



*The Spiritual Five, circa 1955. Standing left to right: Scottie Lee Jackson, tenor; Robert Mason, baritone; Silas Washington, lead. Bottom row: left to right: Marshall Jackson, bass; Lee Arthur Toussaint, lead. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.*

# THE (ORIGINAL) SPIRITUAL 5 ON NASHBORO RECORDS

by Opal Louis Nations

**T**he history of the Spiritual Five (or 5) gospel quartets is a long and convoluted one. The first documented Spiritual Five originated in Tyler, Texas before World War II. Members included Lonzo Lee Washington, 'Spooney', Willie Washington, Isiah Ford and Jerry Bell. According to the late Tony Harris of the Traveling Four, two later members, namely Percy Jackson and Bob Oguin, split from the Tyler group and migrated to Los Angeles.

The Los Angeles line-up, composed at various times of Oguin and Jackson, W.C. Trammel, General Allen, J.D. Somerville, Eugene Rhone, Milton Curry, Dorsey Livingston and Otis Willard, recorded for Score and Coleman Records. We know that the 1950 quartet included Trammel, Allen, Willard, Rhone, Somerville and Jackson. They were then known as the Spiritual Five Quartet. Somewhere along the line an additional Spiritual Five, also known as the Spiritual Four and Spiritual Kings, was formed in San Diego. None of seven known members were connected in any way with the L.A. outfit. In 1952 a group calling themselves the Spiritual Five recorded for Top Hat Records. The late Rev. Odis Brown of the Paramount Singers of San Francisco sang in this squad. This was probably the Percy Jackson outfit. By 1954 both groups had vanished into obscurity.

In 1953, a Chicago-based Spiritual 5 was organised. Soldiers included Marshall Jackson, bass, Silas Washington, lead, Lee Toussaint, second lead and tenor, Scottie Jackson, first tenor, Willie James Bush, third lead and Matthew Jackson, utility lead singer. All were upstanding members of the Metropolitan Baptist Church at 11 Washington Street, pastored by Rev. Ledbelly. Some members sang in the church choir. The name of the group was derived from the simple fact that they were all spiritual souls and five in number. They rehearsed sometimes at each other's homes but principally at Marshall Jackson's house in Caprini Green.

Lee Toussaint (Allen Toussaint's second cousin) had formerly sung rhythm and blues with Pirkle Lee Moses and the Five Stars of Englewood on Chicago's South Side. The Five Stars later evolved into the El Dorados of 'At My Front Door' fame on Vee Jay Records. Toussaint professes to have written songs for Pirkle Lee Moses and to have given him the authorship rights as Toussaint's family frowned on any of their kin taking up with 'lascivious' rock and roll singers.

By 1954 the Spiritual 5 were playing church suppers and local Baptist venues. Robert Mason, the group's booking manager, made frequent trips through cold and snow to make contact with Mahalia Jackson to get her support. Eventually persistence paid off and Jackson introduced the boys to Ernie Young at Nashboro Records in Nashville in February 1955. The group's first session was conducted during the spring of that year. As was usual with

Ernie Young and his relationship with the group, the boys recorded more titles than were issued. The initial release pitched the camp meeting-feel, up-tempo 'Heavenly Father' with the hypnotic, chant-like 'I've Been Born Again'.

The 2nd May issue of *Billboard* awarded both sides of the single a miserly two stars, which this writer thinks is a gross underestimate of the platters' worth. The poor rating must have affected the group's opportunities to record again as they had to wait almost a year and a half before taking another shot at the gospel big-time. In June 1956 the Spiritual 5 recorded the joyous 'Everyday Will Be The Same', lead by the beautiful high tenor warbling of Silas Washington. 'I'll Carry My Burden', the underside, is equally inspiring and full of spiritual excitement. This time, the 7th July *Billboard* Magazine assigned a deserved three-star rating to this gem of a single.

By this point, the group's reputation had grown by leaps and bounds. Extensive tours started to come their way. They even appeared on a gig at a Mobil service station in Alabama. During this period they performed on a programme with the Staple Singers. One of the Spiritual 5's most requested songs was their unique arrangement of the traditional hymn, 'Uncloudy Day' (a.k.a. 'Unclouded Day'), which Ernie Young recorded but kept on the shelf after the group's second session. One of the 'Unclouded Day' hymn's earliest documentations is accredited to the Rev. Edward W. Clayborn, a guitar-picking evangelist from New York City who recorded the song for Vocalion in January 1927. Unfortunately, Clayborn's rendering was also shelved.

It would be easy to conjecture that Roebuck Staple might have lifted Clayborn's rendering, as the evangelist often travelled to Chicago to perform and Roebuck could have caught the performance. Lee Toussaint asserts that the Staple Singers lifted the Spiritual 5 arrangement after a 1955 concert on which they shared billing. The Spiritual 5 were deeply offended by the alleged plagiarism, more so when Ernie Young refused to issue the group's version.

Despite this, the Spiritual 5 continued to tour. They travelled highways and byways in a 1955 Cadillac Fleetwood 75. Lee Toussaint handled most of the driving and was adamant about not letting anyone else share the chauffeuring.

A strange occurrence happened on a programme in Columbus, Georgia. Silas Washington was holding forth on a song called 'If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again' (a chart Nashboro issued on an Ernie's album, LP 2002). A pregnant woman in a balcony seat had fallen into a swoon and all of a sudden lost her balance. She fell to the seats below. The group thought the worst had happened. But no, quite the contrary. The woman, without a scratch to show for her fall, rose to her feet and while still in a swoon commenced to sing 'If I could hear my mother pray again' in step with Silas who had resumed his song. (Later on the group learned that the woman had named her child after Silas.)

The Spiritual 5 were also extremely fortunate in having Rev. Percell Perkins, and in particular Robert Harris from the Soul Stirrers, as tutors and voice coaches. Harris's tenure stretched to eighteen months.



*The Mighty Stars of Harmony, circa early 1960s: Lee Arthur Toussaint, bottom right. Others unknown. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations*

1957 was a busy year for the group. Outside of one Nashboro session conducted in June, which netted the eerily beautiful 'I Don't Have To Worry' with Washington's floating falsetto pipes, and the hard sung 'King's Highway', Toussaint, Jackson and Washington started on a two year spate of backgrounding sessions behind other notable Nashboro acts. The group toured with Rev. Cleophus Robinson and Sister Josephine James. The trip took them from St. Louis to Nashville. Stationed in Erie, the quartet toured Pennsylvania and New Jersey, then on through cities like Syracuse, Buffalo and Niagara Falls. These trips were shared with the Fairfield Four and Bells of Joy. They motored extensively throughout the Mid-West and down the East Coast. The group remembers sending demos they had made on Chicago's South Side to Ernie Young when touring took up much of their time.

In July 1957 the Spiritual 5 introduced the Pilgrim Jubilee Singers to Ernie Young, who signed the 'Jubes' to a two-year contract. In 1958 the Spiritual 5 traversed the Southern states with the Canton Spirituals. Somewhere around this time they toured with the Soul Stirrers, embarked on an eight-week trip with the Caravans, Swanee Quintet and Gospelairens, and appeared at Du Sable High – home turf in The Windy City with Rev. Julius Cheeks, Soul Stirrers, 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi, Dixie Hummingbirds and Swan Silvertones.

In November Ernie Young issued the ethereal 'Let Me Have A Talk' (an arrangement of 'Have A Little Talk With Jesus') and the beautifully close-knit rendering 'Trouble Will Be Over'. Spiritual 5 recording dates always seemed sparse and few and far between, a situation that clearly did not support them and bring them along.

Silas Washington was an awesome high tenor singer, up there in rank with Johnny Jones of the Swanee Quintet and Hardie Clifton of the Brooklyn Allstars. Three months prior to the November session, Toussaint, Jackson and Washington had begun backgrounding behind Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke, starting with 'I Can't See Them Now' (Nashboro 623) and finishing approximately two years later with 'Warfare' (Nashboro 675). At least nine sides bore the group's excellent support. Lee Toussaint insists that he, Jackson and Washington backed Willie Morganfield on his first Aquarium sides, a fact that escapes documentary evidence.

The Spiritual 5 had to wait a year before being called for their fifth and final Nashboro session. This resulted in the release of the sanctified 'I'm In Your Care' and the traditional 'Walk Around', lead by basso Marshall Jackson and not Jimmy Jones as stated in the Hayes/ Laughton Post War Gospel Records discography. Some time during 1960-61, the original Nashboro Spiritual 5 group split apart. Lee Toussaint insists that the hard-driving 'Joy In Jerusalem' and the tortured 'Sweet By And By' (Peacock's first release on the group), was initially cut for Nashboro). This might have meant that when Don Robey signed the boys to a contract he also purchased the two Nashboro sides, releasing them during the spring of 1962. Aurally, the overall mix and balance sound more like a Peacock endeavour than a Nashboro one, but then again Robey might have remastered the sides.

By 1963 the original Nashboro line-up had gone. Lee Toussaint signed up with Claude Ellis and the Mighty Stars of Harmony (formerly the Stars and Harmony) and the reconfigured Peacock group soldiered on into the mid-1960s with Sammie Wideman still writing many of the outfit's charts. After the release of 'Christ's Blood' / 'Call Him Up' (both lead by Wilson Pickett), the group returned to Nashboro, but by now most of the late fifties membership had quit. The original Nashboro Spiritual 5 were a tough, talented squad of dynamite singers who could have risen to greater glory had it not been for Ernie Young's lack of vision and artist development.

***Thanks to Theodore Jackson, Lee Toussaint and Scottie Lee Jackson.***