

The Spiritualaires Gospel Singers of Hurtsboro, Alabama are one of the last of the gospel quartets originating during the Golden Years of gospel of the late 1940s and 1950s and still participating in gospel programs and on radio in 2006. During their entire six-decade career they have been based in Hurtsboro, a small town just inside the Russell County line in east central Alabama. While great favorites at gospel programs in the area, the Spiritualaires never turned professional or traveled far to other programs. Through the years, they have kept true to their homes and their original sound. While so much of contemporary gospel features trained voices, slick production, histrionic performance tricks and loud volume, the Spiritualaires have sung on in a style with its origins in the 1940s and 1950s. While performing, they rarely move about, with a nod of the head, hand clapping and toe tapping their only performance traits.

The Spiritualaires of Hurtsboro originated as the East Highland Gospel Singers around 1948. 15-year-old Robert Marion and his stepbrother Willie Smith began to go door-to-door as teenagers singing gospel songs for the pleasure and delight of neighbors and for gifts of peanuts and sweet potatoes as well. A friend of the group, Elizabeth Lizzie Bell Scott, suggested the East Highland name. Other original members included Charlie Williams and Jonah Relf, the brother of current member Sam Relf.

After a few years, the teenage singers changed their name to the Christ Gospel Singers and were joined by current members Rufus Jordan and Sam Relf. Original members of this group included Johnny Coleman, Lawrence Long and brothers Danny and David Marion. By the mid-1950s the group was singing regularly at local church programs and in the surrounding area of Russell, Macon and Bullock Counties. Around 1955 the Christ Gospel

Singers broke up. Robert Marion sang with several other groups including the 5 Gospel Singers of Cottonton, Alabama before deciding to reform the Christ Gospel Singers in 1958. Marion again recruited his stepbrother Willie Smith along with current Spiritualaires members Rufus Jordan and Sam Relf. At a program soon after the reformation an acquaintance of the group quipped to Robert Marion that "y'all can't be the Christ Gospel Singers. Y'all ain't t that good." Feeling the sting from this comment, Robert decided to change the name of the group to the Spiritualaires.

Other members of the Spiritualaires who have either passed on or left the group over the years were: Robert Dubois, Benjamin Thomas, Willie Owens, and Algie Long. When Long died in the early 1980s, current member Jimmy Anthony joined completing the current line-up.

Joining the Spiritualaires in 1958 was guitarist Curtis Harris. Barely a teenager, Harris had been playing since the age of five when he had fashioned a guitar out of a cigar box. Harris' bluesy style is firmly within the tradition of the local Bullock and Macon county area. The slow, languid Lighting Hopkins influenced style has always been popular in the area with both players and listeners citing Hopkins as a favorite. However, Harris' bluesy licks are a rare contribution for gospel. Beginning in the 1920s, there were many recorded country blues players who sang sacred tunes, but they merely sanctified a song by adding sacred lyrics to blues changes. Guitar-accompanied gospel groups developed their own style of discreet accompaniment over the years with the guitar usually used either to set the pitch at the beginning of a song or to keep the tempo throughout the tune. Rarely for a group performing solely gospel material has there been such a bluesy presence. Harris is even allowed short solo stretches at times as in *I've Got Somewhere To Lay My Head*.

Like the Christ Gospel Singers, the Spiritualaires became great favorites in the area and were soon making guest appearances on the local weekly radio broadcast of the St. Mark's Traveling Four. The St. Mark's Traveling Four to this day remain a legendary group. Although they ceased performing in the mid-1980s, their near 50 year career and church wrecking performances are still recalled by many in the area. The Traveling Four would let the Spiritualaires sing a song or two on their radio program and this tutelage soon led to their own radio program. Around 1965, the Spiritualaires began broadcasting their Sunday morning program on WBAT in Tuskegee, Alabama about 30 miles from Hurtsboro. In 1973, The Spiritualaires moved from WBAT to WBIL in downtown Tuskegee where they remain to this day. During the fall of 2005, they were forced to shorten their broadcast from 30 minutes down to 15 minutes because of the loss of a long time sponsor.

Weekend or early morning gospel radio broadcasts by both non-professional community based groups and professional groups like the Swan Silvertones, Fairfield Four and Flying Clouds of Detroit once blanketed the airwaves throughout the South and much of the country. Very few now remain and they are all hosted, produced and paid for by local, community-based groups, individual lay people or churches. Most of the programs are now hosted solely by preachers or lay people who use the time to invite listeners to their worship services or to deliver a sermon or homily. Scarcer still are programs hosted by singing groups. The radio programs offer an outlet for the singing groups to not only sing for the community, but to announce upcoming appearances, give condolences to bereaved families, greetings to shut-ins and acquaintances and other community announcements. Many in the area tune in every week for this information and fellowship with their local gospel community. A necessary evil for some but a delight to others, homespun, improvised commercial pitches for the supporting sponsors of these shows add to the sense of spontaneity and authenticity of these local radio programs. The Spiritualaires take great delight in presenting their own pitches.

As late as the early 1990s there were still at least two other AM radio gospel programs in Alabama hosted by singing groups. The Spiritual Voices of Whitehall, Alabama hosted radio programs in Montgomery on WXVI and WZTN throughout the 1970s and 80s; the Victoryaires of Tuscaloosa, Alabama broadcast on WTSK in the 70s, 80s and early 90s. Notable, too, was that the performance style of these two groups were nearly identical to the Spiritualaires. Both were accompanied only by a single electric guitar and featured loosely textured back-up harmonies on many of their songs.

The repertoire and style of The Spiritualaires reflects the musical milieu of East Central Alabama. Bullock, Macon and Russell Counties have always had a tradition of both blues players and African-American country & western music fans. In fact, one of the long time African-American communities in the area known as Little Texas, once featured a regular African-American rodeo. Local blues guitarists George Daniels and Albert Macon still perform at weekend houses and joints in the area, and their playing features both blues and country & western elements. A characteristic of many Alabama based African-American gospel groups and singers is the tendency to slow down many songs. Songs sung not only by some quartets and groups but also by congregations and Shape Note singers in Alabama are often slowed to a strikingly beautiful tempo. This is true for the Spiritualaires, with the country influenced *Some Folk Say* being the quickest tune of the ten selections here.

The songs featured on this CD can be divided into several groups. Songs like *Trouble, I'm Going to Tell on You* and *I've Got Somewhere to Lay My Head* are slow, bluesy moans. Lyrically, the languid *I'm Going to Tell on You* is striking vis-à-vis the blues in that the singer, Robert Marion, changes the usual blues taunt directed towards a wayward lover into one of conviction from the singer directed not to a two timing sinner but to Jesus himself. The promise this time is to tell of the good deeds of the Lord.

Songs like *Packing Up Our Clothes, I've Done What You Told Me To Do* and *The Lord's Prayer* display the wonderful harmony skills of the Spiritualaires. The practice of this type of a cappella harmony singing has virtually disappeared. Whereas the harmonies on the bluesy tunes are more relaxed and informal, on these selections the Spiritualaires fall back into a practice originating in the early 20th century. An a cappella version of the Lord's Prayer or the 23rd Psalm was often used by many older prewar harmony quartets in Alabama to begin their weekly rehearsals. Versions of the Lord's Prayer performed by younger groups in a more modern style still turn up at gospel programs in central Alabama. The harmony practice of many of the pre-war Alabama harmony quartets such as the Birmingham Jubilee Singers, the Bessemer Sunset Four, and the later Sterling Jubilee Singers, originated in the vocal culture classes taught by teachers trained in this type of close harmony singing at schools like Tuskegee Institute. They in turn were carrying on a tradition begun by such groups as the Fisk Jubilee Singers and various touring singers from Tuskegee Institute itself from the late 1800s. It's notable that the Spiritualaires in their own way continue the tradition to this day in the very shadows of Tuskegee Institute. The arrangement of the Spiritualaires version of *The Lord's Prayer* is taken from the 1956 VeeJay commercial recording by the Swan Silvertones. It was a hit not only nationally but in central Alabama too, and is well remembered by many groups and singers in the area.

The Spiritualaires also sing a country and western tune. *Some Folk Say* is not an aberration or novelty song but a tune firmly within the tradition and sensibility of the group and the gospel community of the Russell and Macon County area. Country music has always been popular and well liked among many African-Americans, and is quite popular in the Macon, Bullock and Russell County area. Indeed, the case may be made that what we know as Country

and Western music is of itself rife with African American influences stylistically, thematically and lyrically. Since this is the case it is only natural that groups like the Spiritualaires include a country and western tune in their repertoire. Both Robert Marion and Willie Smith are country music fans with Robert mentioning Bill Monroe and Johnny Cash and Willie listing Webb Pierce as particular favorites. Marion stated in an interview that, "some of those country songs sounded good; them jokers got down!" Likewise, these tunes are highly popular with gospel audiences. *Some Folk Say* remains the Spiritualaires most requested song at gospel programs. Robert Marion recalled that once at a program in the early 1970s with the Florida Spiritualaires, the leader of the Florida group tipped off Marion that they were going to try out a country and western tune during that evening's program. Marion well remembers the overwhelming response to the Florida Spiritualaires' countrified gospel tune. So did other members of the Spiritualaires of Hartsboro. Several years later Sam Relf decided to act on this notion and composed *Some Folk Say*. The Spiritualaires repertoire also draws from traditional gospel songs and hymns. Here, the best example is their version of Thomas Dorsey's *When the Gates Swing Open*. This song is popular with quartets and groups in Alabama and has become a standard for many. The Spiritualaires version, led by Rufus Jordan, is certainly one of the highlights of the disc. *Come Over Here* and *I've Done What You Told Me To Do* were recorded during one of the Spiritualaires' Sunday morning radio broadcasts in February of 2004. The studio at WBIL in Tuskegee is a bit cramped and the Spiritualaires huddle around a single microphone during the broadcasts. Friends and guests are present and they may enter the studio at any time or even join in the singing. Consequently, these selections are more informal than the other songs. Bits of conversation and even the studio's squeaky door can be heard in the background.

After the rise of Sam Cooke in the early 1950s, the primary commercial emphasis became a single gospel lead at the expense of group harmony. As an alternative to this, some quartets developed a guitar accompanied ensemble vocal sound. There were several commercially recorded quartets during the 1950s whose sound is similar to the Spiritualaires. Groups like Zion Harmonizers on Avant, the Hurricane Travelers on Fortune, the Seven Stars on Delta, the Dixieland Singers on Chess and the Ambassador Singers on Agent display a guitar supported quartet sound with loose harmonies and a repertoire consisting mainly of slower tunes. By the early 1970s, with hardly any of the Golden Age's nationally known performers still in the national spotlight, gospel had retreated to the regional level. Here, local radio stations and small record labels like HSE, J&B and Champ, and many even smaller Mom and Pop labels, continued to support gospel groups and programs. The music itself, after the stylistic soul searching of the late 1960s, had settled into a modern form with elements of contemporary blues, soul, funk and country and western. Individual chords, particular chord changes and other instrumentation that was deemed acceptable and not too worldly by congregations and program audiences became codified into the modern gospel quartet sound of such as Doc McKenzie, Troy Ramey or the Mighty Clouds of Joy.

Through it all, the Spiritualaires stuck to their original sound. Their loyalty to this sound, and to their home community and churches through their perpetual music program appearances and their live Sunday morning radio show, has allowed them to sustain their unique gospel sound in our rapidly changing world. During many of their Sunday morning radio broadcasts, Willie Smith - who usually announces the upcoming programs and appearances on the air often ends these announcements with the phrase, "so come on out to the program this Sunday evening and let's have a good time in the name of the Lord."

- Kevin Nutt, August 2006, Montgomery, Alabama