ON THE GOSPEL HIGHWAY, IN THE GOSPEL BYWAYS

Chris Smith journeys from Alamogordo to the Promised Land via the Moon, guided by some recently released gospel CDs.

The discs under consideration, all 24 trackers, are four compilations of ‘gospel rarities’ gathered from hither and yon; two volumes compiled from Nashboro 45s; and one collection (with presumably another to follow) of recordings made in Newark. The time span is the late 1940s to the 1960s, generally regarded as gospel’s golden age.

The presentation is a bit more than minimalist; there are no notes, but the ‘Rarities’ series and the Newark CD give recording dates, issue numbers and personnels, some of which could have been made more accurate by consulting Hayes and Laughton. The booklets with the Nashboro collections list the artists’ 45s for the company, with dates, but without personnels; one must buy both CDs to get these – in any case, not very useful – listings complete. The thinking, presumably, is that prospective purchasers are likely to want both volumes anyway, and will have the appropriate discographies in which to delve more deeply for information. This is doubtless true, but a little more detail would not have been hard to supply.

A glance at the track listings will make it obvious that the ‘Black Gospel Rarities’ series lives up to its name; there are some well-known names here, but many of the singers and groups, even the occasional ones on big name labels like Chess or Atlantic, will be unfamiliar to all but the most fanatical enthusiasts. They, like more casual listeners, will know that obscurity does not imply inferiority; equally it does not, of course, guarantee excellence, but there’s a great deal of high quality music here, much of it never before reissued, and much of it unlikely to be reissued again.

The tracks by Edna Gallmon Cooke on ‘Rarities’ first two volumes have been available before, on Shanachie and Spirit Feel, but some records are worth having more than once. Gallmon Cooke was the Ella Fitzgerald of gospel music, with sophisticated harmonic and rhythmic vocabularies, and an impeccable ability to build and pace a song. When she’s joined by the Radio Four, perfection is piled upon perfection. The Radio Four’s great leader, Morgan Babb, with his later group, the Philco Singers, is a highlight of the Nashville sets, on which there’s also more great work by Madame Cooke.

If few women dared to mimic Edna Gallmon Cooke, flirting with Jesus, it’s apparent from the ‘Rarities’ volumes that a lot of female groups wanted to be the Ward Singers in those days; it sometimes seems that the rest (compare, for instance, the Booker Singers) wanted to be Dorothy Love Coates and the Original Gospel Harmonettes. These are not bad models to follow; less successful are some of the male quartets who try to be the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. It’s quite a feat to emulate Archie Brownlee’s larynx-shredding lead; the problem, as heard on the Drexail Singers’ ‘Jesus Said’ or the Dynamic Gaylarks’ ‘Child Do Love Jesus’ is that where Brownlee built up to a frenzy, some of his acolytes start in one, and consequently have nowhere else to go. The results are better when singers know who they admire, but stay in their comfort zones; hear, for instance, the Alamogordo Spiritual Aires’ lead, who knows that he can’t be Sam Cooke, and rests content to take what he needs from his hero’s style, all the while accompanied by a terrific pianist.

Much of the material on the four ‘Rarities’ volumes is good, and some of it is great: one might single out the raw power of the Spiritual Harmonizers, produced by Henry Stone; Julia Peterson’s forthright sparring with her group, and with their Hammond organist; the Rosettes’ odd but effective collaboration with a jazz trio on ‘I’ll Be Satisfied’; or the gorgeous jubilee sound of the Parker Brothers, doubtless inspired by fellow Norfolkers, the Golden Gate Quartet. (The Gates’ own ‘Didn’t It Rain’, on Volume 4, is the sort of old favourite they could put across while juggling chainsaws in their sleep, but ‘Be Ready When My Jesus Comes’ is tougher and more confrontational than their norm.)

It’s worth noting that ‘Rarities 4’ differs from its companions in being all from the 1950s and in comprising mainly male quartets, either unaccompanied or minimally accompanied. It also includes a few tracks that I would not have thought particularly rare, either as 78s (Elder Beck’s serious comedy on ‘Wine Head Willie’) or because previously reissued (the topical numbers by the Gospel Pilgrims and the Echoes of Zion), but they’re all great stuff, so we’ll let that pass.

The three other ‘Rarities’ discs all include the occasional clunker; to pick from each in turn, there are the dull Progressiveaires; the sentimental vacuities of ‘Somebody Bigger Than You And I’ and the Bates Singers and Little Barbara Ann Ward, both blaringly unfocused, although wee Babs at least had the excuse of being a child. There is much more to savour than to spurn on all these.

Edna Gallmon Cooke.

Elder Charles Beck.
Everywhere else here is top-notch, however, with Marion Williams reverting to her normal, majestic form, and the best version of the Caravans (Shirley Caesar, Alberta Walker, Inez Andrews, Delores Washington, and piano-pounder Eddie Williams) giving their all; the rampaging ‘I’m Not Tired Yet’ is a fitting conclusion to the disc, and no exaggeration on Andrews’ part. The belting track by Professor Ernie Young and the Ladies Of Music reinforces one’s doubt that he’s on the Willie Webb Singers’ Parrot coupling (Rarities 3 and 4). The mixed-sex Unique Gospel Singers aren’t of course, but one accepts that ‘the Solidly in the Mainstream Gospel Singers’ is a less snappy name. Speaking of names, there’s much more to the Victorious Glorylanders of Greensboro, N.C. than a grandiose handle; their lead singer’s effortless shifts from sweet to searing stand as a reminder of the strength in depth, then and now, of African-American sacred music, where star quality lurks in every small-town church.

As with Newark, ‘Nashville gospel’ is an indicator of studio location, not regional style. By the time Ernie Young founded Nashboro, recordings and the gospel highway had established nationwide notions of what quartets and soloists ought to sound like, but there was still plenty of room for diversity and self-expression within the big tent that was gospel music. Statistical proof of that, perhaps, is that only the Southern Echoes’ ‘Be Ready When He Comes’ and the Chosen Gospel Singers’ ‘Trouble Of This World Condition’ (both on Volume 1, and both splendid performances) are also on the four-CD Tompkins Square set, ‘Fire In My Bones’, which I reviewed in these pages a while ago.

The artist roster includes, as already noted and eulogised, Young’s greatest standbys, Morgan Babb and Edna Gallmon Cooke. The Arc Gospel Singers also had a long tenure with Nashboro, although their greatest days were earlier, on Gotham; ‘Every Day’ is one of the few tracks on Volume 1 that’s not up to much, certainly not by comparison with the same group’s ‘I’ve Weathered The Storm’ on the other disc.

Elsewhere on Volume 1, the Sons Of Jehovah’s fancy chord voicings were probably more interesting for them to work out than they are for the listener to hear; the Travelin’ Echoes’ impassioned bass lead is let down by lacklustre responses; and the Gospel Five Singers’ ‘This Is My Testimony’ is a dull and platitudinous monologue to set beside ‘Don’t Blame The Children’. That sentence was written to get the negatives out of the way, because everything else on this disc is eminently listenable and enjoyable. Hear, for instance, seventeen-year-old Candi Staton, purring enticingly that ‘Sin Is To Blame’ with the Jewel Gospel Trio; the Trumpeteers, rocking the Last Judgement to the accompaniment of Holy Roller guitar on ‘Seven Angels’, as if determined to prove that there’s more to them than yet another beautifully burnished remake of ‘Milky White Way’; or Marshall Jackson, hauling his testimony up from way down in the bass-ment on ‘Walk Around.’

And so, finally, to ‘Rare Nashville Gospel Volume 2’, which is both a difficult and an easy record to review, and for the same reasons: it’s all wonderful stuff, with nothing at all, making it difficult to avoid a parade of superlatives. The best I can do by way of a cavil is that the Spiritual Five’s ‘Heavenly Father’ and ‘I’ve Been Born Again’ both kick off with a garish fairground organ flourish, but after that, the offending instrument retreats to supplying discreet fills and responses.

The disc is dominated by male quartets, with female groups, and soloists of either sex, the more obvious by their infrequency; when they do pop up, they are not in the least out-sung by the competition. The repertoire is a mix of the old favourites that the singers knew their audiences loved, and the original compositions that benefited Excellorec Music for certain, and the singers, we must hope. Once again, I can pick out some highlights, but in doing so, it’s important to stress the absence of lowlights: among the especially rewarding moments, then, are the Southern Echoes’ ‘Higher Up The Mountain’, which is evidence if it were needed, of Robert Harris’s God-like status among male leads; the two bass singers supplying the responses on ‘Surely It Was God’; ‘The Holy Bible’, whereon the Sons of Jehovah, fit a supercharged V-8 engine to the old jubilee flivver; and Professor Harold Boggs, rocking it out on piano and his debut Nashboro release, and boosted by string bass and a mixed chorus.

Gospel specialists will wish to acquire everything reviewed here, which means that this article will serve them only as a notification of its existence. Other readers will appreciate that all these releases are highly desirable listening. If choices must be made, ‘Black Gospel Rarities Volume 4’, the Newark set, and the second Nashboro disc would be my recommendations; it would be invidious to try to rank them.

These discs are available from the various specialist outlets which can be tracked down on the internet. Label shots courtesy Revelation Records and B&R Archive.