



The Gospel Side of Specialty Records – The Post-War Period

by Opal Louis Nations

A historical backdrop:

It is generally acknowledged that almost from the start of Art Rupe's involvement in the country's popular vernacular musics, gospel and spiritual expressions were among his keenest passions. He would often drop in on a church gospel program and sometimes shed a tear when moved by a particular jubilee quartet spinning on a phonograph. Rupe told me that during his boyhood he was exposed to gospel music emanating from the open windows in the summer from the African American Baptist church in his hometown neighborhood in Pennsylvania.

Rupe did not fit the stereotypical hard-nosed, cash-driven, stogie-stompin' record mogul. He was an intelligent, quiet, analytical and compassionate character who not only got involved in disseminating black talent to make a quick buck but genuinely enjoyed the musics he put out. At the close of gospel's golden age, when the 1960s came around, the popular music industry began to transform itself into one that conjoined politics with culture.

1964 saw the advent of "The British Invasion." A year later rock & roll had fully matured into rock and its separate audiences had blended into one and, says Philip H. Ennis in his 1992 book, *The Seventh Stream* (the seven different types of popular

music, published by Wesleyan University Press), the musical materials and performers from the separate streams were combined to form a new and different idiom with its own artists and music. Rupe felt no longer in touch with what was going on and ceased to release fresh product into 1969. Reissues started to emerge in 1970.

Rupe started in the record business in early 1944, when Robert Scherman proprietor of Premier Records, persuaded him to invest a few hundred dollars in his new, fledgling Atlas recording company on 8548 Sunset Boulevard. Atlas was set up to capture the music of the cocktail combo craze and signed Nat King Cole, the Three Blazes and Frankie Laine among others to the label. Somehow Atlas lost money despite the release schedule that continued on into the close of 1947.

Rupe severed his ties with Scherman after only a few weeks. He anticipated that hot boogie woogie would supplant cocktail blues and in the summer set up the Juke Box label to support it. Rupe's first efforts sold very well and he found himself in need of nationwide distribution as well as business guidance. Rupe partnered with Al Middleman and Eli Oberstein of the New York-based Sterling / Hit Records to get his Juke Box product properly distributed. Rupe begrudgingly became a record plant manager. The break with Sterling / Hit Records came in the fall of 1946 when the ever-vigilant Rupe discovered errors in the sales figures. Rupe retained his Juke Box masters after the dissolution.

With all the components now at his disposal, Rupe took the final leap and established Specialty Records Inc. around the same time as his break with Sterling in August 1946 at 2719 West Seventh Street in Los Angeles. A 500 series was born. Twenty-five releases constituted the first series, stretching from August 1946 to April 1948. The initial five had previously been issued on his Juke Box imprint. By the fall of 1946 Rupe seemed to be primarily occupied with the work of Joe Lutcher, Jump Jackson, Roy Milton and Jimmy Liggins. The last twenty releases reflected the jump-blues focus. Joe Lutcher's "Rockin Boogie" (512) later saw reissue on the 300 series.

In 1947 Atlas Records recorded one of Rupe's favorite gospel quartets, the Zion Travelers. Too bad Rupe was not around by then— the potency of the two releases probably would have improved with his input. Rupe was partly involved with the releases of Sterling's three wonderful jubilee aggregations: The Sunshine, Smith and Diamond quartets. The Smith Jubilees were the sharply dressed quartet that Fanita Barrett's father sang lead in (Fanita sang in the Blossoms.) The Smiths were a class act. The Sunshines were a fine rhythmic jubilee group lead by the impressive R.H. Jennings. The Diamonds were marked by a strong high tenor and a broad harmonic sound.

Rupe stopped his Juke Box release operation four months before the introduction of the 300 series. However, it took him until December 1947 before he was able to launch his first three releases, all recorded by the Southern Harmonizers (more on them later

In December 1947 The American Federation of Musicians had just called a second recording ban (the first was in July 1942 when the AFM wanted a portion of the price of each record to go into a fund for retired musicians – gradually the major labels conceded in 1943 and 1944.) The second ban again concerned the financial welfare of musicians. Sales of recordings had doubled between 1945 and 1946. Record companies could well afford a musicians' raise. Record manufacturers such as Decca, Columbia, Apollo, Philo, Capitol and RCA were disallowed the hiring of union

musicians until the strike was settled in December 1948. The initial strike announcement gave record companies a chance to stockpile product. Others (mainly the small independents) hired non-union musicians. Rupe put out ten gospel records during the strike, but only one was recorded during the ban. Seven were from stockpiles and two were a-cappella from midway through the strike.

While all this fuss was going on in support of musicians, the gospel quartet singers who, if solidly jubilee in style, recorded in a-cappella. Although many of them enjoyed increased studio time during the ban, some resented the fact that they should be treated without regard to better pay and conditions. This was when Abraham Battle stepped up to the plate. Battle was born in Haynesville, Louisiana and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area during World War II. He sang in the Starlight Quartet and legendary Southern Travelers who recorded for Bob Geddins' Big Town label. The Southern Travelers became one of the Bay Area's leading quartets under Battle's expert training and management.

After talking with various other sympathetic quartets, Battle created the Standard Jubilee Singers Alliance. They held a convention and organized themselves into what they hoped would become nationwide chaptered affiliations with state presidents representing gospel outfits of all kinds. Every state contributed to a national fund that would benefit every member upon retirement. Problems came about when the nationally known groups found they had to contribute as much to the fund as lesser known groups. All enjoyed the same sized retirement deal. Quartets such as the Pilgrim Travelers and Soul Stirrers felt that they deserved a larger slice of the retirement package over those groups that were lesser known. Then, as the organization got off the ground, more and more of the funds' kitty was being used to cover other expenditures, and the alliance eventually fell apart. All was not lost, however, as Battle and his friends managed to salvage what was left to form the American Singers Alliance. They purchased a large building for the housing of retired gospel singers and set up programs to train and promote gospel artists.

In Late June 1941, in response to A. Phillip Randolph's threatened march by the N.A.A.C.P. on the Capitol, Roosevelt finally issued an executive order to end workplace discrimination. In response, Lockheed and Vega aircraft manufacturers opened their doors to skilled black workers. African Americans had composed an insignificant portion of migrant workers to Los Angeles up to this point. The Armed Services had depleted most of the pool of skilled and semi-skilled aircraft employees. Now Lockheed, Douglas, Kaiser and the Long Beach shipyards became large employers of working minorities.

African Americans seeking a better life flocked into Southern California from the poor Southern states to fill war-created jobs. Many of the migrants sang in gospel groups back home. Some of these moved to the Los Angeles area and reformed their quartets when they arrived. Others came intact. These quartets included many "soldiers" from Houston, Texas – the Southern Gospel Singers, Friendship Gospel Singers and Heaven Bound Gospel Singers. From Dallas came the Golden Wings. The Soul Comforters came from New Orleans and the Ohio Wonders from Memphis, just to give a few examples.

A slightly different situation came about in the San Francisco Bay Area. Kaiser and others placed ads in newspapers through the Southlands for blue collar workers to fill jobs in the Oakland and Richmond shipyards and spare parts depots. Many

thousands of African-Americans came and they too consisted of numerous gospel quartet singers. These included the Greater New Hope Gospel Singers from Houston and the Pilgrim Travelers from Terrell, Texas. Even the Soul Stirrers from Chicago stuck around the Bay Area for awhile, enjoying the concerts and programs sponsored by the freshly vitalized black churches and spiritual storefronts that sprang up in the East Bay.

Our backdrop, against which indies like Southern California's Specialty Records operated during the 1940s, would not be complete without the inclusion of the Los Angeles Gospel Renaissance. As Prof. Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje states in her book, "California Soul" (University of California Press, 1998), Pastor John L. Branham of St. Paul Baptist Church was one of the key innovators who introduced and implemented traditions that altered the performance and development of black sacred music in Los Angeles. Branham gave impetus to the black music tradition during the early Post-War years. Coming from Chicago, Branham brought West some of the Windy City's leading gospel figures. These included James Earle Hines of the Good Will Singers, Cora and Sallie Martin and piano and choir directing genius, Gwen Lightner. Branham was inspired by Thomas A. Dorsey and the Gospel Singers who made frequent visits to the Los Angeles area in the late 1930s. Into this groundswell of "new" gospel music talent came the Jubilaires from Florida and the noted Kansas City Soul Revivors from Missouri.

At the close of World War II, thousands of San Francisco Bay Area blue collar workers found themselves out of work. This impacted the gospel singers. Some managed to settle in the Bay Area as did the Paramounts and the Rising Star Gospel Singers. Others returned home while some headed South in search of greener pastures. These included the recorded Nightingale Jubilaires and Mountain Star Harmonizers from Richmond. If one were to describe the typical, generally accepted Los Angeles gospel group vocal sound, say from the Post-War period, it would be similar to a typical street corner singing vocal group – soft, smooth, close and soulful, the exceptions being the more sanctified aggregations like the Mighty Clouds of Joy and Los Angeles Angels.

A Mrs. Greenwood (whom we shall talk about later) was instrumental in bringing gospel talent to Rupe as was pioneering black disc jockey Joe Adams a little later on.

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The artists:

We know almost nothing about **the Southern Harmonizers** who recorded in December 1947. When Lee Hildebrand and I conducted a search of the Specialty tapes and records library we found neither masters, shellac recordings, tapes nor transfers by the group. We have had to dig up shellac copies from collectors (including yours truly) to come up with three of the six sides. Others were found in Stanford's Music Library. Trying to find sides by this group is as difficult as turning up gospel sides on Rupe's Fidelity label (three releases) issued in 1951 and 1952. All we know is at least three Southern Harmonizers groups were around at this time. One of these was Caucasian.

With the help of gospel researcher Bob Marovitch, I think we are able to come up with a few "educated suppositions." The original Southern Harmonizers were formed

in the Chicago area in the early 1930s. The founders of this quartet, William Hardison, Henry Redd and Riley Chappelle, moved to Los Angeles in 1935 and formed the West Coast Harmonizers who never recorded (as far as I know.) A second group of Southern Harmonizers were put together in the Mid-West during World War II. The Chicago Defender for January 26, 1946 tells us that the group traveled the Mid-West sponsored by the Negro Chamber of Commerce to give church and school concerts of African American folk songs, gospel songs and spirituals.

To launch his 300 series, Rupe chose to issue three records by this group accompanied by Essie Hayden, the only person mentioned by name anywhere, just before the recording ban. To complicate matters, there was a Southern Harmonizers quartet founded by Leonard Bell and Richard Orange in 1942 in East St. Louis. All original members are now deceased. The proprietor of Quinn's Records in East St. Louis has conducted substantial research but has found no evidence that they ever recorded for Specialty Records.

This leaves us with noted pianist Essie Hayden. It is my contention that pianist / singer Essie Hayden and her gospel-singing husband William Hudson founded the quartet. Essie built a substantial reputation in the Mid-West playing behind gospel artists. Both Essie and William are now dead. In all likelihood, Essie's Southern Harmonizers were a family group including William Hudson. Their style is rather odd for a jubilee quartet of that vintage. The high tenor's extended notes are not generally considered part of jubilee canon. This group, to my knowledge, never recorded again. The only facts Rupe can recall is that he recorded the group in Chicago and that there definitely existed two separate outfits.

The Pilgrim Travelers were one of this country's leading quartets during the decade following World War II. Their unique sound and style were based almost entirely on rhythm accentuated with repetitive chanting and heavy foot patting. The group was formed in Houston in 1933. Original members included Joe Johnson, founder and manager, brothers Willie and Johnny Davis, Presley Thomas and Walter Lattimore. All were singers at the Pleasant Grove Baptist. The group split up in 1942. Johnny and Willie Davis and Joe Johnson moved out to California while picking up cousins Kylo Turner and Keith Barber in Cleveland, Texas.

By 1946, the Pilgrim Travelers were composed of Kylo Turner, tenor, James W. Alexander, tenor and manager, Willie Davis, Isaih H. Robinson, baritone, and Raphael Taylor, bass. While on tour in the San Francisco Bay Area, the group recorded for Bob Geddins' Big Town label in Oakland. Although Geddins issued the resulting six songs on three Big Town 78s, the masters were soon sold to Jack Lauderdale and reissued on Down Beat in Los Angeles. Most of the Pilgrim Travelers' loyal fans resided in Los Angeles, so this turned out to be a good deal for the group.

The three records were in the jubilee style and had little to do with the later "walking-in-rhythm" format. In 1946, the Pilgrim Travelers were noticed on an L.A. program by a Mrs. Greenwood. Greenwood was a gospel promoter, record label owner and proprietor of two significant gospel record stores on Central Avenue. Greenwood took the group under her wing, found them work and recorded innumerable singles on them. The number of sides waxed is not known, partly due to the fact that most were made to be sold at her concerts.

By this time, Keith Barber, baritone, had replaced Willie Davis. James W. Alexander possessed extremely well-honed management skills and was able to secure,

with Mrs. Greenwood's help, a one-year contract with Art Rupe on Christmas Eve of 1947. This was a standard contract that demanded a minimum of eight sides during the twelve-month period. The group was paid \$78.00 per side with a three-cent royalty for every record sold. A second, similar contract was signed on September 15, 1949. All six of the outfit's 1948 releases were big sellers for Rupe and the group. This was the Pilgrim Travelers' second most successful year yet the best was yet to come.

Alexander also served as talent scout for Rupe. With Rupe's insistence, the Pilgrims' trademark "walking-in-rhythm" came into full flourish in 1947-1948. Rupe explains the origins of the foot-patting signature. "During one of our first recording sessions their heavy foot patting was audible filtering through to the vocal mikes. The engineer complained that he couldn't isolate this "interference." I decided to place another mike close to the floor to pick up and accentuate the beat of their feet – and it accentuated rhythm to the recording. Hence, "walkin-in-rhythm" was the sales feature I noted on the label."

All Specialty artists had promotional blurbs written for them. These were broadly distributed among jocks and promoters. The March 1949 handout read as follows: "The Pilgrim Travelers broke all attendance records at the Golden Gate Auditorium, in New York and at the Brooklyn Music Academy. They appeared at The Laurel Gardens Auditorium and at The Newark Convention Hall. On a tour of the South, 6,500 persons showed up at the City Auditorium in Birmingham."

By 1950, the Pilgrim Travelers were at the pinnacle of their power. Hits included "Jesus Met The Woman At The Well" and "Mother Bowed." 1950 also brought disaster. Early in the year the group was involved in a car accident. All five members were injured and taken to The Palm Springs Community Hospital. Luckily only Keith Barber suffered major injuries to his neck, which wrecked his voice. Rupe mailed three checks to the hospital to cover expenses. This included paying the group, the hospital and the doctors. Barber's unique baritone voice was never the same again. The group kept him on until his departure during the summer of 1956.

Lead tenor Kylo Turner was let go a year earlier. Excessive drinking and womanizing had taken its toll. The group was released from their contract by the fall of 1956, and they never rose to great glory again.

Having been fortunate enough to interview **the Golden Keys**, this writer knows a good deal about them. The fact that they were a one-shot recording deal who recorded during the ban suggests that Rupe may have leased the two sides in an arrangement with Talmadge Emerson to help gain a stronger sales foothold in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Golden Keys, a.k.a. the Golden Four, were organized in 1947 by Talmadge Emerson who ran a gospel record store / distributorship in Oakland. The group was one of the first in the Bay Area to accompany themselves with guitar. Emerson not only managed the group but financially supported it. Membership in and out of the outfit was fluid. At the time of the one Specialty outing soldiers included Thomas Rucker, first tenor, James Price, second tenor, Archie Gatling, baritone, Isiah N. Claiborne, bass, with Ernest Conway, guitar.

"God rode" (Specialty 311) was a fabulous congregational gospel song best remembered today in the Davis Sisters version. Rupe must have really enjoyed it. Too bad it never really garnered effective national exposure – it deserved not to disappear into obscurity. Soon after the Specialty release the group disbanded with some

members entering the Service. A group calling themselves the Golden Keys or 5 Golden Keys was recorded at the Olympic Auditorium in September 1951. They are a different outfit. So are the boys who recorded an unissued Hollywood session in late 1954.

Soon after the dissolution, Talmadge formed a second Golden Keys outfit. Taking four members from the former Keys of Harmony and three from the former Golden Eagles, Talmadge built a seven member group to handle last minute replacement problems. This second semi-professional outfit included ex-Golden Eagles Clarence Van Hook (who later became a solo gospel recording artist and recording studio proprietor), Alec Bernstein and Talmadge Emerson himself. This group traveled on weekends to Fresno, Madera, Modesto, Bakersfield, Tulare and Los Angeles. Once later on they toured Texas.

In 1955 they recorded for the Pasadena-based H & W Records. The lineup at this point included the impressive James Black, lead, Sam Wells, second lead, Clarence McGhee, tenor, Leroy Watkins, bass, J.B. Martin, second tenor and Leroy Leonard, guitar. Yet another configuration of members recorded for Bob Geddings' Irma and for their own Golden Keys imprint during the 1960s. The Golden Keys had vast potential but being a part-time group and anchored to home by family, their popularity only extended as far as the Southlands.

Wynona Carr was an extraordinary talent. In fact, I would go as far as saying she was excessively talented. She was an extremely prolific songwriter and wrote dozens of imaginative lyrics to go with her charts. Thirty-two of her songs are registered with Rupe's Venice Music Publishing Company including "Give me your hand to hold" (1959), which she creatively shared with pop singer Ed Townsend, "Our Father" (1951), which was co-written with James Alexander of the Pilgrim Travelers, her biggest hit, "Life is a ballgame" (1953), at that time, the gospel song with the longest lyric, and the amusing "Nursery rhyme rock" (1956).

Wynona Carr was possessed of an amazing vocal range that matched gospel's finest divas. She recorded with Rev. C.L. Franklin's New Bethel Baptist Choir (1954) and directed Franklin's choir while still in her teens, sang duets with Brother Joe May (1950) and went out on the road with Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Marie Knight and the Fairfield Four, among others. On top of this, Wynona Carr was stunningly attractive and took full advantage of the fact by dressing in the style of Anna May Wong, the temptress of the Orient. She was proficient on piano and possessed a comic wit.

Her problem was that her copious gifts outsized and overran her mental ability to deal with her day-to-day life. She called herself a "problem child" and hated Rupe's "Sister Wynona" moniker. Life's little pitfalls always managed to get in the way of what could have been a triumphant career. She would fail to show up at pre-arranged engagements because she had no car or money. Her purse was snatched at a railroad station and Rupe was asked to help. Her mother's health prevented her from filling studio sessions. She got into a car accident and Rupe had to help finance new wheels.

The people around her took full advantage of her child-like ways of coping with her day-to-day problems. Her calamitous mishaps reminded one of "I Love Lucy" in reruns. In the end, the feeling of helplessness and despair lead to drug abuse. At the close of the 1950s, after almost half a decade of having recorded wonderfully strong and gritty R&B recordings, she managed to secure a contract with Reprise (1961-1963) for whom she cut a few singles and a pop album of forgettable charts. She always

wanted to be able to cross over into a broader audience, but her decision to go with a company who really did not know how to deal with her outsized talent was a bad mistake. The album sank like a brick. Wynona Carr died on May 12, 1976.

Back in late 1945 people were saying that Wynona Carr sounded like Marion Anderson. Rupe was so impressed he brought her from Cleveland out to Hollywood to record with the Austin McCoy Trio. The resultant "Each day" cut in the style of Sister Rosetta Tharpe and the Sam Price Trio made waves and was impressive enough to have Sisters Emily Bram and Ethel Davenport make covers soon thereafter.

Wynona Carr's second session held in Philadelphia in August 1949 failed to move Rupe into putting out a follow-up. A third session in March 1950 brought us the upbeat "What do you know about Jesus" but sales figures were not very encouraging. Rupe then tried a different strategy. He recorded Carr again with Brother Joe May and the combination seemed to work sales-wise for a while. After two more not too lucrative solo sessions in 1950, Rupe began to wonder whether all her little financial bailout episodes were really worth it. But as luck would have it, the April 1952 Hollywood session brought us the imaginative "The Ball Game" (Life is a ballgame) which sold well over a long period of time. Carr thought she had a winning formula and recorded two more colorful opuses, "Dagnet for Jesus" and "15 Rounds for Jesus," both of which Rupe failed to use as follow-ups due to his fear of offending the church establishment.

Carr wanted to cross to R&B and Rupe began to think of Carr as merely a vehicle for writing songs. Rupe's attitude worked in Carr's favor as she was easily able to persuade Rupe to try her as a secular talent. Carr's secular output beginning in late 1955 did sell in worthwhile quantities and she was able to stay with the label until late 1959.

Carr's one-time partner, **Brother Joe May**, was a different story. May's relationship with Rupe and Specialty, which lasted almost a decade, started on a warm, convivial note back in October 1949 and ended on a sour one on February 17, 1958. Rupe's last session with May was held with the Pilgrim Travelers on August 2, 1955. For three years after that, May fought Rupe in an effort to persuade him to release him from his contract. Rupe refused to let May go and contractually renewed his yearly option to prevent him from going elsewhere. Rupe wanted May to cross over and sing blues, and he refused. Rupe told me he did not pressure May into singing blues, although the suggestion was made in correspondence with the artist. Rupe stubbornly declined to put out May's gospel sides that were stockpiled. Rupe used poor sales as an excuse not to record him. May groveled and pleaded. His February 1959 letter to Rupe stated he had nine mouths to feed and that they were starving to death and Rupe was the cause of it. Only then did Rupe cave in and free May from contractual obligations.

Rupe insists that he terminated May's contract simply because he was not selling anymore, but evidence suggests that fresh material was not being released after August 1955.

Joseph W. May was born in the tiny country town of Macon, Mississippi to Warren and Aslean May on November 9, 1912. The Mays were poor but were able to scratch out a living. They attended the Church of God because it was the sole source of comfort to them in time of need. He began singing church solos at the age of nine, then joined the senior choir at The Little Church Out On The Hills. At first he was asked to sing at local churches but as his reputation for fine, strong singing spread, he wound

up appearing throughout Mississippi and Alabama as a soloist in the Church of God quartet.

After finishing up high school he worked as a day laborer to help the family in Macon. Joe and his wife Viola moved to East St. Louis in 1941 after Charles and Annette (his singing children) were born. In St. Louis, Missouri he was hired as a laborer at the Monsanto Chemical plant. He continued to sing in his off hours. News spread of his talent and he was seen by Willie Mae Ford Smith, six years May's senior. Smith settled in St. Louis in the early 1920s and became an Evangelist at the Church of God Apostolic where she saw May and was much impressed by his talent. May became Smith's most coveted pupil. Smith is credited with originating the introduction of the "sermonette" during the course of rendering a song.

May, like Smith, possessed a voice that was strong, rich and powerful. She dubbed him the "Thunderbolt of the Middle West." It was at the National Convention's soloists concert at The Second Baptist Church in Los Angeles that May was seen by Rupe's gospel talent scout and Pilgrim Travelers leader, James W. Alexander. May auditioned for Rupe and was signed to a contract in August 1949. On September 10, he attended his first session in Hollywood, the date that was to bring to light his most popular and most frequently requested anthem, Thomas A. Dorsey's "Search me Lord."

It was no wonder gospel fans rushed to pick up a copy. May had been singing the song in concert for years. The record buyer never quite gets a grasp of May's awesome powers which rarely come across on record. May appeared twice on T.V. Gospel Time in 1964. For many this was the first time one was able to observe May's fearsome stature and commanding presence. A bear of a man, May stood four-square on stage. This brought to mind Ruth Davis of the Davis Sisters.

February 1950's release of "Do you know Him" met with more churchgoing public acceptance. May soon quit his job at Monsanto and went out on the Gospel Highway. He often appeared in "sparring" concerts with Mahalia Jackson, the couple billed as "The World's Greatest Gospel Singer versus The Thunderbolt of the Middle West." At the peak of his career during the early 1950s, May was earning the princely sum of \$50,000 a year, an amount unmatched by most other gospel artists at the time.

May's move to Nashboro Records of Nashville in 1958 did not serve him too well. Nashboro's distribution setup did not adequately cover those areas where most of May's fans lived, namely the West, Midwest and Northeast. May always responded to those in need of wanting to hear him sing without thought to expense or road mileage traveled. He would try to show up at a moment's notice. It was on such a trip to Cairo, Georgia on July 13, 1972 that May passed into a coma. He died the next day at the Archibald Memorial Hospital in Thomasville from a cerebral hemorrhage.

Much has been written these last two decades about the Soul Stirrers. Currently there are three books available on the life and times of the group. In order of historical importance they are: (1) "Dream Boogie (The Triumph of Sam Cooke)" by Peter Guralnick (Little, Brown and Co., 2005), (2) "You Send Me (The Life and Times of Sam Cooke)" by Daniel Wolff (William Morrow & Co., 1995), and (3) "Our Uncle Sam (The Sam Cooke Story from His Family's Perspective)" by Erik Greene (Trafford Publishing, 2005.) There are also magazine-length essays by Lee Hildebrand, Ray Funk, myself and others.

Instead of repeating much of what has already been said many times, I am going to turn to first-hand impressions – excerpts from a taped interview with Specialty's Art

Rupe, transcriptions of which were found in the Specialty archives (interviewer unknown.) I have only edited these transcriptions for brevity and clarity. In Rupe's own words: "When I signed the Soul Stirrers to Specialty in February, 1950, we did it without an audition. In fact, they were virtually the only artists we did not audition first, so great was their prior reputation. They recorded whenever they came to town. Constant touring kept them out on the road most of the time, so they weren't often available. Head arrangements were shared by all the members of the group. Crain was maybe the member with the most input. Old hymnbooks were the source of their material, primarily the words. They came up with their own arrangements to P.D. (public domain) songs. One of our main problems was establishing copyrights for all our gospel artists.

The Soul Stirrers were first and foremost performers. One or two of them might have had deep religious convictions. Some started out as ministers. I feel as they got along they realized that their function was more as religious entertainers no different from anybody else. They were very skilled and spent many hours in practice. They gave something unique of themselves. Their power shows in how well they have survived up to today. They were all perfectionists. They were just like a basketball team. When one threw a note, someone would respond to it. Beautiful thing.

They even paid the same attention to songs that weren't very interesting, or didn't sell. It would still be polished. In concert they would stretch a song to ten or twenty minutes so as to make the audience fall out. Soloists were extemporaneous, background was the same and solid. They put up over 100,000 road miles a year. Never in front of less than 500 people. The big programs in auditoriums with other groups usually took place on weekends. They would hit smaller towns on Mondays and Tuesdays, the churches. Early on they took what people paid at the door. Later we put them through a booking agency and paid them a guaranteed sum. When they got going the group charged \$300 or \$400 a night.

They had their groupies, religious types. They'd take a drink, go to after hours clubs like everyone else. They wanted to convey a straight-laced image. Their service was to give people a religious experience in song. Groups were jealous of one another, like children. You pushed their records, why don't you push mine, sort of thing. Groups were fashion-plates. They had flash. They were showmen. They'd call out "Sell it Sam!" Sam was shaped in large measure by Soul Stirrers rehearsals. He was a very intense person, never showed he was nervous. When you talked to him he studied you. He'd listen, take in impressions with his pores as well as his eyes and ears, a perfectionist. He would work for hours at practice and at rehearsal. He sometimes gave the impression of being a little bit cocky, very sure of himself. To prove your point you had to show him. I had no problems with Sam as a singer – he would respond. I encouraged his melisma as I do all artists.

I had problems keeping them on-mike without inhibiting them. We recorded with two mikes, lead on one, group on the other." Bunny Robyn engineered and Rupe himself conducted most of the sessions at Master Recorders. [Note: The Soul Stirrers began recording at Master Recorders in Hollywood in March 1954, after seven Universal Recorder sessions from February 1950 to July 1953.]

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The origins and history of the Soul Stirrers up to their signing with Specialty in February, 1950:

- 1926 S. Roy Crain formed The Mt. Pilgrim Baptist Church teenage quartet in Trinity, Texas. S. Roy Crain, Reed Love, Bennie Abbott or El Connie Davis and Lloyd Bailey. Later switched names to Soul Stirrers
- 1930 S. Roy Crain became baritone for the New Pleasant Green Gospel Singers in Houston, Texas formed by Rev. Walter Lee Le Beaux in the 1920s. Le Beaux, Edward D. Rundless, Crain, A.L. Johnson and O.W. Thomas. Switched names to Soul Stirrers
- Early 1936 Group recorded as the Five Soul Stirrers of Houston for Library of Congress. Rev. W.L. Le Beaux, 1st tenor, Ernest R. Rundless, 2nd tenor, Senior Roy Crain, utility, A.L. Johnson baritone, O.W. Thomas, bass
- Late 1936 Replacement members basso J.J. Farley came aboard. Group moved to Trinity area
- Early 1937 Replacement member tenor Rebert H. Harris came aboard
- Late 1937 Group moved to Chicago from Trinity, Texas
- 1939-1940 Group recorded as the Five Soul Stirrers in Los Angeles for the Bronze label. Harris, Rundless, Mozel Franklin, S.R. Crain, Jesse J. Farley
- Early 1945 Group recorded as the Five Soul Stirrers in Los Angeles for the Bronze label. Members changed to Harris, Crain, Franklin, Thomas L. Bruster and R.B. Robinson, baritone, and Farley
- Late 1945 Group recorded as the Five Gospel Souls for J. Mayo Williams' Ebony label in Chicago. James Heywood Medlock replaced Mozel L. Franklin
- 1946 Group signed with Ed and Leo Mesner's Aladdin label of Los Angeles. Harris & Crain, tenors, Medlock, Bruster and Robinson, baritones, Farley, bass.
- May 1946-
Feb. 1947 Group records in Chicago as Soul Stirrers
- Mid-1947 Group recorded with Willie Eason in Chicago for Aladdin Records
- Nov. 1947 Soul Stirrers continued to record for Aladdin in Chicago
- Late 1948 Baritone Leroy Taylor came aboard
- Early 1950 Tenor Paul Foster replaced Leroy Taylor
- Feb. 1950 Soul Stirrers sign with Art Rupe at Specialty Records

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The under-recorded **Golden Echoes** were formed in Los Angeles by baritone William C. "Big Axe" Broadnax and tenor Wilmer M. "Little Axe" Broadnax in 1947. The Broadnax siblings were from Houston where, during the late 1930s, they had sung in the family group. By 1940, "Little Axe" had joined the Southern Gospel Singers of Los Angeles, a group started by A.L. Johnson, a one-time member of the Soul Stirrers, where, along with tenor James W. Alexander (who later joined the Pilgrim Travelers), Roscoe Castle (who later joined L.A.'s Harmony Five) and basso Frank Henderson they recorded for Leroy Hurte's Bronze label.

Other members of the original Golden Echoes (Echo) were Jimmie Copeland, baritone, and A. Singleterry, bass. They were managed by A.L. Brown. While touring on the East Coast in September, 1948, the group stopped off at the Coleman Hotel in Newark proprietored by the Coleman Brothers Gospel Quartet who ran a recording studio and record company from out of their basement. The Echoes at that point served as a means to show off the vocal talents of the Broadnaxes. In reality, Wilmer was anatomically a woman who dressed as a man. While at The Coleman, the Golden Echoes cut two outstanding records. Little Axe's fine, high tenor voice really tore into "Lift Him up," the topside of the first release. "On Mount Olive," the underside of the second release, is every bit as strong on fervor and conviction.

Soon after the Coleman session, the Broadnax siblings switched personnel and took on E. Miller and Clentis K. Williams, baritone and bass.

When Berkeley, California's Rising Star Gospel singers split up in 1949, "Little Axe" grabbed Paul Foster and Eldridge Vann (Bostic) to replace E. Miller and Clentis K. Williams. Jimmy Ricks came from the Flying Clouds of Detroit on bass and "Big Axe" went off to Atlanta to join the Five Trumpets. By the time the Golden Echoes signed with Specialty in April 1949, they were a highly skilled quartet with a sound years ahead of its time. For all this, Rupe chose to release one single on them in July 1949. It was not until 1992 that Lee Hildebrand and I chose to issue their complete and extensive session from April 5th, 1949 for the first time. Lee and I figured that Rupe just did not like "Little Axe."

Foster quit the group after the session and went with the Soul Stirrers. Four Golden Echoes sides turned up some months later on Jack Lauderdale's Down Beat label out of Los Angeles. I suspect that these were traded by Rupe (as they mostly included some of the unreleased Specialty songs probably remastered at Down Beat in July 1949.)

Unable to find work, the Golden Echoes split up for good in late 1949. "Little Axe" continued to jump from one celebrated quartet after another, first the Spirit of Memphis (1949-1953), Fairfield Four (1953-1954), Five Blind Boys of Mississippi (1959-1962) and a short-lived reconstituted Golden Echoes on Peacock (1962). He retired in 1965.

While trawling through the Specialty archives in 1994, Lee Hildebrand and I discovered a bunch of studio and master tapes on Sallie Martin accompanied by her adopted daughter Cora, among others. Some were live with or without Bro. Joe May and others were from four sessions at Universal Records in Hollywood stretching from August 1950 until June 1952 (two were issued in the 300 series). The only released Specialty-related Sallie Martin material up to this date were on four singles, taking us up to June

1951. Now we had a chance to release for the first time a whole CD's worth of Sallie's and Cora's work. This we did (see Specialty CD 7043 and three cuts included on the Specialty C D collection 7056.)

I mention all this because Sallie Martin was a pivotal figure in the development and dissemination of gospel music in Chicago and elsewhere, both before and after World War II. She was born on November 20, 1896 in Pittfield, Georgia. Orphaned at sixteen, she began singing in 1932 and joined the Dorsey Singers, Thomas A. Dorsey's gospel choir, at the Ebenezer Baptist in Chicago. After becoming Dorsey's pianist, she formed the Roberta Martin Singers (no relation) in 1935. She organized the Sallie Martin Singers in 1940 when Martin and Kenneth Morris formed the Martin & Morris (gospel sheet) Music Company on Indiana Avenue. She wrote her first gospel song, "Try Jesus, He satisfies," in 1943.

The building was also a school where students were given instruction in gospel singing. Many leading gospel songwriters like Thomas Frye and Lillian Bowles gave their publishing to Martin & Morris. Martin and Dorsey became celebrated as the "Mother" and "Father" of gospel music. Her first ventures out to the Los Angeles area began in the 1930s but she did not record there until 1944 when she signed with Bronze. Switching names to Her Singers of Joy, she recorded for Aladdin in 1947.

Two years later, after much acclaim, she switched names again to Her Nationally Famous Quintet and cut one record for Exclusive. The two songs wound up at Specialty where they were reissued by Lee Hildebrand and myself on Specialty CD 7056 in 1994. Her raucous, "born again" singing style is reminiscent of some of the old 1930s beer tavern blues singers. Her early experiences with Dorsey had a lasting effect. The pair established the National Convention of Gospel Choirs & Choruses in 1932. She penned more than one hundred gospel songs.

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Our first 125 Specialty singles take us up to April 1951. This was when Rupe's interest in gospel had reached such a peak he began to consider creating a gospel series of its own. Gospel was really grabbing notice and the market had flourished. He immediately started the 800 Specialty line, the content of which you will (I hope) encounter in our second box.

-- Opal Louis Nations
December 2010