



JESSE WHITAKER – far right

**“Walking in Rhythm”
The Jesse Whitaker Story
(The Pilgrim Travelers)**

by Opal Louis Nations

In March 1995 David L. Gough established The Gospel Music Hall of Fame & Museum on West McNichols Street in Detroit. Among the early living inductees were Shirley Caesar, the Fairfield Four and Dorothy Norwood. This year’s nominees include L.A. gospel deejays of long standing, John and Vermya Phillips, and the legendary Pilgrim Travelers, among others. The exemplary, “classic” Pilgrim Travelers Quartet held sway for almost ten years. The lineup included Kylo Turner and James W. (“Alex”) Alexander, tenors, Keith Barber and Jesse Whitaker, baritones, and Rayfield Taylor, bass. Only two of these soldiers are alive and well today, Rayfield Taylor, who lives in Houston, and Jesse Whitaker who hails from Steele, Missouri.

Whitaker was born in Benoit, Mississippi on February 8, 1920. Benoit sits close to the Arkansas border and is north of Greenville, Miss. on Highway 1. His Missouri-born mother Leomia was a fine singer but never exploited her talent. His father, born in South Carolina, had no particular musical interest. The young lad attended the Shady Grove Baptist Church and was fortunate enough to catch the touring Masonic Travelers and Seven Sons in concert at the church.

In 1936 the Whitakers bought a farm in Missouri and the family switched steeples to the Oak Grove Baptist in St. Louis. Always humming and singing as a child, young Whitaker got himself a battery radio on which he riffed along with the syndicated Golden Gate Quartet on NBC. After listening regularly to the Gates, Whitaker was hooked on the sound of close acappella harmony. He just had to sing quartet and be part of a group. His first opportunity came when he was invited along on the road with

the Smith Jubilee Singers of St. Louis. Whitaker traveled all over Arkansas with the Smith Jubilees, picking up pointers and getting to know what it was like going from place to place for days at a time. The group split up in 1946. Various strays ended up in Los Angeles where a second and extremely proficient Smith Jubilee Singers group was put together.

During World War II Whitaker left the St. Louis area and ventured north up Highway 55 to Chicago where he hooked up with the Kansas City Gospel Singers who were passing through at the time (see my article on the group in Real Blues #15, October/November 1998.) The K.C. Gospel Singers sang spirituals and jubilees in the prevailing acappella tradition. They were managed by the colorful Rev. Billups, a freemason with money in real estate. The group had enjoyed a regular thirty-minute Sunday morning broadcast over KNC in Kansas City.

When Whitaker joined the group membership included Rev. Richard Foster, lead, Courtney Mason, tenor, Lawrence Hambrick, baritone, and Stacey Gaston, bass. Lawrence Hambrick met with his maker when he was mugged and murdered in Fort Worth, Texas shortly thereafter. According to bass singer Stacey Gaston, the group first encountered Whitaker in Blytheville, Arkansas. Whitaker was with the Smith Jubilees who were sharing a program with the K.C. Gospel Singers. The K.C.s were clearly a better group, and Whitaker wanted to defect and enlist as lead tenor singer. As Hambrick was gone and Gaston had to double as baritone, the K.C.s needed a baritone to take Hambrick's place. But according to Gaston, the K.C.s took Whitaker along anyway. Gaston states that Whitaker sat and learned for six months before finally taking the mike to sing switch-baritone with him.

Near the close of World War II Whitaker traveled out to California with the K.C. Gospel Singers, then composed of Gaston, Mason, Foster, and Cecil McDaniels. Whitaker says that he spent some time in Texas during 1945, then moved to Oakland, California. Tired of traveling, he needed a break. Once settled in Oakland, Whitaker joined the Golden Harp Jubilee Singers. The Golden Harps were one of the hottest quartets in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1946. Chock full of talent, the group enjoyed a regular thirty-minute Sunday night broadcast over Oakland's KWBR. The Golden Harps gave remote broadcasts from various local black churches and took requests from the listeners.

Various gospel luminaries moved in and out of the group, including baritone Paul Foster Snr who later joined the Soul Stirrers, "shout" tenor Vance "Tiny" Powell who went on to sing in the Paramount Gospel Singers and Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, basso George "Oo-pee" McCurn who down the road joined Whitaker in the Pilgrim Travelers and Archie Reynolds who managed and sang tenor in the Paramount Gospel Singers. Other soldiers included E.D. Lacy, first tenor, O.C. Williams, second tenor, and secretary Columbia Banks. The group, trained by Vance Powell and managed by Rev. Holley, cut one vanity record for Har Tone. By now, the quartet had scaled down to Powell, Reynolds, Foster and McCurn. the outfit made many radio transcriptions over just a few months.

Whitaker remembers training "Oo-pee" McCurn to sing bass on a song he had composed while in the group. This is where the Pilgrim Travelers entered into the picture. The Pilgrim Travelers were formed by Joe Johnson and the Davis brothers, members of the Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Houston, in 1936. (This Joe Johnson should not be confused with Joseph E. Johnson who sang baritone in the CBS Trumpeteers.) By 1962 baritone Willie Davis had brought the group out to Los Angeles, taking with him his two farmboy cousins, tenor Kylo Turner and baritone Keith

Barber. Both were picked up in Cleveland. Like everyone else, the Travelers were inspired by the Golden Gate Quartet but tried to model themselves after the Soul Stirrers of Chicago. Unlike the Soul Stirrers, the Pilgrim Travelers later developed poly-rhythmic chant patterns as opposed to high tenor harmonies and melismatic embellishments as were frequently used by the Soul Stirrers.

In 1945 they were joined by tenor James W. ("Alex") Alexander from Hamilton, Mississippi. Alexander had sung in the Silver Moons of Kansas before the Travelers. He had also sung in the Southern Gospel Singers alongside Wilmer A. Broadnax, a.k.a. "Little Ax," who went on to greater fame and prosperity with the Spirit of Memphis Quartet.

In 1946 after Johnson's departure, Alexander assumed overall control of the group. Although criticized by many for his dictatorial control, Whitaker insists that Alexander always worked towards consensus and that each and every one got along fine. It was 1946 when the Travelers, consisting of Turner, Alexander, Willie Davis, baritone Isaiah Robinson and Basso Rayfield Taylor hit Oakland to headline a program which included Whitaker and the Golden Harps. Alexander was much impressed with Whitaker's backgrounding and sometimes humorous disposition. While in Oakland, the Pilgrim Travelers cut one session for Bob Geddings' Big Town label at his home-made studio on Eighth and Center Streets in Berkeley.

This was followed by an L.A. session for Mrs. Greenwood on her Greenwood imprint on Central Avenue. Mrs. Greenwood was taken by their appearances at the Peoples Independent Church. As with other "community" gospel quartets like the Kansas City Gospel Singers, who recorded for Castle, Geddings sold masters to Jack Lauderdale's Swing Time discery. Some of the recordings later surfaced on his imprints. Some time during the summer of 1947 Whitaker got a call from Alexander in New York. Baritone Isaiah Robinson had quit the group--would he, Whitaker, take his place? Whitaker, who was taken by surprise, had not planned on joining a fully professional group and was a little reluctant at first but Alexander soon won him over.

In the fall of 1947 the Pilgrim Travelers, through introductions from Mrs. Greenwood, signed with Art Rupe at Specialty Records in Hollywood, only days after the signing of the Southern Harmonizers, Rupe's first contracted gospel quartet. Alexander, who had a penchant for spotting worthwhile talent, later became Rupe's gospel talent scout and brought Sister Wynona Carr, Brother Joe May and others to the label.

Christmas Eve 1947 marked the Pilgrim Travelers' first session. At least fourteen songs were committed to 16" metal masters. Some of these were later held back and never issued. The group included Turner, Alexander, Barber, Whitaker and Taylor. As Anthony Heilbut states in his book, *The Gospel Sound* (Limelight Editions, 1971), both principal leads Turner and Barber were strongly influenced by Rebert H. Harris of the Soul Stirrers and that Turner's falsetto crooning contrasted with Barber's harsh growls. Whitaker's exquisite baritone was admired by many including the young Ray Charles. The group developed a toe-patting, "walking rhythm" style which evolved into the use of a fully miked foot-board in the studio.

The Travelers' first five releases sold well enough to take them on many multi-state engagements. In July 1948 the group returned to the studio to cut at least eight new songs. Among the pack was the swing-lead "Mother bowed," a mournful praise song filled with guilt, regret and gratitude, written by a man called Henry and arranged by the group. "Mother bowed" developed into one of the outfit's best selling and certainly most requested ballad opuses.

During the summer of 1949 Art Rupe had forged a deal with Randy's Record Mart of Gallatin in Tennessee with whom carefully advertised "package deals" were conceived and marketed. Randy packaged the first five Pilgrim Travelers singles releases and through air time garnered on Nashville's WLAC had Gene Nobles market them convincingly at an irresistible price. This served to generate a welter of sales for Rupe and almost continuous bookings for the group. On the touring circuit, the group broke all attendance records in 1948 at both New York's Golden Gate Auditorium and the Brooklyn Music Academy.

During a foray into the Southlands they drew a crowd of 6,500 at Birmingham, Alabama's City Auditorium. A much touted press release outlined the story of a spiritually needy, sick woman in Washington, D.C. which ran as follows. During an appearance in D.C., the boys received an urgent call from promoter Miss Francis White. A dying woman had called White to ask if the group could come to her house to sing and pray for her recovery. The Pilgrim Travelers of course showed up and the woman recovered. She never missed a Pilgrim Travelers concert in her city after that.

Quartets, even by the late 1940s, still encountered resistance from some church ministers who argued that vocal groups placed "entertainment" above praising God, but the Pilgrim Travelers by virtue of their spiritual conviction at the rostrum, managed to assure the church brethren of their deeply felt religious unity. The group began adding instruments to their recordings. Some time during late February 1950 the outfit was involved in a head-on highway auto collision in which Alexander, Turner, Barber, Taylor and Whitaker suffered minor injuries. Laid up at Palm Springs Community Hospital, the Travelers were forced into canceling a string of personal appearance dates in the Southlands. The group's members were without money to cover medical expenses at the time and were forced into having Rupe mail checks for the grand sum of \$601.30 to the hospital on the understanding that he would be reimbursed. However, due to the accident, Keith Barber was unable to sing as well as before.

On July 21, 1950 at the group's eighth session at Hollywood's Universal Recorders, the boys included a song Whitaker and Rayfield had written entitled "Welcome home" led on record by Turner and Barber. At this same session the group recorded two songs they had originally recorded for Mrs. Greenwood, "I love the Lord" and "My road's so rough and rocky." Interest in the songs was so strong that the Pilgrim Travelers were asked to re-record them. The quartet at this point was at the peak of their popularity. Peter Guralnick in his book, "Sweet Soul Music" (Harper & Row, 1986), states that on the road it was the Pilgrim Travelers, Soul Stirrers and Original Five Blind Boys of Mississippi who toured together and made up what Alexander calls the "Big Three of Gospel," or grand gospel triumvirate.

In the December 1950 Billboard West Coastings column was an announcement stating that Specialty Records had flooded the gospel field with five releases by the Pilgrim Travelers (this was another Randy's Record Mart bargain package give-away.) The magazine went on to report that Specialty would plug the tunes on seven 50,000 watt a.m. outlets throughout the Mid-West and South. No other quartet had ever enjoyed such innovative, blanket publicity.

Whitaker insists that Alexander always made sure that the group was well rested before they made public appearances. Whitaker was later placed in charge of acquiring new uniforms. "I tried to find outfits that stood out and was the first to buy suits in eye-grabbing colors. I had our suits made at Skeets Taylor on Forty-Third in Chicago. The Soul Stirrers used the place, too." When sessions came up, the Pilgrim Travelers rehearsed all day for two or three days prior to going in to record. Most

rehearsals took place at Alexander's house on Wilson Place. All the boys would come up with ideas for songs. Whitaker's compositions just popped out of his head at the spur of the moment. "I was always trying to get Alexander to sing as he had a good voice, but it wasn't until August 1956 that I managed to get him to sing lead on session." (The song was "Close to Thee, Specialty 889.)

A Specialty press release dated April 1951 announced that the Pilgrim Travelers with the Spirit of Memphis Quartet drew a crowd of almost 3,000 at The Booker T. Washington Auditorium in New Orleans with over 500 being turned away at the box office. Billboard then announced in its April 1951 issue that Alexander had incorporated the Pilgrim Travelers, thus coming up with a fair and equitable agreement whereby all five members jointly shared in the organization's stock. A European tour was planned, and John Dolphin continued to issue old masters of the Pilgrim Travelers he had acquired from Bob Geddins long ago. In February, 1953 Whitaker wrote "A hard road to travel," but it was Turner and Barber who sang lead on the waxing.

On July 2, 1953, the group recorded a song which pushed the fellows straight to the top of the gospel best-sellers' list. The tune, written and lead by Whitaker on the pressing, was called "I've got a new home." "I've got a new home" was marked by a heavy, infectious, dragging rhythm and Whitaker's airy, floating baritone lead. Ray Charles, who had always been a huge fan of Jesse Whitaker's voice, swore he would pay homage to Whitaker one day by secularizing his arrangement. He did make good on his promise (much to Alexander's consternation) during the fall of 1956 when he waxed "Lonely Avenue," backgrounded by the Raelets. "Lonely Avenue" peaked at number six in the Billboard R & B charts that October.

Alexander, in a letter to Art Rupe from the Savoy Hotel in Atlanta on September 12, 1956, suggested that Rupe collect royalties for the use of his group's arrangement. In an earlier letter to Rupe from Houston, Alexander stated that fans thought "Lonely Avenue" was in fact a Pilgrim Travelers' release. Rupe, after legal consultation, decided to let the situation ride.

Back in 1953, the Pilgrim Travelers had nothing really much to worry about. All their releases continued to sell in quantity. A report in Billboard from February 1954 stated that through Herald Attractions, the Pilgrim Travelers chalked up an estimated gross of \$100,000 playing 173 dates at ballparks and auditoriums, drawing approximately 110,000 people. The aggregation played to 10,000 in Columbus, Ga., 5,000 in Dallas, 3,600 in Oakland, Ca., and 5,200 in Birmingham, with tickets scaled at \$1.25 a pop. Of the top triumvirate, the Original Five Boys of Mississippi pulled a little more, and the Soul Stirrers a little less.

Whitaker's fondest memory was playing the Apollo Theatre with the Soul Stirrers and Gospel Harmonettes. In 1953, the Pilgrim Travelers was the first gospel group to play the Apollo. His worst memories were having to eat on the run while traveling through the segregated South where sometimes they had to grab whatever they could at a grocery store and consume it quickly in the car.

In late 1953 the Pilgrim Travelers had picked up tenor Walter Budgett, but after the January 8, 1954 session the group had to cut him loose because of problems connected with his epilepsy. The January 8, 1954 session produced four songs, one of which, "In my heart" (a mournfully soulful opus that evolved into a strong, muscular chant), was written by Whitaker. Also in January the group began a two-year backgrounding-on-sessions relationship with Bro Joe May.

It seemed that Whitaker knew how to write winning songs. His next composition, "Straight Street," recorded at the January 13, 1955 studio date, proved to be one of the

group's most significant sellers. Lead by Whitaker, "Straight Street" embodied both the "walking-in-rhythm" sound and spiritual essence that are so unmistakably the soul of the Pilgrim Travelers.

As gospel quartets added more instrumentation to their performances, a rebellion led by ultra-conservative ministers mainly with ministries in the Southlands created a strong opposition against those who "jazzed up" religious recordings. The Pilgrim Travelers were battered with their share of complaints. To counter accusations, Herman Hill, publicist with Specialty Records, issued a press release entitled "Gospel singers deny jazzing up their newest recordings," dated September 1955. It ran:

"Hollywood.... The renown Pilgrim Travelers have categorically denied "jazzing up" their newest gospel recordings entitled "Troubled in mind" / "Every Prayer" [Specialty 883 from an August 4, 1944 Hollywood session]. Most Southern California DJ's who feature gospel music have played both sides and have spoken in praiseworthy terms of the platter. A scattered few in turn have refrained from using the record because they claimed their listeners would not approve. One station said it planned to play the record and let their listeners be the judge. J.W. Alexander, manager of the Pilgrim Travelers, has pointed out that "The bible gives proof that reed instruments similar to the sax, as well as the flute, have been used in religious ceremonies since time immortal. Horns, violins, pianos, harps, organs and other musical instruments are commonly used today. We would be the last group in the world to do anything to offend or desecrate the dignity of gospel and spiritual music. Instead we feel that we have captured the genuine beat and cadence of gospel on these two sides"."

Nevertheless, the end of the "classic" Pilgrim Travelers era was drawing to a close.

The August 4, 1955 session is marked by two other interesting points. One, Alexander made his lead singing debut on a song entitled "Close to Thee" and, two, the group recorded the dramatic "How Jesus died," a song written by both Whitaker and George "Oo-pee" McCurn.

In September 1956, a month after what turned out to be the Pilgrim Travelers' last Specialty session, Kyo Turner up and quit. Moving to South Fourth Street in Memphis, Tennessee, Turner set his mind on pursuing a solo career. Meanwhile, as Alexander tried to fill Turner's shoes, he drew away a little from the welfare of the group by acting as unofficial R & B talent scout for Rupe. Work for the Pilgrim Travelers started to dry up. In a letter sent by Rupe to Alexander, then sequestered at gospel promoter Ronnie Williams' address on Belmont Terrace in Newark, he stated that he was a non-acceptable substitute for Turner and that promoters felt they need not pay so much for a group (namely the Pilgrim Travelers) lacking one of its star leads. Rupe told Alexander to find a new lead singer the hard way, like when the Soul Stirrers replaced the retiring Rebert H. Harris with Sam Cooke. Alexander, in turn, replied by telling Rupe that he was well received by the fans as temporary lead and had garnered much praise for his rendering of "Bless us today" (a song Rupe refused to release, after it was recorded on the group's last session of August 1956.)

As Lillian Cumber at Herald Attractions Booking Agency refused to find work for the group, and Rupe held back on sessions and contract renewal, the Pilgrims were forced to look elsewhere to record.

During the summer of 1957 Andrew Karres and John and Alex Siamas of Rex Productions formed the Keen and Andex labels. Bumps Blackwell, who took Sam

Cooke to the company from Specialty, was put in charge of musical direction, and Bob Keene (after whom Keen was named) was designated principal A & R duties. Blackwell brought the Pilgrim Travelers to Andex. The group at this juncture was composed of James Alexander, tenor, Ernest Booker (from the Alpha-Omega Singers on Peacock), tenor, Jesse Whitaker, baritone, George "Oo-pee" McCurn, bass plus a young lead tenor who had sung in the Kings of Harmony & their Queen, Holy Wonders, Highway Q C's and Chosen Gospel Singers by the name of Lou Rawls. It was Whitaker more than anyone who kept the old familiar Pilgrim Travelers sound alive, and both he and Rawls shouldered the lions share when it came to laying down the lead-work.

The Pilgrim Travelers cut six singles for Andex, many of which were culled for their one album entitled "Look Up" (Andex 5001; also Famous LP 513.) Whitaker had a hand in writing if not simply arranging at least eight of the twelve charts. These included a remake of "I could do better than that" (the original surfaced for the first time on a CD Lee Hildebrand and I produced at Fantasy Records in 1994) on which Whitaker sang lead, a song made popular by the Famous Blue Jay Singers entitled "Jesus met the woman at the well," the soulfully touching "A soldier's plea," the upbeat chart best recalled as sung by the Golden Gate Quartet called "Daniel saw the stone," the suitably arranged traditional standards "The battle of Jericho" and "Go down Moses," the song which launched the Soul Stirrers' recording career, "Walk around," plus the liltingly beautiful "Come home," otherwise known as "Softly and tenderly." "Come home" is perhaps Whitaker's most exquisitely arranged song."

The Pilgrim Travelers were fortunate in having Sam Cooke as supplementary back-up singer on their recording of the traditional "Motherless child." The Pilgrim Travelers' album "Look Up" was reissued three more times, first under the guise of the Alabama Singers on the Italian Joker label, then on the San Francisco Bay Area-based Solid Smoke label (8034) and finally on V.S.O.P. out of Washington, D.C. in 1988. However, none of the six singles releases sold in impressive quantities.

Yet another setback befell the group on Monday, November 10, 1958. By now, in an attempt to break into the pop field, the quartet had changed names to the Travelers, recorded the forgettably trite "Teen-age machine age" for Andex and were out on the road doubling as Sam Cooke's backing group and opening act.

Sam Cooke, along with Cliff White (Cooke's co-writer and guitarist), Ed Cunningham (Cooke's valet) and Lou Rawls were involved in a car accident on Highway 61 near Marion, Arkansas. The brand new yellow 1958 El Dorado convertible, driven by Cunningham, slammed into the rear of a loaded, parked soybean truck. The car was speeding. Cooke was slumped in the front seat, asleep, next to the driver and miraculously sustained only minor injuries from flying glass. Cunningham was mortally wounded, having been impaled on the steering wheel. White had broken his collarbone, some ribs, and had mashed his fingers. Rawls had been struck in the head by the steel overhead bar and was admitted to intensive care at the Crittendon Memorial Hospital in West Memphis. Rawls remained in a coma for five and a half days. The tragedy eventually led to the breaking up of the Travelers on tour with Cooke in Florida in late 1958.

Lou Rawls, with Alexander plus a pick-up group he labeled as the Pilgrim Travelers, recorded one excellent album entitled "The Soul-Stirring Gospel Sounds of The Pilgrim Travelers" for Capitol Records in 1962.

Shortly after this, Whitaker teamed up with James Wafer to form the New Pilgrim Travelers who signed with Brother Duke Henderson's Proverb label on LA's South Central Avenue. Both Whitaker and Wafer managed, wrote, arranged, and sang lead

with the group on three singles and an album entitled "Peace In The Valley." Whitaker stayed with the group at the start when they ventured out on local gigs, but when out of town work started to roll in, Whitaker quit and went to work at Sears Roebuck as a porter in the service center. Whitaker felt he had had enough of being out on the road and opted to settle down.

Whitaker then went to Hermanville, Mississippi. Around this time, Alexander mobilized yet another Pilgrim Travelers group, and on Kent Records the outfit recorded one single and one disappointing album called "Did You Stop To Pray This Morning."

In 1970 Whitaker relocated to Missouri where he took charge of the family farm. While working as assistant manager in shipping and receiving as well as driving a truck for Montgomery Ward, he took up with a quartet out of Portageville called the Wandering Five. The Wandering Five had broadcast over KMIS for thirty-seven years, recorded for tiny local labels and were widely popular. However, the Wandering Five split up in 1985.

Whitaker then hitched up with a quartet called the Silver Bells of Blytheville, Arkansas (North of Memphis). Blytheville was a relatively short trip south from the Missouri border. (This is not the group who recorded for Nashboro during the 1960s.) Soldiers included Whitaker, lead baritone, secretary and treasurer, Rev. S.D. Foster, lead and bass, Robert Robinson, lead and background tenor, Bill White, lead and baritone, Russell Thomas, tenor, Lodie Wright, second lead, and manager Clarence Fisher. The Silver Bells motored out on the church circuit through Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee and Illinois. The Silver Bells evolved into the Spirit of Blytheville, an outfit with whom Whitaker continued to instill his own unique blend of vocal finesse.

In retrospect, it was Whitaker who wrote the most winning and best remembered songs and it was his "floating" baritone that gave the Pilgrim Travelers that special edge.

— Opal Louis Nations,
October 2000