

WINDY CITY WONDERS

Macomba 3905 (Two CDs: 78:09; 77:14)

CD One: FAMOUS BLUE JAY SINGERS: In The Upper Room/ I'm Bound For Canaan Land; REV. DWIGHT 'GATEMOUTH' MOORE: Glory, Glory Hallelujah/ The Bible's Being Fulfilled Every Day/ I'm Going Through/ Thank You Jesus; NORFOLK SINGERS: By And By/ Dig A Little Deeper; ROBERT ANDERSON & CHOIR: Jesus (Is My Friend); EVANGELIST GOSPEL SINGERS OF ALABAMA: Leaning On The Lord/ Lord, Stop The War/ Never Grow Old/ Walk In The Light; FOUR-A-MELODY MEN: I'm On My Way/ Mother Pray For Me; SPIRITUAL STARS: Good Religion/ I'll Search Heaven; BREWSTERAIRES: Where Shall I Be When The First Trumpet Sounds/ (The Lord Gave) Me Wings For My Soul; REV. CHAMBERS: Me And The Devil; SOUTHERN STARS: Don't Give Up/ Surely God Is Able/ This World Is In A Bad Condition/ I Saw The Light/ Prodigal Son; ELDER CHARLES BECK: I'm Gonna Tell God/ Wine Head Willie Put That Bottle Down



CD Two: SILVER STARS: 12 Years Old/ Take It To The Lord; REV. UTAH SMITH: Two Wings/ Take A Trip; SOUTHERN STARS: I Remember I Heard My Mother Pray/ Tired Of The Devil/ Jesus Will Be Waiting/ Weep Little Children; ELDER CHARLES BECK: I'm Walking With Jesus At My Side/ When; REV. H.R. JELKS: The Gospel Of Christ (Pt. 3); REV. ROBERT BALLINGER: How I Got Over/ This Train; DIXIELAND SINGERS: Our Prayer/ Where We Never Grow Old; ELLIS & DIXON SPIRITUAL & VOCAL GROUP: Precious Memories, Parts 1 & 2; GOSPEL WONDERS: He's My All And All/ I Want To Live, Live, Live; PILGRIM HARMONAIRES: He Said He Would Move; BELLS OF JOY: What A Fellowship/ I Found Another Soldier; 5 BLIND BOYS OF MISSISSIPPI: A Weeping For A Mighty Long Time/ Take Your Burdens To Jesus; SEVEN MELODY MEN: Nobody Knows, Nobody Cares/ Rockin' Lord

The front cover promises 'Windy City Gospel on South Cottage Grove 1947-1959', and Opal Louis Nations' notes make frequent mention of South Cottage Grove, ambiguously readable as a location or a label. Never heard of it? There are clues to what we're really talking about in the CDs' Macomba branding, and the all-square borders of the booklet design. For many readers, the track listing will be giveaway enough, but if anyone still hasn't figured things out, Garry Kasparov could probably lend a hand to Phil in the blanks (Shetland readers will recognise the influence of the Up Helly Aa bill on the previous sentence).

The Blue Jay Singers, possibly Birmingham's greatest quartet, get matters off to an almost unsurpassable start, but they have plenty of competition from the other artists here. Admittedly, 'Gatemouth' Moore, although lively, is not a front-runner; a blues singer who'd recently seen the light, he seems still to be developing an individual gospel style. These early recordings owe a sizeable debt to Sister Rosetta Tharpe, above all on 'The Bible's Being Fulfilled Every Day'. Robert Anderson, rightly described by Opal as 'perhaps the most skilful post-war baritone to come out of Chicago', has no problem establishing his individuality and greatness. He's supported by female singers, who are severely under-represented on these discs. Company policy? It seems unlikely, given that Sister Tharpe wasn't the only big star on the distaff side.

Normally, I'd pick out highlights, but in the case of the quartets, virtually everything is top flight, even from total unknowns like the Spiritual Stars. Special mention is due, though, to the Norfolk Singers' driving 'Dig A Little Deeper', which avoids the fancy chords that a number of quartets apply to that song. The Evangelist Gospel Singers of Alabama, and the variously numbered Melody Men hark back, very pleasingly, to jubilee stylings; so do the Memphis-based Brewsteraires, whose revival of a song associated by the likes of us with Blind Lemon Jefferson begins in solemn beauty, and by the end has become larky enough to feature a vocal tromnet break.

The Southern Stars, from Virginia, had four singles on the mystery label, and are accordingly

the most heavily represented quartet here; they combine Tidewater close harmony with the more aggressive lead singing that was coming to dominance in the early fifties. The Silver Stars were also Virginians; from Richmond, they often shared the bill with the city's much more famous Harmonizing Four. On the evidence here, they must have held their own.

Of the singing preachers and guitar evangelists, Rev. Utah Smith has been much reissued, but is still a marvel; so, too, is Rev. Chambers, whose tale of all-in wrestling with Old Nick makes one sigh for its flipside, which couldn't be traced for inclusion. Elder Beck, ragging on 'Winehead Willie', combines comedy with serious social criticism; on the reverse, he takes Roy Brown's gospel-inflected blues stylings back to church on a feedback loop. Beck's tracks on CD two are a bit syrupy, sad to say. Also taking the blues to Sunday school is Rev. Ballinger; his piano, Willie Dixon's bass and Odie Payne's drumming generate a wonderful, sauntering swing. Rev. H.R. Jelks is represented by the straining final third of a six-sided sermon.

The Gospel Wonders probably include Calvin White, who went on to sing memorable lead with Abyssinian Baptist Choir, and had a modest career in soul music with C and the Shells, aka the Sandpebbles. The Wonders' tracks are enjoyable enough; much more compelling are the Bells of Joy and the Blind Boys of Mississippi, who join the roster towards the end of both the fifties and these discs. Their presence emphasises the comparative scarcity of nationally celebrated artists on - I can't be bothered to keep up the charade - Chess. The Bells' and the Blind Boys' sides are among a good many leased from smaller labels; that even Chess's biggest gospel star, Rev. C.L. Franklin, was outsourced from Joe Von Battle suggests that Len and Phil saw gospel as just a tributary branch of their revenue stream. Archie Brownlee's final recordings are predictably ferocious, and the Bells are reliably professional, although the guitar part on 'I Found Another Soldier', sounding like an electric ukulele, is odd.

That famous names are a rarity on these discs usefully highlights the fact that, in the fifties, the rock of ages had quality written all the way through it. The otherwise completely obscure Dixieland Singers and Pilgrim Harmonaires are up close to the greats for precision, beauty and intensity, and even the engagingly artless Ellis & Dixon aggregation, perhaps briefly emerging from a local church, have a great deal of charm; they feature a female lead, trumpet, trombone and smoky saxophone. 'Windy City Wonders' lives up to its title almost throughout, and is another must-have from Opal's reissue assembly line; you can get it (only, we're advised) from Roots & Rhythm, and so you should.

Chris Smith

N.B. To endeavour to avoid any confusion, readers should note the booklet and the tray card's spine show the title of this issue to be 'Windy City Wonders', but as you can see, the 'face' of this issue shows it to be 'Windy City Gospel on South Cottage Grove'.