

The Story of the Stovall Sisters of Oakland, California

by Opal Louis Nations



Stovall Sisters: Nettie, Lillian, Rejoyce.

In 1970, The Stovall Sisters, composed of Nettie Stovall, Lillian Stovall Jackson and Rejoyce Stovall Moss recorded a gospel album for Warner/Reprise 'The Stovall Sisters', (LP 6446). Its sound was considered ahead of its time, a mixture of shout gospel and funk, it did not fit into either genre. Rev. James Cleveland told the group that gospel fans would find the album confusing because conceptually the music seemed neither one thing nor the other. He was right. Sale figures were poor and the group never got a second chance. One high point, though, was that they had included the original of 'Hang On In There', a song later covered successfully by Johnny Bristol and Bette Midler.

This aside, producer Norman Greenbaum heard the Warner record and concluded that they were just perfect as background singers behind a song he had written called 'Spirit In

The Sky'. The girls cut a demo. When Dorothy Morrison quit the Edwin Hawkins Singers she went to Buddha Records and cut her first solo album (Buddah SP26). The album contains a Greenbaum arrangement of 'Spirit In The Sky' with backing singers. "This is not us!" says Rejoyce Stovall. Norman Greenbaum had taken off the Stovalls' backing track and had replaced it with another unnamed female set of singers.

While Morrison's family hailed from Longview, Texas, the Stovalls go all the way back to the slavery days at Stovall's plantation, according to Rejoyce who has conducted considerable ancestral research. The plantation was situated several miles south of Friar's Point, east of the Mississippi River in Coahoma County, Mississippi. "We got our name from the plantation", says Rejoyce who also thinks the family had some kinship with the Morganfield family of which Muddy Waters was a member.

Although primarily African American, the Stovalls were also a mix of German, Blackfoot and Cherokee Indian blood. By the 1930s, the musical side of the Stovall family was living in Glasgow, east of Bowling Green in Barren County, Kentucky. The Stovall Singers' mother, Della Pearl, was born in Brownwood, Texas, between Waco and San Angelo. "Della Pearl had gypsy blood," says son Wayne Stovall, now a minister living in Sacramento, California. "That's why we never settled very long in one place. We were always moving around." Rumour has it that Della Pearl was related to the great world heavyweight-boxing champion, Joe Louis.

Della Pearl was also an accomplished guitarist and gospel singer whose reputation spread throughout Limestone, McClennan and Falls Counties. She played the instrument across her lap. Her husband, James Clay, was a colourful, genial character of many nicknames – 'Kittle' and 'Cannonball' were just two. James Clay was fond of the ladies. He worked off and on



The Stovall's mother Della Pearl, aged sixteen.



The Stovalls' father James Clay.



God's Little Wonders.



God's Little Wonders – unidentified friend, far left: Left to right: Rejoyce, Lillian, Nettie and Wayne Stovall.

as a maintenance man. Rejoyce says he worked on the railroad for a spell, later on as a cook. This was aboard the L & N Pullman on the line between Louisville and Indianapolis on its way to Chicago.

James Clay could not read or write but he could sure blow a mean jug and made it sound like an upright bass. His jug was an empty one gallon wine bottle that he would sling over his shoulder. The Stovalls attended the Oak Grove Baptist Church in Glasgow. Rejoyce tells that her great-great grandfather, John Lewis Stovall Snr.,

activity started back in Kentucky. Both Della Pearl and James Clay went out as a blues singing duet at first before the children came along. They would play dives and juke joints and anywhere folks would listen. When the children started coming (musical instruction began for all those over the age of two), they were roped into a gospel-singing group. This helped the family to sing both in and out of church. They were poor and desperately needed money for food. One family friend (whose name Rejoyce cannot recall) traveled all the way from the South to

was a Buffalo Soldier in the 25th Infantry regiment. She has a large photograph of the brigade on the wall of her living room to prove it.

Della Pearl bore 21 children, but just ten survived – Dorothy, Myrtle ('Billie'), Frances and Georgia Mae were the first females born, then came Wayne, followed by Nettie Lillian, Rejoyce, Donald and 'Baby' Jeanie, in that order. Evelyn Cosby, a cousin, sang with the Stovalls when they recorded as the Valley Wonders.

In 1944, the Stovall family moved from Louisville to Indianapolis. They found a place on Missouri Street near a canal and a chicken slaughterhouse. The Mt. Zion Baptist pastored by Rev. J. Johnson, a heavysset gentleman, was the family church. Those children old enough to serve as 'helpers' were enlisted to assist deliver the children who came along later on, although according to Rejoyce mama most time coped alone. What with continuous childbearing and trying to scrape together enough money to feed the kids, Della Pearl and James Clay had little time to take proper care of the young survivors. "We kids knew a one-legged prostitute named Anna Red who lived over on Indiana Avenue," says Rejoyce. "Anna Red was covered with knife scars but she bore a soft and kind heart. She looked after us and made sure we kept out of trouble."

Della Pearl was in charge of the family musical entertainment, an

bring fresh fruit and vegetables for the Stovall children.

The first Stovall singing group from the Kentucky days was the 4 Loving Sisters, composed of Dorothy, Myrtle ('Billie'), Frances and Georgia Mae (the unit of the first born sisters.) They would go out with their parents on the same program. It is sad that no fully confirmed recordings were ever made of this group who came together happily before an interest in the opposite sex took them away from the group.

Not long after the move to Missouri Street, Della Pearl gathered up Wayne, Lillian, Rejoyce and Nettie to form God's Little Wonders. Rehearsals were conducted in earnest in the living room. God's Little Wonders started out in public like the Jewel Trio and Hutchinson Sunbeams as little more than toddlers. They became the darlings of Marion County. Cousin Evelyn Cosby sometimes sang in the group.

In 1946, Wayne's brother-in-law, who sang in a group out of Louisville called the Voices of Harmony, invited Wayne to come sing for a short spell in the outfit, then composed of Obedia Thompson, Charles Kirby, Paul Johnson and Jimmy Witherspoon (no connection whatever to the famous blues shouter.)

Eighteen years later, the Voices of Harmony cut one single for Don Robey's Song Bird label out of Houston. This was shortly after the Valley Wonders' second release on the label. The Valley Wonders evolved out of God's Little Wonders. Wayne, Lillian, Rejoyce and Nettie were still there but 'Baby Sister' Jeanie and 'Baby Boy' Donnie were late additions as was Elphonso, guitarist.

The Valley Wonders spent a good deal of time out on the road. The group traveled throughout the central Eastern states in a 1947 Cadillac limousine chauffeured by James Clay. Wayne remembers a time when the family thought they had been given a warning vision from God. "We were on the road between St. Louis and Indianapolis just outside of Effingham with Evelyn Cosby's husband Lacey at the wheel. We were driving over the limit 'cause we were anxious to get home." Della Pearl and James Clay were riding with the four singers seated in the back of the limo. All of a sudden Della Pearl turned her head to the side windows and exclaimed, "Look, Indians" and just as sure as night follows day, a line of mounted Indians sat ominously in silhouette along the ridge of the hills to the right and left side of them. Lacey panicked and slammed on the brakes and the car's front axle shot out from under like a bolt of lightning. The burning hot iron burned into the blacktop. All members of the family swore they saw the silhouettes but each in their hearts knew that in reality the Indians were a fiction. They reckoned God had made a sign to slow them down.

Whenever the Stovalls hit Detroit they made a point of dropping by to see cousins who in some cases were an unsavoury bunch. A few made their living robbing banks. One rowdy individual, a certain J.T. Woods, was in the habit of drinking and carrying on. His attitude got so bad that his son was driven to the point of killing him. On a brighter note, the Stovalls were firm friends of Rev. C.L. Franklin and his family. C.L. treated his children with a firm hand. Wayne met up with Sam Cooke in Indiana in the early 1950s. The pair became firm friends. As was true of many singers at the time, Wayne's vocal style absorbed much that was Cooke's. Wayne claims to have co-written a song with Cooke. But with that said, Wayne still claims Claude Jeter as his strongest influence.

The Stovalls shared the stage with The Staple Singers, Caravans, the Womack Brothers, Al Green and the Green Brothers, Blind Boys of Mississippi, Harmonizing Four, Soul Stirrers, Davis Sisters and the Highway QCs.

Later when they added secular music to their act (but they never crossed over), they shared



Rejoyce at the piano, with Elphonso on guitar.



The Differentials, Nettie, Rejoyce and Lillian.

billing with Ray Charles, B.B. King, Big Mama Thornton, Etta James, Bobby Bland and Jackie Wilson plus a host of others too numerous to mention. The Stovalls even got a crack at The Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts show on CBS Monday nights. The group sang Sam Cooke's 'You Send Me' on Keen Records.

After an earlier 1955 Apollo Theatre appearance in Harlem, the Stovalls moved out to Berkeley, California. Wayne sang on a few local dates with his sisters, but he did not feel happy about the arrangement. Preferring to be with an all-male quartet, Wayne put out feelers through the gospel networking system and got one response from Melvin Shepherd, lead singer with the Richmond based Golden West Singers who were, at this point, contracted to Ray Dobard's Music City label on Alcatraz Avenue in Berkeley.

In 1956, Wayne and the Golden West recorded 'Testify', a sanctified soul-gospel record at Music City and issued on Music City 885.

In retrospect, 'Testify' was one of the group's golden moments on wax. Wayne submits he carried the soft, soulful, mid-western gospel style of singing to Bay Area quartets. Also in 1956, Wayne got back with the Loving Sisters plus high tenor Evelyn Cosby to play

at Chicago's Du Sable High School. They took the auditorium by storm and were asked back for a 1957 and 1958 appearance.

During a brief move back to Indianapolis, Della Pearl and the family hooked up with RBM Records, operated by the Indianapolis Record Distributing Company. Two songs were issued on RBM 200 under the Valley Wonders soubriquet, 'Today', on which Evelyn sang lead, and the Stovalls' original version of Clara Ward's arrangement on Duke Records of 'Time Is Winding Up'. The current Stovall sisters do not remember this session, so it is more than likely that the 4 Loving Sisters cut these songs. The Valley Wonders, according to Wayne, were the toughest group in Indiana during the late 1950s and often beat out all the competition.

When the family returned to the San Francisco Bay Area, the Valley Wonders (Stovall sisters) were invited to play St. Mark's Church pastored by the legendary Rev. George W. Killens. Killens holds the singular distinction of being the first ever Afro-American preacher to be recorded on portable equipment in service at the Oakland auditorium in 1946. He claims not to know of this until after Ollie Hunt leased and had released his recorded material some months later.

Like Wayne Stovall, Joe Simon also had some contact with the Golden West Singers of Richmond, California. Simon rehearsed with the Golden West but was never taken into the group. It was likely that through Simon, Wayne was introduced to Garrie and Clara Thompson of Hush Records based in the San Jose suburb of Sunnyvale.

The Stovall Singers - Wayne, Lillian, Nettie and Rejoyce - were taken on as background singers by the Thompsons. They adopted the soubriquet the Differentials. After finding that the word was commonly used in the automotive business (the differential being a gear enabling a vehicle's rear wheels to revolve at different speeds when rounding corners), they dropped the name and reverted back to the Stovalls.

According to Alec Palao in his 1997 liner notes to Joe Simon's early Hush sides for Ace Records, the Stovalls supported Simon on his first solo outing following the two releases he made with his group, the Golden Tones. The songs were in fact 'It's A Miracle' and 'Land Of Love', both from a July 1960 date at the Bob Geddins studio on Twenty-fourth and San Pablo Avenue.

The Thompsons were not exactly straight with Wayne. Wayne had written a song called 'You

Left Me Here To Cry Alone'. He cut a demo for Thompson with what were then the Differentials. Wayne says that Clara Thompson told him they could not use the song. What she did not tell him was that Joe Simon and the Golden Tones had recorded the tune as Simon's second Hush release and had credited the song writing to Johnny Heartsman who probably worked on the arrangement. The Thompsons cut this at radio station KRE down on the Bayshore in Berkeley.

The Stovalls were introduced to Bumps Blackwell, A&R man for Keen, during a visit Bumps made to relatives living on Sixteenth Avenue in Oakland. Wayne played the Differentials' demo of 'You Left Me Here To Cry Alone' not knowing what was going on with the song. Fortunately for all, Blackwell never used the song. But he was impressed with what he heard and invited the Stovalls down to Keen Records in Culver City. Wayne wanted Bumps to record masters for Thompson but Keen owner John Simas demanded an outrageous sum for them (\$90,000.)

Wayne later had a second song stolen from him. Wayne was singing lead with the Oakland



Label shots: Opal Louis Nations.



Top: The Valley Wonders (aka the Stovall Singers) with Wayne, Donnie and Leroy. Middle: The Valley Wonders (aka the Stovall Singers) with Wayne, Donnie and Leroy. Bottom: The Valley Wonders (aka the Stovall Singers) with Wayne and Donnie, top row; Leroy Leonard on guitar.

All Stars and had included a song the group had not yet recorded called 'All My Life, I Say Yes Lord'. Next thing he knew, the Templeaires were singing the song to the same arrangement. "That's what happens," he said, "when you sing at The National Baptist Convention".

The Differentials sang background on Ben Joe Zeppa's sessions, but on his Hush session conducted at the Bob Geddins studios, he says that the Hot Notes of Richmond were used on backgrounds. They may have worked on 'Terry Lou', a song Zeppa recorded for the obscure Oakland Award label. On a trip to Texas in 1963, Della Pearl managed to get the Stovall Singers signed to a one-shot record deal with Jimmie

(Stovall Sisters) with no male voices. Rejoyce also served as musical arranger. Somehow the two Song Bird releases got lost in the shuffle, but the group kept working. As was usual with good gospel talent, their live performances far outshined whatever promotion was put behind their recordings. Wayne then traveled to Cincinnati to honour background work for Syd Nathan's King Records. A short while later, he was asked to join Larry 'Stickhorse' Stickman and the Oakland All Stars with whom he stayed off and on for many years.

The Stovall's appeared on NBC's musical variety series, 'Hullabaloo' directed by Steve Binder. The group played the prison circuit

and Dora Avant's tiny, obscure Avant label in Dallas. The Avants had also recorded the Little Wonders, not to be confused with God's Little Wonders.

The Avant outing pitched a fiery, burn-'em-up version of 'Time Is Winding Up' with a soul-drenching, mid-tempo reading of 'I'm Going On With Jesus'. Both were led by Wayne with heavy drum and stinging guitar from Elphonso who stayed in the group for only a brief while before being replaced by Leroy Leonard who played for record store owner I. Emerson's Golden Keys, one of the Bay Area's most underrated gospel quartets.

The Stovalls had relocated to Stuart Street in Berkeley, California by the time the record hit the streets. Four more Avant recorded songs were leased to Don Robey of Peacock/Song Bird Records in Houston.

Robey was a business chum of the Avants'. Under the Valley Wonders moniker, Robey issued the following on his Song Bird subsidiary: 'The Lord's Prayer', rendered in well-mannered form and a Latinised version of 'The 23rd Psalm' (Song Bird 1011, 1964), a sweetly warbled 'Troubled Heart' penned by Clara Thompson, sandwiched with what was given as 'God's Gonna Move His Hands' but which, as it turned out, was yet another Caravans like rendition of 'Time Is Winding Up' (Song Bird 1034, cut in 1965) without Wayne but with shuffle rhythm enhancement added.

"We did record 'God's Gonna Move His Hands'", says Rejoyce who wrote the song, "but they switched it for some reason". Song Bird 1011 featured the Valley Wonders

at Soledad, Fulson, San Quentin and Cooke County Jail. Feeling homesick, Wayne returned to Indiana in 1967 where he hitched up with brother-in-law Bill Seagal, a Jewish businessman. Seagal pressured Wayne to cut a solo pop record called 'Blowing Bubbles'. A demo was made but it found no takers.

During a trip to Mississippi a year later, Seagal contacted Wayne again. This time he wanted him for a recording session in New York with the Travelling Inner Lights (a 'shout' gospel group). Seagal managed the quartet who was currently recording for Jerry Blaine at Jubilee Records. Wayne hopped on a Greyhound bus heading for New York and made a B-line for Blue Bird Studios. An album was cut (Jubilee 6002) on which Wayne sang lead on Vivian Cooper's arrangement of 'You Can't Hurry God' and 'The Blood'. "We had a 45-minute practice session on the studio front steps, then we went straight in and cut most of the songs in one take", says Wayne. Wayne returned to Berkeley. The album received little attention and the group changed names to the Mighty Quotations.

One of folk-rock's most sought-after items on the collectors' lists is William Truckaway's recording of the flower-power ballad 'Blue Greens On The Wind'. The Stovall Sisters ended up backgrounding on the record after placing an advert in a local newspaper, which read 'Three black girls looking for background singing'. The song Truckaway performed survives in video form. It was also used in a cartoon and picked up as a commercial for Jack-in-the-Box. The song is considered one of the earliest examples of soft rock with synthesizer.

Having a female manager helped the Stovalls a lot. A residency was negotiated for the Stovall Sisters to open for Redd Foxx at his nightclub on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles. The Stovall Sisters replaced the 3 Harris Sisters who had split up. The Stovalls sounded very much like the former group and came out on top during auditions. Foxx liked them so well he took them on tour with Demond Wilson of Sanford & Son. The Stovalls returned and moved to Arthur Street in Oakland. They appeared on the Ted Mack Amateur Hour on TV's Channel 13 alongside Oakland gospel diva Odessa Perkins (one-time soloist with the Clara Ward singers during residency at Disneyland in Anaheim.)

The Stovalls also enjoyed occasional work with Earth Wind & Fire, Funkadelic, Parliament and Cannonball Adderley. In the mid 1970s, James Clay invented a crazy dance called 'Hold The Mule'. He would hold dance demonstrations out on the sidewalk for anyone who asked. He joked that the moves came from a mule when his tail was set afire, the kind of down-home humour one could expect from the jug-blowing James Clay.

Sometimes the girls split up. Nettie went for a spell in the Foreign Affairs Band and both she and Lillie sang in the Night Shift Band. Wayne and the Oakland All Stars recorded for Kenneth Vanzandt and for Brother Henderson's Proverb label in Pacoima, but almost nothing came of it. Same with home dubs made with the Oakland Silvertones, a group Wayne was involved with for a while.

He also sang in the Omega Aires, a group with ex-members of the Oakland All Stars. After quitting quartet work, Wayne took up the cloth and became a minister. Another odd Stovall backgrounding appears on heavy metal artist Quiet Riot's album cut in 1971. The Stovalls moved to Fruitvale Avenue in Oakland. Rejoyce, Lilly and Nettie still go out as a trio to play the occasional gig. Recent events include backgrounding for Johnny Talbert and the long-overdue induction into the Bay Area's Blues Hall of Fame.

With special thanks to Wayne and Rejoyce Stovall for their invaluable help. All photos courtesy of Wayne and Rejoyce Stovall.