



Booklet cover Dixie Hummingbirds – courtesy Opal Nations

CD1 – Volume 3 (1951-1954)

- 1 In That Home By And By - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1588) P 1951 (Jessie Renfro-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 2 He's So Wonderful - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro w/ 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi
(Peacock 1588) P 1951 (Virginia Davis-Theodore Frye) Carlin Music Corp
- 3 A Soldier Not In Uniform - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1704) P 1952 (Barney Parks-Bob Robin) Chappell-Morris Ltd/Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 4 Will He Welcome Me There - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1704) P 1952 (Barney Parks-Don Robey) Chappell-Morris Ltd/Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 5 I Know I've Been Changed - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1705) P 1952 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 6 Trouble In My Way - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1705) P 1952 (Ira Tucker-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 7 I'll Be Satisfied Then - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1707) P 1952 (Jessie Renfro-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 8 No Room In The Hotel - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1707) P 1952 (Jessie Renfro-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 9 I Thank You, Lord - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1709) P 1953 (Unidentified) Copyright Control
- 10 A Sinner's Plea - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1709) P 1953 Barney Parks-Don Robey (Songs Of Universal Inc)
- 11 Lord If I Go - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1713) P 1953 (Ira Tucker-Don Robey) Copyright Control
- 12 Eternal Life - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1713) P 1953 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 13 I Must Tell Jesus - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1718) P 1953 (Jessie Renfro-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 14 Hell's Attraction Light - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro w/ The S&L Choir
(Peacock 1718) P 1953 (Cecil Shaw) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 15 In The Sweet By And By - Rev. Cleophus Robinson & The Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1719) P 1953 (Joseph Webster-Sanford Bennett-Cleophus Robinson) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 16 God's Word Will Never Pass Away - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1721) P 1953 (Julius Cheeks-Don Robey) Chappell-Morris Ltd/Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 17 Does Jesus Care - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1721) P 1953 (Julius Cheeks-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 18 Let's Go Out To The Programs (#1) - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1722) P 1953 (Ira Tucker) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 19 I'll Keep On Living After I Die - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1722) P 1953 (Roxie Moore) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 20 Live Right, Die Right - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1727) P 1954 (Roxie Moore) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 21 Prayer Wheel - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1727) P 1954 (Unidentified) Copyright Control
- 22 Another Year - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1728) P 1954 (Ernest James-Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 23 I'm Going On With Jesus All The Way - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1728) P 1954 (Ernest James) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 24 I Wanna Be There - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1732) P 1954 (Unidentified) Copyright Control
- 25 I've Had My Chance - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1732) P 1954 (Jessie Mae Renfro) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 26 A Charge To Keep I Have - Rev. Cleophus Robinson
(Peacock 1733) P 1954 (Charles Wesley-Unidentified) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 27 Jesus, I Can't Live Without You - Rev. Cleophus Robinson
(Peacock 1733) P 1954 (Viola Dickens) Chappell-Morris Ltd/Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 28 Christian Testimonial - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1736) P 1954 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal inc

CD 2 Volume 4 (1954-1956)

- 1 Will The Lord Be With You - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1736) P 1954 (Roxie Moore) Songs Of Universal Inc.
- 2 Go Where Jesus Is - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1739) P 1954 (Julius Cheeks - Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 3 I'm Serving The Lord - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1739) P 1954 (Ernest James) Songs Of Universal inc
- 4 I'm Not Uneasy - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1740) P 1955 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 5 Sinner, Sin No More - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1740) P 1955 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 6 It Must Have Been The Lord (That Touched Me) - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1742) P 1955 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 7 Take Care Of Me - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1742) P 1955 (James Walker) Peermusic (UK) Ltd
- 8 On The Judgement Day - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1743) P 1955 (Julius Cheeks-Ernest James) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 9 Who Will Be The One - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1743) P 1955 (Julius Cheeks) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 10 A Christian Life - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1749) P 1955 (Ernest James) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 11 Somewhere To Lay My Head - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1749) P 1955 (Julius Cheeks) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 12 The Story Of Madame Bethune, Part 1 - Dixie Hummingbirds with Otis Jackson – narrator
(Peacock 1753) P 1955 (Otis Jackson-Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 13 The Story Of Madame Bethune, Part 2 - Dixie Hummingbirds with Otis Jackson – narrator
(Peacock 1753) P 1955 (Otis Jackson-Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 14 Just Jesus - Bells of Joy
(Peacock 1755) P 1955 (A.C. Littlefield) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 15 Doing For Jesus - Bells of Joy
(Peacock 1755) P 1955 (Lavada Durst) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 16 Hold My Hand - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro w/ Bro Cecil Shaw w/ 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi
(Peacock 1756) P 1955 (Charles Hudspeth) Songs Of Universal inc
- 17 Deliver Me - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro w/ Bro. Cecil Shaw w/ 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi
(Peacock 1756) P 1955 (Jessie Sapp) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 18 Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1757) P 1955 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 19 Devil Can't Harm A Praying Man - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1757) P 1955 (Ira Tucker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 20 Room, Room - Rev. Cleophus Robinson
(Peacock 1758) P 1956 (Lucie Campbell) Screen Gems-EMI Music Inc
- 21 I've Got A New Born Soul - Rev. Cleophus Robinson
(Peacock 1758) P 1956 (James Cleveland) Carlin Music Corp
- 22 Save A Seat For Me - Orig. 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi
(Peacock 1760) P 1956 (Archie Brownlee) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 23 There's No Need To Cry - Orig. 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi
(Peacock 1760) P 1956 (Lloyd Woodard) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 24 Lord Have Mercy - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1761) P 1956 (Ernest James-Don Robey) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 25 See How They Done My Lord - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1761) P 1956 (Julius Cheeks) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 26 When I Cross Over - Brother Cleophus Robinson & Sister Josephine James
(Peacock 1762) P 1956 (Unidentified) Copyright Control
- 27 Pray For Me - Brother Cleophus Robinson & Sister Josephine James
(Peacock 1762) P 1956 (Cleophus Robinson) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
- 28 Troubles Will Be Over - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1763) P 1956 (James Walker) Songs Of Universal Inc
- 29 Way Up On High - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1763) P 1956 (James Walker) Songs Of Universal Inc

CD 3 - VOLUME 5 (1956-1957)

- 1 Thank You Lord For One More Day - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1763) P 1956 (Hattie Foster) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
 - 2 Get Right Church - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1763) P 1956 (Roxie Moore) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 3 In My Mind - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1765) P 1956 (Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 4 Burying Ground - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1765) P 1956 (Don Robey) MCA Music Ltd
 - 5 Oh, Have You - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro w/ unidentified male vocal group
(Peacock 1766) P 1956 (Jessie Sapp) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 6 Have Your Own Way - Sister Jessie Mae Renfro
(Peacock 1766) P 1956 (Jessie Sapp) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 7 If It Ain't One Thing (It's Another) - Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1769) P 1956 (Joe Hinton) Don Music Co
 - 8 I Found Something - Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1769) P 1956 (Jethro Bledsoe) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 9 Loving Hand - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1770) P 1956 (James Walker) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 10 Cool Down Yonder - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1770) P 1956 (Traditional-Ira Tucker) MCA Music Ltd
 - 11 I Gave My Heart - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1771) P 1957 (Julius Cheeks) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 12 I'm Coming Up, Lord - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1771) P 1957 (Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 13 Live On Forever - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1773) P 1957 (Roxie Moore) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 14 Just Trusting - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1773) P 1957 (Roxie Moore) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 15 Pressing On - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1774) P 1957 (Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 16 View That Holy City - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1774) P 1957 (Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 17 I Need Thee - Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1776) P 1957 (Jethro Bledsoe) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 18 Come And Go With Me - Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1776) P 1957 (Joe Hinton) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 19 Just Faith - Gospelaire of Dayton, Ohio
(Peacock 1777) P 1957 (Robert Washington) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 20 Sit Down Children - Gospelaire of Dayton, Ohio
(Peacock 1777) P 1957 (Robert Lattimore) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
 - 21 The Lord Will Make A Way - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1778) P 1957 (Julius Cheeks) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 22 To The End - Sensational Nightingales
(Peacock 1778) P 1957 (Julius Cheeks) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 23 Lost In Sin - Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1779) P 1957 (Bobby Mack) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 24 When - Spirit of Memphis Quartet
(Peacock 1779) P 1957 (Joe Hinton-Robert Reed) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 25 Christian's Automobile - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1780) P 1957 (Jessie Archie) Universal/MCA Music Ltd
 - 26 Stop By Here - Dixie Hummingbirds
(Peacock 1780) P 1957 (Unidentified) Copyright Control
 - 27 How Much Longer (Will My Journey Be) - Gospelaire of Dayton, Ohio
(Peacock 1781) P 1957 (Don Robey) Songs Of Universal Inc
 - 28 They Don't Understand Me - Gospelaire of Dayton, Ohio
(Peacock 1781) P 1957 (Robert Washington) Songs Of Universal Inc
- THIS COMPILATION P 2008 ACROBAT MUSIC GROUP LTD
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Dixie Hummingbirds – courtesy Opal Nations



ospel collectors have waited many years for the completely and thoroughly anthologized

re-releases of some of the finest shout and jubilee ever recorded on what is considered to be the most important post-war gospel indie label in the States – Peacock of Texas. Most of these sessions took place in Memphis or Houston. Volume 1, “Come On Over Here” (Acrobat ACMCD 4209), brought us from 1951 up to 1953 with the work of Rebert Harris & The Christland Singers, Southern Wonders, Gospel Tones, Swanee Spiritual Singers, Jeanette Harris & The Golden Harps, Stars of Hope, Gospel Travellers and The Wilson & Watson Singers. Volume 2, “Be What You are” (Acrobat ACMCD 4210), took us up from 1953 to 1954 with more sides from Rebert Harris & The Christland Singers and Southern Wonders plus The Southern Tones, Sunset Travelers, Mid South Singers, Heaven Bound Four and Christian Travelers.

With the exception of Rev. I.H. Gordon and a few Rev. Cleophus Robinson cuts, Volume 3 takes us up to the close of 1957, a period thought of as gospel quartet at its peak of perfection. Disc 1 starts in 1951 and goes through to 1954 with essential sides from Sister Jessie Mae Renfro (mother of singer Jane Sapp), Rev. Julius “June” Cheeks & The Sensational Nightingales, the late Ira Tucker & The Dixie Hummingbirds, Rev. (Bro.) Cleophus Robinson & The Spirit of Memphis.

Disc 2 takes us from 1954 into 1956 with more sides by Sister Renfro, The “Gales”, The “Birds” and Rev. Cleophus Robinson plus goodies by The Bells of Joy, Bro. Cecil Shaw, Original 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi and Sister Josephine James. Disc 3 picks up in mid-1956 and takes us to the close of 1957. The “Birds,” “Gales” and Sister Renfro are all here plus The Spirit of Memphis and Gospelaire. Disc 3 gives us two additional Bells of Joy cuts not included on our Bells of Joy collection (Acrobat ACMCD 4207) and two additional 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi sides not included on our 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi collection (Acrobat ADDCD 3003.) Volume 5 brings joy to our ears with four additional Spirit of Memphis nuggets not included on Acrobat ADDCD 3007, The Spirit of Memphis collection. Enjoy!

Don Robey’s Duke and Peacock Record Empire

“When I got into the music industry in 1948,” said Robey, “I soon found I had two strikes against me. I was black and I was in the record business.” However, through shrewd manipulation and entrepreneurial skills, Robey wound up with more than a hundred artists and groups under contract on approximately eight labels. With the help of music directors Dave Clark and Joe Scott, he substantially influenced the development of shout gospel and Texas blues.

Don Detric Robey was born on November 1, 1903 in Houston’s Fifth Ward, the heart of the black residential and business district. He attended high school but dropped out in eleventh grade thinking he could get rich quick as a hustler and gambler. After finding out for himself the foolishness of his plight, he met and married Beatrice Sherman. He was barely out of his teens. The couple settled in Galveston and in 1922 Beatrice gave birth to Louis Reed Robey, a first son. With new family commitments, Robey was forced to seek gainful employment. He managed a taxi cab business with a friend which exposed him to the ways of the white world. He then spent time as a traveling salesman for a local liquor distributor. Through his work, he became familiar with the Houston nightclub and beer joint scene, how the places were run and the entertainment they hired to draw business.

Robey developed a passion for blues and down-home gospel. Through the contacts he made in his work, he began promoting ballroom dances featuring at first territorial bands such as Milt Larkins whose sidemen included Eddie “Cleanhead” Vinson, Arnett Cobb and Illinois Jacquet. He soon found himself able to step up into the big league by promoting Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie and others. He branched out into sporting events. His love of outdoorsman activity led to an involvement in rodeo, boxing and golf promotion. With the money he had saved, he acquired The Bronze Peacock Dinner club at 2809 Erastus Street at the corner of Liberty Road in the heart of the Fifth Ward’s business district.

The War was just over and folks wanted to enjoy themselves dining and dancing just like in

the old days. The club hired the hot jazz combos and bands of the day. These included Louis Jordan, T-Bone Walker and Lionel Hampton. Robey set up Las Vegas-style gambling tables in a room out the back. All this was done with class and decorum. Robey, being an African-American, but of light complexion, wanted to appeal to those who were better heeled, much like himself. Everything was going great guns. Money was rolling in, except one night The Bronze Peacock patrons were robbed of their cash and jewelry at gunpoint. Robey was left in an awkward position. His club was robbed but he could not call the cops because his gambling was illegal. Robey installed two-way mirrors with gun-slots in the walls. Armed guards were added to protect his entire property. However, police crackdowns took place and rumors of gangland connections forced Robey to diversify. He opened a retail record store at 4104 Lyons Avenue in the heart of Houston's northeast business section.

Robey transferred various parts of his business interests to the retail address, including the Peacock Record Company and Buffalo Attractions booking agency. Later on, the Lyons Avenue neighborhood deteriorated into a high crime area and in 1953 Robey was forced to move to 2809 Erastus Street. The retail record store was also an immediate success. He found Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, a twenty-three-year-old singer, fiddler and guitarist protégé of the Texas bluesman Aaron 'T-Bone' Walker (although in later years Brown insisted that his heroes came from various musical disciplines.)



Dixie Hummingbirds – courtesy Ray Funk

One night Brown substituted for Walker who had suddenly been taken ill and was unable to fill the engagement. Robey was so impressed that he first bought Brown a guitar, then took him on a plane trip to Los Angeles and had him record for Aladdin Records backed by the Maxwell Davis Band. However, lack of promotion led to poor sales figures. Dissatisfied by the way Brown was treated at Aladdin, Robey decided to set up his own recording company. In late 1948 Robey cut six numbers on "Gatemouth" Brown accompanied by Jack McVea's Band at a small studio on Houston's Hamilton Street. The session resulted in three initial releases on Peacock Records in November-December 1949.

The Peacock name was taken from The Bronze Peacock and the new Lion Publishing was inspired by the Lyons Avenue address. Back in February 1949, recording engineer William D. (Bill) Holford opened his Audio Company of America (ACA) recording studio on Westheimer Street. This was Houston's first full-service sound studio. Throughout 1949 Robey cut his Peacock talent at ACA. Recordings at ACA lasted up until the start of 1956, after which sides were cut on Erastus Street.

In August 1952, Robey formed a partnership with David J. Mattis and Bill Fitzgerald at Duke Records situated at the Tri-State Recording Company, 3136 North Lafayette Circle, in Memphis, Tennessee. Less than a year later, in April 1953, Robey gained full control over Peacock and Duke Records and established their headquarters at The Bronze Peacock. Duke/Peacock's biggest stars included Johnny Ace, Little Junior Parker, Johnny Otis, Bobby Bland, The Dixie Hummingbirds, Mighty Clouds of Joy, Sensational Nightingales and 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi. These and others kept Peacock Records solvent for twenty-five years.

Robey's largest hit was "Hound Dog," recorded in March 1953 by Willie Mae 'Big Mama' Thornton. Its success spawned a shower of covers by Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, Elvis Presley, Little Esther, Homer & Jethro and others. Three months later, as if a kind of earthquake aftershock had taken place, Robey enjoyed yet another smash with the fateful Johnny Ace's release of "The Clock" on Duke Records.

Robey issued his first gospel sides by The Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi in the 1500 series in June 1950 (see Acrobat ADDCD 3003 for the early Peacock Blind Boys recordings.) The first of only one gospel release on Duke emerged in June 1952, exactly two years later. In May 1952, the Peacock 1700 series was started to feature gospel releases only. These three Texas Gospel & related Peacock discs take us from September 1952 (with the exception of Peacock 1588) through to the close of 1957. Song Bird Records, Robey's subsidiary, was created in late 1963 to focus on the wealth of new gospel talent coming along. Robey's Peacock album series commenced in 1959. The R&B/soul subsidiary Back Beat was formed in 1957 and Sure Shot in October 1963. Peacock singles flourished throughout the 1960s. Song Bird singles survived into the early 1970s and continued after ABC-Dunhill bought the entire company on May 23, 1973. The ABC agreement included a clause that would allow Robey the right to consult and oversee the release of product from the catalog. He held this privilege up to the time of his death from a fatal heart attack in Houston on June 16, 1975. The Masonic Lodge in Houston performed graveside services for him at his hometown's Paradise North Cemetery.

Sister Jessie Mae Renfro

It is truly amazing how little is known about Sister Renfro, considering how popular and how significant a gospel recording celebrity she became between 1951 and 1958. She was the first female diva to be signed with Robey's Peacock Records during the spring of



Sister Jessie Mae Renfro – courtesy Tony Heilbut

1951 and remained Peacock's only female soloist up until early 1963 when Inez Andrews was signed to the Song Bird subsidiary. Robey held that only male gospel soloists could produce the sort of sound he was looking for. Sister Renfro was an exception. To Robey, Sister Renfro symbolized the gospel equivalent of Willie Mae 'Big Mama' Thornton and indeed he was correct in every respect.

Evangelist Jessie Mae Renfro Sapp was born in Waxahachie, Texas to Nesiah and Jessie Hayes on October 3, 1920. She was raised around Dallas where she became involved with the Church of God in Christ church. Although she was drawn to blues singers of the Deep Ellum part of town, and sang briefly in clubs in her teens, she wound up with The Sallie Martin Singers with whom she traveled extensively during the war years, helping to establish Sallie Martin and Kenneth Morris self-published gospel songs. While with Martin, Sister Renfro picked up kudos from Rosetta Tharpe, Clara Ward and Emily Bram whom she much admired.

While traveling in Southern California with her sister, piano and organ accompanist Eloise Hayes, she was noticed by Mrs. Greenwood. Mrs. Greenwood, an L.A. native, ran two gospel music stores on Central Avenue during the mid-1940s and was the first to record the Pilgrim Travelers on her Greenwood label. In fact, it might have been through the Travelers that Greenwood was introduced to Sister Renfro. One extremely rare record was issued on the Greenwood label in 1947, giving us Deacon Roman Holmes' "What Manner Of Man Is This" and "Give Me Strength."

"Give Me Strength" is a standard, mid-tempo gospel ballad accompanied by Eloise in a style reminiscent of pioneer female pianist Arizona Dranes. "What Manner Of Man Is This" is a "bluesy" gospel song sung with vigor but lacks particular distinction. An early May 1951 Billboard Magazine announced that Sister Jessie Mae Renfro of Tulsa, Oklahoma was auditioned by the great Marion Anderson who picked her as possessing one of the greatest voices in the spiritual field. On the quality of her voice, Sister Renfro had acquired in April a recording contract with Peacock Records in Houston. I suspect that Sister Renfro relocated to Oklahoma around 1950 and that Chicago deejay (but New Orleans-born) Rev. I.H. Gordon introduced Sister Renfro to Don Robey. Both Gordon and Renfro were signed to Peacock around the same time. Both wound up recording with the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi. Gordon was a close friend of Robey's and often passed along recommendations for fresh talent.

At Sister Renfro's first April 1951 session, she recorded with her sister's piano accompaniment with Vance "Tiny" Powell and the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi backing her on "He's So Wonderful" and "Rock Of Ages (Hide Thou Me.)" For the kick-off release of May 1951 Robey chose the rocking "A Wonderful Savior" with organ and drum muscle and the beautifully sung Toplady & Hastings ballad "Rock Of Ages (Hide Thou Me)". Sister Renfro had to wait until Christmas before enjoying a follow-up release. Robey was reluctant to issue more wax on Sister Renfro whose initial release did not seem very promising. But his patience eventually paid off.

The Christmas follow-up offered us the delightfully celebratory "He's So Wonderful." The infectious melody, carried perfectly by the joyous Sister Renfro, grabbed the attention of Sam Cooke who made it his own when, in a different arrangement, he recorded it for Specialty with the Soul Stirrers in 1956. Sister Renfro's version was originally written by Virginia Davis and Theodore Frye. Sister Renfro's reading of "He's So Wonderful" did not draw the record buyers' attention until Sam Cooke had recorded it, although it had been a pot-boiler for some time. The reverse of "He's So Wonderful" was the mournfully blissful "In That Home, By And By", sung with the usual vim.

In January 1952, Sister Renfro married Rev. J.R. Sapp in Ft. Smith, Arkansas. The couple moved to Oklahoma City where Rev. Sapp acquired a ministry at The Sixth and Laid Church of God in Christ. Sister Renfro became the Minister of Music at the church and organized its choirs and groups. One of her first choirs was The City Wide Ocapella Choir. A year after Robey released "He's So Wonderful", he issued the sparse "I'll Be Satisfied Then" with only organ support and the belting, storytelling "No Room In The Hotel". An irritating cymbal supports Sister Renfro's September 1953 release of "Hell's Attraction Light," helped along tastefully by her choir from The Sixth and Laid Church in Oklahoma City.



Sister Jessie Mae Renfro – courtesy Tony Heilbut

The reverse, "I Must Tell Jesus," waxed with three-piece rhythm support, finds Sister Renfro in full throttle and should have pricked up more ears than it did. Both charts were awarded three stars in Billboard's New Spiritual Releases column. Interestingly, a late January Hollywood report in a February 1954 issue of Billboard reported that Peacock and other independent record companies were selling more gospel product than ever, except in the West. They also commented that booking agencies like Herald Attractions were setting dates through promoters and not agents that had never had that much interest in gospel acts. Sales of mail-order spirituals were up. The proliferation of local black gospel programs had markedly aided record sales. This was good news for Don Robey who put out at least twenty-two gospel singles in 1954.

Sister Renfro's next outing came in October 1954 with the release of the three-star rated "I Wanna Be There" and "I've Had My Chance." "I Wanna Be There" is another ragtime Sounding belter from the November 1952 session that brought us the previous two platters. "I've Had My Chance" is sung with gusto, but as before lacks strong, individual elements. "Deliver Me" coupled with "Hold My Hand" constituted Sister Renfro's sixth Peacock single release and were from the August 1955 session that brought us the lovely "Softly And Tenderly" which was only issued to the public on a 1960s Peacock album. Fall 1955's "Deliver Me," supported by the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi, had all the pizzazz to make it sell but little happened. The reverse, "Hold My Hand," is equally strong, in fact more so because of the Blind Boys' strong and enthusiastic support. "Hold My Hand" is a wailer in every respect.

Sister Renfro's following release of February 1957, "Have Your Own Way" and "Oh, Have You" received a tepid rating in the Billboard New Spiritual list. One reason why her records failed to sell more impressively was the fact that she was pretty much "grounded" at the Sixth and Laid and could not travel to promote her records. George C. Stebbins' "Have Your Own Way" is given the standard treatment and the belting vocal is strong. "Oh, Have You", supported by an unidentified male vocal group, is a fine ballad-style tune, sadly too short in length.

Sister Renfro's final single, "The Lord's Prayer" and "You've Got To Move," surfaced in January 1959 to much fanfare in that month's Billboard. It was included in Robey's half page ad and was awarded a three-star A-side rating in the New Spiritual Releases section. By now, R&B dominated the retail 45 rpm record racks, thus limiting display space for gospel releases. Stiff competition and market saturation sadly meant that many excellent releases passed unnoticed.

Sister Renfro's excellent reading of Josephine Forsyth's arrangement of "The Lord's Prayer" passed gospel fans by. "The Lord's Prayer" is sister Renfro's best record and, like wine, improves with age. This was certainly one of the best recorded versions of a song that was waxed by at least fifty black gospel artists over a thirty-year span. The reverse, "You've Got To Move", was not shabby either. The excitement generated on this side far excels her every other Peacock effort. Both sides are supported by the Alpha Omega Singers, made up of the great Ernest Booker who sang in the Pilgrim Travelers, C. Moore, G. Bland, A. Johnson and Richard Wallace who went on to sing and play guitar for the Stars Of Bethlehem and Mighty Clouds Of Joy.



Sister Jessie Mae Renfro – courtesy Galen Gart

After the album release of "Softly And Tenderly," Sister Renfro's version of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" appeared on a Song Bird album collection. By now, she had changed her name to Jessie May Sapp and had recorded two singles for Carlo Martingoni's tiny Deldon label with help from Georgia Louis's referral. Louis probably helped Sister Renfro acquire a guest spot on 'T.V. Gospel Time', a syndicated black and white weekly show produced by Howard A. Schwartz and directed by Pete Brusuc in Nashville.

Some time during the close of the 1960s, Sister Renfro, billed as Jessie Mae Renfro Sapp, cut a rare album with the Oklahoma State Choir Southwest, but the details of this are unknown to me. The collection was probably made for the sole benefit of her church and was never distributed outside of Oklahoma City. Sister Renfro was inducted into the Oklahoma Jazz Hall of Fame on July 28, 1989. She died in Oklahoma City on January 15, 1996.

The Sensational Nightingales

The Sensational Nightingales are as strong today in both talent and performance as ever before. Starting out as a straight-arrow jubilee quartet, then evolving into a shout group and on into melody-based balladry rendered with a teasing, hard edge, The Sensational Nightingales have found a place among the ranks of quartet nobility. Today's soldiers include manager, tenor/guitarist Joseph Henry "Jo Jo" Wallace from Williamston, North Carolina, born October 4, 1926, who joined in late 1951 having quit the Silveraires who recorded for Gotham; Horace "Sug" Thompson, born July 31, 1940, bass player and background vocalist, who first joined the group in 1963; Darrell Luster, lead tenor and recording producer, and Larry Moore, background vocalist. Their latest CD, "The Gales", came out in February 2008. In 1999, the Sensational Nightingales were one of the first quartets inducted into the Gospel Hall of Fame. They were recognized as one of the cornerstones of gospel quartet music at that time.



Sensational Nightingales – courtesy Opal Nations

Their history dates back to just after World War II, with a group formed in Philadelphia called the Lamplighters. Soldiers included Jerome Guy, tenor, Sam Whitley, bass, Junior Overton, lead, and Theodore Price, baritone. Although the Lamplighters were primarily a gospel group, the outfit also included jazz and blues in their repertoire, like most groups. This helped them find a greater volume of work. A quartet called the Landlighters was also around in the New York area during the late 1940s. The Landlighters recorded "I've Got A Home In That Rock" for Bess Berman's Apollo label in 1949. Could it be that the Lamplighters who sang jazz and blues was the same group as the Landlighters who sang strictly gospel? Nobody has yet come up to substantiate this.

However, guitarist Howard Carroll, born in Philadelphia on April 27, 1925 played a few shows with the Lamplighters and in March 1946 formally joined the group. Later, in 1949, Guy and Carroll changed the group name to the Nightingale Quartet. Bird groups, like the Orioles and Ravens, seemed to be the order of the day. Deciding to stick solely to gospel singing, the Nightingale Quartet played concerts around Philadelphia and also appeared on a regular radio show broadcast from the St. James Hotel.

Overton had a day job that got him off work late. This made it difficult for the group to fulfill outlying engagements. Paul James Owens of the Israelite Gospel Singers, born July 27, 1924 in Greensboro, NC, was persuaded to join to cover the work. But the group still suffered from lack of name recognition. They were virtually unknown outside of Pennsylvania. Rev. Nathaniel Townsley introduced the outfit to former Dixie Hummingbird baritone Barney Parks, born July 15, 1915 in Wilmington, South Carolina, who had just left the Service. Parks had the knowledge and managerial experience to put the group out there. Some group members had families and could not commit to extensive travel. With a few shuffles, the group ended up composed of Howard Carroll, baritone and guitar, Paul Owens, lead tenor, Ben Joyner, formerly with the Dixie Hummingbirds, tenor, and William Henry, basso. Henry, too, used to be with the Dixie Hummingbirds. As the 'Birds changed personnel, they seemed to end up in the Nightingales.

The group now started to make an impression and caught the ear of Benny Wells and Lander Coleman of Coleman Records. Coleman Records operated from out of the

basement of The Coleman Hotel at 59 Court Street in Newark, New Jersey. Lander with his brothers and cousins went out as the Coleman Brothers Gospel quartet and often appeared on the same programs with nationally recognized quartets, many of whom not only stayed at the family-owned hotel but also recorded for the family-owned Coleman Record label. This convenient arrangement made it possible for top touring groups to stay long enough in one place to work up material which would be recorded and distributed through the Colemans' own network down the East Coast. If it were not for Lander Coleman, many of the big name quartets like the 5 Blind Boys of Alabama and the Harmonizing Four might never have successfully launched their careers.

The Nightingale Quartet cut one session at The Coleman Hotel in June 1949 from which three releases emerged during late 1949 and into 1950. Among the best of these were the Paul Owens-led songs "Get Away Jordan", "Savior Don't Pass Me By" and "In The Room With The Lord", Owens was the group's driving force at that time. Parks put the Nightingale Quartet on programs with Sister Rosetta Tharpe, as he did with the Dixie Hummingbirds. Parks, who ran the outfit like a military squad, put the group on radio in Wilson, North Carolina. He rehearsed them in Goldsboro, not so far away.



Rev. Julius Cheeks – courtesy Major Hollis

In December, 1949, billed simply as the Nightingales, the group recorded one acappella session for Syd Nathan's King Records at New York's Beltone studios. Five titles were recorded with Owens at the helm. Somehow, without Carroll's guitar, the songs lacked drive and luster. They sounded dated and controlled both in style and arrangement. Something needed to be done to add more voltage to the Nightingales. Parks was very familiar with Spartanburg. Not only was it Greenville's sister city, but it was known for its wealth of fine gospel singers. Ira Tucker had been auditioned by Parks in Spartanburg for his part in the Dixie Hummingbirds. He also knew of Julius "June" Cheeks through Tucker and from hearing him sing.

It was in late 1950 that Parks came looking for "June" to join the Nightingales. "June" Cheeks was born in Spartanburg, South Carolina on August 7, 1929. He was pumping gas in Spartanburg at the time, only one step up from picking cotton, his former employment. According to Anthony Heilbut in his book "The Gospel Sound" (Limelight Editions, 1985), Cheeks grew up poor and illiterate, a man who quit school in second grade to help his mother raise money to bring up the family. He shared the ramshackle shack he called home with twelve children and a widowed mother called Big Chick. He learned the words of the Bible from a series of records he acquired in 1953. He worked as a water boy when he was twelve. A neighbor owned a radio at which he would listen on Sundays to catch the gospel programs. He loved the Dixie Hummingbirds and idolized Ira Tucker. He joined a raggedy gospel quartet made up of field workers called the Baronets.

Parks came to the filling station and handed Cheeks ten dollars and told him to meet him in Charleston that evening. Cheeks' voice was tough and strong and under Parks'

guidance, and seemingly endless rehearsals, made a showman and harmonist out of him. In early 1951, Parks, through his connection with Marie Knight, got the 'Gales into the Decca studios. The 'Gales cut two sessions with Knight in New York. Both the January and February dates produced four sides. The group was made up of Owens, Cheeks, Joyner, Carroll and Henry. The standout was the track called "Satisfied With Jesus," co- led with Paul Owens and written by B.B. McKinney.

On February 20, 1951, the 'Gales enjoyed their first and only Decca session on which Cheeks sang first or second lead with Owens on four songs. On "My Rock" (shared lead), one hears a fairly well-mannered, reined-in Cheeks. On "There's A Vacant Room In Heaven" (Cheeks solo) and "Live So God Can Use You" (shared lead) we experience much the same thing, but on "Our Father" (Cheeks solo) we hear a less inhibited Cheeks, although it seems that Owens is pretty much calling the shots. I suspect that friction between Owens and Cheeks led to a parting of the ways.

By December, 1951, Paul Owens had switched allegiances to the Dixie Hummingbirds. What had in fact happened was that Owens switched with the 'Birds' second lead, Ernest James. Ernest came to the Nightingales and billed as the Sensational Nightingales, the group really took off. Cheeks' anguished squalling pitted against James' high tenor screams turned the Sensational Nightingales into a force to be reckoned with. The problem here was that petty rivalries got in the way as both leads strove to out-do each other. Nevertheless, the Cheeks-James powerhouse switch leads lasted for at least two glorious years, a period when no group had the courage to come on after the 'Gales had quit the stage. Cheeks and James totally tore down the church with their singing and carrying on. The Sensational Nightingales were labeled the "baddest" quartet on the road. Quartets battled to sing them out but only Archie Brownlee and the Blind Boys of Mississippi and Bro. Cecil Shaw and the Silverlight Quartet came anywhere close. Battles were fierce. Some singers sang themselves so ragged they had to leave the road to seek medical attention.

By mid-1952, Barney Parks had managed to get both the Dixie Hummingbirds and Sensational Nightingales signed to Don Robey's Peacock Records in Houston, Texas. Their first session, held in July, is an extremely interesting one. By now, the group consisted of Julius "June" Cheeks, first lead baritone, Ernest James, second lead tenor, "Jo Jo" Wallace, tenor and guitar, Willie George, "Bill" Woodruff (born in Spartanburg, S.C. on January 15, 1929), tenor, and John Jefferson bass (born March 30, 1926 in Madison, Georgia.) Six songs were cut in Houston, four of which surfaced on two releases, one in August 1952, the second in March 1953.

The first release featured the sorrowful Korean War opus "A Soldier Not In Uniform", pitched with the upbeat "Will He Welcome Me There?" By now, Cheeks' voice had deepened but had not yet developed an anguished rasp. On "Will He Welcome Me There?" he jousts with James but keeps within the boundaries of vocal control. The second release of "I Thank You Lord" backed by "A Sinner's Plea" brings us a different scenario. On "I Thank You Lord" James wails and hollers against Jefferson's pumping bass and a wall of high harmonies. Bill Woodruff leads on "A Sinner's Plea" in Jeter-like fashion. Out of the four songs, only "Will He Welcome Me There?" seemed to have drawn much attention. It got the 'Gales on an East Coast tour with the Bells of Joy who were riding high with the healthy sales of "Stop Right Now, It's Praying Time". However, the 'Gales were still building kindling and by their second Houston session of October 1953, they were ready to take on all competition.

The release of the loping "God's Word Will Never Pass Away" in November 1953 set the stage for what was to come. Robey kept the group busy by sending them on a string of one-nighters through Arkansas, Louisiana, Kentucky and Indiana. The reverse of "God's Word..." gave us "Does Jesus Care", a song written by Kenneth Morris and led by Cheeks with soul and passion. Here we can feel the overwhelming might of this man's matchless emotional reserve. What we should have experienced with "Does Jesus Care" is a two-part record. By the end of this single sider, one wishes that the reverse would pick up and take this beautiful song and us into paradise. But Cheeks was never given the chance he most probably would have taken when he sang it in live performance where he must have laid out many a sinner.

We have to wait until May 1954 before going out and seizing the next 'Gales release. Meanwhile, Robey's healthy spiritual sales helped increase popularity, not only for the 'Gales but for his Bells of Joy, Christland Singers, Dixie Hummingbirds, Jessie Mae Renfro and the Sunset Travelers whom he kept on the road for as long as he could. The May 1954 release of "I'm Going On With Jesus" was ascribed a four-star rating in Billboard's New Spiritual Releases column, an honor few achieve. The reverse, "Another Year," got three stars. "I'm Going On With Jesus" is a mad, galloping opus with intricate rhythms. James and Cheeks build up the emotional insanity to exhausting limits. "Another Year" finds Cheeks preaching in stop-time and singing in mid tempo. The signature hard-throated scream has taken precedence for the first time on record. From now on, many of Cheeks' leads will follow this same formula, preaching, anguished pleas and sanctified, doomed-if-you-don't lyrics, set against a pumping bass and a wall of wailing voices in high register.



The Sensational Nightingales, 1947. Back row: Ben Joyner, former Birds bass singer William Henry, Howard Carroll; front row: Paul Owens, Julius "June" Cheeks.

Sensational Nightingales – 1947 – courtesy Jerry Zolten

The 'Gales' following release was listed in the May 14, 1955 New Spiritual Releases and was awarded three stars, top and bottom. This, I think, was due in part to Robey's insistence on the group holding to arrangements that had proven successful in the past and not having the group try fresh ideas. Both Cheeks and Wallace were gifted with excellent writing and arranging skills which were obviously set aside. The record in question was "I'm Serving The Lord" sandwiched with "Go Where Jesus Is". "I'm Serving The Lord" is a mid-tempo chart lead by James who pushes it into emotional catharsis. "Go Where Jesus Is" is a Cheeks/James vehicle sung in similar style to the reverse. One only wishes that Cheeks could have grabbed the last chorus and cut his chops on it.

In May 1955, Peacock issued "On The Judgement Day", backed by "Who Will Be The One." Both songs were from their third session, of February 1954. "On The Judgement Day" is another Cheeks-James sparring, this time an echo-chambered effect had been added. Both Cheeks and James try to out-sing each other on this mid-tempo burner that finds Cheeks at the peak of his saved and sanctified powers. "Who Will Be There" starts mournfully and builds as Cheeks adds more and more fire and brimstone. Stories are told of how Cheeks, bathed in sweat at the end of his performance, was taken away between two supporting soldiers to recover from death-defying physical exhaustion. If ever a gospel singer gave much, few gave more. All this greatly influenced Wilson Pickett of the Violinaires of Detroit, so much so that Pickett's pipes ended up as torn and raggedy as did Cheeks'.

In June 1955, the 'Gales cut their landmark recording of "A Christian Life", backed with "Somewhere To Lay My Head." "A Christian Life" garnered yet another four-star rating in

Billboard, while the underside “Somewhere To Lay My Head” received three stars in the July 2, 1955 New Spiritual Releases column. “A Christian Life” is for this writer one of the group’s all-time finest moments. Set against high-powered, high sweet wailing voices and fabulous pumping bass, James takes this song through the church roof up within earshot of the man upstairs. “Somewhere To Lay My Head,” led by Cheeks, was the antithesis to the Highway Q C’s softer reading of May 1955. On the ‘Gales version, Cheeks grunts, growls and grabs you by the gut as if by the last stanza you still needed his rock solid conviction.

The ‘Gales’ next release surfaced in April 1956. It was made up of “Lord Have Mercy,” a left-over from the October 1953 session, and “See How They Done My Lord”, recorded in March 1956. “Lord Have Mercy,” a co-lead, mid-tempo tune, was conceived as others to replicate the winning formula of before. “See How They Done My Lord” is a joyous sounding Cheeks nugget centering on the crucifixion, a less than joyous subject. However, Cheeks gives the song a weight of worrying.

We now come to the ‘Gales second all-time spirit-killing masterpiece, “Burying Ground”, which Cheeks used in live performances to kill all competing opposition and convince everyone present of the fact that nobody ever beat out the ‘Gales. Cheeks was one of the earliest practitioners of “crowd-creeping”, cutting through audiences with a long mike cable, creeping and confronting ladies up close with a stern facial countenance and growling remonstrance. It was easy to imagine how overworked the attendants must have been (usually dressed in hospital garb), carrying away the bodies of those who had fallen in a swoon or, as Rev. Settle used to say, had gone beyond the “pop-off point”.



Sensational Nightingales – courtesy Opal Nations

“Burying Ground” was released around Christmas 1956, an appropriate time. The underside gave us “In My Mind”, yet another demon slayer. First with “Burying Ground” – one cannot fail to feel a spasm-like tingle up the spine or a shudder as a result of the emotive force that overwhelms the individual’s state of mind. This is the description of my feelings whenever I hear “Burying Ground,” one of the finest moments in recorded quartet gospel music. It is led by Cheeks of course, and sung so hard you are convinced he has been there and back. Come to think of it, Cheeks’ immediate ancestry did include individuals with Indian blood. Cheeks might have been able to say that he had indeed a sacred burying ground way over yonder. “In My Mind” is another mid-tempo wailer with Cheeks’ usual, but less intentional, histrionics.

January 1957 saw the release of yet another remarkable ‘Gales recording, the awesome “I Gave My Heart To Jesus”, with Cheeks’ frighteningly savage voice, as urgent and exciting as ever before. One cannot imagine Cheeks ever finding a man standing after he performed it live in concert. So devastating are his emotional vocal incendiaries, you can imagine flames shooting from his mouth. The late Kip Anderson told me that when he went out as pianist with Clara Ward, he often encountered Cheeks in concert. He said that one time, when Cheeks was on a double show program (one performance in the afternoon, a second in the evening), that during his first show he would step off stage, creeping and screaming into the audience, cutting his way with his voice like a corn harvester. When he reached the back

door of the church, he continued on past the line waiting for the second performance, all the while singing down his second house. Not a woman remained on her feet.

The record was reviewed under Billboard's New Spiritual Releases list for February 16, 1957. Both sides were awarded a full four stars rating, and certainly deserved the credential. Sales, however, did not generate as much excitement as the record. The B-side, "I'm Coming Up, Lord", is a righteous chart with a strong, pumping bass.

Shortly before the release of "I Gave My Heart To Jesus", Jo Jo Wallace wrote a tune called "The Twist", but because he could not record a risqué R&B song with the 'Gales, he offered it to Little Joe Cook who had recently quit the Evening Star Quartet to sing R&B with the Thrillers on Okeh Records. Cook's Okeh handlers rejected the song as too risky, so Jo Jo then offered it to Hank Ballard who took the song to number sixteen in Billboard's R&B charts in April 1959. "The Twist" had its roots in a gospel song called "Don't You Know."

The 'Gales only had to wait three months for the release of their next single which was "Pressing On" twinned with "View That Holy City". "Pressing On" is a jumpy number rendered ruggedly by the man with the steel voice, Julius Cheeks. "View That Holy City" is started by an unidentified tenor lead singer. Cheeks picks up midway but never quite gets time to set it ablaze.

Right on the heels of "Pressing On", Robey elected to rush out "The Lord Will Make A Way", coupled with "To The End". The echo-enhanced "The Lord Will Make A Way" is a hymn in mid tempo sung in standard fashion. On the other hand, "To The End" rocks the soul of the church with Cheeks' cheerful, raspy stanzas and his wife Marge's stomping piano that drives the tune along like a stoked up train. A remake of the song filmed in the early 1960s for 'T.V. Gospel Time' shows Cheeks and the Four Gospel Knights supported by Marge playing this song with her elbows, her gown lined with silken crosses, a sight one never forgets.

February 1958 marked the expansion of Don Robey's Peacock and Duke recording empire. A strong sales, promotion and distribution network was set up on the East Coast and plans were laid for the making of Duke and Peacock blues and gospel albums. The Sensational Nightingales were being set up for the Peacock Label's initial gospel album release. Barney Parks died February 24, 2007 at Durham V.A. Hospital. John Jefferson, the great pumping basso, left this earth August 17, 2005 in Washington, New Jersey. Paul Owens died in Philadelphia on October 17, 2002. Bill Woodruff passed in Newcastle, Delaware on July 15, 1955, and the legendary Julius Cheeks was taken on January 27, 1981 in Miami, Florida. There will never be another "June" Cheeks.

Rev. Cleophus Robinson

Rev. Cleophus Robinson was head of an immeasurably talented musical family. His wife, Bertha L. Robinson, who shared vocal chores with him on their 1957 hit record for Peacock, "Leaning On The Lord", is a formidable vocalist in her own right. The six Robinson children are all musically gifted. Rev. Cleophus Robinson junior, singer, organist, and choir director, has become a formidable gospel recording artist. Linda Robinson McCaskill is a vocalist of great warmth and compassion. Rev. Paul "Cadillac" Robinson is both singer and drummer. Priscilla Robinson Wiley is yet another gifted soloist. Rev. Shadrach Robinson is a singer, orator, and accomplished keyboard musician. Aquilla "Mother" Robinson is singer, flutist, and choir director. Let us not forget Rev. Robinson senior's sister, Josephine James with whom the preacher shared his best selling and fondest remembered recording, "Pray For Me", waxed for Peacock in 1956.



Rev. Cleophus Robinson – courtesy Opal Nations

Josephine entered upon a successful solo career in 1961 and became enormously popular on the European gospel circuit during the late Sixties. Not wanting to leave out any gifted member of his aspiring musical family, Robinson senior recorded “God’s Sons And Daughters” with his niece, Catherine Gill in 1964. Three years later, he proudly etched a single with his mother, Lillie Robinson. The song was appropriately entitled “Old Time Moan” and brought back childhood memories of being moved and inspired by hearing her sing and moan at the family’s tiny rural clapboard church in Mississippi-St. John’s of Canton.



Rev. Cleophus Robinson & Sister Josephine James – courtesy Opal Nations

Robinson senior was born to Lillie and Coleman Robinson in Canton on March 18, 1932, the youngest of nine children. His parents were farmers who worked a small parcel of land. Robinson drew the attention of local neighbors with his late evening gospel recitals, most often rendered when bringing in the cows. He also sang in the cotton fields and at calla lily gatherings. On August 9, 1938 at St. John’s of Canton, the young Robinson “got converted.” He made a habit of singing with his mother (his strongest influence) at the

church on Sundays. Sometimes this habit proved remunerative. Lillie possessed a robust voice in the likeness of Mahalia Jackson. On March 19, 1948 at the tender age of sixteen, Robinson left Canton to seek his fortune. He landed in Jackson, Mississippi where he worked in construction during the day and in various restaurant kitchens during the evenings. After a few weeks, he had saved enough money for his bus fare to Chicago—the promised land for those seeking a better life.

For eighteen months, young Robinson sang as guest on programs in a handful of churches. He became a member of The Greater Harvest Baptist Church pastored by Reverend Louis Boddie. Evelyn Gay of the famous Gay Sisters of Chicago who recorded for Savoy introduced Robinson to Lee Egalnick of Miracle Records whose best known releases were those of Sonny Thompson and Memphis Slim. Robinson had many offers from quartets but did not want to be a group singer, preferring to stay a soloist like the artists he most admired—Mahalia Jackson and Brother Joe May. In September of 1949, Robinson cut four songs for Miracle Records. From this Egalnick issued one single, “Now Lord” / “I Love The Name Jesus.” Because of inexperience, Robinson’s singing lacked depth and a sense of self confidence. This was reflected in the shortage of sales.



Rev. Cleophus Robinson – courtesy Shannon Williams

Toward the close of 1949 and at the end of a singing tour, Robinson moved to Memphis where he was taken in by his uncle, the late Rev. L.A. Hamblin. Hamblin persuaded Robinson to finish high school. Keeping active, Robinson initiated a weekly radio broadcast – “The Voice of the Soul” – remotely from Rev. Hamblin’s church. Robinson’s broadcast compounded his reputation as a gospel soloist. During his final year at Manassas High in Memphis, Robinson was fortunate enough to meet touring gospel singers who, while passing through town, appeared on his gospel program. One such gospel recording artist was Brother Joe May, an influence and later a close friend.

In 1950, Robinson played his first major concert at the famous Mason Temple in Memphis, the heart of The Church of God in Christ denomination. By the summer of 1953, having graduated Manassas High, Robinson had reached a crossroads, whether to pursue gospel as a career or his passion for the dramatic arts. Deciding at once on an acting career, Robinson enrolled at LeMoyné College and signed up for a drama major. During his first year of college, he was asked repeatedly to actively promote his own recordings. At the end of the freshman year, Robinson was forced to make a decisive choice-catch up on his dramatic studies or pursue the path of the gospel troubadour. Robinson, of course, chose the latter.

Back in early 1953, Robinson hitched up with the extremely talented pianist, Napoleon Brown, with whom he recorded right up to Brown's death on April 17, 1978. Some time in June 1953, Robinson was brought to the attention of Don Robey. Old friend Brother Joe May of St. Louis had sung Robinson's praises to Robey's booking agent, Evelyn Johnson who passed the word along. May was responsible for persuading him to relocate to St. Louis in 1957.

Robinson's first session for Peacock came about in July 1953 while at Manassas High School. As vocal groups proved more lucrative in gospel than soloists in terms of sales at that time, Robey had Robinson placed with the legendary Spirit of Memphis Quartet, who had signed to the label some six months previously. Members on his June 1953 and March 1954 sessions included Jethroe Bledsoe, Silas Steele, Willmer M. Broadnax, Earl Malone, Robert Reed and Fred Howard. The third session was comprised of Willie Jefferson, Jethroe Bledsoe, Earl Malone, Robert Reed and Fred Howard. Three sessions in all were shared with The Spirits. Ten tunes were issued over a period of three years. All but one featured a quartet background. None of the sides sold in appreciable amounts at their time of issue and all sadly remain collectors' items to this day.

The first release gave us "In The Sweet By And By" and "When I Can Read My Title Clear". "In The Sweet By And By" is rendered in an almost Latin popular vein, supported by organ, piano and drums, the most accompaniment used on any Peacock gospel release at that time. It was issued in September 1953 and drew a three-star rating from Billboard under the New Spiritual Releases column for September 26. Robey was reported to have called Robinson "The Nation's Wonder."

In March 1954, Robey chose to release "He's A Wonder" backed by "I'm Holding On". Both sides were awarded three stars in Billboard's New Releases column and were thought worthy of a twelfth of a page square in April 1954's Billboard. Robinson must have felt embarrassed upon finding that a publicist had translated his name into Greek in the ad, from Cleophus to Cleophilus. "He's a wonder," however, sold very well for "Cleophilus".

October 1954 marked a third release with "A Charge To Keep I Have" and "Jesus, I Can't Live Without You". Robey must have become more confident in Robinson as he included the release in his half-page spirituals Billboard ad of the same month. "A Charge To Keep I Have" is a solemn dirge supported by what seems like an Indian war drum. Robinson sings with passion, and the group does their best in support. "Jesus, I Can't Live Without You" is a little more spirited (no pun intended) – drum and pumping bass support lift it above the mundane and the Spirit of Memphis seem to play more of an active role.

At Christmas 1954, Cleophus Robinson was picked as part of WDIA's sixth annual Gospel Goodwill Revue in Memphis. As the Spirit of Memphis was an annual fixture on the show, it was obvious that Robinson would be invited along, too, as most of his sides were with them. The Revue was a mixed affair; R&B and Blues artists also shared show time.

"I Am Determined," backed with "Going Home To Jesus", marked Robinson's next release of May 1955. "I Am Determined" was surprisingly awarded a four-star commendation in June 1955's Billboard New Releases. The reverse was given three stars. Strange that in 1953, Robinson was affixed the "Rev." tag, but by late 1954 he was reduced to "Bro", as if he had undergone some form of denunciation. Our confidence is, however, restored in January 1956 when we find him billed again as "Rev. Cleophus Robinson". "I Am Determined" is a slow, mournful affair sung with a lot of soul. "Going Home To Jesus" is a mid-tempo song that catches a little more attention.

Robinson had a particular vocal style all of his own. His sorrowed phrasing and note-bending trickerations are unique. This gives him distinction but also more easily determines whether a gospel listener is a fan or not. Robinson's long-awaited January 1956 release of "I've Got A New Born Soul" and "Room-Room" was bestowed a Billboard four-star top rating. This time, Robinson had to compete with the Dixie Hummingbirds' release of "Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow". Both were awarded the same amount of stars and both hit the streets on the same day. But it was the Robinson release that got the twelfth of-a-page square in late February's Billboard. The 'Birds were even excluded mention on the list of the sixth-of-a-page Billboard gospel ad Robey placed around the same time.

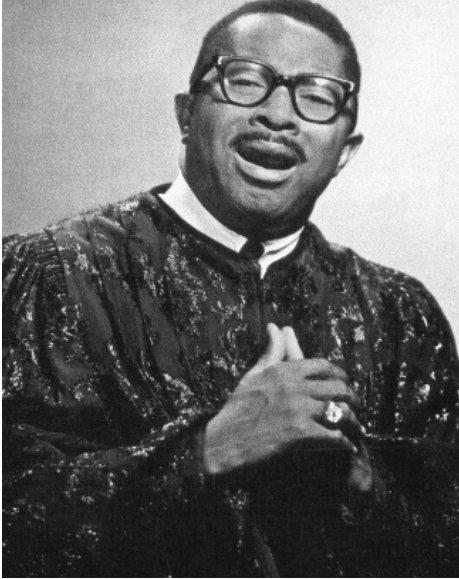
"I've Got A New Born Soul" is a bright, bouncy chant, full of joy and passion. "Room-Room", on the other hand, is a smooth ballad that retains a hymn-like feeling. Robinson sings this with warmth and passion.

In the spring of 1956, Robinson tried to sell Robey on the idea of recording himself and his sister Josephine in a live, spontaneous church setting. Robey, knowing how well Robinson could generate excitement during a church service, readily agreed and had the couple record together that May. The result was the run-away hit, "Pray For Me". The billing on the label read "Rev. Cleophus Robinson and his sister Josephine James".

Despite the success of "Pray For Me," Robinson seemed to fade from Billboard's radar and rarely was mentioned again. "Pray For Me" was flipped with "When I Cross Over", a second brother and sister duet. "When I Cross Over" is a rocking chart full of energy and grit. The pairing works well and should have continued on ensuing platters. "Pray For Me" is a dragging gospel blues, lit up by strong singing. Each vocalist tends away from one tight, united harmony but deals with the song in their own inimitable fashion.

Christmas-time 1956 saw the release of "Help Me To Carry On" and, to keep things in the family, Sister Josephine James and Bertha Robinson sang duet on "Leaning On The Lord" for the flip. Unfortunately, we have space only for a few of these Robinson sides. Others will be included on later volumes.

By February 1957, Robinson had moved from Memphis to St. Louis, married Bertha, and was installed as pastor of The Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church at 4005 Washington Boulevard. As his congregation grew to twelve hundred souls, Robinson raised enough money to renovate and refurnish the building to accommodate the extra flock. Robinson's first Sunday radio broadcast from the church came about in June, 1959. The program, entitled "Hour of Faith", went out weekly at six p.m. over KATZ. Robinson stayed with Peacock Records until 1962, but Bertha actively remained with the company up to 1969. During the 1962-1963 period, Robinson cut three albums for Orrin Keepnews at Battle/Riverside Records in Chicago. Of the three, one collection remained unissued until last year and another featured Jessy Dixon and The Gospel Chimes on vocal backgrounds. However, with Battle's demise, Robinson was back on Peacock by late 1963, where he continued to record from his church with The Bethlehem Baptist Church Choir under the supervision of singer/director Coretha Bell.



Rev. Cleophus Robinson – courtesy Opal Nations

Robinson became one of the first regular black T.V.preachers when on April the 4th 1964 he originated together with Louis Bates a ten-minute weekly spot on KPLR, broadcast simultaneously over several cable networks. The show grew so widely popular it was expanded to thirty minutes. From September 1964 to July 1965, Robinson waxed for Savoy out of New Jersey. During this time, he recorded “How Sweet It Is To Be Loved By God”, an extremely successful reworking of Marvin Gaye’s Motown original “How Sweet It Is To Be Loved By You.”

By Christmas 1965, Robinson was back on Peacock in time for his parishional version of the seasonal evergreen “Silent Night”, which drew considerable attention. Robinson was the first minister to preach a sermon in its entirety at Harlem’s Apollo Theater on Palm Sunday in 1966. In 1967, Robinson enjoyed his first European tour and was recorded in Amsterdam as trouper with The Spiritual and Gospel Festival for the German Fontana label. However, Robinson remained under contract with Peacock until 1969, when he parted from the label for good. Throughout the Sixties, Robinson put many aspiring gospel singers into the spotlight. These included The O’Neal Twins, Rev. Oris Mays, Beatrice Haynes, and Victoria Hawkins.

Right after being voted the nation’s number one gospel soloist by The National Association of T.V. and Radio Announcers, Robinson signed with Nashboro Records, with Rev. Cleophus whom he recorded eighteen albums. “Wrapped Up, Tied Up, Tangled Up” is perhaps Robinson’s most successful recording on Nashboro. He often fielded requests for the song at concerts. The tune has an irresistible rhythm that cannot help get the spirit moving. Clapping assists fine, straight-ahead singing. Sister Josephine joins the preacher on the final choruses.

During the 1970s, ABC Records reissued a smattering of Robinson’s old Peacock recordings as well as collections of newer material. Nashboro continued issuing Robinson recordings well into the 1970s and early 1980s. Interspersed were releases on Savoy into the late 1970s. Over the years, Robinson performed at many major world class venues. Some of these included New York’s Lincoln Center, Cobo Hall in Detroit, Carnegie Hall, Washington, D.C.’s Constitutional Hall, and at the University of Jerusalem in the Holy City at which Robinson became the first African American artist to appear in concert.

Unfortunately, tragedy struck on the night of August 16, 1992 when an unidentified arsonist set fire to The Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church. However, destruction and rebuilding did not hamper other of his enterprises such as the Cleophus Robinson Scholarship fund founded in 1967 to aid African American students who wished to enter the professions.

In 1993, Robinson waxed a wonderful album for Savoy with the famous Swan Silvertones and one of his sons on keyboards. It was called "The Lord Is My Light".

Rev. Cleophus Robinson died in St. Louis on July 2, 1998 at the Barnes Jewish Hospital. His sister Josephine, also born in Canton, Mississippi, in 1934, is still alive and singing in church.

The Gospelairees of Dayton, Ohio

This writer was fortunate enough to catch the Gospelairees' performance in Great Britain on January 16, 1966 at The Fairfield Halls in Croydon. Their schedule had been cut from two to one show due to poor ticket sales. German promoters Horst Lippman and Fritz Rau were playing on the promising results of their first gospel caravan in 1965 when the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi and others came to play six English venues plus dates in Western Europe. On this, the second European Spiritual & Gospel Festival, the (first time in the UK) Gospelairees, who were an iron-throated quartet, generated so much excitement that several people were shouted into comas. Other attendees, such as Dusty Springfield and Eric Burdon, were driven into a cathartic state. News spread and somehow the Gospelairees were given a brief spot on BBC T.V.'s Top of the Pops where one hundred gaping teenagers experienced their first beyond-the-acne cleansing.

Generally, gospel music in Great Britain remained an adjunct of jazz throughout the 1950s. Jazz critics reviewed gospel in the trades and were generally lost in their appraisals due, in part, to the lack of interest on behalf of the record companies who only made irregular, cursory inroads into the major U.S. gospel indie catalogs. Greater enlightenment dwelt in France and Germany where Brits like me trundled off to buy records before the existence of Transat Imports in London. All this was turned around in the 1970s with the black Brixton revival and emergence of fine church singing from the Seventh Day Adventists.

Beginning details of the Gospelairees are sketchy at best. Liner notes to their third Peacock album (Bones in the Valley, PLP 111, 1963) tell that joint-managers Clarence Kendricks and Melvyn Pullen founded the Gospelairees in 1954 and that original members Stanley Landers, Clarence Kendricks, Percy Gowdy, Robert Lattimore (born in 1921) and Melvyn Pullen (born May 2, 1924) were drawn from various churches around the Dayton area.

The group played around the state and quickly built an outstanding reputation leading up to their appearance on the 15th anniversary celebration for blind pianist and singer, the late Prof. Harold Boggs (who recorded for Nashboro) at his Gypsum Tabernacle in his home town of Port Clinton, Ohio on November 29, 1956.

The second half of the three-day celebration was m.c.'d by singer Mary Holt, "The Angel of the Airwaves", who enjoyed radio and T.V. exposure in Cleveland. Holt presented the Gospelairees as headliners with the Boggs Specials, Mdm L. Raibon of Toledo and The Church of God in Christ Chorus from Mansfield. After this, the group's reputation spread beyond the New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C. areas.

In 1957, the Gospelairees recorded one single for Dora and Jimmie Avant in Dallas to launch their Avant label. The songs were entitled "We're Marching Together", a song supporting the civil rights in Little Rock, and "Some People Never Stop To Pray". In October 1957, they were noticed by Don Robey in Houston and signed to Peacock Records. Group personnel at that point included tenor Melvin Boyd (born December 1932), manager/second tenor Melvyn Pullen from Dayton, second lead high tenor Paul Alex "Easy" Arnold (born February 7, 1932), also a Daytonian, baritone Frank L. Peoples from Blairsville, Penn., Robert "Bob" Lattimore of Shelby, North Carolina (born in 1926) who doubled singing bass and playing guitar accompaniment as well as serving as the group's musical director, and Bob Washington, first lead tenor. Washington (born Paul R. Washington on September 22, 1928) hailed from Beckley, West Virginia and made his home base in Youngstown, Ohio. He started out singing and preaching at his foster father's church in Youngstown. His foster father was the Rev. E.A. Austin.



Gospelaires – courtesy Opal Nations

Paul “Easy” Arnold attended Roosevelt High and was a member of Dayton’s Mt. Olive Church pastored by Rev. McFarland. He sang in the choir and the legendary Revelators gospel group before serving in the U.S. Navy and going with the Gospelaires. Arnold was the perfect high tenor foil to Bob Washington’s growling, preacherly, sanctified leads.

Robey’s first release on the Gospelaires was the smoldering “Just Faith”, written and led by Bob Washington. The reverse was “Sit Down Children”, an arrangement of the traditional “Sit Down Servant,” sung up-tempo with great gusto. Billboard’s New Spiritual Releases announcement in late June 1957 awarded a full four stars to both songs. In August, Billboard reported heavy sales around Texas, but strong competition from elsewhere prevented it from breaking nationally.

A follow-up was issued in December 1957. The beautiful, almost Sensational Nightingales-like “How Much Longer” (Will My Journey Be) led by Washington was undersided with his lead on “They Don’t Understand Me”, a march-like ballad over in the Julius Cheeks corner. It was quite obvious that the Sensational Nightingales were the group’s role model at the time. Although the Gospelaires were wrecking churches and carving out a name for themselves, their records did not sell in impressive amounts. As Ray Funk pointed out in his two paragraph bio on the Gospelaires in the Galen Gart and Roy C. Ames book “Duke/Peacock Records” (Big Nickel Publications, 1990), the Gospelaires did not truly ignite until 1962 with the addition of seventeen-year-old “sky high” falsetto Charles McLean from Greensboro, North Carolina. Hence, the Gospelaires became a powerful force on the gospel “battles” front during the 1960s era when the Mighty Clouds of Joy, Violinaires and Gospelaires fought among themselves to gain the strongest public support. Both the Violinaires and Gospelaires featured strong tenors who crossed from one group to the other. In the late 1960s, Washington’s ministerial commitments took him away from the group and Paul Arnold stepped into his place, as he did during the group’s most memorable appearance on ‘T.V. Gospel Time’ in 1966 when he tore up the show.

The Gospelaires also tore it up on gospel “Caravan” shows at The Apollo in Harlem and Uptown in Philadelphia. In 1968, Don Robey persuaded Charles McLean to cross over. Under the Chuck McLain soubriquet, he recorded “My Lover’s Vow” for his Back Beat subsidiary. The release flopped and he returned to the Gospelaires in 1970. The Gospelaires split up a decade later. Surviving, one time or another, members include Joe Brown, Charles McLean and Marvin Lattimore. Members gone on include Paul “Easy” Arnold in Dayton on October 22, 2006, Frank L. Peoples, also in Dayton, November 19, 1988, Melvyn Pullen at an undisclosed location on December 27, 2002, and Rev. Robert

Washington passed away on April 2, 1996.

The Dixie Hummingbirds

On Tuesday, June 24, 2008, at approximately 10:10 a.m., Ira B. Tucker, the last long-serving soldier (70 years) of Philadelphia's world-famous Dixie Hummingbirds passed from this life in the City of Brotherly Love. He had been sick for some while. He died from complications due to cardio-vascular irregularities. He has been replaced by lead tenor Carlton Lewis, a soldier who physically resembles Tucker. Tucker had recently reformed a Dixie Hummingbirds outfit whose singing talent rivaled the soul-raising of the golden era, namely the 1940s and 1950s. In 2006, this group put out an excellent CD entitled "Still...Keepin' It Real-The Last Man Standing" for Tucker's own Nip N' Tuck Productions in Philadelphia. The squad included Ira Tucker Snr and William Bright (from the Sons of Birds), lead tenors, Lindon Baines Jones, background tenor and guitar, Abraham Rice, tenor/baritone, Edwin Cornell McKnight, basso profundo, Torrey Nettles, drums, and Willie Coleman, bass.

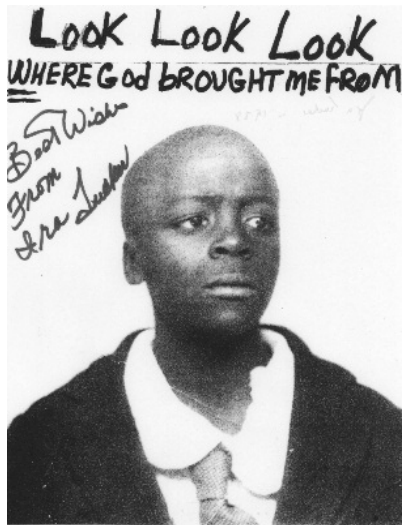
At the time of Tucker's demise, Robert Tisdale and Carlton Lewis had replaced Abraham Rice and Willie Coleman. Tucker had recently celebrated his eighty-third birthday.

For the beginnings of the group, we have to go back to 1928 and the sanctified little old wooden Bethel Church of God Holiness on Bailey Street in Greenville, South Carolina. The church had a junior choir and from out of this Greenville area native James Bodie Davis (born June 6, 1916 in Greenville, S.C.) formed the Junior Boys. The first recruit was his childhood singing friend, baritone Barney Parks (Born Barney Lee Tate on July 15, 1915 in Wilmington, SC.) Parks had moved to a small town near Greenville from Wilmington with his parents Maggie Parks and James Tate.

In addition, Davis picked up basso Fred Owens and tenor lead Bonnie Gipson Jnr. They grew into a tight-singing four-member quartet. Wearing unmatched clothes and singing spirituals, they rocked the churches around Greenville. The local Sterling High School in Green County became the sponsoring, nurturing entity the group needed to get themselves launched. They soon became the Sterling High School Quartet. Through Sterling's Prof. Hickson, the group got a music scholarship at Morris Brown University in Atlanta. But the outfit was more impressed by the Heavenly Gospel Singers, one of the top quartets of the day, from out of Spartanburg, South Carolina.

Led by Roosevelt Fenoy, the Heavenly Gospel Singers were fully professional and cut records. The Sterlings, having no money, listened to the Heavenly's from a window outside. Gospel singing to the Sterlings offered dignity and a means of support. The Sterlings appeared in Atlanta at the annual C.O.G.I.C. convention and were well received. Davis dropped out of Sterling High during the Depression and came up with a new name for the group which tied it to the state, the South Carolina Hummingbirds, which he shortened to the Dixieland Hummingbirds, then again to the Dixie Hummingbirds.

The 'Birds toured in earnest during the 1930s. As they were acappella, they could rehearse anywhere. By 1937, the original group started to fall apart. J.B. Patterson temporarily replaced basso Fred Owens and Bonnie Gipson Jnr was dropped because of pitch problems. Substitutes moved in and out of the quartet, as many had family commitments and were unable to tour. They continued to stay a four-member quartet up to the time of their first recording in New York for Decca in September 1939 (according to Dixon and Goodrich's "Blues & Gospel Records 1890-1943" (Oxford University Press, 1997.)



Ira Tucker – age 13 (1938) – Courtesy Ira Tucker estate

Jerry Zolten in his authoritative book on the 'Birds' entitled "Great God A'Mighty" (Oxford University Press, 2003) states that the group's New York sessions took place in 1938 which makes more sense because of personnel changes. The Decca acappella session line-up was composed of James B. Davis, lead, Fred Baker, tenor, Barney Parks, baritone, and ex-Heavenly Gospel Singers basso Jimmy Bryant, who was dropped shortly thereafter and replaced by the thirteen-year-old Ira Tucker who eventually became the group's baritone singer. The 'Birds' Decca sides, dominated by Bryant's strong, striding basso, are in the standard jubilee style of the time.

Tucker was born into poverty on May 17, 1925 and grew up with his mother in Spartanburg. He was educated through the Spartanburg public school system. Ira's mother discovered he had a love for singing and a voice to match. At age five, Ira went from house to house in his neighborhood offering to sing for people.

Davis was able to find a basso replacement for Bryant in Florida in the shape and form of William Henry, born September 28, 1914 in Hickory, S.C. Henry stayed for awhile but was never able to match Bryant's showmanship.



Ira Tucker and Louise Archie (1944) – courtesy Opal Nations

After Tucker joined the group, they traveled the Carolinas with Holden Smith and the General Four, a harder singing quartet. Tucker learned a lot from Smith and gained both

confidence and inspiration from his more dramatic lead style. This resulted in both Davis and Tucker alternating leads. Tucker developed a more emotional style and started putting his own arrangements to songs. The Dixie Hummingbirds were gradually moving away from stand-on-a-dime jubilee as exemplified by their heroes, the Golden Gate quartet. Basso William Henry sometimes picked a guitar during the group's performances.

By now, the group was able, through Davis's tight management, to look smart in matching suits and ties despite the fact they earned next to nothing on church programs in Virginia, Florida and the Carolinas. The Dixie Hummingbirds, now made up of James Davis, Barney Parks, Ira Tucker, William Henry and Wilson Baker, moved to Washington, D.C., then on to Philadelphia where they made their permanent home. Davis had an aunt in Philadelphia from whom they could rent rooms. He picked the city for its easy access to major cities on the Boston to Washington corridor. Besides which, Philadelphia was a far safer city than Greenville, South Carolina.



Dixie Hummingbirds – courtesy Ray Funk

In Philly, Charlie Newsome, a booking agent the group had met in Florida, found them regular work and a spot on WCAU radio, a 50,000 watt clear channel CBS network affiliate. They were billed as the Swanee Quintet. Top touring gospel groups were now showing up on radio and in films. In November 1942, John Hammond and Barney Josephson got the 'Birds into New York's downtown Café Society in place of the Golden Gate Quartet. The Dixie Hummingbirds had arrived. They were now reaching a wider and more sophisticated audience which meant that the 'Birds, now billed as the Jericho Quintet, had not only to present spirituals in down-homey fashion but include old American ballads and folk songs along with politically focused material. But uncompromisingly, the 'Birds sang everything in their own inimitable style. Supported by Lester Young, the 'Birds, wearing Zoot suits, slid out on stage like Buck & Bubbles at the Apollo. At times, they would alternate with the Golden Gate Quartet and even covered each others' repertoire. The 'Birds closed at Café Society on January 20, 1943, to allow other big acts to appear there. The draft was beginning to take its toll on the group.



The Dixie Hummingbirds over WCAU. Photograph from the *Philadelphia Afro-American*, 10 October 1942. Wilson Baker in front; from left: Ira Tucker, James Davis, Barney Parks, William Henry.

Dixie Hummingbirds – 1942 – courtesy Jerry Zolten

By July 1944, the date of their return to recording on Irving Berman's Regis label in Newark, the group line-up had evolved into James B. Davis, lead tenor, Beachey Thompson from the Willing Four (born October 12, 1915 in Newberry, S.C.), tenor, Ira B. Tucker, baritone, and Spartanburg-born William Bobo (born May 12, 1915), bass. Bobo was formerly Bryant's replacement in the Heavenly Gospel Singers. The 'Birds cut only one split session with Sister Ernestine B. Washington under their own name for Regis. This resulted in the single release of "I Just Couldn't Keep It To Myself" backed with Ira's beautiful debut lead on "Book Of The Seven Seals", sung in narrative style. Behind Sister Washington, the Birds crooned "If I could make it in" and "Savior don't pass me by" to Prof. Alfred Miller's piano accompaniment. In all likelihood, it was through Washington that the 'Birds recorded at all. 1944 was also the year that Ira married his childhood sweetheart, Louise Archie of Greenwood, South Carolina.

The Dixie Hummingbirds then took part in "shellac drives". As part of the war effort to recycle shellac, the group would sing for about ninety minutes from the back of a truck furnished with a public address system. They would follow this with a message to their listeners to bring old, unwanted records to the truck. They also traveled throughout the East Coast and found some work at small auditoriums and theatres through the sale of their recordings. They were awarded a regular spot at Philadelphia's W.I.P. on Sunday mornings at 8:00 a.m. They were now getting gigs at classy venues in their home town of Philadelphia. A regular Saturday radio appearance followed over WFIL at 1:45 p.m. Then came a self-produced Easter anniversary concert at the Metropolitan Opera House, an event that became a tradition.

In February 1946, the 'Birds signed with Bess and Ike Berman's Apollo Records in New York City. The 'Birds enjoyed four Apollo sessions in February 1946, January 1947, June 1948 and January 1949. Both bassos William Bobo and Providence Thomas shared Apollo sessions time. The sessions were infrequent due to almost constant touring to out of state gigs to stay together as a group. Apollo Records had star talent under contract. Besides Mahalia Jackson (with whom the 'Birds kicked off the label's 100 series), the Georgia Peach, the Two Gospel Keys and the Reliable Gospel Singers recorded for the label.



Ira Tucker and James Walker – late 1950s – courtesy Ira Tucker estate

Ira Tucker's ethereal lead was clearly in evidence on most of the eighteen sides recorded for Apollo. His glorious high tenor on "One Day" from 1947 and pretty phrasing on "God Is Now Speaking" from 1949 set the mold for what was to become the Dixie Hummingbird sound. Apollo broadened the group's popularity through national, as opposed to statewide, distribution. "My Record Will Be There," the group's second release of 1946, drew the most attention for its intricate, interwoven harmonic patterns. Record sales increased. The Bermans encouraged the 'Birds' to cross over into the more lucrative blues & rhythm idiom but the members were solidly against doing it.

Five months after the 'Birds' July 1948 Apollo session, the group appeared in Harlem's Apollo theatre with label-mate Mahalia Jackson. Their performance was a triumph. But by January 1949, the 'Birds' had severed all ties with the controlling Bess Berman and Apollo Records. An August 1949 Billboard announced the signing to Ivan Ballen's Gotham label in Philadelphia of five gospel outfits, one being of course the Dixie Hummingbirds. The 'Birds' approximately one year stay at Gotham produced at least seventeen recordings over the course of three or more sessions.

The July 1949 date was the last all acappella session. The second, toward the close of that same year, featured the great Doc Bagby on organ. Bagby was recording songs like "Jitterbug Waltz" and "Jumpin' At Smalls" for Gotham around that time and was filling in on sessions. A drummer was added to an arrangement of one song on the third session. It was not until 1952 that the 'Birds' fully succumbed to instrumental accompaniment. Gotham sides included two sessions (late 1949 and early 1950) with the Angelic Gospel Singers. Shared efforts rewarded us with the uplifting old Blue Jay Gospel Singers' nugget "Standing Out On The Highway" and the rapturous "Dear Lord Look Down Upon Me" written by Thomas Dorsey.

Six titles in all were cut with Ira Tucker, baritone and shared lead, James B. Davis, tenor, Beachey Thompson, tenor, William Bobo, basso, and the previously unrecorded Ernest James, the group's new second lead and high tenor from Philadelphia. The Angelics were made up of stalwarts Margaret Allison, shared lead and piano, Lucille Shird, Josephine McDowell and Ella Mae Morris. Doc Bagby filled in on organ, Ernest James' presence here suggest that the session may have taken place when the 'Birds' alone waxed their second and last sessions. The third session offered us the infectious "Cool Down Yonder" and fine sparring on the Tucker and Bobo-lead "Get Away Jordan," reminiscent of Mahalia Jackson's arrangement. A version of Bro Joe May's signature song "Search Me Lord" and the lovely "Is There Anyone In Heaven That You Know" were cut on the group's second session. The first gave us William Bobo's emotional licks on "Come See About Me" and the impassioned two-part "Move On Up A Little Higher", another of the group's tributes to Mahalia Jackson.

In late 1951, James Davis realized that because black spiritual groups like the Golden Gates, Deep River Boys and Charioteers had made it over to the mass market through affiliations with major labels, he saw no reason why the Dixie Hummingbirds should not follow suit. Finding an opportunity, the 'Birds signed in late 1951 with Okeh Records for whom they made two records, one on themselves and one with the Angelic Gospel Singers. The Gotham collaboration had worked well previously, so it was A&R man Danny Kessler's intention to stick with the same winning chemistry.

By now, Ernest James had defected to the Sensational Nightingales and was replaced by Paul Owens who had already enjoyed considerable experience as lead tenor with a handful of quartets, including the Israelite Gospel Singers and Sensational Nightingales. Owens was born in Greensboro, North Carolina on July 27, 1924. Owens sang second lead tenor on both sides of the 'Birds'-only release. Tucker took the lead as was custom on the "I'll Never Forget" and "I'll Live Again" sides. The arrangement of the songs were distinctly Tucker and the improved sound quality conveyed how adroit the group had become with their harmonies.

The double group sides gave us the sanctified "One Day", lead by Bernice Cole from the Four Believers, Owens and Tucker, and Thomas Dorsey's "Today (Evening Song)", a more mournful chart. All efforts to add solid rhythm accompaniment (more than one instrument) were rejected by the 'Birds until August 1952 when permanent guitar support was added. By 1952, the 'Birds had not yet scored a national hit despite the fact that they had waxed for two major labels, Decca and Okeh. Gospel package tours were catching on. Just like in R&B, top religious stars played theatres and auditoriums before large crowds paying three or four dollars to get in. Record labels with rosters of gospel artists sponsored packages for their artists or if a major act like Mahalia Jackson or Rosetta Tharpe was touring nationally over their turf, the label promoters would go out of their way to get their label's talent onto the programs when they passed through their major marketing areas.

The 'Birds were introduced to Don Robey, proprietor of the Duke/Peacock Records in Houston by WABQ Cleveland gospel deejay Rev. I.H. Gordon. Gordon was originally from Texas and a friend of Robey's. During 1951, Gordon had done a few favors for Robey who repaid by putting Gordon on record with the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi in 1951 (singing "Doctor Jesus" / "Seek The Lord.") The 'Birds met with Gordon on his Cleveland program. The Blind Boys were Robey's first gospel signing. The Dixie Hummingbirds were about the sixth, coming to Peacock at just about the same time as the Sensational Nightingales. Barney Parks, who over the years managed and sometimes helped along both the 'Birds and the 'Gales, was probably partly responsible for the signing of both quartets to Peacock Records.



Dixie Hummingbirds – courtesy Opal Nations

The 'Birds' first Peacock session took place at Bill Holford's ACA Studios in Houston in 1952. Sole accompaniment on drums (later dubbed over) was probably metered out by Lloyd "Fat Man" Smith's drummer. Four songs were recorded. The doom-laden Korean War opus "Wading Through Blood And Water", coupled with C.A. Tindley's "What Are They Doing In Heaven Today", hit the streets in April 1952. A quarter-page ad in Billboard magazine that month heralded the 'Birds' first Peacock release. The Peacock issue came at the same time as their two former Okeh recordings which meant they enjoyed extra exposure and could plug all three releases at once.

Davis says Robey paid the group very little, only chump change after covering all the production costs, which included the studio engineer's salary, studio rental, etc. "Wading Through Blood And Water" did well but did not catch alight. By August 1952, Paul Owens was gone to the Swan Silvertones and replaced by guitarist Howard Carroll. Carroll was born in North Philadelphia on April 27, 1925. Robey was in the midst of launching a campaign to put his gospel artists in front of rhythm accompaniment, thus adding more energy into the mix and steering them away from the virtues of tight singing and standup jubilee.

The 'Birds' second release, "Lord If I Go" / "Eternal Life," came from their second Houston session of August 1952. "Lord If I Go" is very much in the jubilee tradition at the start, then moves into shout double time and back again into jubilee. "Eternal Life" is a beautiful ballad tailored perfectly to suit Tucker's stylings. The song is otherwise known as "He's A Friend Of Mine".

The group's first big seller constitutes the next release of January 1954. "Let's Go Out To The Programs" was the group's first stab at blatant self-advertising. Imitating a verse of a best known song by a widely recognized quartet (in this case four of them) in a make-believe concert, is as good a publicity stunt as walking a high wire over Broadway. Of course, the song includes a verse on the 'Birds. The idea came from a record by the Modernaires with Paula Kelly on Coral from 1953 with the George Cates Orchestra.

Tucker showed he could impersonate A.C. Littlefield, Sam Cooke, Archie Brownlee and

Kylo Turner with the greatest of ease. The song became extremely popular in concert as one would imagine and a second "Let's Go Out To The Programs" with the 'Birds' paying homage to all female groups was put out in November 1958. The reverse of "Let's Go Out To The Programs" (Part 1) gave us "I'll Keep On Living After I Die", a slow chant centering on eternal life, a common issue in Tucker's lyric writing which often came to him while sitting on a river bank, holding a fishing rod and gazing down into the still waters.

The 'Birds' next release of April 1954 offered us "Live Right, Die Right," pitched with "Prayer Wheel", "Live Right, Die Right" was described by Jerry Zolten as a mellow swing jubilee, and quite rightly so. At this point, Tucker did not see reason to abandon the jubilee tradition altogether. In fact, his recordings at the time showed he used jubilee to launch his own more extrovert excursions into shout gospel.

The reverse, "Prayer Wheel", was inspired by the Heavenly Gospel Singers who recorded the song in 1936, according to Zolten. April 1954 also marked the addition of baritone James Emerdia Walker, born May 24, 1926 in Mileston, Mississippi. Walker had been immersed in gospel singing since childhood. His family were staunch members of the church. Walker moved to Missouri in 1941 and sang professionally around St. Louis. After a stint in the Navy, he returned to St. Louis and sang in the unrecorded Union Melody Men. After a meeting with Cliff Givens, Walker became the baritone for the Southern Sons in 1953.

After a brief stay with the Southern Sons, Walker joined the Harmonizing Four where he caught the attention of James Davis who thought he would make an excellent all-round utility man, as he could sing all parts well. Walker also possessed songwriting talents which the 'Birds thought an enormous advantage.

"Prayer Wheel" was followed by the October 1954 release of Roxie Moore's "Will The Lord Be With You" on which Davis and Tucker traded licks. The reverse was "Christian Testimonial", led by Ira Tucker alone. "Will The Lord Be With You" is a fine mid-tempo hymn-like chant on which Walker plies his weeping-like baritone pleas for the first time. "Christian Testimonial" is a mournful dirge sung blissfully in Tucker's usual high register.

The group's seventh single release, another taken from their April 1954 session, paired "Sinner, Sin No More", a jumpy song that must have kept the saints' feet tapping, with "I'm Not Uneasy" from the June 1953 session. "Swing Leads" were now the order of the day. The 'Gales had Cheeks and James playing off each other and other groups quickly adopted the formula and followed suit. "I'm Not Uneasy" is a lilting ballad of the first order.

In July 1955, Robey issued "It Must Have Been The Lord", a Tucker vehicle in the semi-jubilee vein, and Walker's first soloing on "Take Care Of Me". Walker's aching style certainly added an urgent soul-like quality the group had previously lacked, a quality which must have persuaded Davis to bring him into the group. Walker's connection with the jubilee style of the past was not as strong as Tucker's. While Davis appreciated and in fact supported Tucker's traditional arrangements, Walker represented the direction gospel was moving in, much to the dislike of the church establishment who thought that church singing should be devoid of all drama, extroversion and commercialization.



Dixie Hummingbirds souvenir program – courtesy Jerry Zolten



Dixie Hummingbirds – courtesy Opal Nations

Our 'Birds selections feature six more single releases. These include the beautiful "Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow" which sold well for them, and the colorful "Christian's Automobile", a tune written by Tucker that ended up as the group's signature song. Tucker was inspired by Brother Rodney's "Keep Your Hand Upon The Throttle", a very popular gospel song from 1950 that dates back a decade earlier to Wash Dawson.

The 'Birds were seen briefly in the movie "The World By Night" and were also featured in 1965 on 'T.V. Gospel Time'. The group was awarded a Grammy for Best Gospel Performance behind Paul Simon's hit recording, "Love Me Like A Rock" in 1973. The song was inspired by the Swan Silvertones' arrangement of "My Rock" recorded by them in 1952. Two film documentaries followed. In 2000, they were inducted into the Grammy Hall and Vocal Group Hall of Fame followed by a Philadelphia street re-naming to Fifteenth and Dixie Hummingbird Way.

Recording-wise, the 'Birds stayed with Peacock up to its sale in 1974, then recorded for its new owners, ABC Paramount. In 1983, MCA acquired ABC and began reissuing old ABC and

Peacock masters. Also in 1983, the group moved over to Atlanta International Records where they continued to record for a decade.

Ira Tucker's funeral service took place on Wednesday, July 2, 2008 at The Met on Philadelphia's North Broad Street (a place where the 'Birds came to enjoy their annual celebration.) He was laid to rest at The Ivy Hall Cemetery.

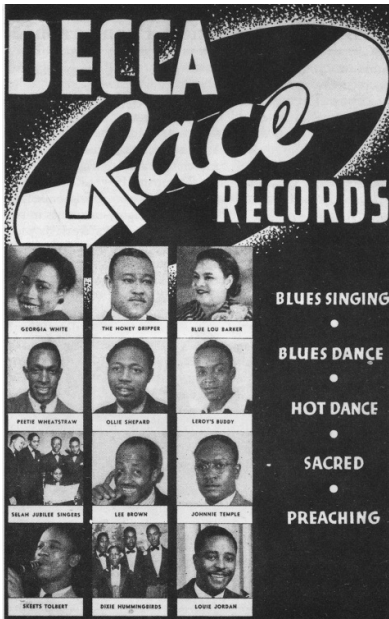
The great basso Willie (William M.) Bobo moved on to glory on April 28, 1976 in Philly's West Park Hospital. James Davis also died in Philadelphia at his home on April 17, 2007. Fellow Philadelphian Paul Owens passed at the University Hospital of Penn. on October 17, 2002. Barney Parks succumbed in Durham, N.C. on February 24, 2007. Beachey T. Thompson also passed in Philadelphia on June 28, 1994. One of the greatest baritones of all time, James Walker, died in Philadelphia on October 30, 1992. Only Howard A. Carroll of the classic, long-standing line-up remains.

* * * * *

You will notice that we have not included biographical details on the Bells of Joy, Bro. Cecil Shaw, the Spirit of Memphis, or the Blind Boys of Mississippi. This is because they have been duly covered in other Acrobat solo artist's collections.

— Opal Louis Nations, July 2008

With special thanks to Ray Funk, Viv Broughton, Rev. Addison, Bob Marovich, Jerry Zolten, the late Rev. Cleophus Robinson, Jo Jo Wallace, Lee Hildebrand, Dr. Marc Lindy, Roy C. Ames, Horace Clarence Boyer, Anthony Heilbut, David Edwards, Mike Callahan, Ruth K. Sullivan, Eric LeBlanc, Seamus McGarvey and Malaco Records.



Decca poster – courtesy Godrich & Dixon



Brother Cecil Shaw (young) – courtesy Steven Shaw



*“Little Ax” of Spirit of Memphis –
courtesy Jonas Bernholm*



Spirit of Memphis – courtesy Kip Lornell



