



"From The Old School"

The Soul Prophets of Sacramento

by Opal Louis Nations

The Soul Prophets are a bunch of tough-singing, gritty-playing hombres from California's state capitol whose roots are deeply embedded in the flesh of gut-bucket blues and the limbs of pew-burning gospel. Marcel Smith, the group's vocal powerpack, was born in 1965 and raised in the capitol city by his grandfolks who washed him in the blood of the Pleasant Hill Missionary Baptist Church in whose choir he torched the rafters. Smith's main soul-men growing up were the sweet and hard gospel pipes of Sam Cooke and Archie Brownlee plus the spiritual grace of Willie Washington, lead for The W.D. (Washington Bros. & Dosty) Gospel Singers with whom Smith later acquired his polished vocal finish.

At age 12, Smith hitched up with "Midnight Fire," a local all-male doo-wop outfit with whom he learned the rudiments of harmony. Four years later he was back in the gospel fold with The Ebony Echoes, a fleetingly extant ensemble. To sharpen his plectrum skills, Smith served a stint in The M3 Band (Marcel, Maurice and Melvin.) Marcel struck frets, Melvin slapped bass, Maurice punished drums, and all sang three-part harmony to create a kind of updated Three Clefs or Big Three Trio sound.

In 1981 W.D. tenor and guitarist Dosty quit and Smith replaced him. Here began an education in gospel technique and trickeration under the close supervision of Washington brothers Willie, Lonzie, and Clemmie. Smith also served as utility man in The South City Cobras Blues Band, a Sacramento blues blasting commando unit formidably ensconced on the Sacto music scene during the 1980s. The South City Cobras also served as prototype for the soul-dripping, hard-core Soul Prophets, born in 1986. Today's S.P. task force is composed of ex-Cobra drummer Anthony "The Heat" Brown who murdered skin in other local blues cells as well as served with The Gospel Motivators. Second ex-Cobra disciple, guitarist Robert Nakashima, cut his chops on the Chi-Town wax of Buddy Guy and Junior Wells with whom the S.P.s have shared billing. They also appeared with Gatemouth Brown, Tower of Power, and Joe Luis Walker. Robert, whose background is also tainted with the anthems of the church,

writes most of the group's scores. Bass plucker Paul Vieira defected from Little Sonny's Blues Band before going over to The Soul Prophets.

Testimony begins with the Little-Milton-like "Doin' Time," replete with Smith's vocal brimstone and Nakashima's fancy fast fingered fretwork. "Nothing left to burn" changes mood with its searing sax figures throttled by Greg Salsedo and solid Brown drum support. Smith works the vocals with firm conviction. Clay Hammond's "Part time love" is sound-painted perfectly with its anguished guitar breaks and deep-soul vocal embellishments. Smith gives one of his most stunning performances on this classic tear-stained supplication. On "My heart told a lie" we hear the Cooke-ing side of Smith's vocal prowess. Sweetly and soulfully rendered, "My heart told a lie" could have been penned by Sam or brother L.C. Cooke. The song renders yet another facet of Smith's extraordinary talent. It is hard to believe that a singer born after the death of his most beloved idol can so easily grasp Sam's feel and touching simplicity in this tribute to the great soulmaster's artistry.

With Eddie Floyd's "I never found a girl" Smith adds throaty grit to the original as well as turn in a creditable performance on Hammond organ. Smith's gospel-tinged testimony takes the song to newfound places. Nakashima's rendering of Freddy King's "San-Ho-Zay" gives this string-snapping instrumental a fresh spin. "Heaven help the lonely" sees Smith back in his Cooke-ing mode coupled with nice high-wail vocal harmony backgrounds and the usual Nakashima pyrotechnics.

The Sacramento News and Review has favorably compared Smith's impassioned vocals to those of Bland and Milton. Of Nakashima they state that his tone, chops, and attack are "hot enough to sear steak." All this most certainly applies to the title track, "Old School." "Put these blues away" matches a sweet mid-tempo riff with case-hardened vocals and firey fretwork.

The program closes with a back-ally reading of "I'd rather go blind," a song made popular by Etta James who lifted it from a refrain recorded by Gloria Walker. Smith takes the song straight to gospel paradise with his wails, screams, howls, and emotive testimony, while Nakashima lets loose a torrent of fretful abuse. The effect is truly awesome. During the golden days of 1992, The Soul Prophets were deservedly chosen as finalists at The Long Beach National Blues Talent Search. In 1993 the guys won a SAMMIE (Sacramento Area Music Award) for Best Blues Band. 1994? Who knows, maybe a nationwide tour? Global recognition? Whatever happens, the quest for the almost perfect form of electric blues is certainly attainable and is demonstrated here with a tinderbox of grit and passion.

– Opal Louis Nations, 1999