

MEMPHIS GOSPEL - JCR RECORDS

*Tony Burke tells the story behind
two new vinyl albums*



The Masonic Travelers. Courtesy of Frank Bruno.

JCR Records, a subsidiary of the D-Vine Spirituals label, was a custom pressings label, founded by Juan D. Shipp which had its first release around 1972.

Shipp was an Air Force veteran and the pastor at the Greater Abyssinia Missionary Baptist Church who also broadcast a gospel radio show on K-WAM, where he DJ'd as 'Juan D'. He started as a station announcer in 1968. His Gospel Train Show went out from 2pm until sunset and depending on the vagaries of the atmosphere, his show could sometimes be heard as far away as Detroit and New York.

One day in 1970, while picking up a friend at the Greyhound bus station in downtown Memphis, Shipp saw a hand-painted sign for Tempo Studios, owned by hillbilly bandleader and drummer Clyde Leppard, who had recorded at Sun Studio with the Snearly Ranch Boys. "Up on the second floor, there was the most fantastic studio that I had ever seen," Shipp says. "The way he had it laid out, each individual had their own cubicle. And the padding of it was so tight you had to just about holler in order for a person to hear you inside of it. It was just that good."

"I guess I recorded about fifty or sixty groups here in the city. I started getting groups from Detroit, Chicago, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Arkansas. I even had a group that called me from California 'cause they loved my sound."

"We had a good sound but sometimes the artists didn't make the grade. Now, I had a secondary label for those that just didn't make the D-Vine cut and it was called JCR. If they were good, but they weren't the best, I couldn't put them on the D-Vine label. Because you can't put everybody on your label - if they're not good enough you don't need to put 'em there. But they want a record so you have to make them a record. So

some friends of mine and I took the first initials of our names - mine was Juan, another fella's name was Charles and another was Robert - and made the JCR label."

Charles Jones and Robert Bowers were both members of the D-Vine group the Traveling Stars, and their names would appear as producers on various D-Vine productions over the years.

Shipp continues: "I don't like to mislead anybody, I like to be fair. And I got to the point where I could tell a group - and I didn't bite my tongue: 'Now, you're good and you can go on the D-Vine label', and I'd tell another group, 'You're not good enough to go on D-Vine now, but if you want to go home and work some more and get everything fine-tuned, you can do that. I can put a record out on you now but it won't be on D-Vine, it'll be on JCR. It'll get played but it won't have the texture that I want for it to be on D-Vine.' Some would go back home and work on it till it got there and others would say, 'Well, I just want a record out.' So JCR, here you come."

Writer and researcher Michael Hurr (who co-wrote 'Mind Over Matter: The Myths & Mysteries of Detroit's Fortune Records' - reviewed by Chris Bentley in B&R 359) tracked down Shipp and in 2011 they rescued Shipp's tapes. They found them in an old shack behind Leppard's house in Olive Branch, Mississippi. "The roof was caving in and nature had started to take back over," Hurr told me, "but somehow



Label shots courtesy of Michael Hurr.



Juan D. Shipp at K-WAM. Courtesy of Juan Shipp.

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST: The JCR Records Story Volume One
Bible & Tire Records BTRC 008 (53:00)

THE CALVARY NIGHTENGALES: Keep On Pushing; **THE PILGRIMAIRS:** Father Guide Me, Teach Me; **THE JOHNSON SISTERS:** You Can't Hurry God; **THE SILVER WINGS:** Call On Him; **THE SOUTHERN NIGHTENGALES:** Every Knee Must Bow; **THE SEVEN SOULS:** I Want To Move A Little Higher; **THE VIGIL LIGHTS OF HOLLY SPRINGS, MISSISSIPPI:** What A Meeting; **DIXIE WONDERS:** Someone Who Cares; **THE Q.C.'S:** You Can't Hurry God; **THE HEWLETT SISTERS:** The Last Day; **THE DIXIELAND SINGERS:** God's Got His Eye On You; **THE STARS OF FAITH:** Sitting Down; **THE MASONIC TRAVELERS:** Rock My Soul; **THE CHOSEN WONDERS:** Too Late, Too Late; **THE GOSPEL TRAVELERS:** Where Are You Going To Run; **THE BIBLE TONES:** Sinner Man, What You Gonna Do.

THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST: The JCR Records Story Volume Two
Bible & Tire Records BTRC 012 (47:00)

THE SILVER TRUMPETS: Little Wooden Church; **THE CALVARY NIGHTENGALES:** My Robe; **THE SONS OF HARMONY:** Save Me Jesus; **THE SONS OF HARMONY:** Stand By Me; **THE DIXIE WONDERS OF WEST HELENA, ARKANSAS:** Stand By Me; **THE CANTON SPIRITUALS:** Learning On The Lord; **THE FAITHFUL TRAVELERS:** He Died On The Cross; **THE BIBLE TONES:** Never Go Old; **THE MASONIC TRAVELERS:** Until My Days Are Done; **THE DIXIE HARMONIZERS:** When I'm Gone; **THE JOHNSON SISTERS:** This Evening Our Father; **THE DIXIELAND SINGERS:** I'm A Changed Man; **THE CHOSEN WONDERS:** Be So Glad; **THE STARS OF FAITH;** I Thank You Lord; **THE FRIENDLY QC'S:** Let's Praise His Name; **THE SILVER WINGS:** He's A Mighty God; **THE SPIRITUAL HARMONIZERS:** It's A Needy Time; **THE BRECKENRIDGE SISTERS:** Man On The Moon

or another, those tapes were in incredible shape. Clyde's niece told us, "You guys got here just in time. Our house is getting foreclosed upon and we have to be out of here in two weeks." It was truly a miracle."

It took a few years for Hurtt to work out how to reissue this rare material. Things got moving when Bruce Watson of Big Legal Mess started Bible and Tire Records. He and Shipp then took two days a week over three months to transfer and archive over 170 reels of tape.

It was Watson's idea to tackle the JCR material first, says Hurtt, partially because there was so little information out there about it. "These two volumes were assembled fairly quickly, in the rough-and-ready spirit that the original JCR sides were recorded at the time. The idea was to set the table for the much more expansive series of D-Vine Spirituals volumes that we're currently working on – the first two will be out soon. Since JCR was Pastor Shipp's secondary label we were kind of doing things backwards, Bruce came up with the Bible verse 'The Last Shall Be First.'"

While considerable research will accompany the D-Vine compilations, finding information on the JCR sides has proven more difficult, Hurtt told me, due mostly to the 'on the spot' custom format of the label. "With D-Vine, Pastor Shipp would be in the studio all night to get just one song right, and he often had lasting relationships with the groups, whereas JCR was more of a service that he provided. The groups that recorded for JCR often recorded, took their records and were never heard from again. So while Pastor Shipp has an incredible recall of many of the D-Vine groups and records, JCR was a different story altogether."



Canton Spirituals, 1966. Courtesy of the Canton Spirituals.

Although Shipp put the word out on the gospel grapevine hoping to reconnect with JCR artists, little could be uncovered about many of the groups, leaving the music to speak here for itself.

The Calvary Nightengales open the proceedings on Volume One with 'Pushing For Jesus', which features sixteen-year-old Wendell 'Music Man' Moore controversially playing wah-wah guitar. Pastor Shipp recalled: "The Calvary Nightengales were a fantastic group. They wanted to record 'Keep On Pushing' because a couple of the guys in the group was having a hard time getting things done and somebody told them they need to keep on pushing to reach a goal. So that's how the song came. My signature thing was to put something in there that others didn't have, so we went into the 'wah-wah' sound."

Wendell Moore, who is now in his early 60s, told National Public Radio's Peter Breslow: "It was just a different sound, and the people was loving it, me being a young kid, doing my thing. You know, you would have the older people saying, 'What are you bringing up all that noise in here like that?' But once they caught on, they loved it."

"We were the first ones to use the wah-wah in gospel music," says Shipp, "but after we started doing it, every other label did, too."

Shipp was ahead of his time in more ways than one. The Canton Spirituals had their breakout release on JCR – 1975's 'Leaning On The Lord' and within a year had recorded the first in a long line of successful albums for the Jackson, Mississippi based J&B imprint.

Although the recordings come from the master tapes, D-Vine's numbering system didn't make much sense, the end result being that many of the records are difficult to date. The vast majority of JCR sides were, according to Hurtt, recorded between 1973 and 1979, but these two albums mostly feature sides from between 1973 and 1975.

The Silver Trumpets, Calvary Nightengales and Sons Of Harmony sides are from 1973. From 1974 come the Dixie Harmonizers, Hewlett Sisters and the Masonic Travelers, who had a successful gospel career with their 'Rock My Soul' deep bass vocals. The Dixie Wonders, Johnson Sisters, Bible Tones, Gospel Travelers, Stars Of Faith, Friendly QC's and Chosen Wonders sides all date from 1975.

The two albums capture the raw spirit and immediacy of the Mid-South gospel quartet sound during its custom label heyday of the early 1970s. It's a sound that has one foot in the harmonies of the 1950s and the other stepping forward into soul.

As Pastor Shipp says: "Some of the groups made the jump, but once they hit the JCR label, that was usually where they stayed, because if they wanted to hit the D-Vine label, they'd go back home. Because I wasn't in it for money, I was in it because I was trying to do something for the groups. There wasn't a whole lot of money in it, so if they wanted to go back home a n d

follow my advice and really work on their tones and everything, then they'd do that, and then when they'd come back they'd be D-Vine material."

Thanks to Michael Hurtt for supplying information on JCR and his information and interviews with Pastor Shipp.



Label shots courtesy of Michael Hurtt.