



The Ruth Black-Castille Story

by Opal Louis Nations

During the latter part of Summer 1947, **Ruth Black-Castille**, supported by **The St. Paul's Church Choir** of Los Angeles, was making waves in gospel circles all over California and throughout the Southlands with a magnificent rendering of **Horatio R. Palmer's** old Baptist hymn, "Yield Not To Temptation." The choir's mighty version with Black-Castille at the helm lifts the melancholy bible-ballad into unexplored realms of passion and blissful joy. Under the resourceful guidance of ex-**Mahalia Jackson** accompanist **Gwendolyn Lightner**, the choral voices wail, hum, chant and soar beyond the boundaries set by **Rev. Glynn T. Settle** and **The Wings Over Jordan Choir** of Cleveland. Now and again during the song a chorister will come out and shout in support of soloist Black-Castille who responds with cadences of strength, grace and grandeur. The fills with which Black-Castille ornaments her music live on today in the vocal stylings of **Rosetta Davis**, impressive soloist with **The Charles Fold Singers** of Cincinnati.

Black-Castille, although enjoying the greatest success with "Yield Not To Tempta-

tion," was not the first popular African-American gospel artist to commercially record the song. **Delores Barrett** and **The Roberta Martin Singers** had put it out only weeks before on John W. Gilbert's Religious Recordings label out of Detroit. "Gwen Lightner taught me the song and how to sing it during practice sessions around the piano," says Black-Castille. "Do it your way, Ruth, and don't be influenced by the stamp Delores puts on it, she (Lightner) said." The Barrett version, staid by comparison, is interpreted in a sweet, crooning, almost demure manner, supported by Roberta Martin's rudimentary piano accompaniment and background harmonies almost suggestive of polite response.

"Paul Reid," says Black-Castille, "played our record over and over on his Sunday gospel program at KDIA in San Francisco, and when Reid was replaced by Al Moreland, Moreland played it regularly, too. Not only that, when Jimmy Burton took over from Moreland, he played it right up until he passed away." In 1949, **Little Axe Broadnax** and **The Golden Echoes** of Los Angeles taped three takes of "Yield Not To Temptation" for Art Rupe at Specialty Records, but Rupe chose not to re-

lease it. The Golden Echoes sing in the old acappella style. The rhythmic foot patting and Axe's strained, anguished tenor lead vocals rise over the crooning harmonies, polished and perfectly in place.

Almost another fourteen years passed before an outstanding quartet version was again heard in the market place. In 1963, **The Norfleet Brothers** of Chicago included the song on their stunning "Shadrack" album, a collection that sadly failed to click with gospel music collectors when it came out. However, today it is a prized and coveted item. The Norfleet Brothers infuse the song with soul and subtle gesture. Swing leads navigate the tune accompanied with beautifully woven harmonies and soft, rippling piano figures. While the Norfleet reading is a quartet masterpiece, Black-Castille's magnificent, atmospheric live-in-church rendering will always remain a groundbreaking landmark in the development of West Coast choristry, a development that paved the way for the likes of **James Cleveland** further down the line.

Ruth Castille-Black was born on July 26, 1924 in Brawley, thirty miles North of the California/Mexican border, East of San Diego. With parents Ira and Rosa Walder, the year-old Ruth moved to East Los Angeles where they all attended the First Baptist Church. Ira was a foundry worker who labored over crucibles of molten steel. Rosa was the only soloist to come forward and sing in the **First Baptist Church Choir** who vocalized without music. When Ruth was four, she sang alongside her mother in the choir. She had the loudest voice and frequently remembered the words to the hymns. In these respects, she always stood out from the rest. Fellow choristers were glad to be able to pick up verses that had carelessly slipped their memory.

Ruth loved going to church and wanted to accompany her parents to services during the week, but homework came first. She joined the B.Y.P.U. (the Baptist Young People's Training Union), a Sunday school type of organization, that taught bible study during the evenings. The B.Y.P.U. set up a mixed gender, children of all ages choral group in which the young Ruth sang. In 1938, the fourteen-year-old Ruth Walder, along with her parents, switched to St. Paul's Baptist Church on Twenty-first and Naomi Streets, a block from Central Avenue, the hub of popular Afro-American musical activity. **Sallie Martin** and her pianist **Julie Mae Smith** came out from Chicago to give recitals at the church.

Ruth joined the junior choir and also sang duets with her sister Dora. Dora later married **R.B. Robinson**, baritone with **The Soul Stirrers** during the 1940s and 1950s. "I remember getting together with Robinson to brag on how I made more money than he did. You see, I was always paid off of the collection plate. Robinson, being in a touring outfit, often had to rely on sponsors and managers, and they sometimes didn't come through with the cash," says Black-Castille.

She graduated to the senior choir, and the church, in need of more space, moved to Fortyninth and Main Streets. The new place of worship came under the pastorship of Rev. John L. Branham from Chicago, who in turn brought out fellow Chicagoan, pianist **Gwendolyn Lightner**, to arrange for the choir. The California-bound exodus continued with the addi-

tion of **Ernie Gladney** and the great Cleveland tenor **Prof. James Earle Hines**, who led and performed with Gladney and Lightner in the famous **Goodwill Singers** who recorded for Irv. Ballin's Gotham label throughout the late 1940s. Both Gladney and Hines shared lead singing in the group, but it was Hines who possessed the more striking and elevating voice.

Branham, Cooper and Hines had all become firmly acquainted when Hines moved to Chicago to build a reputation at the annual National Baptist Conventions. At St. Paul's, Branham, Lightner and Hines built up the legendary 150-voice mixed choir with Hines directing. The last and most important defection from Chicago was Sallie Martin and her **Martin & Morris Singers** composed of Sallie (often referred to as the "mother of gospel music" for her gospel publishing, promoting and performing), her adopted daughter, contralto **Cora Martin**, singer/pianist Julia Mae Smith and **Dorothy Simmons**.

The Martin & Morris Singers became a major feature at St. Paul's while recording for Bronze, Aladdin, Dolphins of Hollywood and Exclusive Records. As attendance figures grew, the church's reputation spread, Branham went to Dick Gordon at radio KFVB who were interested in airing a regular program by remote from the church. The ministry paid for the broadcast as the church was without sponsors of any kind. KFVB, a Warner Brothers affiliate, signed the ministry to a weekly sixty-minute program, a broadcast that was to continue for ten years. Frank Brewer produced the show, and Joe Adams did the announcing.

Branham, Hines and Lightner, between them, prepared the choir for broadcast. Through syndication, the choir was heard all through the South and up the West Coast. **The St. Paul Choir** of L.A. became one of the first West Coast choruses to record for a major record label. The ministry signed with Paul Weston at Capitol Records in April 1947. Their first release, "I'm So Glad (Jesus Lifted Me)," became the choir's radio theme. "I'm So Glad" also turned into a strong-selling record for the Los Angeles-based **Voices of Victory** in 1953 when they recorded the chart for Decca. **Thurston G. Frazier**, the choir's composer and arranger, was a close friend of Lightner's. The two later worked together with **The Voices Of Hope Choir**.

All royalties from recordings went straight into the church's account, where it was used to

pay for radio airtime. At St. Paul's, Hines formed a **New Goodwill Singers** group. This was composed of Prof. Hines, Ernie Gladney, **Gwendolyn Cooper** (piano), **Wilbert Pritchard** and Ruth Black-Castille. "We toured throughout the South constantly, appearing mostly at school auditoriums," says Black-Castille. "We always headlined, local groups opened for us," she adds. "Hines was good to us, and he got along well with everyone." A few handbills and advance radio publicity were all they had to announce their concerts. De-

Black-Castille.

She met and married Milton Castille, a partnership that survives to this day. In 1948, Sallie Martin replaced Gwendolyn Lightner as choir director. Lightner went off to play piano for The Voices Of Hope Choir directed by Thurston G. Frazier. Frazier was music director with two other major Los Angeles choirs, **The Victory Baptist**, at which Billy Preston's mother Robbie served as pianist, and **The Opportunity Baptist** on East Twenty-third Street, where **Doris Akers** served as musical director.

The St. Paul's Capitol recording contract ended and was not renewed. "I then joined the **Simmons-Akers Gospel Singers** just after they went from a trio (and had guested at our church) to a quartet and had recorded for Score Records (an Imperial subsidiary). The group included Dorothy Simmons, Doris Akers (piano), **Louise Bird**, myself, and one other whose name I have forgotten. I was with the group when Doris wrote "Lead Me, Guide Me," and I helped out on the arrangements to "You Can't Beat God Giving" with Doris and Thurston. I was singing in the group when I moved to San Francisco in 1951 and continued to travel with them for two more years."

In 1954, Black-Castille joined the El Bethel Baptist Church under the pastorate of Rev. J.B. Willis. A year later, **Faifest Wagoner**, Oakland's "Mother of Gospel Music," organized a group called **The Gospel Tones** out of some of the stronger voices at the church. Members included Ruth Black-Castille, **Ella Jamerson-Haynes**, **Ronnie Brown**, **Rochelle (Joann) Forks** and **Barbara Gliton**. The Gospel Tones, a.k.a. Angelaires, sang around Bay Area churches for four or five years. Black-Castille continued to give guest performances at the Third Baptist Church in San Francisco and at The National Baptist Convention. She later joined the Tabernacle of Faith Missionary Baptist Church at 1414 Valencia Street in San

Francisco and currently serves at this ministry as head of the Church Mothers Guild. On Sunday July 19, 1998, a musical appreciation was given at the Tabernacle of Faith in her honor. The church was filled with family, friends, and many, many fans.

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- (with the assistance of Ruth Black-Castille and Gwendolyn Lightner)

photo: courtesy Opal Nations/Last Chance Archives



*The Inspirational Tones circa 1955
(Ruth Black-Castille, back row right)*

spite this, The New Goodwill Singers stayed together for four years.

"After I made my one solo debut with the choir ("Yield Not To Temptation" / "We sure Need Him Now"), I went with the new **Sallie Martin Singers** made up of Gwen, Sallie, Cora, **Melva Williams** and myself. You can hear me singing on the sides we made for Capitol Records ("Just A Closer Walk With Thee" and "Dig A Little Deeper (In God's Love)"). I never went out of my way to solo. I always preferred to sing background. That's why you don't hear me sing lead very much," says