

THE STERLING JUBILEE SINGERS Jesus Hits Like The Atom Bomb

New World Records 80513

Gospel Quartet Singing In Jefferson County, Alabama

Jefferson County is the heartland of black American a cappella gospel quartet singing. For more than seven decades black quartets have thrived in Birmingham and Bessemer, and they have provided immeasurable spiritual uplift and musical enjoyment to a large portion of the local population. The tenacious survival of black quartet traditions in Birmingham and Bessemer preserves a cultural and historical continuity that informs and enriches many lives. The older singers share a sense of brotherhood, a common identification with four-part harmony heritage and lore. For many singers, a powerful desire to perpetuate these traditions is coupled with a belief that singing is their allotted personal service to God. These are reasons why there are so many septuagenarians and octogenarians in the field; they're striving to earn the epitaph, "He sang until he died."

The Sterling Jubilee Singers and Four Eagle Gospel Singers are the oldest gospel groups still active in Jefferson County. The remarkable longevity of these two community-based quartets is almost unprecedented in gospel music history. The Four Eagles marked their 58th year of continuous singing activity on November 17, 1996, while the Sterlings commemorated their 67th anniversary on September 8, 1996.

African-American a cappella quartet traditions were already generations old in the South when the movement became popular in Birmingham during the 1920s. These traditions have deep roots in nineteenth-century American folk and popular culture. The local quartet activity had its incubation in the mining camps, company quarters, and other segregated black industrial settlements, and was in part a product of the rich fellowship that survived and was enjoyed in those oppressive environs.

A variety of circumstances contributed to the emergence of black quartet singing in Birmingham early in this century. Black educators stimulated racial pride in the traditional religious melodies. Forgotten heroes such as Madame E. Azalia Hackley organized massive black folk-song festivals in cities around the U.S. At the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington and Robert R. Moten cultivated a heritage of black religious folk music.

In 1906 Fisk University Professor John W. Work II spent three weeks at Tuskegee training the students in jubilee music, at the request of Booker T. Washington. Prof. Work was director of the Fisk University Jubilee Quartet, which would begin recording for Victor in 1909. In that year the Tuskegee music department was headed by Jennie Cheatham Lee, assisted by instructors Willa Hadley and Miranda Winters; all were Fisk University graduates, pupils of Jennie A. Robinson, the famous first head of Fisk's music department. The Tuskegee Institute music department was very much under the musical influence of Fisk University. This has special significance, because Tuskegee, like Fisk, was primarily engaged in educating teachers for service in the Southern rural schools, and through this route the music departments of Fisk and Tuskegee were profoundly effective in passing their musical training into the broader black community. Hundreds of teachers went out into the Southern rural primary and secondary schools early in this century, building music curricula and public musical exhibitions around the singing of traditional spiritual songs. We do not

know how many future music directors and quartet trainers were nurtured in these programs, but we can speak of Professor Malachi Wilkerson, principal of Parker High School and early director of the annual Negro Folk Song Festival in Birmingham, and his wife, Julia C. Wilkerson of the Parker High music department. Mrs. Wilkerson was acknowledged by Birmingham's greatest community-based quartet instructor, Charles Bridges, as being an important early musical influence on him during his school days.

The first substantial, popular, and otherwise significant black quartet active in Bessemer's industrial communities was the Foster Singers. The group was organized and trained by Mr. R. C. Foster when he migrated to Jefferson County in 1915. Mr. Foster told me:

I was in school under a young man who graduated from Tuskegee Institute, who learned to sing there, and he taught me quartet music, Professor Vernon W. Barnett. He was a black man, and he came out to teach a little small school; that was the Charity High Industrial School in Lowndes County, Alabama. A certain portion of the day we had practice. We called it voice culture.

All the voices were trained to sing evenly, not one higher than the others. You could hear the four voices, but they were so *even* that if you were sitting out there you couldn't hardly tell who was singing what . . . Barnett taught us how to get those parts out there distinctly and leave each man staying on his part. If he's singing baritone, he stayed on the baritone level. That's the way they learned it at Tuskegee.

We didn't holler out loud; we sang quietly. And the harmony was even, and it was balanced in a way where it was just like music itself . . .

Now Charlie Bridges used to have a wonderful voice . . . gospel singing, and it was nice, I didn't have a thing against that. But it was different.

Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, in the outlying industrial-residential communities surrounding Bessemer, a small coterie of very gifted, nonacademic, African-American quartet singer-directors including Charles Bridges, Son Dunham, and Gilbert Porterfield guided a new musical synthesis: The "gospel quartet" style emerged.

These extraordinary grassroots "trainers" were part of a mass immigration of black laborers from rural Alabama and Georgia, where folk-music traditions, including shape-note and quartet singing, were very vital. Bessemer's great trainers recombined all these resources and instigated a revival of indigenous creativity in black a cappella quartet singing, which spread far outside the State of Alabama.

The birth of this new style of quartet singing touched off a riot of activity in the Jefferson County communities. By 1930, practically every block in the black neighborhoods from Dolomite to Leeds boasted at least one quartet. It became a pervasive activity. During the 1930s and 1940s there were almost as many female quartets as male. In such groups the women were trained to sing the male voices, including basso. Tom Lacey sang with gospel quartets in Bessemer from 1925 until his death in 1990. He was an astute observer of quartet singing, and had vivid reminiscences of this period:

Every house you go, somebody was in a quartet. Bessemer was full of 'em! Back in the old days, when I was coming up, I used to eavesdrop at the houses when Charlie Bridges and different ones used to practice them [ladies'] quartets. I'd get around the window. They sounded like somebody was blowing a harp or something! They'd run us away from there sometimes . . .

I learned "time, harmony, and articulation," and different things through trainers who used to train me. Man, back in them days Charlie Bridges was good!

The community-based trainers held fast to the harmony lessons of the voice culture class, stressing attack and release, time, harmony, and articulation. Nevertheless, unlike the more staid university spiritual quartets at Tuskegee or Fisk University, Birmingham's laboring-class quartets of the 1920s absorbed the heavy musical influences of ragtime and blues; in particular, the prevailing developments in rhythm, harmony, attack, and so forth. There was receptivity for innovation. The unforgettable Silas Steele, of the Brighton community outside of Bessemer, perfected an "emotional," sermonizing lead singing style that became inseparable from gospel quartet performance. A few years later, Jefferson County bass star Porterfield Lewis popularized the "pumping" bass technique, borrowing from black secular quartet music, in which the bass part essentially mimics a tuba. This has since become a signature of the black religious quartet form.

Two outstanding Bessemer trainers, Norman McQueen and Gilbert Porterfield, carried the local gospel quartet ethos to Chicago and New Orleans (respectively) when they relocated in those cities around 1930. Norman McQueen had served for ten years as second tenor with Bessemer's pioneering Foster Singers before relocating to Chicago in 1927, where he organized and trained the city's first important community-based black religious quartet, the Alabama-Georgia Gospel Singers. McQueen is repeatedly referred to in the "West Side Notes" column of *The Chicago Defender* as "Chicago's quartet expert." In 1931 Norman McQueen organized the Chicago Progressive Quartet Association, comprised of more than 75 local quartets, all of whom had the benefit of McQueen's instruction.

By the 1930s, Jefferson County had earned a reputation as America's capital of gospel quartet singing. Despite the fact that Birmingham never had a permanent recording facility, at least ten resident black a cappella gospel quartets made commercial phonograph records prior to 1940. Some of these records, especially those by Charles Bridges' Birmingham Jubilee Singers and Silas Steele's Famous Blue Jays of Birmingham, were influential nationally. The recorded legacy of historic Jefferson County gospel quartets also includes remarkable recordings by the Dunham Jubilee Singers, Bessemer Sunset Four, Heavenly Gospel Singers and other great groups. Much of this recorded legacy, a treasury of American folk music, has recently become available in reissue.*

The Famous Blue Jay Singers were the first Jefferson County gospel quartet to leave the state on far-flung barnstorming tours. Many Jefferson County quartets used the music they learned in Alabama as a ticket to somewhere else. The Mighty Kings of Harmony, originally known as the BYPU Specials of Starlight Baptist Church in the Winona mining district, began their two decades of touring a few years after the Famous Blue Jays, in the mid-1930s. The Kings of Harmony are credited with introducing the gospel quartet style to the New York City metropolitan area.

During the 1930s, the Blue Jays set up operations in Dallas, before moving on to Chicago around 1940. The Kings of Harmony reportedly took Houston "by storms and jumps" when they relocated there in the late 1930s. The Heavenly Gospel Singers of Birmingham also set out touring on a full-time basis in the late 1930s. The Kings of Harmony and the Heavenly Gospel Singers both used Cleveland as their home base in the 1940s. Members of the Heavenly Gospel Singers ultimately settled in Los Angeles.

Clearly, however; times have changed. None of Jefferson County's once-famous itinerant quartets are still in existence today. Those are not the groups who have survived to enjoy marathon histories and golden anniversaries. The Sterling Jubilee Singers, Four Eagle Gospel Singers, Birmingham Southernaires and Delta-Aires never took singing for their livelihood, traveled only on weekends, and were largely unknown outside of Alabama before 1980. Their members chose long ago to remain in the Birmingham area rather than risk "the dangerous highway," with its corrosive influences and temptations. The groups that stayed here were peopled, almost to a man, by steelworkers and miners, many of whom retired with 40 years of service to their employers. They are accomplished in perseverance.

If on any given Sunday you come out to a gospel quartet program at Bessemer City Hall Auditorium or the newer Bessemer Civic Center, you will not hear the Famous Blue Jay Singers or the Kings of Harmony; however, you may hear the Four Eagle Gospel Singers performing traditional gospel songs in four-part harmony arrangements handed down from earlier generations of Four Eagles' members, some forty or fifty years old.

On any Sunday afternoon in Bessemer you might also hear John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers. The Sterlings are the oldest quartet presently active in Jefferson County, and they are among the oldest traditional gospel quartets in the U.S. No other quartet more faithfully preserves the distinctive Jefferson County gospel music heritage. Their arrangement of "Will He Welcome Me There?", a traditional song that was recorded by the Dunham Jubilee Singers of Bessemer in 1930, is close to the roots of the old original Birmingham style.

For many reasons that cannot be adequately addressed here, black a cappella quartet singing, a staple of American folk and popular music for almost a century, managed to slip into popular disfavor in the late 1950s and then gradually into widespread desuetude. By the 1970s, black quartet singing as an art form had become strangely unfamiliar to younger black people. The situation at that time did not bode well for the survival of a cappella gospel quartet singing through the year 2000, which now seems assured.

A revival in black gospel quartet singing took place during the 1980s and early 1990s. The Jefferson County Quartet Reunion, a concert program funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, staged on Sunday, October 12, 1980, at the Boutwell Auditorium in Birmingham, marked a turning point. Although the program was poorly supported locally, the program booklet, "Birmingham Quartet Scrapbook," and the simultaneously released *Birmingham Quartet Anthology* LP drew the attention of the outside world. Interest in Birmingham quartet traditions increased significantly.

A one-hour film documentary titled *On The Battlefield: Gospel Quartets in Jefferson County, Alabama* was

made for Channel 4 TV (Great Britain) in Alabama in 1984. The film featured the Sterling Jubilee Singers and included performances by the Four Eagles, the Birmingham Sunlights, and others. This documentary was first aired in Great Britain early in 1985 and has since been broadcast throughout Germany and other European countries. It has also been aired in Japan and Australia, with the result that the Sterling Jubilees have cadres of fans in such far-flung capitals as London, Sydney, and Tokyo. *On The Battlefield*, one segment of a seven-part film series titled *Repercussions: A Celebration of African-American Music*, has long been available on video in the U.S.

Since 1981, the Sterling Jubilee Singers have been invited three times to Washington, D.C., by the Smithsonian Institution. The Four Eagles have also made three singing trips to Washington, D.C., and have many admirers in the nation's capital. The Sterlings, the Four Eagles, and other local quartets have been enthusiastically received at many cultural events and festivals across the State of Alabama—from First Night at Mobile to the W. C. Handy Festival in Florence, and they have been especially well represented on the Folklife stage of Birmingham's downtown City Stages Festival. These quartets have used the increased opportunities and exposure to write their own chapter in Jefferson County's gospel quartet legend.

—Doug Seroff

Doug Seroff is a music scholar and record collector who has worked extensively with Jefferson County gospel quartets.

Straight Place, a low rectangular building, sits beside the railroad tracks that run through the heart of Bessemer, Alabama. Its plywood-covered windows give no hint of the activities within, but on sunny Wednesday mornings when the door is left open, incredible vocal music spills out. Passersby who stop to listen hear heartfelt singing, layers of powerful harmonies, emotional exclamations, and a pulsing bass voice. They know that the Sterling Jubilee Singers are rehearsing, as they have done weekly, in one location or another, for sixty-seven years.

The Sterling Jubilee Singers were founded in 1929 during a vibrant period when large numbers of African-American men who worked in Jefferson County's steel mills and ore mines were forming a cappella gospel quartets, inspired by local groups like the Birmingham Jubilee Singers and the Famous Blue Jay Singers that had found success as recording and touring artists. The original Sterling Jubilees were trained by singing master Charles Bridges, who was a strong force in shaping the Jefferson County a cappella quartet style. The founding members and most of those joining later were union men who worked for U. S. Pipe and other steel-related companies. During the 1940s and '50s they performed at union functions and on local radio programs as the CIO Singers and under that name recorded "The Spirit of Phil Murray," an original song commemorating the death of the first president of the steelworkers union. In the late 1950s gospel music began to feel the influence of instrumentally-based rock and roll and soul music, but the Sterling Jubilees persevered as an a cappella quartet. Of the area groups performing today, they best represent the unique Jefferson County style that once flourished there.

At the heart of the Sterling Jubilee's success and longevity is their weekly highly-structured rehearsal. Following an agenda formed early in the group's history, they open with a reverential song such as "Did You Stop to Pray This Morning?" or "One Morning Soon," recite the Lord's Prayer in unison,

then individually quote Bible verses. A second song precedes the business meeting, which is conducted in the formal language of parliamentary procedure.

The meeting consists of the Secretary's report, and old and new business. At times the new business includes a report from the Critic concerning infractions of the group's time-honored by-laws, developed to maintain a strict code of behavior and professionalism. Members pay a one-dollar fine if they are late for a performance and five dollars for uniform violations. Their attire is important to the Sterling Jubilees, and they have a number of uniforms accessorized with specific ties, handkerchiefs, shoes, and socks. This leaves much room for error, and all admit to paying numerous five-dollar fines. They agree that it is a pleasure to pay the penalties and maintain the system that has worked well for the group for 67 years.

Their business completed, the rehearsal begins. The group may run through numbers they expect to sing at their next performance, usually an anniversary program of another group, though they also regularly appear in state and local folk festivals. They wait until they are at the event before finalizing their selections, however, basing them on what preceding groups have sung and on requests from fans. They consider rehearsal a time for working on new songs or modifying old ones. At times they work on classic numbers with their newest member, Archie Garner. In so doing, they do not teach him to sing it exactly as the previous singer of his part did; they listen to his interpretation of the song. If they like it and it fits into the established Sterling Jubilee style, they incorporate it into their rendition. If they prefer the earlier version, they suggest it be done that way. Thus their arrangements are not static, but slowly change as the personnel changes.

Rehearsals are often intense. John Alexander says, "You have to get into it like you are going to eat it. When you get ready to go out, it ain't hard to do right. If you did it right before you leave rehearsal, you've got it." Before leaving, the Sterling Jubilees hold hands in a circle and sing the group's traditional benediction, with both reverence and humor, invariably closing the meeting with laughter.

This recording, originally produced by the Alabama Folklife Association, documents the Sterling's rehearsal at Straight Place in Bessemer on Wednesday, April 20, 1994. Including all the elements of a traditional Sterling Jubilee rehearsal—even the trains that pass by the hall intermittently—it differs from an actual meeting only in the omission of the business meeting and in the nature of the opening song. Wanting their first number to have impact, they selected "Atom Bomb" rather than one of the more worshipful numbers with which they normally begin. Five of the selections on the recording were made in earlier sessions at the Hoover Public Library on November 22 and 29, 1993.

Personnel: In 1985 the name of John Alexander was affixed to one faction of the Sterling Jubilee Singers when long-time member Henry Holston departed to found another set of Sterling Jubilee Singers. The following list details the current members' dates of birth, the office(s) they hold, their longevity in the group and the part(s) they sing:

John Alexander (1914)—President and Manager; 40 years; Lead, fifth*, tenor, and baritone.

Sam Johnson (1915)—Vice President and Financial Secretary; 34 years; lead and fifth.*

Mrs. Ruby Alexander (1920)—Recording Secretary and Uniform Committee, 8 years; lead, fifth*, first tenor, second tenor, bass, and baritone.

Sam Lewis (1913)—Critic, 38 years, bass.

Archie Garner (1932)—5 years, lead, baritone, and tenor.

*Fifth refers to the high voice over the tenor.

The Songs

Atom Bomb, more typically titled *Jesus Hits Like the Atom Bomb*, came to John Alexander's attention when the Pilgrim Travelers, based in California, performed in Birmingham in the 1950s. Lead singer, John Alexander.

Peace in the Valley is one of Thomas A. Dorsey's most famous compositions. The Sterling Jubilees worked out their quartet arrangement after hearing it sung by a choir. Lead singer Archie Garner enhanced the Sterling Jubilee's version when he joined the group.

God Shall Wipe All Tears Away was originally recorded in 1944 by the Kings of Harmony of Birmingham, and has long been part of the group's repertoire. Inspired by later versions of the song, John Alexander further developed the Sterling Jubilee's version into one of their strongest numbers. Sam Johnson, lead.

Little Wooden Church on the Hill is a gospel standard credited to T. A. Dorsey. A 1939 recording of it by the Dixie Hummingbirds inspired the Sterling Jubilees' arrangement of it. John Alexander, lead.

The Lord's Prayer was adapted by the Sterling Jubilees from a recording made by the Swan Silvertone Singers in 1956. Sam Johnson, spoken lead; John Alexander, lead.

Will He Welcome Me There? was brought to the group by Sam Johnson. He had sung it in Marion, Alabama, in the thirties with the Sunset Four, who learned it from a hymnal. The song also has a deep history in the Jefferson County quartet tradition, having been recorded by the Son Dunham Jubilee Singers in 1930. Archie Garner, first lead; Sam Johnson, second, or "swing," lead.

Job is a "jubilee," or "rhythmic spiritual," generally associated with the Golden Gate Quartet, who recorded it in 1937; however, the Sterling Jubilees first heard it performed by the Pilgrim Travelers and worked up their own arrangement of the traditional song. John Alexander, lead.

I Never Heard A Man was inspired by a recording of the old gospel tune by Clarence Fountain and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama. Archie Garner, lead.

My Jesus Knows is an adaptation of *I Was Praying*, recorded by Archie Brownlee and the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi in 1952. However, as scholar Doug Seroff notes, "the Sterlings have staked their own claim on this song; it's been one of their 'crip' numbers for as long as I've known them." Sam Johnson, lead.

Every Time I Try to Do My Best is a popular tune sung by many gospel groups, recently brought to the group by Archie Garner, who sings lead on it.

Operator was composed and arranged by the Sterling Jubilees after Ruby Alexander, who was tuned

to a local "easy-listening" radio station and heard a song about calling Jesus on the phone. Ruby Alexander, lead.

Testimony is a Sterling Jubilee arrangement of a song they heard a quartet from Chattanooga do with preaching interspersed throughout. John Alexander, lead.

Benediction has been part of the Sterling Jubilee's rehearsal longer than any of the group's present members can remember. John Alexander, lead.

Originally produced by the Alabama Folklife Association, with additional funding from the Alabama State Council on the Arts. Joyce Cauthen served as project director in consultation with Doug Seroff, who provided expertise, information about the history of Jefferson County quartet tradition and the Sterling Jubilee Singers in particular, and specific notes about the songs included on this recording.

Dan Gainey recorded all three sessions on a Sony D-10 Pro DAT using an overhead Crown SASS/P Stereo microphone. The staff of the Hoover Public Library provided support and space for the initial recordings in this project.

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Producer: Joyce Cauthen

Engineer: Dan Gainey

Mastering: Daniel S. Farris, TapeSouth, Birmingham, Alabama, assisted by Dan Gainey

CD mastering: George Blood Professional Audio Services, Philadelphia

Atom Bomb, Job, I Never Heard A Man, My Jesus Knows, and Operator were recorded at the Hoover Public Library on November 22 and 29, 1993. The remainder of the recording took place at Straight Place in Bessemer, Alabama on April 20, 1994.

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JESUS HITS LIKE AN ATOM BOMB
JOHN ALEXANDER'S STERLING JUBILEE SINGERS 80513-2

- 1 Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb (L. McCullom, publ. by Edwin H. Morris & Co., Inc, ASCAP) 2:57
- 2 Devotional (Traditional) :50
- 3 Peace in the Valley (Thomas A. Dorsey, publ. by Unichappell Music Inc., BMI) 6:57
- 4 God Shall Wipe All Tears Away (Antonio Haskell) 3:28
- 5 Little Wooden Church on the Hill (Thomas A. Dorsey, publ. by Unichappell Music Inc., BMI) 3:53
- 6 The Lord's Prayer (Traditional) 3:07
- 7 Will He Welcome Me There? (Traditional) 4:44
- 8 Job (Traditional) 2:49
- 9 I Never Heard a Man (Traditional) 4:31
- 10 My Jesus Knows (Cecil L. Shaw) 4:13
- 11 Every Time I Try to Do My Best (Traditional) 5:18
- 12 Operator (Ruby Alexander) 2:42
- 13 Testimony (Traditional) 2:24
- 14 Benediction (Traditional) :29

John Alexander's Sterling Jubilee Singers

John Alexander, lead, fifth, tenor, and baritone; Sam Johnson, lead and fifth; Mrs. Ruby Alexander, lead, fifth, first tenor, second tenor, bass, and baritone; Sam Lewis, bass; Archie Garner, lead, baritone, and tenor.

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