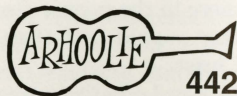


Rev. Louis Overstreet

With his sons and the congregation of
St. Luke's Powerhouse Church of God in Christ



1. A PRAYER & I'M A SOLDIER IN THE
ARMY OF THE LORD (6:46)
2. I'M WORKING ON A BUILDING (6:58)
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Total time: 75:21

Rev. Louis Overstreet – vocal, guitar, and
bass drum. Accompanied by his four sons and
members of the congregation (except solo
items).

Cover left to right: Alvin Sidney, Robert Lee,
Albert Lee, Louis Jr., and Rev. Louis Overstreet.

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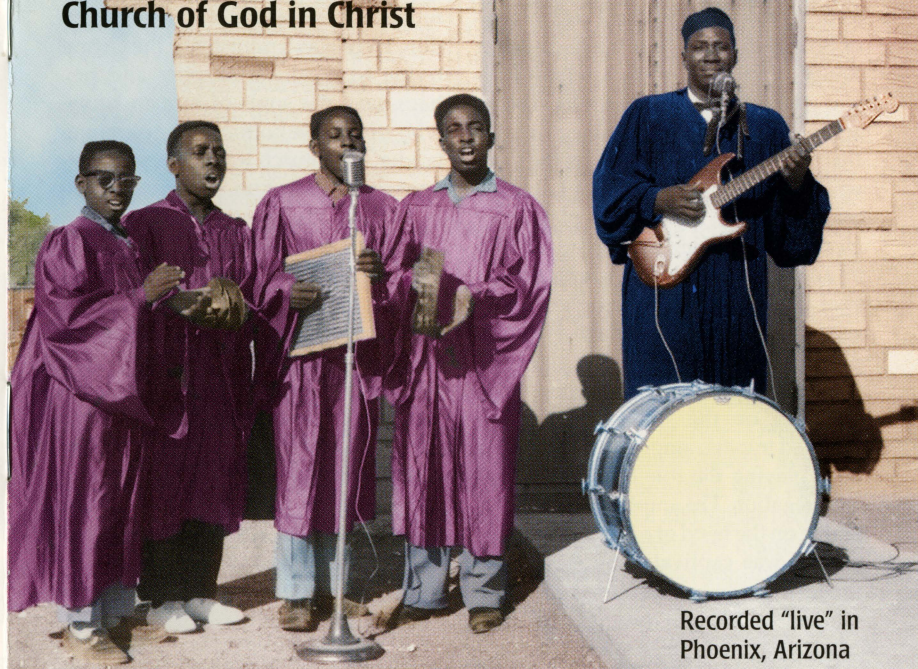
#5, 7–10, 12–16 previously unreleased. All others
previously available as ARH LP 1014.

Edited and produced by Chris Strachwitz
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Rev. Louis Overstreet

With his sons and the congregation of
St. Luke's Powerhouse
Church of God in Christ



Recorded "live" in
Phoenix, Arizona

REV. LOUIS OVERSTREET

About this recording

In the Summer of 1960, on my first trip through the southwest, I happened to drive through the small community of Scotlandville — just north of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with a fellow who was well acquainted with the local blues scene. The sun was just going down on that hot evening, and there on the sidewalk outside a tavern, was a tall black man dressed in a black robe playing an electric guitar which was plugged into an amplifier with a chord running into a beer joint. He had a microphone on a rack around his neck which was also plugged into the amp. About eight feet away from him, around a second mike, standing on the sidewalk and also plugged into the amp, were four young boys playing the role of his choir and congregation. The amplifier in turn was sitting on the hood of a car parked at the curb. I was captivated by this man's prayers, songs, and intensity of deliv-

ery. His task was not an easy one and his audience did not seem especially attuned to his messages of spiritual salvation. Here was a minister of the Gospel trying to persuade skeptics and perhaps save the souls of human beings who were at the bottom of the economic ladder. His church was wherever some one would allow him, perhaps for a fee, to plug in his amplifier and address whatever listener would stop long enough to be impressed as I was. That hot evening I heard for the first time the songs and prayers of a man I was never to forget. I was captivated by his way of bringing the gospel to people outdoors, perhaps in much the way Jesus had done in his day, but with the help of some incredible music and singing. I did not learn his name until several years later, but I knew he belonged to the Church of God in Christ and as he later told me: "I don't preach denomi-

nation — I preach Christ."

For two years I thought about the preacher and his four sons but it wasn't until October of 1962 that I finally met him — in Phoenix, Arizona. I had very little money in those early days of trying to operate a small record label on the salary of a high school teacher. I was trying to build a record label to document the blues and other regional musical traditions which drew me to the rural South, like a magnet. I was slowly selling a few records here and there by blues singers I had recorded but I was doubtful about selling any religious music or sermons. In 1962, however, I returned to Scotlandville and inquired about the preacher with his four sons in the same block where I had first seen and heard him. Finally a woman tavern owner told me that she thought his name was Overstreet but that she had not seen him for some months and that she had heard that he had moved out west, to Phoenix, Arizona! I thanked her and on my way home to California I stopped at a service station in the south end of Phoenix, where I was told most of the

black population resided. Upon my inquiry about a singing, black preacher with four sons, the attendant smiled at me and said: "he's got a church now and it's just around the corner!"

This recording is the result of my spending about a week with Rev. Overstreet, his sons, and the congregation of St. Luke's Powerhouse Church of God In Christ, all of whom warmly welcomed and encouraged me to document this remarkable ministry. Today my only regrets are that I was never able to really help this minister financially in any significant way since the record never became a best seller like those of Rev. C.L. Franklin. I do believe however that this recording is perhaps the only one ever made of such a ministry which presents not only portions of the actual services, but also the wonderful singing and preaching talents of Rev. Overstreet alone, with his congregation, and his four sons. Four beautiful solo performances along with additional excerpts from the services have now found space on this expanded CD version of the original LP record.

The Services

As the members of the congregation entered the Church most of them knelt against the benches with their faces down and prayed, alone or in unison. After a while one of the assistant preachers might read from the Bible. Others would give testimony as to how much they had been helped, others would complain of their troubles with the hope that the power of God would help them and that the congregation would pray for them. Someone might get very moved and break out into a song — “I’m a Soldier” was a very popular one, and soon the whole congregation would join in. As Rev. Overstreet set up his guitar and his sons settled down on the side bench with the drum, tambourines, rubboard and cymbals, they all joined with the congregation in the joyous praising of the Lord.

Singing and dancing are considered gifts from God and were an inte-

gral part of the worship service. As some were moved by the spirit they got up and did a solo dance in front of the altar, others followed suit and the music droned on (“Holiness Dance”). Then, as a little rest was needed, Rev. Overstreet would break out with a prayer, he would be moved by the spirit to give his message— with no text or notes—the Lord helped and guided him. As the spirit moved among the congregation, the tension built up and they responded. Soon they would break out again in dance, song, and joyous shouting and clapping. Rev. Overstreet might lead the congregation (“Yeah, Lord”) or one member might be inspired to sing out—but the Reverend’s powerful voice rang out over the loudspeaker and again his sons joined him on the instruments and the holiness dancing and joyous praising of the Lord continued until everyone needed some rest again. At

that point the choir came forth with a few selections, and Rev. Overstreet might join them (“Working on a Building”).

As the choir finished, Rev. Overstreet might deliver the sermon for the evening. Someone in the congregation would read lines from the Bible one by one. Rev. Overstreet would repeat each line and the congregation echoed in turn. From there he built his short sermon, always timely and down to earth, dealing with very real problems facing members of the congregation. As he concluded the sermon his sons might join him in a song like “Getting Richer,” or they did a number on their own like “Is There Anybody Here.” If the spirit was strong that evening the song would soon be picked up by the congregation and the entire church would again sing and shout the joyous songs of the Spirit.

On other evenings Rev. Overstreet might call on all those who were afflicted to step forth with the hope of being healed. They prayed that the evil spirits might leave their bodies and lest

any of the evil spirits enter others still seated, everyone lined up in front of the minister to have him lay his hand on their foreheads and heal and help them with their troubles. On another evening, or during the Sunday noon services, communion was administered—the bread was broken and the wine was passed for all the members of the congregation. Again on yet another evening a visiting preacher might drop by and deliver a spirited message, and the services could last late into the night, past the midnight hour if the Lord was with the congregation, although many of the school children would have gone home by then.

On most days Rev. Overstreet also held afternoon prayer meetings where I recorded many of the selections when no amplifier was turned on. Those meetings were often sparsely attended since much of the congregation consisted of domestics who were working long hours. Many afternoons were often used to go out of town — as far as Tucson, where street services were conducted — especially on weekends. The

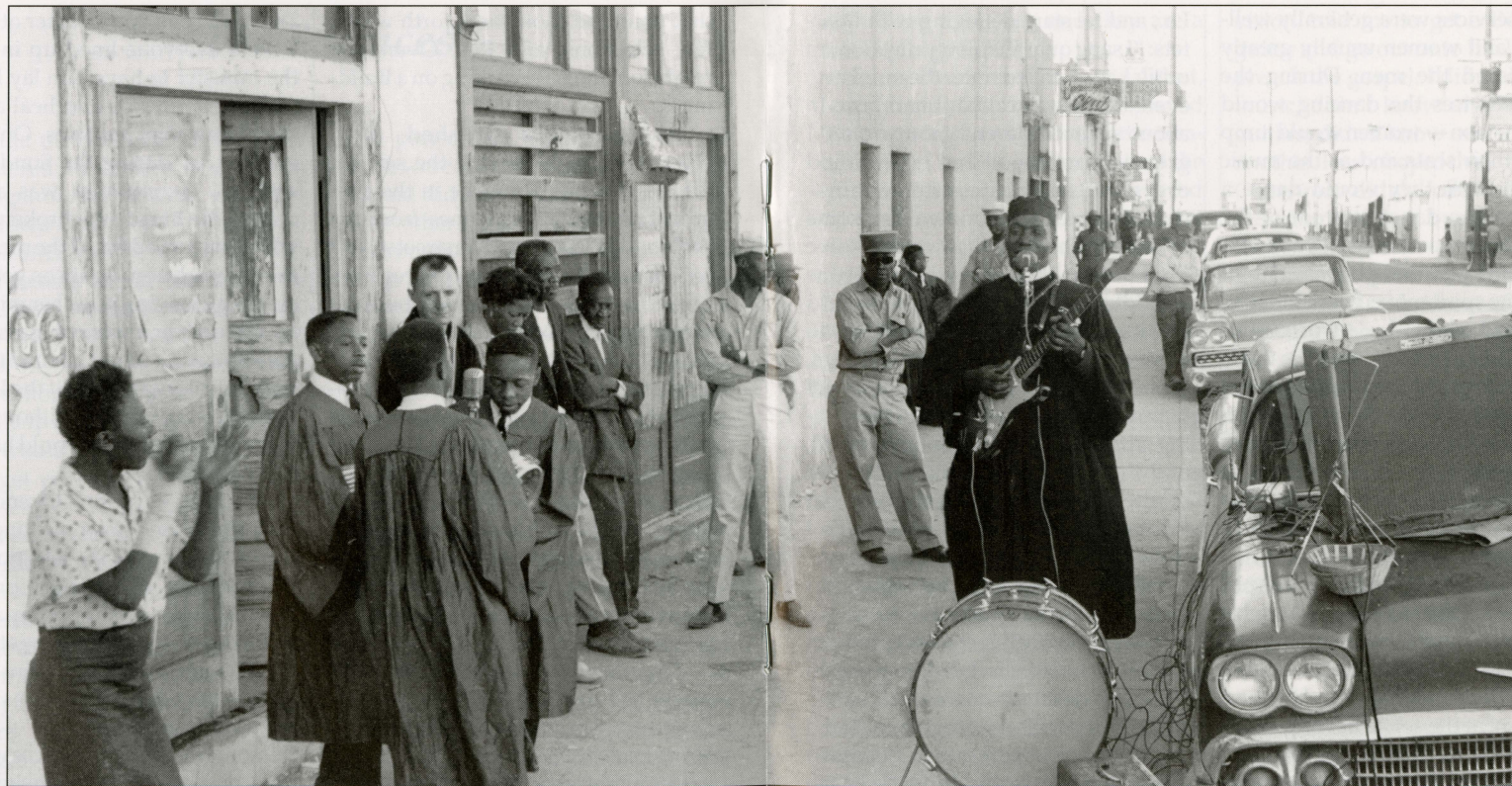


Photo © by Chris Strachwitz

Rev. Overstreet and his sons ministering to the down and out on a street in Tucson, Az., early 1963.

evening services were generally well-attended and women usually greatly outnumbered the men. During the evening services the dancing would begin very soon—women would jump up from their seats and as the music energized them they would dance a Charleston-like dance in front of the altar where a good sized space was reserved for just this purpose. Obviously as the spirit moved parishioners, they got rid of the day's frustrations and found new energy after the day's hard work to praise the Lord via music and dancing. If you have never attended a service at a Church of God in Christ, perhaps this album will give you at least a glimpse of what it is like and maybe you will seek one out in your neighborhood.

Louis Overstreet was born on April 1, 1921, near Lakeland, La., where his parents lived and worked on a farm. He was baptized in the Baptist Church and at an early age began to hear and learn many of the songs he sang all his life. In 1933 his mother moved with him and his five sisters to Baton Rouge,

La., and he started singing with quartets: "I sang quartets all my days, on up until I was called into the ministry, even after I was called. I had been in about seven different groups after I grew into manhood and none would ever stand, so the last quartet I was in—that was in De Quincy—we had some of the boys in there that wouldn't live up to what they were singing: one would gamble, another one would drink, so I told them that wouldn't do to serve the Lord and do these things, then go out and expect people to get happy and enjoy and shout at the singing. And I said I'm gonna quit you all, and I'm not going to sing any more quartets—and this was a prophecy, but I didn't know it. I spoke it but really I didn't have a meaning to it; it just came to my mind to speak it and I spoke it. I said I am never gonna try to sing a quartet again until I get me four sons of my own. I said the Lord is going to bless me with four sons, and I'll have a group that will stay together; and I hadn't met their mother then. But down through the years the Lord blessed me

with these four sons and they are a wonderful group."

Louis Overstreet, Jr., is the oldest, born January 25, 1947, and he played the drum in church and also the tambourine, as well as singing most of the leads on the songs which the boys did on their own. Albert Lee Overstreet was the next one, born on February 3, 1948. He sings the driving lead on "Is There Anybody Here," and also plays the rubboard in church and during the street services. Robert Lee Overstreet arrived next, on March 12, 1949, and he took up the cymbals as well as singing his part. Finally the "baby" of the family, Alvin Sidney Overstreet arrived on July 10, 1950. He used to play the triangle back in Louisiana where that instrument was a very popular one, but they no longer had one at the time of these recordings and so he added to the rhythm by clapping his hands. It was usually his duty during the outdoor services to circulate among the audience and pass the plate for an offering.

In 1938 "the Lord spoke to me in a

vision, told me to get a Bible and a guitar and go out onto the highways, preach the gospel. I didn't know any music, didn't know anything about guitars, didn't know one string from another. I just obeyed the Lord." Louis Overstreet didn't follow the Lord's request right then but in the '40s he finally did. "Went out and bought a guitar—paid \$200 for a Gibson. I did like the Lord said. About 45 days after I bought it he gifted me with the music." And when asked about the origin of his style he simply replied: "That's the way the Lord gave it to me. This music is handed on from on high."

for 15 years, beginning in 1941, Louis Overstreet worked at a turpentine factory in De Quincy, La.. While still working there he went into the ministry, at first part-time, but he baptized his sisters and pastored his mother until her death in 1958. In 1956 the ministry became a full-time job with Louis Overstreet and his work took him throughout the South to Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, all over Louisiana, into Texas, Arizona, Ne-

vada, and west to California. Rev. Overstreet and “the little Overstreet brothers” would stop on the streets of the cities, plug in their amplifier at a nearby bar and preach the gospel. Often the police would come and listen. Many cities had ordinances against outdoor loudspeakers and of course against disturbances, especially if these should be racial in nature. They would stand and listen but most of the time they would soon go away when they heard that Rev. Overstreet preached only of the Love of God. “Integration made it hard on outdoor services. Many ministers were involved, but we went right on and had them anyway; and they would come and listen, but found us not rousing up integration and let us be. I have always been a spiritual songster in all my days.”

In July of 1961 the Overstreets came through Phoenix on their way to Los Angeles and “hooked up to a night club called Trotter’s Inn, right on Broadway,” and went on to hold their street service. They didn’t intend to

stay and were due in Los Angeles for the July 4 holiday, but “the Lord wanted us to stop traveling. Another minister had built this church and he said the Lord told him to build it but not to pastor it, so he just waited until God sent the right person along. He chose me to be the right person.” At the time of this recording the congregation consisted of close to 100 loyal members, many of whom joined after a revival when many were baptized. Rev. Overstreet and his sons continued to travel a bit now and then. On Saturday afternoons they would pack their car and head for Tucson, Arizona, where they brought the Gospel to the people on the streets—to the winos, the gamblers, the poor, the down and out men and women of our cities who often lead an empty existence but who were often brought to the church through the missionary spirit of Rev. Overstreet and his sons. On Friday nights, just before the services at St. Luke, Rev. Overstreet and his boys would go over to Buckeye St. in Phoenix and try to bring the Gospel

there to the people also, hoping that they would find their way back to Christ.

Rev. Louis Overstreet died in April of 1980 of a heart attack but his wife,

Mary H. Overstreet carried on his tradition. She also became an evangelist and today is associated with the Powerhouse Temple of the Church of God In Christ in Portland, Oregon.

(Chris A. Strachwitz— 1963 & 1995)

“Make a joyful noise unto the Lord”

Of the sanctified churches, The Church of God in Christ has, in terms of music and song, been very influential. It was founded by a Black minister from Memphis, Tenn., Charles H. Mason, in 1895. The appeal of a church which encouraged playing of instruments in church was considerable, and the new denomination spread rapidly. Not only did the new church encourage music, it also placed great importance on being “called” to preach, rather than on ordination. This meant that even the uneducated in the mainly illiterate and poor Southern communities could become pastors of the church, if they had been “sanctified” and had the call to preach to others that they too, might be possessed by the Holy Spirit.” (Paul Oliver: “Songsters and Saints” p. 172)

Or as Elder Curry preached in 1930: “Thank God we dance you know, in service, we can talk in service. We praise God on instruments in service, now it’s got to be proven tonight” and he drew his proof from passages of Psalms 149 including verse 3: “...Let them praise His name in the dance; let them sing praises unto Him with the timbrel and harp.”

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