake Up" on the Thomas label in 1966.

Otis and McCall cut at least six sides together for Nashboro Records on the group's third session of April 1964. (See *Ring Them Golden Bells - The Best of The Gospel Songbirds*, AV1 4581, 1995--for three of the four Otis-lead songs.) The lineup included Matthew Hayes, who was in and out of the group at various times, Joseph Moore, Sylvester Hudson, Rev. John Dowdy, A.J. Durr, Maurice Dollison and Otis Clay. Otis sang lead and testified on "Let Jesus Lead You," supported on both flanks by solid background singing. He also pulled out all the stops fronting "If I Could Hear My Mother." Dramatic screaming and hollering pushed the tune to visceral limits. He also shared lead on the group's cover of the old Sinatra standard "I Believe," inspired by the former Five Blind Boys of Alabama's impressive rendering for



Otis testifying at the 1999 Mississippi Valley Blues Festival

Photo/Jo Anne Korczynska

Otis Clay: Live

By WAYNE HEARN

These days, Otis Clay comfortably straddles the line between gospel and secular music, confident that his now-regular band, the well-seasoned Platinum, can follow him back and forth as he tailors each performance to please not only the whims of his audience, but the demands of his soul.

"We've reached a real comfort zone," says Clay, speaking by phone from his West Side Chicago home, the dulcet sounds of Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers playing softly in the background. "Right now, for the first time really, I have a band that I know can follow me, and we can go gospel and as well as secular. We're musically very compatible."

Platinum, which worked for years with fellow soul-singer Tyrone Davis, has both the talent and the tools to deliver: Kenneth "Hollywood" Scott on guitar; Edmond Farr and Gerald Warren, drums; Joewan Scott, bass; Benny Brown, keyboards; Fred Johnson, trombone; and Darryl Thompson, trumpet.

Clay and the band continue to tour throughout the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast states, giving fans a show that "deals with emotions," he says.

"Our shows are pretty much the same in that the feelings are always right there," he explains. "It's a soul show, but that's what gospel is all about too—emotions and feelings—so there's a sameness there. When we go into the gospel, it's not like we're crossing a great divide, and nobody goes into some sort of cultural shock. It's a natural thing."

He notes that *The Gospel Truth*, his 1993 gospel release, largely grew out of the acclaim he received for including the gospel song "His Precious Love" on his hugely successful *Soul Man: Live in Japan* album a decade earlier.

Clay says most audiences enjoy the mix, but that his fans in Atlanta, Ga., are especially enamored of his gospel music. "My secular music never had a real foothold in Atlanta, but then here comes my gospel album, and it was almost like it became an anthem. It's unbelievable!" he says.

Clay says he's cut back a bit on his Windy City club dates. On the day of this interview, he was to perform at an evening benefit for CORE Center, a local HIV/AIDS prevention program, at a downtown Chicago hotel.

As the new year opens, he says his top priority is to finish work on two new CDs, one gospel, one secular, that he promises will be released during the first half of 2001. "There's still some work to do, and I want to stay close to home and get that done," he says.

You could summarize Clay's approach to his craft by combining the titles of two cuts on "The Gospel Truth" CD: By "Working Hard" "You Can Make It." ♦

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Herman Lubinsky's Gospel label. The Gospel Songbirds' cover sounds almost doo-wop in arrangement and style.

Otis also gave an urgent, sanctified reading on the bouncy "Did You Ever Call Jesus." But even with Otis in the lineup, the Gospel Songbirds failed to sell records in large quantity. Otis was then brought into the Sensational Nightingales by lifelong friend and tenor singer Arthur Crume. Crume, who sang, arranged and played bass guitar with the Soul Stirrers on Chess Records, was on loan to the Sensational Nightingales, who were rehearsing charts for their first album release (without the awesome Rev. Julius Cheeks), entitled *Travel On*. "Most of the members of the groups I was in were old enough to be my father," recalls Otis. "They taught me a lot, so when I joined the Nightingales, it was easy for me, to make the transition to be a professional gospel singer. When I joined I knew all the songs—I didn't have to rehearse. They were in Chicago one Sunday and they said 'Meet us the next Sunday in Detroit.' So I had a whole week to think about it. So I went to Detroit. Horace Thompson was going into the Service, so they needed another member. Crume put my name out, so the group came to Chicago to play on the Gospel Songbirds' anniversary program. I was so excited when they asked me to join!" says Otis.

The Gospel Songbirds rarely traveled out of state. The Sensational Nightingales, on the other hand, were a road group, and this was what Otis wanted. During Otis's brief tenure (without contract) with the Sensational Nightingales he toured extensively down the East Coast and across to the Pacific Coast. Otis quickly realized that life as a gospel troubadour was hard and often meant canceled engagements and living well below the poverty level. Wanting more than ever before to make a reasonable living out of singing, Otis was forced to look, for a second time, at cutting secular music. By mid 1965 Otis had signed with George Leaner's One-Der-Ful Records and was well on his way to becoming one of the nation's most talented soul artists.

In 1985 Otis cut "His Precious Love," a song originally recorded by Jimmy Outler and the Soul Stirrers in 1963. The record was a tribute to his heroes of old. The cover perfectly recreated the glory of gospel's golden age. "His Precious Love" was included on Otis's highly acclaimed *Soul Man Live in Japan* album. He honored the Soul Stirrers a second time when he covered the Johnnie Taylor-led "When the Gates Swing Open" on a 12-inch 45. The Soul Stirrers originally cut this for Specialty in February 1958.

Other gospel songs followed and were collectively released on CD. All were recorded for Stan Lewis's Jewel label in Shreveport. Blind Pig Records followed suit by putting out the excellent *Gospel Truth* album in 1995. Last April Otis appeared at the Lou Rawls Theatre alongside Inez Andrews and his lifelong heroes and mentors, the Soul Stirrers, with whom he plans to cut an album. Otis's ventures back to his gospel roots have thankfully become more plentiful of late.—
With invaluable assistance from Eric LeBlanc and Makoto Takahashi ♦