

# “John the Revelator”--The Golden Gate Quartet (1938)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Kathryn Kemp (guest post)\*



*Golden Gate Orchestra, reissue*

Gospel, as a distinct musical genre, has a long rich history that pre-dates the arrival of enslaved Africans to the English colonies in America. The Negro spiritual, as an art form, was created in “hush arbors”--sacred spaces where people could sing and worship away from the oppression and inhumanity of chattel slavery. The spirituals sprang from the experiences of the African people and share their consciousness of life in Africa and America. These enslaved persons developed a theology to explain the existence of a God who loved them but also allowed them to live in bondage. Their understanding of the God taught in the new religion of the Bible contained stories that gave them hope and faith. Stories about the Hebrew children in Egypt who were liberated by Moses. They heard stories about Jesus the Christ--who gave freedom to all who believed in His name. American folk music derived from this early tradition of Negro spirituals. These songs were the first indigenous musical form developed by people of African origin in America. W.E.B. Du Bois asserts it “remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”

Negro spirituals moved from “hush arbors” and churches to classrooms when they became part of a musical curriculum in high school and college glee clubs. Arranged spirituals, sung and performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers (formerly known as the Nashville Singers), popularized the music of people of African ancestry throughout concert halls in American and Europe during the 1890s. These singers raised more than \$170,000 from these engagements. A portion of the money was used to build Jubilee Hall completed in 1875, on the Fisk campus. Black vocal training became more prevalent in high school and college educational experiences. Jubilee singing, however, was thought of primarily as a function of the sacred worship experience. Quartet singing created the paradigm for the black sacred tradition of traditional spiritual singing to become ingrained into the developing gospel sound. Spirituals became both sacred and secular while many of the lyrics remained spiritually oriented.

A performance platform was created allowing groups to sing for black and white audiences and assisted in the evolution of the sacred to the secular. This was aided by the formation of the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA)--the organization that nationalized black vaudeville in 1921. Blues queens, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, headlined these shows. Preaching evangelists, blues singers and jazz artists were sources of entertainment in those days. The Great Depression ushered in an economic period when people wanted to listen to upbeat music--not sad spirituals. The repertoire of the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet was popular during this period.

Most quartets began as neighborhood groups. Many began in barber shops where they were trained and coached by their mentors. Legend states that the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet was initially formed in 1931 at Eddie "A.C." Griffin's Barbershop in Norfolk, Virginia. High school students Willie Johnson and Henry Owens became the protégés of Eddie Griffin. They were members of the Booker T. Washington High School Glee Club in Norfolk. Griffin taught them how to arrange old spirituals into songs with chords and tempo.

Their official introduction as the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet was announced in 1931 by the "Norfolk Journal and Guide." Willie Johnson, baritone and narrator; Henry Owens first tenor; practiced every day with Eddie Griffin and Robert L. ("Peg Leg") Ford, the older guys. The quartet toured throughout rural Virginia. Their gospel message was sorely needed and appreciated during this period in the time known as the Great Depression. William Langford ("High Pockets"), second tenor, replaced the elder barbershop owner Eddie Griffin around 1935. Orlandus Wilson--bass--replaced "Peg Leg" Ford in 1936.

The younger quartet was then able to travel extensively without family or work commitments. They sang in churches and community events. The church denounced the group for singing the "devil's music" and destroying the sanctity of the spiritual as sacred music. Their first performance on radio occurred through WIS station in Columbia, South Carolina. They moved to 50 watts WBT station in Charlotte, North Carolina, where they were exposed to a much larger listening audience. They were singing on radio stations in 1935, the year of their high school graduation.

The Quartet moved to New York where they were groomed by Barney Josephson, owner of an inter-racial night spot in Manhattan which was part of the left-wing and Popular Front activities. In December 1939, they began a four-year nightly job at his Café Society. They stopped singing there in tandem with the Harlem Riot of 1943 and increasing anti-Communist rhetoric aimed directly at their songs. Owens and Johnson enlisted in the armed services. They returned to the group after the war but left for other pursuits in the late '40s and early '50s. The Gates have had many quartet changes over the years but always maintained their style of delivery and position as one of the most successful quartets with the jubilee style. Their prophetic interpretation of biblical content, coupled with blues, scat and political content in the Post-War period were popular musical choices for many people.

Quartet singing is built on the concept of "basing," which is the interplay between the lead and the group. Timing, crisp precision, improvisations with variations, one refrain, call and response, and background harmony are the techniques used to blend the different musical sounds. Their

singing featured close harmonies and included blues notes. The strophic style had a distinctive repetitive pattern between the refrain and the verses. The a cappella singing of the Golden Gates Jubilee Quartet was enhanced by their ability to use their hands to imitate train sounds and their voices to imitate trumpets and other musical instruments and jazz elements.

The performance style of the Gates resembled that of another well-known quartet group--the Mills Brothers. The Mills brother began under the tutelage of their father who owned a barbershop and founded a quartet known as the Four Kings of Harmony. The brothers--John Jr., Herbert, Harry, and Donald--utilized his techniques and harmonies and began performing in the area. The Mills and Gates quartets were known admirers of each other's talent and style. The Golden Gate Quartet thrived in this Post-Depression environment while black and American values were merging into a new consciousness of what America is as a nation.

The Golden Gate Quartet recording career began with the backing of Eli Oberstein who ran RCA's/Victor race-based label--Bluebird in 1937. Record companies had found a new audience of black Americans, willing to purchase race-based records of gospel, blues, and jazz artists during the 1920s-1930s. These companies recorded artists who included Blind Willie Johnson, a sightless Texas preacher--the original author of "John the Revelator," recorded by Columbia Records (1930) in Atlanta. He was accompanied by his wife on guitar. The lyrics chosen by Blind Willie Johnson focused on Adam and the fall of man, Jesus, the apostles and his passion. It ended in the Book of Revelation with John and the Resurrection. There are many lyrics which use the words of Blind Willie Johnson with few variations. This particular song continues to be recorded into the 21<sup>st</sup> century by groups as diverse as Son House (Eddie J. House Jr.), Ralph Stanley, Tom Waits, Taj Mahal, Son Ra, Nick Cave, Sharon Riley with Faith Chorale, and Sam Moore in "The Blues Brothers," Curtis Stigers and the Forest Rangers, Depeche Mode, and Gov't Mule.

The Golden Gates' recording of "John the Revelator" was among their earliest recordings. This arrangement was written and narrated by Willie Johnson, the first leader of the group. This arrangement of "John" was inducted into the National Recording Registry in 2005. This Registry lists sound recordings that are preserved for their significance in culture, history and aesthetic quality. The lyrics penned by Willie Johnson uses the deity of Christ for its interpretation. He begins with the biblical prophecy of Isaiah, shifts to the gospel of Matthew, and culminates with the "Day of the Lord" in Revelation. He focuses on Jesus' trial and crucifixion by his own which led to Calvary. He presents John's narrative on the resurrected Christ as the Son of God who not only redeems mankind from sin, but also heals man of all physical disabilities. The final battle of Armageddon in Revelation is depicted as the song ends. It is written in strophic form as is the original recording of Blind Willie Johnson but it varies in the repetition of the repeating verse/chorus using an augmented AB form.

The Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet caught the attention of John Hammond, a record producer and civil-rights activist. Hammond recruited them for his second production of the "From Spirituals to Swing" concert at Carnegie Hall in 1939. This quartet was unique. The Golden Gates Quartet (as they were now known), later sang for President Franklin Roosevelt on many occasions, at Constitution Hall at the insistence of Eleanor Roosevelt, and with many well-known singers and blues artists. They also appeared in Hollywood films.

The composition of the group changed after World War II ended. Willie Johnson and Henry Owens stayed a few years after returning from the war but eventually moved to other careers. Orlandus Wilson took charge of the group for many decades. They eventually moved to Europe, which became their home. They have performed in over 76 countries. They have influenced the careers of many singers--including Elvis Presley. They were inducted into the Vocal Hall of Fame in 1998. An article in the "Los Angeles Times" on the death of Willie Bill Johnson called him "the Gospel Innovator of Rock 'n' Roll."

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and my not reflect those of the Library of Congress.