THE PILGRIM JUBILEE SINGERS

- HOMECOMING -
THE PILGRIM JUBILEE SINGERS LIVE AT THE WENDY PHILLIPS HIGH SCHOOL, SOUTH PARK, CHICAGO

The Pilgrim Jubilees

Quite often on their more recent recordings, The Pilgrim Jubilees preach about how they came up from humble beginnings and abject rural poverty. "You know I didn't always come from Chicago," Clay Graham, the quartet's lead tells the crowd. "Didn't always have it easy. My brothers and I grew up in a little three-room country shack down in Houston, Mississippi. We didn't have much back then, church, but we had a family altar."

The Graham boys were members of The New Zion Baptist Church in Houston. Cleve, the third oldest brother, born January 8, 1928, tells of how he sang in the church choir alongside his brother Eddie. The second oldest brother, Elgie C. B. Graham, conceived the notion of forming a family gospel group. The boys wanted the simple Graham Brothers tag, but Elgie had grander ideas and christened the fellas The Pilgrim Jubilees. Other fledgling founders included Theophalus, the oldest brother, Cleve and Clay Graham plus Cleve and Clay's first cousin, Monroe Hatchet.

Elgie held the group together and was a major source of inspiration. The quartet did the rounds of singing in local churches on weekends and were avid fans of The Fairfield Four's weekly radio show out of Nashville over WLAC, sponsored by Sunway Vitamins.

In 1952, Cleve, Clay, and Elgie moved from Mississippi to Chicago and reconstructed a new Pilgrim Jubilees with themselves (all sang as alternating tenor leads), Major Roberson, baritone and booking manager, and a little later on Kenny Madden who served as bass. Madden stayed with the outfit for six years. It was during rehearsals at various barbershops on the North Side that the group was discovered by Al Benson, the most dominant and influential African American D.J. on Chi-Town airwaves at the time. The almost unintelligible Benson broadcast over WGES and dabbled in the recording business.

Benson introduced The Pilgrim Jubilees to Art Sheridan, president of Chance Records for whom they recorded one single in January 1953. The record suffered from lack of promotion and went nowhere. In 1955, the group took on Roy Harris as their manager. Roy was an old friend from Mississippi and had served in The Norfolk Singers who had recorded for the Chess Brothers' Aristocrat subsidiary.

In August that year the group traveled to Los Angeles for the annual National Quartet Convention where they performed as an opening act. The Soul Stirrers were also in attendance, and it was S. Roy Crain, the group's manager, tenor, and friend of Roy Harris who introduced The Pilgrim Jubilees to Art Rupe of Specialty Records. Rupe's gospel talent scout and A & R man, Professor Alex Bradford, supervised one session with the group and six songs were committed to tape. However, Rupe was dissatisfied with the quality of the recordings and chose not to release any of them.

In the early summer of 1957 The Pilgrim Jubilees, not having enjoyed a record release for four-and-a-half years, signed with Nashboro Records where over a period of three years the group cut four extremely fine singles. Members at this juncture included Cleve, Clay, and Major Roberson with the addition of Ben Chandler, tenor, Kenny Madden, bass, Bobby McDougal, lead guitar, and Michael Ray Atkins on bass guitar. Pianist Larry Morton was added a little later on. A guitar player by the name of Johnny (last name unknown) also served briefly in the lineup. None of the four singles generated major sales action, so the group label-hopped once again.

By late 1959 The Pilgrim Jubilees, now signed with Don Robey's Peacock label out of Houston, Texas, recorded "Stretch out," the first in a string of successful recordings made over a period of ten years. Robey issued fourteen singles and three albums by "The Jubes", all of them selling pretty well. On the group's first album, entitled "Walk on," the recording engineers made a major blunder

by switching one of the "Jubes" tunes for a selection by the late Reverend Robert Ballinger. The Pilgrim Jubilees contined to record for Peacock into the 1970s when ABC Paramount acquired the company. The group then returned to the Nashboro fold where they cut four studio albums, the tremendous live concert double gatefold album featured on this CD, and a greatest hits collection.

During the memorable Chicago winter blizzard of 1979, The "Jubes" performed a homecoming concert at The Wendy Phillips High School on Martin Luther King Drive, near South Park in Chicago. The gig was organized by local d.j. Isabel Johnson who coordinates ongoing yearly homecoming concerts for the group.

Cleve Graham relates that twenty-six inches of snow fell that day and traffic heading for the recorded concert had to be re-routed. But regardless of weather, 550 chilly souls showed up to see "The Jubes" live and ready to fire up the auditorium.

After Isabel Johnson's cursory introduction, "The Jubes" kick into "We're the people," a funky ice-breaker that boogaloos along to stabbing organ and sweeping guitar accompaniment. Major Roberson interjects some homespun homilies before breaking into the deep, bluesy "Time to testify," an opus jammed in Little Milton-like fashion.

Typical "Jubes" harmonies gel behind a few bars of "Life's evening sun" before a hard driven "Made it over" gets the "church" to its feet and working on their holiness dance. "True story" ("Zebra mule") tells the sermon-like story of an elderly comforted man burdened by the trials and tribulations of every-day life. "Stretch out" gets our feet back on the floor. Roberson's sandpapered voice socks the message home.

"Let me come home" is a touchingly beautiful ballad sung with warmth in close-knit harmony driven by an iron beat. "No time to lose" is yet another pretty score given only a fleeting rendition. "I've got Jesus" ("That's enough") turns the lights on and the batteries running as the group shifts into gear. "Soulville" is once again reached with the help of a smooth rendering of "He brought joy to my soul."

A fiery testimony introduces us to "Don't let Jesus down," a crowd-stirring chant that gains strength and authority with chorus upon unending chorus climaxing at absolute exhaustion. "Old Ship of Zion" is preceeded by throaty sermonizing and stinging guitar runs which work the audience into total riot. Nirvana is reached and "The Jubes" finesse into "Old Ship of Zion" with amazing grace. More sermonizing introduces us to a palm-slapping arrangement of "We need prayer" fired up with shouting and general mayhem.

The live set concludes with an intense operatic rendering of the late Professor Alex Bradford's best seller, "Too close." The song is given an open harmony treatment with Roberson "flaming" the vocals. "Homecoming" is "The Jubes'" personal favorite Nashboro album on which they feel they have given their best shot.

The original release of HOMECOMING was a two record set with the live material contained on sides 1, 2 and 3. The fourth side was made up of four studio recordings. We have included "Three Trees," from the original release

Some time around 1980, "The Jubes" signed for a brief period with Savoy before joining the Malaco roster of gospel talent where they remain to this day. The Pilgrim Jubilees continue to give concerts to live audiences across the nation, most recently at the Kaiser Auditorium in Oakland, California.

— Opal Louis Nations - February, 1995

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