



# PARAMOUNT SINGERS

WORK  
&  
PRAY  
ON

ARHOOLE  
CD-382

Over 60 Minutes of  
A Capella Gospel

Left to Right:

back: J. B. Williams &  
Rev. Odis Brown  
center: Clyde Price &  
Joseph Dean  
front: Archie Reynolds &  
William Johnson

Cover photo by  
Tony Heiderer

Back photo of  
The Paramount Singers by  
Sandy Miranda

Produced by  
Chris Strachwitz &  
the Paramount Singers

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PRAY ON

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## THE PARAMOUNT SINGERS

### *"Work & Pray On"*

At the beginning and at the end of the two recording sessions that produced this remarkable album, the six Paramount Singers huddled like football players, their heads bowed in prayer. This quiet ritual of thanks to God for the gift of song has been a Paramount tradition since the group was first organized in Austin, Texas 56 years ago.

**Work & Pray On** is one of the finest recordings of a cappella African-American gospel quartet music to have been made since the genre slid into decline during the mid-'50s. As quartets added rhythm sections, often cluttering rather than strengthening their sound, pure harmony of the type practiced here by the Paramounts became less important, as did the necessity of having a bass singer. Recent years, however, have seen a resurgence of interest in a cappella music in general because audiences have found that nothing beats the blend of unadorned human voices in harmony. Leading current exponents of a cappella in the black gospel field include the ven-

erable Fairfield Four, the young, decidedly traditional Birmingham Sunlights and the wildly experimental Take 6. And Spencer Taylor's Highway QC's, who were perhaps the last major quartet to record a cappella during the '50s, now feature an unaccompanied segment as part of their program.

Add the Paramount Singers to the list. Although the San Francisco-based group had long featured many a cappella selections in its repertoire, the Paramounts only recently began singing totally without instrumental accompaniment. The death in 1979 of founding member Ben Williams, who doubled as bass singer and guitar player, left a great void in the group. Unable to find a suitable bass vocalist, leader Archie Reynolds, who'd sung second tenor since joining in 1946, took over the bottom parts himself. Several guitarists were tried, but, Reynolds explains, "nobody worked out because of our style of singing." They instead decided to go a cappella and discovered that audiences,

both religious and secular, in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area, as well as in Portland and Salt Lake City, took to their new sound immediately. "It seems like it's working out better that way than it did with music," he says.

Only a few quartets have been in existence longer than the Paramounts, most notably the Fairfield Four, the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Soul Stirrers. If the Paramounts failed to gain widespread notoriety, the quality of their recordings of the late -'40s through the mid -'50s matched that of other top quartets of gospel music's golden age. Unlike the professional quartets of the Midwest and South, where the distance between major cities was relatively short, the Paramounts were located on the West Coast and seldom ventured further from home than Los Angeles. They recorded for nationally distributed companies — Coral and Duke — as well as for the smaller Olliet and Trilon labels in Oakland, but shunned touring outside California because they all held down day jobs.

Lead singer Joseph Dean, a Paramount since 1948, once turned down an offer to join the famous Spirit of Mem-

phis. "I told them I didn't like traveling," he explained. "We never did like traveling because we all had families."

While the Paramounts have seen countless personnel changes over the decades, the rich close harmony of their East Texas roots has remained a constant. Their original Austin lineup consisted of two sets of brothers: Ermant and A. C. Franklin and Geno and Kermit Terrell plus Herbert Sneed and Ben Williams. By the time they made their recording debut, in 1941 for the Library of Congress, Sneed had been replaced by James Hayward Medlock, who went on to sing alongside R. H. Harris in the Soul Stirrers.

World War II disrupted the group. The Terrells were inducted into the army and, after their discharge, settled in the Bay Area, where they formed a new set of Paramounts with Williams and two other recent arrivals from Austin — Sam Reece and Victor L. Medearis. Kermit Terrell, Reece and Medearis were eventually replaced by Vance "Tiny" Powell, Archie Reynolds, E. Morris Kelley and, briefly, Paul Foster, later of Soul Stirrers renown.

Reynolds, now 70, was born in Gulf



Port, Mississippi, and raised in New Orleans. After coming to San Francisco in 1943, he organized the Swanee River Singers, then joined a pop quartet called the Symphonic Harmonizers before returning to gospel with the Skylarks. It was in the Skylarks that he met Powell, an awesome lead singer who had gained a considerable reputation for his work in the Midwest with the Evening Melody Boys, the Friendly Brothers and the Flying Clouds.

Born 69 years ago in Hope, Arkansas, Joseph Dean came on board (replacing Foster) in 1948 after having sung with an amateur quartet from Richmond, California called the Lovely Four. "I had a voice, but I really didn't know how to sing until I got with the Paramounts," he states. "They taught me how to sing the type of singing that I'm doing today. When you become a professional, you learn a lot about pronunciation and toning of the voice in order to make harmony and round-tone notes." Dean and Powell proved a winning pair, their alternating "cool" (Dean) and "hot" (Powell) leads giving the Paramounts a tag team much like that of R. H. Harris and James

Medlock or Paul Foster (later, Sam Cooke and Foster) in the Soul Stirrers. Powell left the group in 1951 to sing with Archie Brownlee in the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi but soon returned to the fold. Then, in 1963, he decided to pursue a career as a blues singer, beginning with a chilling rendition of the Bob Geddins tune, *My Time After While*. Powell continued to rehearse with the Paramounts until his death in 1973 but made few public appearances with the group because, according to Reynolds, "the people didn't accept it."

Rev. Odis Brown, a Paramount since 1979, today provides the "hard" contrasts to Dean's gentler leads, having been primed for the task during the week and a half he spent in 1951 singing opposite Sam Cooke in the Soul Stirrers while Paul Foster was recovering from pneumonia. Born 68 years ago in Lufkin, Texas, Brown studied harmony as a child with Prof. George Taylor, a Prairie View College instructor who also tutored several of the Soul Stirrers in his spare time. Brown sang with the Spiritual Five of Lufkin for 17 years and recorded with them for the Top Hat label in Houston.

After his job as a journeyman molder brought him to San Francisco in 1951, he organized the Gospel Trumpets and recorded with them for the Oakland-based Jaxysen label.

While 78-year-old Arcadia, Louisiana-born baritone singer J.B. Williams came to the Paramounts with Rev. Brown from the Gospel Trumpets, newer recruits Clyde Price and William Johnson had little prior gospel quartet experience. First tenor Price, 64, began singing in the choir at San Francisco's Double Rock Baptist Church (pastored by former Paramount Victor L. Medearis) after coming to the Bay Area at age 17 from his native Marshall, Texas. Archie Reynolds spotted him three years ago singing with the Fellowship of Male Choruses, a multi-church choir. "In the male chorus," Price states, "you can miss a note here and there and you can get away with it. The Paramounts really keep you on your toes."

At 39, Richmond, California-born second tenor singer Johnson is the youngest and newest member. He had previously performed and recorded with a soul group called the Emulations,

although his father, Willie Johnson, had sung bass with the Golden West Gospel Singers, as well as behind Joe Simon in an R&B group called the Golden Tones. "Harmony-wise," the younger Johnson says, "it's hard singin' with the Paramounts because of the chords that they do, but I'm hangin' in there. I love it. I've been around that type of singing for so long, it's like a part of me – that rich harmony."

Johnson's lilting, wonderfully elastic tenor, like Dean's, shows traces of a Sam Cooke influence. The two men square off in this collection, the Paramounts' first commercial recording since 1955, on the haunting *If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again*. Johnson is teamed with the emotion-choked Rev. Brown for *He'll Work It Out*, while taking the helm all to himself on the beautiful *He Looked Beyond My Faults*, a Dottie Rambo composition that combines elements of the melodies of *Amazing Grace* and *Danny Boy*. First popularized in black gospel circles by Andrae Crouch, the tune has recently been featured in the repertoires of such quartets as the Jackson Southernaires and the Five Blind

Boys of Alabama. Now, the Paramounts give it their distinctive a cappella touch.

Five of the selections had previously been recorded by the Paramounts. *Jesus Is All This World to Me*, which features Dean's tenor gliding in and out of lovely layers of harmony arranged by Reynolds, was cut for Duke in 1955, as were *Mother* and *Work and Pray On*. *Heaven in My View* had appeared only as an a cappella demo that recently turned up in the Specialty Records tape vault. The Paramounts introduced Thomas A. Dorsey's now-standard *Peace in the Valley* into the quartet repertoire and

recorded it twice – in 1949 for Trilon and two years later for Coral. Tiny Powell took the leads originally. Here, Joseph Dean applies his voice with an uncanny blend of grace and grit.

Through prayer and dedication to their music and families, the Paramount Singers have survived passing fads in gospel to carry into the '90s a rich vocal tradition begun in Texas more than a half century ago. If, in their huddles during the album's sessions, they prayed for a winner, the results indicate a clear touchdown.

*Lee Hildebrand – July 1992*

## The Paramount Singers

**Archie Reynolds** – bass & leader

**Joseph Dean** – tenor

**Rev. Odis Brown** – tenor

**Clyde Price** – tenor

**J. B. Williams** – baritone

**William Johnson** – tenor

Cover photo by Tony Heiderer

Back photo of Paramount Singers by Sandy Miranda

Produced by Chris Strachwitz & The Paramount Singers

Recorded by Mike Cogan at Bay Records, Berkeley, CA 1992

## The Songs:

### 1. WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH

(Albert A. Goodson)

Lead: Rev. Odis Brown

### 2. JESUS IS ALL THIS WORLD TO ME

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 3. THERE'S A LEAK IN THIS OLD BUILDING

Leads: Joseph Dean & Rev. Odis Brown

### 4. HE LOOKED BEYOND MY FAULTS (Amazing Grace)

(Dottie Rambo)

Lead: William Johnson

### 5. JESUS GAVE ME WATER

(Lucie E. Campbell)

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 6. OH, ROCKS

Lead: Clyde Price

### 7. CHILD OF THE KING

(John B. Sumner)

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 8. HE'LL WORK IT OUT (Problems)

Leads: William Johnson & Rev. Odis Brown

### 9. GREAT DAY

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 10. MOTHER

(Archie Reynolds)

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 11. IT'S GONNA RAIN

Lead: Archie Reynolds

### 12. DEEP RIVER

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 13. WORK AND PRAY ON

(E. Morris Kelley)

Leads: Joseph Dean & Rev. Odis Brown

### 14. IF I COULD HEAR MY MOTHER PRAY AGAIN

Leads: William Johnson & Joseph Dean

### 15. EZEKIEL (Dry Bones)

Lead: Archie Reynolds

### 16. OUT OF THE DEPTHS OF MY SOUL

(Thelma V. Gross)

Lead & Prayer: Rev. Odis Brown

### 17. HEAVEN IN MY VIEW

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 18. MY LORD WHAT A MORNING

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 19. PEACE IN THE VALLEY

(Thomas A. Dorsey)

Lead: Joseph Dean

### 20. FAMILY PRAYER

Lead: Rev. Odis Brown

Unless composer is given, songs are traditional, arranged by The Paramount Singers and © by Tradition Music Co. – BMI.



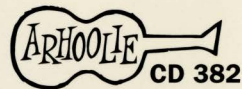
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# PARAMOUNT SINGERS

## "Work and Pray On"



**Over 60 Minutes of A Capella GOSPEL MUSIC**

1. WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH
2. JESUS IS ALL THIS WORLD TO ME
3. THERE'S A LEAK IN  
THIS OLD BUILDING
4. HE LOOKED BEYOND MY FAULTS  
(Amazing Grace)
5. JESUS GAVE ME WATER
6. OH, ROCKS
7. CHILD OF THE KING
8. HE'LL WORK IT OUT (Problems)
9. GREAT DAY
10. MOTHER
11. IT'S GONNA RAIN
12. DEEP RIVER
13. WORK AND PRAY ON
14. IF I COULD HEAR MY MOTHER  
PRAY AGAIN
15. EZEKIEL (Dry Bones)
16. OUT OF THE DEPTHS OF MY  
SOUL

17. HEAVEN IN MY VIEW
18. MY LORD WHAT A MORNING
19. PEACE IN THE VALLEY
20. FAMILY PRAYER

*Total Time: 68:12*

### The Paramount Singers:

**Archie Reynolds** – bass & leader

**Joseph Dean** – tenor

**Rev. Odis Brown** – tenor

**Clyde Price** – tenor

**J. B. Williams** – baritone

**William Johnson** – tenor

Produced by Chris Strachwitz &  
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Recorded at Bay Records, Berkeley, CA 1992

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