THE CHRISTLAND SINGERS Robert H.Harris, James Johnson (tenors); Rev. Leroy Taylor, Heywood James Medlock (baritones); George Croffet (bass) with unk drums. Chicago October 1951
1. I KNOW MY JESUS IS THE LIGHT 1592 (Harris-Robey) 2. LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT JESUS 1592 (Medlock-Robey) 3. IN A FEW MORE DAYS 1599 (Spain) 4. PEACE IN THE LAND 1599 (Robey-Taylor)

THE SOUTHERN WONDERS Rev. Ernest McKinney, Henry Jack Franklin (tenors); R.L. Weaver, Sammy Lee Dortch, James Darling (baritones); Artis Yancey (bass); Louis Blair (guitar) plus unk drums. Houston June 1952
5. COME ON OVER HERE 1702 (Tate) 6. WHO IS THAT KNOCKING 1702 (Blair-Robey) 7. GAMBLING MAN 1711 (Beaver- Robey) 8. THIS IS REST FOR THE WEARY 1711 (Trad)

THE GOSPEL TONE SINGERS A.D. Batchelor, Willie Fields (lead vocals) others unk. November 1951
9. REST FROM MY LABOUR 1596 (Fields) 10. SPEAK TO ME JESUS 1596 (Broadnax)

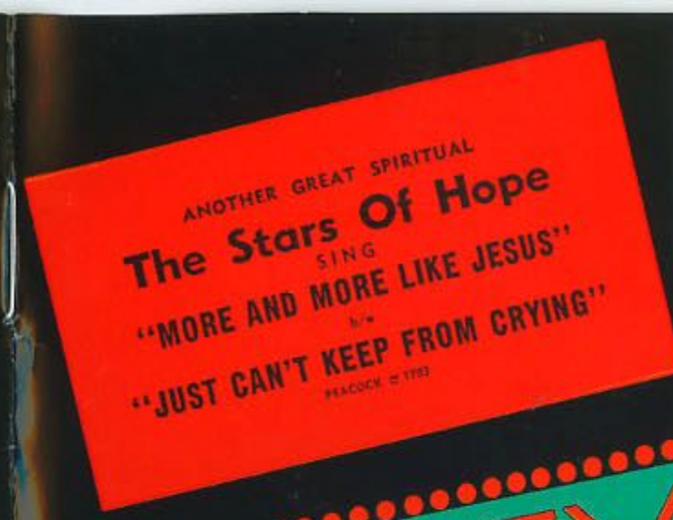
SWANEE SPIRITUAL SINGERS P. Greenwood, C. Watson others unk. January 1953
11. GOD SPOKE TO ME ONE DAY 200 (Sweet) 12. LET US STAND ON THE ROCK 200 (Greenwood)

GOLDEN HARP GOSPEL SINGERS Ann Grant, Jeanette Harris (lead vocals); Irene Williams (soprano); Gussie Walton (2nd soprano); Betty Weathers (bass) unk drums. Chicago October 1951
13. WILL THERE BE ANY STARS IN MY CROWN PART 1 1591 14. WILL THERE BE ANY STARS IN MY CROWN PART 2 1591 15. CALLING JESUS,MY ROCK 1588 16. I'LL MAKE IT SOMEHOW 1588 (York)

THE STARS OF HOPE H. Benjamin, N. Byrd, L. Jones (vocals) others unk. c. July 1952
17. I JUST CAN'T KEEP FROM CRYING 1703 (Byrd-Robey) 18. I WANT TO BE MORE LIKE JESUS 1703 (Dorsey)
As above c. July 1953
19. WHERE SHALL I GO 1712 (Byrd) 20. YOU BETTER MIND 1712 (Byrd)

THE GOSPEL TRAVELLERS Eugene Walton (lead vocal); Ray Hurley (tenor); John Spencer (baritone); Troy Yarborough (bass); Ray Hurley (guitar). Memphis c.1952
21. GOD'S CHARIOT PART 1 DUKE GI (Walton) 22. GODS CHARIOT PART 2 DUKE GI (Walton)

WILSON AND WATSON SINGERS Andrew Wilson, Robert Watson (vocals) others unk. October 1951
23. AFTER AWHILE 1582 (Watson) 24. KEEP THE FIRE BURNING IN ME 1582 (Robey-Wilson)



TEXAS GOSPEL

COME ON OVER HERE

Golden Harp Singers
sing
"WILL THERE BE ANY STARS IN MY CROWN"
PART # 1 and # 2
Peacock # 1591

It took Houston gambler, hustler, nightclub proprietor Don Robey a little more than a year (after his first Peacock release of "Gatemouth" Brown's "Atomic Energy") to realize the potential of making predominantly rhythm-based shout gospel recordings to satisfy the growing demand in the Southern market. With this in mind plus his shrewd and sometimes threatening business manipulations, Robey saw a clear path to achieving a good measure of success. It took Robey approximately four years to corner the market with some of the finest blues-colored gospel quartet artistry ever committed to wax.

Robey's first lucrative gospel investment was with the skills of Archie Brownlee & The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi (see ADD 3003.) Brownlee had a reputation for being the "hardest" tenor lead in the business. He upset the church with his walking-"serenades" through the sinners' benches during performance. Two early releases gave Robey the promise of bigger and better profits. The first of these was the Five Blind Boys' "Our Father," the outfit's third release, recorded in September 1950. "Our Father" was described in a March 1951 Billboard as being a "hot religioso." The second early release was

Don Robey

the Bells of Joy's infectious foot-tapper "Let's talk about Jesus," recorded as the group's first offering in October 1951 (See ACMCD 4207.) "Let's talk about Jesus" set sales records, peaked only at the time by Johnny Ace's runaway success with "My song" on the Duke R&B sister label.

Right at this time Robey had his sights set on the great Rebert H. Harris, the father of "modern" spiritual quartet. Harris inspired both by his father's shaped note singing (his father was a minister) and country music broadcasting, brought the yodel to Post-war gospel squads. No lead tenor could yodel as skilfully and effectively as Harris who also mixed a magic melancholy into his style. Harris was at his zenith when he "retired" from the Soul Stirrers in 1950. Being a deeply religious singer, Harris thought that gospel singing had strayed from the path of steadfast conviction and had taken on the traits of a circus side show.

Harris joined a local church-affiliated quartet called the Christland Singers who were already made up of ex-Soul Stirrer alumni such as Heywood James Medlock, Thomas L. Bruster and spiritual guide Rev. Leroy Taylor. To Robey it must have seemed a coup to have Harris on his roster. Not only did he have the great Brownlee, he also had

The Christland Singers

the highly respected quartet legend himself—Rebert H. Harris. When the Christlands' first session rolled around, Bruster had not yet become a full-time member. Second tenor James Johnson and basso George Croffet had been taken aboard.

The October Chicago session gave us four Soul Stirrers-like sagas, although later recordings marked a departure from this norm. These included the achingly beseeched "A few more days" (I'll lay my burden down) and under Taylor's leadership, the scorching "Peace in the land" (Where I'm bound.) Without Harris, the Christlands possessed no special musical advantage over many scrambling to impress. This might account for disappointing sales. The group's more dramatic second and final session came about in August 1953 (see ACMCD 4210.) Refusal to tour may have had something to do with the group's poor investment potential.

Henry Jack Franklin and the Southern Wonders were signed in June 1952. Outside of the Spirit of Memphis (who also opted to go with Peacock in January 1953), the Southern Wonders were the second most beloved quartet in South-West

The Southern Wonders

Tennessee. Robey saw at once the crossover potential in the Southern Wonders who were certainly skilled enough to go in that direction. But Henry and the boys were steadfastly against crossing over. Their audience was solid church folk, and they did not want to lose them. This ongoing battle with Robey lead to a short but musically rewarding tenure with Peacock. Unfortunately, the group was wrought with internal dissension. Although the fellas stuck together into 1967, they did not record after 1955.

The outfit was blessed with a strong lead tenor in Ernest McKinney. Supporting members included R.L. Weaver, the talented Sammy Lee Dortch who went on to warble in the Sunset Travellers during O.V. Wright's stay, coach, spiritual guide and baritone singer James Darling who had been one of the original recorded members of the Spirit of Memphis, basso Artis Yancey, and fret-picker Louis Blair who switched to playing behind the Spirit of Memphis after the Southern Wonders' final Peacock recordings. Because the Spirit of Memphis were close to the group in every respect, the Southern Wonders sounded very much akin to them except the unique depth of sorrow the group was able to convey on record.

Little is known about A.D. Batchelor with Willie Fields and the Gospel Tone Singers who recorded only once for Peacock around November 1951. The Gospel Tones were one of a handful of quartets who used Sam Phillips' Memphis Recording Service to cut material. A deal was arranged to have six of their songs sold to Peacock who remastered only two of them for release. The Gospel Tones have a tight, polished

sound. Fields is an accomplished "shout" tenor lead. He later waxed with the Holy Travellers for George Leaner's Halo Records in Chicago.

The obscure Swanee Spiritual Singers were responsible for launching Robey's Duke 500 series in April 1953. Nothing is known of their later exploits. The quartet's rendering of (Let us) "Stand on the rock" is quite possibly the most impressive reading of this old spiritual. Tight tones and infectious rhythm should have propelled this group through prevailing competition.

The five-gal Golden Harps are entirely a different matter. They were founded in the 1930s and are well documented. Even today the gals (a current bunch) go out occasionally to concertize. The Peacock configuration included first alto lead Jeanette Harris, one-time spouse of the legendary Rebert H. Harris (who to some degree helped in finding gainful musical employment), second lead alto Ann Grant, sopranos Irene Williams and Gussie Walton, plus basso Betty Weathers. Like the Soul Stirrers, the Golden Harps produced pretty chording arrangements, which offset perfectly the all-out lead vocals. This Chicago-based outfit cut one session for Peacock in October 1951.

Golden Harp Singers

Golden Harp Singers

sing

"WILL THERE BE ANY STARS IN MY CROWN"

PART # 1 and # 2

Peacock # 1591

SPIRITUALS With Feelings

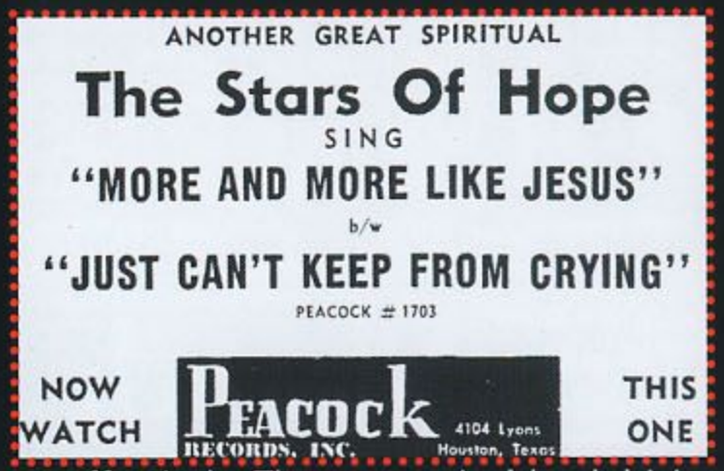
PEACOCK RECORDS, INC. 4104 Lyons Houston, Texas

BLUES With the Zip

This resulted in two singles releases. The first of these was the traditional "(Will there be) Any stars in my crown" which they stretched to two parts. The Golden Harps' version with its hypnotic harmonies and fiery swing-lead work certainly outshines the later, better-known, Chuck Wagon Gang cover of the 1990s. The song slowly builds by the chorus and peaks when the group switches to double-time.

June 1952 saw the follow-up release of "Calling Jesus my rock" which sticks to the formula of melodic harmonies and muscular lead singing. The reverse, "I'll make it somehow," is a little more sanctified with its use of a prayer-like reading set to song.

While the Jackson Gospel Singers held the singular distinction of being the champions of female quartet down in New Orleans (during gospel's golden era---the 1950s), Chicago's Golden Harps certainly matched that distinction on their own turf.



The all-male Stars of Hope give the impression that their roots were once firmly planted in the earlier jubilee quartet tradition. Their style carries well over into the newer, more theatrical "shout" form. The group's swing lead vocals and rhythmic harmonies certainly impress effectively. The aggregation' hard-driving "Where shall I be" raises swing-lead and pumping basso to a new plateau.

The Gospel Travelers were also committed to tape by Sam Phillips at The Memphis Recording Service in 1952. The Gospel Travelers, like the Spirit of Memphis, also enjoyed a regular gospel program over WDIA hosted by David James Mattis. WDIA was the largest black-oriented radio station in the South. During the spring of 1952 Mattis, who was also the station's white-skinned program director, opted to start his own record label. With help from Bill Fitzgerald, a local record distributor, Mattis set up Duke Records. Mattis's first release was the Gospel Travelers singing a two-part drama entitled "God's chariot."

"God's chariot," (Parts 1 and 2), centers around the great tornado, which ripped through the mid-south the previous winter. Howling winds were dubbed under the singers' voices to add dramatic effect. Being a "radio group," the Gospel Travelers were used to dramatization to heighten the overall effect, so the idea presented no problems. But Mattis lacked the distribution network and promotional dollars to launch his recording outside the WDIA footprint. Mattis turned to Don Robey in the hope of cutting a favourable partnership deal on the distribution of the record. The end result was that Robey wound up with the master tape, which contained other songs by this group. "God's chariot" was the first and only Duke release on the group.

When Robey took commanding control of Duke Records, he relegated his entire Duke Gospel output to the 200 series, which was started in April 1953. He switched to issuing his entire gospel product on Peacock in early 1957.

The Gospel Travelers were composed of "Cousin" Eugene Walton, a prominent gospel deejay on KWEM. Walton sang lead. Others were tenor and guitarist Ray Hurley, baritone John Spencer and basso Troy Yarborough. Legend has it that the outfit recorded earlier for Modern and later again for Duke. The only other recording we can verify for sure is one cut in 1955 in Memphis, for, yes you guessed it, the Chariot label.

Disappointingly, Billboard Magazine only awarded "God's chariot" a tepid two star rating. Despite this, the record sold surprisingly well and has since become a collectors' classic.

Our closing act, the mixed-gender Wilson & Watson Singers, had had considerable exposure on Charles Henry's Houston-based Macy's label before landing on Peacock in October 1951. The outfit's version of "After awhile" from their first and only session is sung firmly and vigorously, while the flip, "Keep the fires burning in me," sounds remarkably female in tone. The label indicates that Andrew Wilson lead the ensemble on this one.

We must remember that some of the strongest gospel quartet was recorded at this time, yet despite competition from Art Rupe in Hollywood and Ernie Young in Nashville, Robey managed to lord it over his territorial fiefdom during the glory years of the 1950s. In fact, Robey gradually strengthened his hold over gospel record sales in the Southlands. In February 1952 he took on the Dixie Hummingbirds and scored with "Let's go out to the programs" in June 1953. Again in July 1952 he signed the most formidable man in gospel, "spirit-killer" Rev. Julius Cheeks, then with the Sensational Nightingales who sold well over a long period of time.

In June 1957 the Sensational Nightingales made big numbers with their engaging "To the end." By 1956, Peacock gospel records were setting trends. Peacock had become the nation's leading Afro-American gospel discery. Only Savoy in New Jersey had anywhere as much clout in an ever-burgeoning market.

Don Robey possessed tremendous business savvy. It was policy to keep his artists out on the road, working through his Buffalo Booking Agency for as long as possible to make the optimum amount of revenue. He also operated a personnel management company, bred and raced thoroughbreds, was an avid game hunter, promoted rodeos, ran high-roller backroom card games and distributed special beauty products. All this helped this light-skinned African American and eleventh grade dropout to stay on top of his game.

Opal Louis Nations *July 2005*

This CD derives from very rare and old 78rpm recordings many of which were originally manufactured in small quantities. There will therefore be a significant amount of surface noise audible. Whilst we have removed much extraneous noise it was considered that any further use of noise reduction programmes would compromise the integrity of the original recordings.

"God's Chariot" has been included for its historical importance which justifies its inclusion.

All illustrations courtesy of Galen Gart's "First Pressings" - Big Nickel Publications and Opal Louis Nations.