

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.

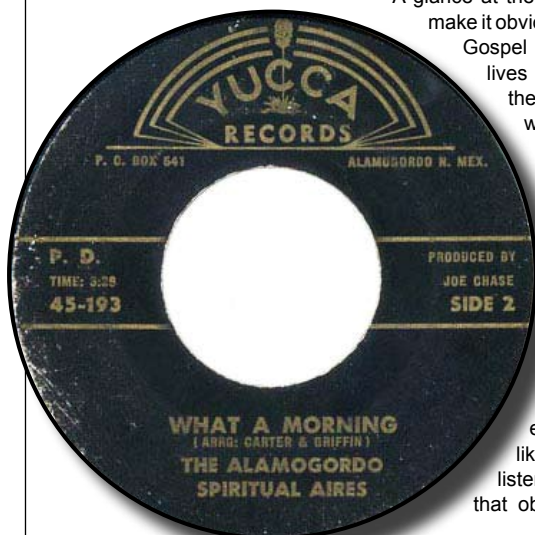


Edna Gallmon Cooke.

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 Drexall 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'; the Silver Harps, (re?)sanctifying the Falcons' 'I Found A Love'; 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



Elder Charles Beck.



discs, and they are all highly recommended. However, Volume 4 is clearly the best of them, which readers for whom cost is a constraint should know.

It's not the best because it's mostly by men, of course; I think the reason is that the singers are more exposed by the lack of instruments, and hence under more pressure to get it right.

From rarity to geography as a (sort of) organising principle. No doubt there was a lively African-American gospel music scene in Newark, N.J., but for our purposes it's significant because it's where the unlikeable but commercially astute Herman Lubinsky operated. The tracks on the Newark CD are all sourced from his labels: two apiece from Savoy and Regent, three from Sharp, and the remaining seventeen from Gospel.

Things kick off about as well as they could, with a 'Gospel Train' by the Selah Jubilee Singers, who'd been recording since 1943. In 1955 they included future blues singer Nappy Brown, but not, despite the booklet, Theron Ruth. Their other recordings here date from 1958, and are also Ruth-less; Jimmie Mitchell supplies a gorgeous Sam Cooke knock-off on the pulsating 'Trouble In The Land', throwing in a reference to Sputniks. Concerned at greater length with the space race is Lawrence Roberts, for whom 'sending up those Vanguard is all in vain.' The Selahs are also responsible for one of the CD's two turkeys, when they abandon mother's old favourites to perform 'Don't Blame The Children', a well-meaning but banal poem recited by bass voice Jimmy Gorham. The other dud here is 'I Believe', where Marion Williams goes after the always-large market for inspirational insipidity; even those of us who were not forever traumatised by the Bachelors' version will find little to enjoy in hers.

Everything else here is top-notch, however, with Marion Williams reverting to her normal, majestic form, and the best version of the Caravans (Shirley Caesar, Albertina 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 Alex Bradford 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 Angelic 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 to criticise negatively 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 Rebert 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.

TRACKLISTING OF CDs COVERED IN THIS FEATURE

BLACK GOSPEL RARITIES VOLUME 1

Revelation CD-5001 (64:42)

CROSS JORDAN SINGERS: Precious Lord/ Sinner Man's Prayer; GOSPEL AMBASSADORS: Jesus I Love You/ I Am A Witness; GOSPEL CHALLENGERS: I Know He's Coming Again/ Must Jesus Bear The Cross Alone; GOSPEL KEYS: How About You/ I Never Heard A Man; EVER-READY SINGERS: One Day When I Was Walking/ Two Wings; JOY RITE SINGERS: What About You; GOSPEL STARS (w. MILTON PULLEN, Piano): When God Made Man/ (w. ELISABETH DAVIS and MAE GOOCH, MILTON PULLEN, Piano): Lord Shelter Me; GOSPEL WONDERS: I Want To Live, Live, Live; JOY HARMONIZERS: Early In The Morning; ROYAL TRAVELERS: Drinkin' My Tears For Water; TRENTON (SILVERTONE) SINGERS: Take Me Jesus; ALAMOGORDO SPIRITUAL AIRES: What A Morning; ROSETTES: Somewhere; EDNA GALLMON COOKE: I've Got Religion; GOLDEN VOICE TEAM: Go Ahead; DREXALL SINGERS: Jesus Said; (LITTLE) LUCY SMITH SINGERS (w. GLADYS BEAMON, soloist): Every Time I Feel The Spirit; PROGRESSIVEAIRES (w. FRANK MOTLEY & ORCH.): My Journey's End

BLACK GOSPEL RARITIES VOLUME 2

Revelation CD-5002 (62:50)

GOSPEL WONDERS: I'm On My Way/ He's My All And All; JULIA PETERSON SINGERS of BKLYN., N.Y.: Give An Account; SILVER HARPS: By And By; JOY RITE SINGERS: You Better Mind; DYNAMIC GAYLARKS (lead CHARLES JOHNSON): Child Do Love Jesus; EDNA GALLMON COOKE: Come By Here; EVER-READY SINGERS: O Mary, Don't You Weep/ I Don't Care What The World May Do; JOY HARMONIZERS: My Heavenly Home; GOSPEL STARLETS: Lead Me To The Rock; ROYAL TRAVELERS: Yes It's Me, Lord, That Came To Thee; DREXALL SINGERS: The Answer; BALTIMORE ECHOES: I'm Going To Look For You/ Save Me; ALAMOGORDO SPIRITUAL AIRES: Nobody Knows; GATEWAY QUARTET: I'll Shake Mother's Hand; TRUETONE GOSPEL SINGERS: Closer To The Lord; ROSETTES When It's Time For Me To Go/ (w. JIMMY ROOTS' TRIO): I'll Be Satisfied; BOOKER GOSPEL SINGERS: Get Away Sinner; (LITTLE) LUCY SMITH SINGERS (w. GLADYS BEAMON, soloist): Somebody Bigger Than You And I; TRENTON (SILVERTONE) SINGERS: In Secret Prayer; BELLS OF HARMONY from LITTLE WASHINGTON, N.C.: Another Day Journey And I'm So Glad

BLACK GOSPEL RARITIES VOLUME 3

Revelation CD-5003 (65:36)

JULIA PETERSON SINGERS of BKLYN., N.Y.: He'll Understand; LITTLE BARBARA ANN WARD: By The Grace Of God/ What Do You Think Of Jesus; GOSPEL WONDERS: Only Jesus Can Save/ I Tried The Man/ Let Your Will Be Done/ Calvary/ Just Tell Jesus All About It; CAPITOL CITY STARS: Good News/ Some Day; BELLS OF HARMONY from LITTLE WASHINGTON, N.C.: I Found You Down On Your Knees; SPIRITUAL HARMONIZERS: Do You Know Him/ God Leads His Children; BATES SINGERS (feat. BETTY JEAN YATES & L. WILLIAMS): Is It Too Late To Enter (At The Golden Gate)/ (feat. LEAINE WILLIAMS) When He Comes; DYNAMIC GAYLARKS (Lead: ELDER E. WHITE): He Rose; SILVER HARPS: I Found The Lord; RUTH BECK SINGERS OF INDIANAPOLIS, IND.: His Love Bubbles Over In My Soul/ I Want To Cross The River Of Jordan; SINGING STARS: Angeles Angeles [sic]/ I'll Be Singing There; VOICES OF JORDAN OF CHARLOTTE, N.C. (Leads: LEN. RANKIN, RANDO FAULKNER): I Found The Lord/ (Lead: BOB BLACK) Ain't It A Shame; WILLIE WEBB SINGERS: God Is Good To Me

BLACK GOSPEL RARITIES VOLUME 4

Revelation CD-5004 (69:24)

GOSPEL PILGRIMS: Korea (Fightin' In A Foreign Land)/ I'm So Grateful To The N.A.A.C.P.; NATIONAL HARMONIZERS: Death Comes Knocking/ Is Your All On The Altar?; ELDER BECK: Wine Head Willie Put That Bottle Down; ECHOES OF ZION: Atlanta's Tragic Monday/ Evening Sun; ROYAL KINGS with MYRTLE MILLER: I Cried Holy; PARKER BROS. QUARTET OF NORFOLK, VA.: I Can't Help From Cryin' Sometimes/ The Separating Line; GOSPEL CONSOLATORS: How Do Earthly Men Know/ One More River; SILVER LEAF QUARTET: Just A Little Talk With Jesus; SOUTHERN STARS: Surely God Is Able/ Don't Give Up; DETROIT HARMONETTES: I Need Thee/ I Gave Up Everything; EVANGELIST SISTERS (MYRTLE MILLER & ELLA FRIDAY): Sometimes; MARY JOHNSON DAVIS GOSPEL SINGERS: I'm Going To Wait On The Lord; GOLDEN GATE QUARTETTE: Didn't It Rain/ Be Ready When My Jesus Comes; SISTER ESSIE MAE THOMAS & THE GOSPEL PILGRIMS: The Storm Is Passing Over; FLYING CLOUDS OF DETROIT, MICHIGAN: If I Get Inside The Gate; WILLIE WEBB SINGERS: Climbing High Mountain

BEST OF NEWARK GOSPEL VOLUME 1

Gospel CD-1001 (69:10)

SELAH JUBILEE SINGERS: Gospel Train/ Old Rugged Cross/ Music In The Air; MARION WILLIAMS: I Can't Forget/ Hallelujah, Praise The Lord/ I Believe/ Get Your Business Right/ Holy Ghost; UNIQUE GOSPEL SINGERS: I Had To Tell It; CARAVANS: I'm Willing/ I'm Not Tired Yet; GATE CITY SINGERS: John The Revelator; REV. H.B. CRUM & HIS GOLDEN KEYS: The Bible's Right/ I Can Feel Him; PROF. ALEX BRADFORD & THE LADIES OF MUSIC: He Makes All My Decisions For Me; LAWRENCE ROBERTS SINGERS: If You Make It To The Moon; SMITH SISTERS: Heavenly Vision; VICTORIOUS GLORYLANDERS OF GREENSBORO, N.C.: How Beautiful/ In The Promised Land; SELAH SINGERS: Trouble In The Land/ Don't Blame The Children; SENSATIONAL SIX OF BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA: Guide My Mind/ I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray; GOSPEL MESSENGERS: His Love

RARE NASHVILLE GOSPEL VOLUME 1 1951-1965

Tennessee Records CD-615 (66:22)

SILVERTONE JUBILEE SINGERS: I Met My Mother This Morning/ It's A Wonder What My Lord Can Do/ The Sun Will Rise In The East; GOLDEN TRUMPETS: Standing On His Word; SONS OF JEHOVAH: Keep Me And Teach Me; ANGELIC GOSPEL SINGERS: Every Day; SONS OF THE SOUTH: I Know It Was The Blood; MORGAN BABB & PHILCO SINGERS: Cold Cold Ground; SPIRITUAL FIVE: Walk Around; TRAVELING ECHOES: For God I Live; TRUMPETEERS: Seven Angels; SOUTHERN ECHOES: Be Ready When He Comes; KINDLY SHEPHERD GOSPEL SINGERS: Left In The Hands Of The Lord; EDNA GALLMON COOKE: My Joy; GOSPEL FIVE SINGERS: This Is My Testimony/ Jesus Is With Me All The Way; CHOSEN GOSPEL SINGERS: Do Thy Will/ Trouble Of This World Condition [sic]; KINDLY SHEPHERDS: So Many Years; PROF. HAROLD BOGGS: Help Me Jesus; JEWEL GOSPEL TRIO: Sin Is To Blame; BRIGHT STARS: Jesus Will Help You; TRUMPETS OF JOY: Last Mile Of The Way

RARE NASHVILLE GOSPEL VOLUME 2 1951-1965

Tennessee Records CD-616 (64:29)

SOUTHERN ECHOES: On My Way To See Jesus/ Higher Up The Mountain/ When Jesus Says: Come Home; SPIRITUAL FIVE: Heavenly Father/ I've Been Born Again/ Lord I'm In Your Care/ Everyday Will Be The Same; GOLDEN TRUMPETS: The Blood Of Jesus/ Just Like Jesus Did/ Down At The Cross; EDNA GALLMON COOKE: Nobody But You Lord/ (& THE RADIO FOUR) Walk Thru The Valley; JEWEL GOSPEL TRIO: Praying Time; SONS OF THE SOUTH: Surely It Was God; BRIGHT STARS: Found The Saviour; SONS OF JEHOVAH: The Holy Bible; TRUMPETEERS: I Want To Know; KINDLY SHEPHERD GOSPEL SINGERS: The Upper Garden; TRUMPETS OF JOY: Sweeter Than The Day Before; MORGAN BABB & PHILCO SINGERS: Take Me By The Hand; PROF. HAROLD BOGGS: When The Spirit Of The Lord Comes; TRAVELING ECHOES: Looking For A Better Place To Live; SILVERTONE JUBILEE SINGERS: I'm Looking For My Jesus; ANGELIC GOSPEL SINGERS: I've Weathered The Storm