

# 'Free At Last'

*Ray Templeton previews the most important post-war quartet reissue anthology for more than thirty years*



**T**here's documented evidence of unaccompanied harmony singing by African Americans in the slave era. Within a few decades of emancipation, the first black sounds to be heard and appreciated by the world at large were made by vocal groups. Before ragtime and jazz, before the blues, the Fisk Jubilee Singers – touring internationally to raise funds for their university – were waking up audiences around the world to the fact that people of African origin could make beautiful, powerful, distinctive music. It featured in some of the very earliest sound recordings, and by the 1920s, was being developed into a range of distinctive new styles.

Groups like the Norfolk Jubilee Singers and, later, the Golden Gate Quartet were as popular as the biggest names in blues, not least because they made some of the most progressive and exciting music around, constantly introducing fresh ideas, innovative ways of grabbing the listener's attention using voices alone, pushing at the boundaries with new techniques and more adventurous harmony. At the same time, they had to keep it real – the African American market wanted African American music, and at its best, a *capella* gospel singing always made the most of its indigenous character. By the 1940s, this music was reaching the peak of its power and artistry, some of the greatest music of its time, and yet apart from some key releases like the Clanka Lanka label's 'Birmingham Quartet Anthology' and the Interstate Music's Heritage Gospel series in the 1980s, it has rarely received the reissue attention it deserves. This new anthology presents more than eighty tracks across three CDs, including some of the finest examples from one of its most important periods, with the emphasis on the rare and previously un-reissued. There are choirs included, like the Wings Over Jordan Choir and the Luvenia Nash Singers, but most of the recordings represented are by quartets – although 'quartet' might be used for groups of five members or more – from big names to the entirely obscure. The former include the the Soul Stirrers (on one of their very earliest – yet finest – performances, on the Bronze label of Hollywood, Ca.), the Pilgrim Travelers (a hauntingly beautiful evocation of the church practice of lining out), the Famous Blue Jay Singers (whose discography stretched back to pre-war sessions for Paramount), the Fairfield Four (including a release on Bullet with a mystery to unravel)

and the Nightingales (later to add the word 'Sensational' to their name and become one of the best-selling groups of their day).

For every quartet to make a big name, there would have been countless others known only in their local communities, who still practiced the art to a very high standard, and had plenty of ideas of their own for making it special. We may know little or nothing about the Silver Leaf Quartet of Florida, the Silvertone Jubilee Singers, the Loving Five Gospel Singers Of Greenville, Texas, or the Sunshine Quartet, but we do know that they made powerful, compelling music.

The influence of pre-war giants such as the Golden Gates and the Heavenly Gospel Singers still persisted to some extent, but there was so much to be heard that was new and different. It may have been the Soul Stirrers who introduced the 'swing lead', where two lead singers traded verses, stepping up the excitement every time they changed, but it was soon adopted by most other groups. The Southern Sons injected a jazzy tinge from popular groups of the day like the Ink Spots and the Mills Brothers. The Rising Star Singers, out on the West Coast, mixed Gates-style chanting with the freshness of a double lead. Other groups reflected their times in the lyrics, like the Seven Star Juniors' narrative about the war, or the Charming Bells harmonising charmingly about the atom bomb. Wild, soulful vocals, solo bass verses, powerful syncopation and counterpoint, falsetto, moaning, shouting – all the big vocal devices had been well used over the decades, but in these years they were concentrated, often pushed to new extremes.

There were far fewer women in quartet singing, but they're represented by Georgia Peach – one of the earliest 'modern' female gospel voices – fronting the male Reliable Jubilee Singers, the Keys Of Heaven with two terrific female leads trading verses, and the all-women Elite Jewels. Female quartets used the same trainers as male ones, and they often had big, robust voices (with a surprisingly rumbling bass!), but they had their own special things to bring, too.

A *capella* went out of fashion pretty quickly in the 1950s, as most of the major groups added instruments and amplifiers, arguably just as it was reaching the peak of excitement and expression, but it clung on at community level, and the latest record here dates from as late as 1969. Most of the labels with substantial gospel catalogues are represented – Savoy, Aladdin, King, Nashboro – but also many smaller outfits, from Coleman in Newark to Big Town in Oakland, as well as obscurities like Ohio and Pepper, and King Solomon, the first record label dedicated entirely to African American sacred music. There has never been a more comprehensive anthology of these magnificent sounds.

'A Capella Black Gospel – 1940s-1960s' (NarrowWay PN-1605, 1606 and 1607), compiled by Per Notini, with the generous co-operation of several important collectors, and with notes by Ray Templeton, is planned for release in Autumn 2020. Labels shots: Per Notini

