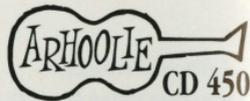


*Sacred Steel* Traditional Sacred  
African-American Steel Guitar Music in Florida



**Part I: Instrumentals and Concerts**

**SONNY TREADWAY**

1. **DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE**  
(Oris Mays, Lion Publishing, BMI).

2. **IN THE GARDEN** (C. Austin Miles, P.D.).

3. **AT THE CROSS** (Watts & Hudson, P.D.).

**GLENN LEE**

4. **CALL HIM BY HIS NAME** (Glenn Lee, ©1994).

5. **PASS ME NOT, OH GENTLE SAVIOR**  
(Crosby & Doane, P.D.).

6. **JOYFUL SOUNDS** (Glenn Lee, ©1994).

**WILLIE EASON**

7. **JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE** (P.D.).

8. **LITTLE WOODEN CHURCH ON A HILL**  
(Thomas A. Dorsey, Unicappell Music, BMI).

9. **FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT,  
A POOR MAN'S FRIEND**  
(Willie Eason, Tradition Music Co./Mango Tone Music, BMI).

**Part II: Live Religious Services**

**SONNY TREADWAY, Jewel Dominion**

10. **THIS IS A HOLY CHURCH**  
(Arranged by E. Treadway and F. Coney)

11. **AT THE CROSS** (Watts & Hudson, P.D.).

12. **AMAZING GRACE** (John Newton, P.D.).

13. **GOD BE WITH YOU** (Rankin & Tomer, P.D.).

14. **CLOSING PRAYER**

**HENRY NELSON, Keith Dominion**

15. **PRAISE THE LORD EVERYBODY**  
(Arranged by Henry Nelson and Rev. Bessie Brinson)

16. **AMAZING GRACE** (John Newton, P.D.).

**AUBREY GHENT, Keith Dominion**

17. **PRAISE MUSIC** (Arranged by A. Ghent).

18. **FATHER IN JESUS' NAME** (Traditional).

19. **HOUSE OF GOD MARCH**  
(Willie C. Eason, arranged by A. Ghent).

20. **GOD BE WITH YOU** (Rankin & Tomer, P.D.).

*Total time: 74:27*

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*Cover: Willie Eason in the 1940s (courtesy Willie Eason)*

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# Sacred Steel

## Traditional Sacred African-American Steel Guitar Music in Florida

With:

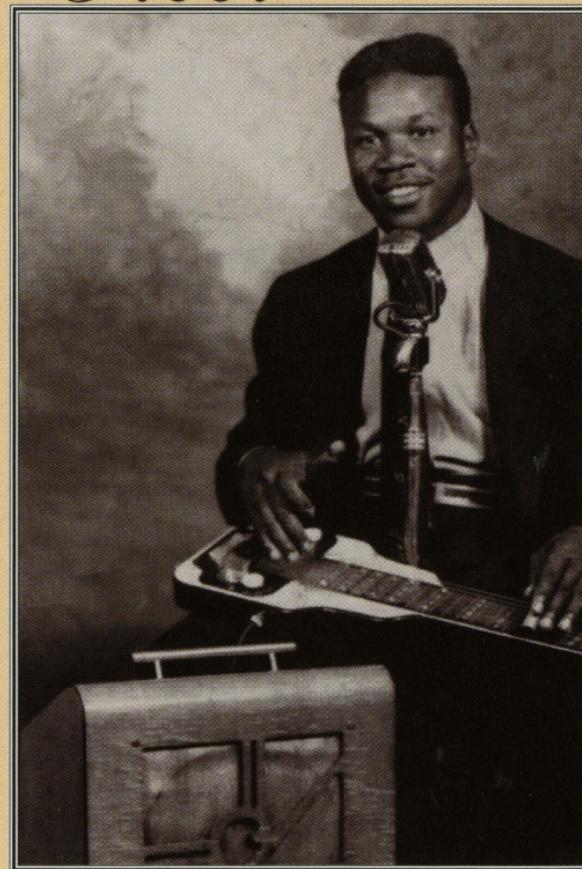
Willie Eason

Sonny Treadway

Glenn Lee

Henry Nelson

Aubrey Ghent



# *Sacred Steel*

## *Traditional Sacred African-American Steel Guitar Music in Florida*

### *An Introduction*

**I**n most churches you say, 'Where's the organist?' In the House of God they say, 'Where's the steel player?,' declared second generation sacred steel guitarist and Ft. Pierce native Reverend Aubrey Ghent.<sup>1</sup>

The House of God, also known as the Keith Dominion, is an African-American Holiness-Pentecostal church. It and the Jewel Dominion, another Holiness-Pentecostal church, share a common founder. Both are national organizations with a strong presence in Florida, and both are homes to sacred steel guitar music. The selections on this album present music from the Keith and Jewel Dominions in Florida, a sample of the work of five of the state's most influential guitarists in the African-American sacred steel tradition.

In the House of God, members of the congregation began playing sacred music on the electric steel guitar in the late 1930s. The foun-

datations for the sacred steel guitar tradition were laid by Willie Eason, Rev. Henry Nelson, and Lorenzo Harrison. Eason had a direct influence on Nelson, who was Eason's brother-in-law, and Lorenzo Harrison. Nelson, who is Aubrey Ghent's father, became the most influential guitarist in Keith Dominion churches. Harrison was the most influential steel player in Jewel Dominion churches. Electric steel guitar music quickly became an integral part of the services, conventions, and revivals of these two sects.

Today, after nearly sixty years of evolution, the sacred steel guitar tradition has become a unique musical form characterized by distinctive guitar styles and repertoire. It is currently experiencing a healthy interest among younger players. As it continues to develop, some of the new guitarists are pushing the aesthetic limits of the form, attempting to redefine them.



Photo courtesy Aubrey Ghent

*Henry Harrison, Bishop Lorenzo Harrison's brother, posing in the 1940s with his Bible and 1940s Kay guitar and amplifier*

# *A Brief History of the Jewel and Keith Dominion Churches*

by Sherry S. and Herbert C. DuPree

Mary Magdalena Lewis Tate (1871-1930) grew up in a Christian home in Tennessee. As an adolescent, she became interested in healing the body by fasting. Tate was influenced by Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Christian Science church, and accepted the Holiness doctrine of "Sanctification" taught by John Wesley. About 1887, she began evangelizing in houses, on streets, and in fields and groves known as "bush arbors." Her two sisters joined her in spreading the Holiness message throughout Tennessee and Kentucky. When Tate founded the Latter Day Church of the Foundation of True Holiness and Sanctification in 1899, she became the first African-American woman to establish a Holiness movement in the United States. In 1903, she founded the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth Without Controversy and was designated General Overseer of the church.

*Pentecost* is the Greek word for the fiftieth day after Passover. The Pentecostal movement takes its name from Acts 2, which describes the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles. African-American Holiness minister Reverend William Joseph Seymour (1870-1922) studied the doctrine of Pentecostalism at a Bible school conducted by white Holiness minister Bishop Charles F. Parham (1873-1929) in Dallas, Texas. In 1906, the Pentecostal movement virtually exploded at Rev. Seymour's Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, California. People came from all over the world to receive the Baptism of the Holy Ghost, manifested in many by speaking in unknown tongues. Continuous rejoicing at the Azusa Street revival lasted until 1909.

In 1908, Tate became ill and unable to walk. God's Pentecostal glory was revealed to her, and she was healed. She began teaching her followers the Pentecostal doctrine and the Church of the Living God became known as a Holiness-

Pentecostal church, as did other Holiness churches that accepted the Pentecostal doctrine. Her church continued to establish branches throughout the southern states and eventually, the nation.

After Tate's death in 1930 from complications resulting from frostbite of her feet, the church experienced difficulties in deciding on new leadership. Following a court order in 1933, the church was divided into three separate legal entities, each taking the name of its leader: the Lewis, McLeod, and Keith Dominions. Each distinguished itself by taking a modified version of the parent church's name.

The McLeod Dominion became the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth, Which He Purchased With His Own Blood. After Bishop Bruce L. McLeod died, his widow, Mattie, married Rev. Jewel, and the church became known as the Jewel Dominion. Bishop Jewel and her successor Bishop Lorenzo Harrison are deceased. Currently under the leadership of Bishop Naomi A. Manning, Jewel's granddaughter and Harrison's daughter, and headquartered in Indianapolis, Indiana, the organization remains known as the

Jewel Dominion.

The Keith Dominion was named for Mrs. M. F. L. Keith, who was the widow of W. C. Lewis, Tate's oldest son. Bishop Keith governed from 1931 to 1962. The second leader was Bishop J. W. Jenkins. In August 1990, Bishop James C. Elliott of Sarasota, Florida, became Chief Overseer and national leader. The full name of the Keith Dominion is the House of God, Which is the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth Without Controversy. The mother church is in Nashville, Tennessee.

The present leader of the Lewis Dominion is Bishop Helen Middleton Lewis of West Palm Beach, widow of Tate's son, Bishop F. E. Lewis. The name of this church has been shortened to Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of Truth.

The Keith Dominion, with about fifty churches in Florida, is estimated to be about five times the size of the Jewel Dominion in the state. Both these churches feature the electric steel guitar as the lead instrument. In the Lewis Dominion, the smallest of the three, the steel guitar is not the dominant instrument. <sup>2</sup>

## *The Steel Guitar Tradition in the Keith and Jewel Dominions*

The steel guitar allows the player to vary the pitch of notes at will, because the steel guitarist is not limited by notes determined by frets. Pitches on the steel guitar are determined by a metal bar that the guitarist places on the strings to “stop” the strings and make musical notes. In fact, the steel guitar takes its name from the metal bar, which is usually made of steel. An accomplished player can use un-restricted vibrato, execute sustained notes of increasing or decreasing pitch, and color notes by other techniques not available to the player of a standard fretted guitar. The properties of the instrument make it well suited for African-American sacred music.

The first commercially produced electric guitars were Hawaiian, or “lap steel,” models made by the Rickenbacker company in 1932.<sup>3</sup> Hawaiian music was extremely popular during the 1930s, and it was several years before standard, or “Spanish neck,” electric guitar sales surpassed electric steel guitar sales. The

electric steel guitar first appeared in Keith Dominion services in the late 1930s. Players and other members of the church credit Willie Eason being the first to introduce the music to the congregation. As Eason toured, he spread the popularity of the form. It was introduced into the Jewel Dominion by players like Bishop Lorenzo Harrison, who grew up in Ocala and attended Howard Academy High School with Henry Nelson. Nelson acknowledges Eason’s influence on both Harrison and himself.<sup>4</sup> Over the years, the steel guitar gained popularity and widespread acceptance within both dominions, eventually becoming the lead instrument. Although the steel guitar may occasionally turn up in other churches, only the Keith and Jewel Dominions feature it in the forefront.

Two types of steel guitars are played in the churches today: lap steels and pedal steels. Many sacred steel guitarists prefer the older, Hawaiian or lap steel guitar mounted on tele-



Photo courtesy Bishop Naomi A. Manning

*Bishop Lorenzo Harrison, the most influential steel player in the Jewel Dominion, with his Gibson triple-neck guitar in the late 1950s. Later he adopted a single-neck, eight-string guitar as his preferred instrument.*

scoping legs. Older sacred steel musicians, like Eason, show distinct influences from the Hawaiian guitar style in their playing. In fact, many members of the Keith and Jewel Dominions today refer to the steel guitar as the Hawaiian guitar. Both Henry Nelson and Aubrey Ghent play Hawaiian-style, six-string, non-pedal instruments made in the 1960s. Nelson says the simpler instrument allows him to play as the Spirit moves him in contrast to the pedal steel, which he sees as more of a thinking man's instrument.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, pedal steel guitars became increasingly popular with country music groups, and lap steels rapidly faded from the mainstream. Except for Fender, all major manufacturers discontinued making lap steels by 1971. Fender stopped making them in 1981.<sup>5</sup> But Keith and Jewel Dominion steel guitarists never stopped playing them.

The pedal steel guitar employs a complex system of foot pedals and knee-operated levers that allow the player to change the pitch of the instrument's strings. This feature enables the player to execute the sweet, fluid sound identified with contemporary country music and increases harmonic possibilities. In

addition to the pitch-changing pedals and levers, the pedal steel guitar usually has at least ten strings and commonly has two necks, further increasing its musical potential. The instrument is seen with increasing frequency in the Keith and Jewel Dominions. No doubt the mass popularity of the pedal steel and decreasing availability of the lap steel has influenced some guitarists in the sacred music tradition to choose pedal guitars.

Except for the steel guitar, the Keith and Jewel Dominion musical ensembles are typical of configurations found in most African-American Holiness-Pentecostal churches. The other characteristic instruments in a group are a drum set; a keyboard instrument, nowadays most likely the electronic version; a standard electric guitar; and in the Keith Dominion, an electric bass. The drum set is perhaps the most important element, and is usually church property. Congregation members often bring their own percussion instruments, such as tambourines, cowbells, and maracas.

Church services in the Keith and Jewel Dominions typically last about three hours, but may run as long as five or more. They involve such standard elements of worship as prayer,

hymns, offering, and sermon. The steel guitarist fulfills a variety of musical functions in a service. A guitarist may play a hymn as a soloist or as the lead in the instrumental ensemble; accompany either individual or choral singers; work with the preacher to punctuate pauses between spoken lines; or provide a musical backdrop for processions and periods of praise.

Accompanying singers presents a challenge for the steel guitarists. Frequently singing begins spontaneously, when a member of the congregation initiates a hymn. A good steel guitarist will know the melody, find the key, and begin playing immediately, thereby ensuring the success of the song.

In conjunction with a speaker, the guitarist frequently plays a variety of slurred instrumental phrases, percussive chords, or sounds resembling human utterances. Notes on the bass strings can produce a low moan; sliding notes on high strings resemble a woman's scream. The interaction adds emphasis and increases dramatic interest. It amounts to an instrumental equivalent of spontaneous vocal responses from members of the congregation.

Many Keith and Jewel services, especially those at large conventions or assemblies, in-

clude one or more instrumental selections, usually based on hymns or gospel songs. These portions of the service give a steel guitarist an opportunity to showcase his technique and personal interpretation of the melody. In a long service, a considerable amount of time is devoted to periods when the guitarist plays hard-driving, up-tempo numbers, known as "praise" music. They are performed at a high volume level, and they help fill the congregation with the Holy Spirit. Individuals in the congregation who are affected by the Spirit are said to "get happy" and appear to enter a trance-like state, usually manifested by dancing, uncontrolled body movements, and sometimes, speaking in tongues.

The steel guitarist leads processional music for the Keith Dominion offertory. To begin the ritual, ushers march to the front of the church with the collection plates. Next, members of the congregation file from their seats, row-by-row, walk past the plates, and return to their seats. During these processions, the musicians play swinging march music, which is often a medley of several spirituals. The first tune of the medley is usually the Keith Dominion's own offering march, known as

“The House of God March.” Willie Eason says he invented the melody in the 1940s based on an up-tempo version of “Onward Christian Soldiers.”<sup>6</sup> According to Jewel Dominion steel guitarist Sonny Treadway, that church stopped the offertory procession several years ago, choosing instead to pass the collection plates to the seated congregation.<sup>7</sup>

### *Regional Strength in Florida*

Sacred steel guitar music in the state is dynamic, exciting, and vital. As implied by Aubrey Ghent’s observation about “the organist” versus the “steel player” in the House of God, the members of Keith and Jewel Dominion churches in Florida expect steel guitar music to be an important part of their worship services. The music can be heard in other states, but the tradition is particularly strong in Florida. Three of the five steel guitarists invited to play at the Keith Dominion’s national assembly in Nashville during recent years are Florida-born guitarists Henry Nelson, his son Aubrey Ghent, and Glenn Lee.

The five steel guitarists presented in this album range from pioneer Willie Eason, who

began playing in the 1930s, to Glenn Lee who, at 26 is the first in the tradition to play the double-neck pedal steel guitar in the “Nashville” country style. Along with Eason and Lee, listeners will also hear Nelson, Ghent, and “Sonny” Treadway, one of the best representatives of sacred music in the Jewel Dominion.

### *The Steel Guitarists*

**Willie Claude Eason** is the oldest musician documented by this project. He is credited by most of the steel guitarists who were interviewed as the first to play gospel music on the electric steel guitar. Born in 1921 in the LaCrosse community in Schley County, Georgia, Eason lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for most of his life. Truman Eason, Willie’s older brother, took steel guitar lessons from a Hawaiian in the mid-1930s. Although Willie developed his own playing style, which was based on extended passages played on a single string, he absorbed some of Truman’s Hawaiian technique. Willie’s frequent use of legato slanted bar technique, double-stops, and endings incorporating sliding artificial harmonics—all techniques identified with Hawai-



*Willie Eason playing and singing in his home, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1994. He uses an old-style brass bar to make notes on his 1950s Epiphone Electar.*

ian steel guitar music—reflect the influence of Truman’s playing.<sup>8</sup>

Two characteristics of Eason’s style have a distinctly African-American flavor. First, he uses percussive, rhythmic chord strums to accent the backbeat. Secondly, he imitates the African-American vocal style with his guitar, usually accomplish-

ing the technique on one string, often using melismas, or slurred multi-note phrases, laden with “blue” notes. Both of these characteristics are found, to varying degrees, in the playing of every steel guitarist documented in this album.

Eason was saved in the House of God when

*(continued on page 14)*

## Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Poor Man's Friend

by Willie Eason

Why'd you like Roosevelt, wasn't no kin, (3X)  
Lord God almighty was a poor man's friend.

Year of 1945, a good president laid down  
and died.

I knew how all of the poor people felt,  
They received the message,  
"We lost Roosevelt."

In his life there were all indications,  
At Warm Springs, Ga., he received salvation.

Listen friend, don't you rush,  
Elizabeth Shamanoff she grabbed a brush.

Dipped it in water and began to paint,  
Looked at the President and began to think.

She never painted a picture for him at night,  
Knew that the President didn't look right.

The time of day, it was twelve o'clock,  
Tell me that Elizabeth had to stop.

Great God Almighty, she started too late,  
That's why they called this that unfinished  
portrait.

A little bit later, about 1:30,

He had a cerebral hemorrhage and the  
world looked muddy.

They called Atlanta, Washington too,  
Like zigzag lightning, the call went through.

They called long distance to notify his wife,  
Dr. Bruen said he died at 3:35.

Great God Almighty, wasn't no bells to tone,  
Less than thirty minutes the world was in mourn.  
And I cried about Roosevelt. (3X)

Well, Roosevelt's administration,  
Congress assembled,

First time in history appointed a Negro general.  
General Benjamin O. Davis, I'm trying to relate,

First Negro general of the United States.  
And after Dori Miller had shown his skill,

They kept a sending him to sea until he got killed.  
Roosevelt said, "I'll back the attack,"

Appointed a Negro captain over White and Black.  
This qualified man was Hugh Mozack

Racial prejudice he tried to rule out,  
Invited Negro leaders into the White House.

He advocated the fair practice of labor,  
To let the poor man know, he was our  
emancipator.

Made Madame Bethune a lady of the land,  
He made part of his will to Mr. Prettyman  
He endorsed inventions of Dr. Washington  
Carver,

This is why that I said he was a earthly father.  
He took my feet out of the miry clay,  
Haven't had to look back at the WPA.  
That is why I like Roosevelt. (3X)

Well, Hoover's administration,  
Congress assembled,

All of the poor folk began to tremble.  
The rich would ride in the automobile,  
Depression made poor people rob and steal.  
Look next door to our beloved neighbor,  
Wasn't getting anything for their hard labor.

Well, great God Almighty they were  
moonshine stillin',  
Brought about a crime wave, robbin' and killin'.

After Hoover had made the poor man moan,  
Roosevelt stepped in, gave us a  
comfortable home.

It was sad about Roosevelt (3X).

Well I've told you the history of Roosevelt's life,  
Now he's done with his grief and strife.  
Great God Almighty but he left a sweet wife,  
Had been so worried since she was a girl,  
After Roosevelt's death what would  
become of the world.

She notified her son, across the sea,  
Don't get worried about poor me,  
But keep on fighting for victory.  
Your father is dead, boys, you all are grown,  
Wouldn't worry about your father but the  
world is in mourn.

It was sad about Roosevelt (3X).

Well God Almighty knew just what was best,  
He knew that the President he needed a rest.  
His battle done fought, victory done won,  
Our problems have just begun.  
Your burden get heavy and you don't know  
what to do,  
Call on Jesus, he's a president too.  
It's sad about Roosevelt (3X).  
Lord God Almighty, was a poor man's friend.

*(continued from page 11)*

he was an adolescent. In the late 1930s, he toured the east coast of the United States from New York to Miami with Bishop Lockley's "Gospel Feast Party," an ensemble that also included piano, bass fiddle, drums, vibraphones, and vocals. After a few years with Lockley, he married and struck out on his own. He found his niche performing in street corner ministries, for which he plugged the amplifier for his lap steel guitar into the nearest store. He developed a style in which his guitar answered back to a sung phrase or completed a sentence from which he omitted words, and he was billed as "Little Willie and His Talking Guitar." A charismatic singer, energetic performer, and clever song writer, he enjoyed considerable popularity in his day.

Eason recorded 18 sides during the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>9</sup> A deeply religious man, Eason steadfastly refused repeated requests from record companies to play rhythm and blues numbers. His faith enabled him to resist their efforts to tempt him with promises of fame and fortune. During gospel music's "golden era" of the 1940s and 1950s, Eason was also a successful promotor of concerts, primarily in Philadelphia, New York, and Chicago, that fea-

tured big name artists of the time. Today he is retired in St. Petersburg, performing occasionally in church with the energy of a man half his years, and he points out that, in the long run, many who left gospel music for careers in secular music did not fare as well as he has.<sup>10</sup>

**Henry Nelson**, the son of Keith Dominion Bishop W. L. Nelson, was born in Ocala in 1930. His oldest sister, Alice, became Eason's first wife. Hearing Eason and his "talking guitar" for the first time in 1940, young Henry was amazed. "I wanted to do everything I saw," he recalls. Bishop Nelson bought his son a steel guitar and, laying his hands on Henry's, told the youngster that he would learn to play if he kept his music "within the anointing." Soon young Henry was making music in his father's church. "I don't even remember rehearsing at home," Nelson says, smiling peacefully. "It was just a gift from God."<sup>11</sup>

Early in the Pentecostal movement, its followers often experienced difficulty in obtaining a building to use for church because members of more established religions discriminated against them. Determined to practice their faith, the Pentecostals held services in fields or groves they called "bush arbors." To



*Henry Nelson, who began playing the steel guitar in Ocala over fifty years ago, performs for a special service at the House of God No. 2 in Ocala, December 26, 1993*

power the steel guitar's amplifier Nelson recalls, "We had to run the [electrical] cord a *long way*".<sup>12</sup>

Nelson plays an eight-string guitar, he fits with only six strings, tuned to a *Bb* major chord.<sup>13</sup> Known for his "mellow" sound, he is adept at regulating his guitar's volume control knob with the little finger of his right hand to reduce the initial attack on a note and make it "swell," imitating the human voice. Nelson remembers one amazed congregation member looking at his three-legged guitar and asking, "If you turn loose of it will it get up and walk away?"<sup>14</sup>

Nelson moved to New York soon after he graduated from high school. For decades, he traveled nationwide to play for church services, revivals, and conventions, usually accompanied by his wife who played the organ. When Mahalia Jackson heard him play in Chicago in 1959, Nelson says she wanted to know who was playing the "talking machine." Within a few days, she had him in Columbia's New York recording studio backing her up on "To Me It's So Wonderful."<sup>15</sup> After an industrial accident partially disabled him in 1968, playing sacred music on the steel guitar became his

full-time job. Nelson's influence as a steel guitarist is widespread among Keith Dominion congregations. A stroke in the spring of 1994 impaired his ability to play and has curtailed his road trips. Within a few months of the stroke, however, his playing ability began to return. Congregations, family, and friends continue to pray for his full recovery.

Nelson's son, **Rev. Aubrey Valdis Ghent**, is one of the most popular sacred steel guitar players in Florida. Born in Ft. Pierce in 1959, he began playing in Keith Dominion churches regularly at age nine and is recognized as a mature master of the tradition. He uses a six-string guitar tuned like his father's, but usually pitched to A major.

Ghent's sense of pitch, even in the upper registers, use of vibrato, and ability to manipulate of the guitar's volume and tone control knobs while picking are highly developed, enabling him to imitate the human voice. He often strives to make his guitar sound "like a female opera singer."<sup>16</sup> In demand as much for his preaching as his playing, Reverend Ghent is "doubly blessed," in the words of his father.<sup>17</sup> After he served as State Evangelist, he was appointed pastor for the House of God Church



*Aubrey Ghent, accompanied by Terrence Elliott, Bishop Elliott's son, on electric bass, playing for more than 500 people at the Keith Dominion's Family and Friends Day in Daytona Beach, September 5, 1993. Ghent frequently plays notes so high that he must move his picking hand out of the way of the bar.*

No. 2 in Ocala, where his grandfather had preached and his father had played steel guitar.<sup>18</sup>

Once or twice a year, Nelson and Ghent play together. Word of the pairing spreads quickly and always results in a packed house.

On such occasions, father and son take turns playing lead high on the neck as the other provides rhythmic bass lines and chords on the lower-pitched strings. Ghent usually leaves his guitar tuned to A major and defers to his father's preference for music played in *Bb* or

*Eb*, the easier keys for Nelson's *Bb* tuning.

Ghent has received a degree of national exposure. His credits include appearances on programs with contemporary gospel stars Shirley Caesar, Albertina Walker, Inez Andrews, and Tremaine Hawkins. He performed at the 1993 National Folk Festival in Chattanooga, and was featured, with Henry Nelson, in the Smithsonian Institution's 1994 Folk Masters series Good Friday Gospel Concert.

**Eston "Sonny" Treadway** is a highly regarded player in Florida's Jewel Dominion churches. He was born in Detroit in 1942. He remembers that when he was five he amazed his father, who was a Jewel Dominion minister, by unpacking his mail-order standard guitar, tuning it, and playing immediately, without assistance. His first steel guitar was a 1950s Bronson lap model. He moved to Deerfield Beach in the mid-1960s and lives next door to the church his wife co-pastors.<sup>19</sup>

Treadway currently plays an eight-string, non-pedal guitar that he made by combining the pickups, controls, bridge, fretboard, and legs from a Fender Deluxe; the tuner assembly from a Sho-Bud ten-string pedal steel; and a body he fashioned from hardwood. He also

plays the harmonica and drums, has recently taken up the saxophone; and he listens to an eclectic variety of music including country, rock, blues, rhythm and blues, and jazz as well as gospel. For three years, he toured Florida and other states playing electric (standard) guitar with Lorenzo Harrison, the late Bishop, Chief Overseer, and steel guitarist in the Jewel Dominion.<sup>20</sup>

His playing style relies on an extensive use of the bass strings. He will not play in an ensemble that includes an electric bass because he feels the notes of the bass are too close those of his steel guitar's lowest two strings. Other characteristics of his playing include frequent use of double-stops, natural and artificial harmonics, and close adherence to melody. He has a reputation for making exciting music without ever overplaying.

**Glenn R. Lee** of Perrine was born in 1968 in Miami. He is the youngest steel guitarist on the album, and the one with the most formal training in music. He is the grandnephew of Lorenzo Harrison and the son of Reverend Robert E. Lee, pastor of the Perrine Keith Dominion church and himself a steel player.

Lee studied piano and other instruments



*Jewel Dominion steel guitarist Sonny Treadway, accompanied by Ronnie Mozee on electric guitar, playing praise music at the 1994 State Assembly, held at the Deerfield Beach church where Treadway's wife is a pastor. Treadway made his steel guitar using parts from Fender and Sho-Bud instruments and a body he fashioned from hardwood.*



*Alvin Lee, 5-string bass (left); Glenn Lee, pedal steel guitar (center); and John Hampton, electric guitar (right) at the Perrine House of God Church, where Glenn and Alvin's father, Rev. Robert E. Lee, is pastor.*

when he was a boy. When he was 13, he studied pedal steel guitar for six weeks in Nashville under country musician Terry Crisp. In high school, he played the saxophone with the school band. His high school playing earned

him a scholarship in music at the University of Miami, but his college education was curtailed: he was diagnosed with cancer in 1986 and given six months to live. He credits his recovery to healing prayers from Bishop Harrison.

Lee serves as chief musician for Florida's east coast Keith Dominion churches, a position he has held since 1988. He is well versed in the music of both the Keith and Jewel Dominions, and he is in frequent demand for his skills as a keyboard player.

Lee is enthusiastic about country music. He likes such performers as Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, and Hank Williams, as well as the music of Elvis and the Allman Brothers. He asserts that he is the first African-American steel guitarist in Florida to learn the country-western pedal steel style and apply it to gospel music. He plays a big, red, Emmons guitar with two ten-string necks tuned in the standard "Nashville" configuration: one neck tuned to a C6<sup>th</sup> chord and the other in E9<sup>th</sup> chromatic

tuning. The ten-string necks give him notes beyond the range of six and eight string instruments. Similarly, the C6<sup>th</sup> and E9<sup>th</sup> tunings and pitch-changing pedals present opportunities for tonal colors and close intervals not readily available on lap steel guitars tuned to major triads.

Lee recognizes the strong influences of Henry Nelson's playing style in Florida. He respects Nelson and acknowledges the expertise of Aubrey Ghent, but he is determined to do something different: to make his own mark. He experiments with new sounds within the framework of the House of God sacred music tradition and strives, by means of his innovations, to help take the congregation just a little higher on its spiritual journey.<sup>21</sup>

## *Looking to the Future*

The music documented by this project does not represent an exhaustive study of the tradition in Florida, rather it shares the results of an initial survey. There are other compelling steel guitarists in Florida who were not documented because of limited project time

and budget. The Keith and Jewel Dominions are both national organizations. Steel guitarists are to be found in churches of both denominations located in the eastern seaboard states, Tennessee, Michigan, Indiana, California, and other states. Sources say they have



*Antjuan Edwards, Henry Nelson's 15 year old grandnephew, began playing for services regularly in 1994. He is the fourth generation of his family to serve as a minister or steel guitarist at the Ocala House of God Church No. 2*

heard of women who play the gospel steel guitar in northern states, but none has been located in Florida.

This collection of sacred steel guitar music is intended to increase the awareness and appreciation of the form. Sacred steel guitar music in Florida is rooted in music from the

1930s and 1940s that is being enthusiastically sustained and shaped by a generation of new, young musicians who respect the roots. It is hoped that other studies of the tradition and its bearers will follow. However the music develops, it represents a tradition to be recognized, shared, and enjoyed widely.

## Notes

1. Aubrey Ghent, interview with Robert Stone, November 7, 1992.
2. Copyright 1993 by Sherry S. and Herbert C. DuPree. Reprinted with permission of the authors.
3. Smith, Richard S. *Rickenbacker Guitars*. Fullerton, CA: Centerstream Publishing, 1987.
4. Henry Nelson and Aubrey Ghent, interview with Sherry S. DuPree, Herbert C. DuPree, and Robert Stone, November 26, 1993.
5. Gruhn, George and Carter, Walter. *Grubn's Guide to Vintage Guitars*. San Francisco: GPI Books, Miller-Freeman, Inc., 1991.
6. Willie Eason, interviews with Robert Stone, January 16 and May 3, 1994.
7. Sonny Treadway, interview with Robert Stone, December 18, 1993.
8. Steel guitars are usually tuned to the notes of a chord. The tuning Eason uses, A-C#-E-a-c#-e, from bass to treble, is known as "high-bass A major." It is one of the earliest tunings used by Hawaiian guitarists. Another connection to the early days of the steel guitar is the bar that Eason uses: brass round stock cut straight on both ends, a typical 1930s design rarely seen today.
9. Details of Eason's recorded material are given in

the discography on page 28.

10. Willie Eason, interviews.
11. Henry Nelson and Aubrey Ghent, interview.
12. *Ibid*.
13. Nelson's Bb major tuning, Bb-D-F-bb-d-f, is equivalent to Eason's A major tuning raised one half-step in pitch.
14. Henry Nelson and Aubrey Ghent, interview.
15. This song, originally Columbia CS 8153, has been re-issued on the boxed set *Mahalia Jackson, Volume 2*, Columbia C2T 48924. Nelson's steel guitar is barely audible on the recording.
16. Aubrey Ghent, interview.
17. Henry Nelson and Aubrey Ghent, interview.
18. In 1994, Antjuan Edwards, Ghent's teenage cousin and Nelson's grandnephew, began playing steel guitar for services at the Ocala House of God Church, making four generations of their family to serve there.
19. Sonny Treadway, interview.
20. Like Harrison, and many other Jewel Dominion steel guitarists, Treadway usually tunes his steel to an E major chord. The seventh and eighth strings are pitched below the range of a standard six-string guitar.
21. Glenn Lee, interview with Robert Stone, March 7, 1994.

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## *The Music Part 1: Instrumentals And Concerts*

### **Sonny Treadway (A)**

**1. Don't Let The Devil Ride** (*Oris Mays, Lion Publishing, BMI*) Treadway's instrumental interpretation of the gospel song hit by Oris Mays of Memphis. Brother Joe May, "The Thunderbolt of the Middle West," covered it in 1969. The growling bass notes and frequent octave harmonies create an eerie effect.

**2. In The Garden** (*C. Austin Miles, Public Domain*) Treadway listens to an eclectic variety of music including country, rhythm and blues, and jazz. The influence of country steel guitarists, who were in turn influenced by Hawaiian music, is evident in this rendition of a well known hymn. The overall feel of the piece, however, remains distinctly African-American.

**3. At The Cross** (*Isaac Watts/Ralph E. Hudson, Public Domain*) Treadway makes this popular medium-tempo hymn gently swing. The skillful electric guitar work is by Ronnie Mozee, who credits Treadway as the major influence on his finger-picking style.

### **Glenn Lee (B)**

**4. Call Him By His Name** (*Glenn Lee, Copyright 1994*) Lee belts out this very bluesy sounding piece, one of his own compositions, on the E9th neck of his pedal steel guitar. The voice-like effects are achieved with a large volume pedal he inherited from his uncle, Jewel Dominion Bishop Lorenzo Harrison.

**5. Pass Me Not, Oh Gentle Savior** (*Fanny J. Crosby/William H. Doane, Public Domain*) Lee plays this popular hymn in a country-western style, using techniques he learned in Nashville at the age of twelve. He departs from convention, however, with the stop-time phrase and jazzy harmonies on the final chorus. Lee is fortunate to have his own band, which includes his brother, Alvin, playing electric bass or guitar, within the Perrine House of God, where his father, Robert E. Lee, is minister.

**6. Joyful Sounds** (*Glenn Lee, Copyright 1994*) The influence of Bishop Harrison's mu-

sic on Lee's playing is especially evident in Lee's use of the bass strings. True to Harrison's preference, the electric bassist sits this one out.

### **Willie Eason (C)**

**7. Just A Closer Walk With Thee** (*Kenneth Morris/Necie Morris, Public Domain*) Listening to Eason's inspired performance of this popular hymn it is easy to imagine him as "Little Willie and His Talking Guitar" exciting a crowd on an east coast street corner in the 1940s. The ending, with its sliding artificial harmonics, is typical Hawaiian technique, most likely absorbed by Eason from the playing of his late older brother, Truman, who studied with a Hawaiian in the 1930s.

**8. Little Wooden Church On A Hill** (*Thomas A. Dorsey, Unichappell Music, BMI*) Thomas A. Dorsey, known to many as "the father of gospel music," was the composer of such favorites as "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" and "Peace in the Valley." Here Eason gives an inspired performance of one of Dorsey's less frequently heard songs.

### **Willie Eason (D)**

**9. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Poor Man's Friend** (*Willie Eason, Tradition Music Co./Mango Tone Music, BMI*). This is Willie Eason's most popular number, composed shortly after the death of FDR in 1945.

## *Part 2: Live Religious Services*

### **Sonny Treadway, Jewel Dominion (E)**

**10. This Is A Holy Church** (*Arranged by E. Treadway and F. Coney*) Known as "praise music," pieces such as this function to help congregation members become filled with the Holy Spirit. Those who feel the Spirit, or "get happy," may experience uncontrollable body movements, do the "holy dance," or speak in

tongues. Treadway plays his own bass lines on the lower strings of his eight-string guitar.

**11. At The Cross** (*Isaac Watts/Ralph E. Hudson, Public Domain*). A popular hymn led by the head of the Jewel Dominion, Bishop Naomi A. Manning, daughter of Bishop Lorenzo Harrison. Harrison set the musical style for steel guitarists in Jewel churches.

**12. Amazing Grace** (*John Newton, Public Domain*) Written by a former English slave trader in 1779, this song remains one of the most popular Christian hymns. Often Jewel Dominion services will feature an instrumental selection by the church band or congregation members. Treadway renders the melody in a dignified, understated manner.

**13. God Be With You** (*Jeremiah E. Rankin/William G. Tomer, Public Domain. Arranged by N. A. Manning*) Bishop Manning leads the congregation in the Jewel Dominion's version of this popular closing hymn. Compare it to the Keith Dominion version (#20).

#### **14. Closing prayer and Amen**

At the conclusion of services the congregation adjourns to the Fellowship Hall for plenty of good food and to say their goodbyes before departing, some having traveled from as far away as Indiana and Michigan.

**Henry Nelson, Keith Dominion (F)**

**15. Praise The Lord Everybody** (*Arranged by Henry Nelson and Rev. Bessie Brinson*) Henry Nelson is backed by his son, Rev. Aubrey Ghent, during services at the Ocala No. 2 Church. Four generations of Nelson's

family have served at the church. The recording captures the first few minutes of a five-hour service.

**16. Amazing Grace** (*John Newton, Public Domain*) Presented here as a "lined" or "metered" hymn led by Rev. Bessie Brinson, Nelson demonstrates his emotionally charged, singing tone. Ghent accompanies with bass figures and chords. Nelson and Ghent play together infrequently, but when they do, the result is invariably a packed house, as was the case during this service the day after Christmas, 1993.

**Aubrey Ghent, Keith Dominion, (G)**

**17. Praise music** (*Arranged by A. Ghent*) This piece is another example of music to help fill the congregation—in this case, more than 500 people at a convention in Daytona Beach—with the Holy Spirit. Ghent gives his personal interpretation of a musical form created by his father. Compare it to Sonny Treadway's playing on #10.

**18. Father In Jesus' Name** (*Traditional*) Ghent's delicate backup for this song of meditation is quite a contrast to his driving praise music. It illustrates his ability to closely imitate the human voice. Ghent says he tries to

make his guitar sound "like a female opera singer."

**19. House of God March** (*Willie C. Eason, arranged by A. Ghent*). In the Keith Dominion, the congregation files by the collection plates in an orderly manner while the musicians play swinging march music. Willie Eason says he composed this tune for the offertory procession, based on an up-tempo version of "Onward Christian Soldiers," in the 1940's. Ghent's

interpretation is freely improvised, and incorporates bits of other tunes.

**20. God Be With You** (*Jeremiah E. Rankin/William G. Tomer, Public Domain*) Another example of Ghent's voice-like backup work. This closing hymn, led by Chief Overseer Bishop James C. Elliott and Trial Bishop Dozier, ends a five-hour service on "Family and Friends Day." The Jewel Dominion uses a different melody for a similar song (see #13).

## *Key to the Recording Sessions*

(A) **Sonny Treadway**—steel guitar; **Ronnie Mozee**—electric guitar; and **Laban Burns**—drums. Recorded February 20, 1994, at the Church of the Living God, Deerfield Beach, Florida.

(B) **Glenn Lee**—pedal steel guitar; **Alvin Lee**—electric guitar (#4) and (#6), electric bass (#5); **Benjamin Beckford**—drums; and **John Hampton**—electric guitar (#5). Recorded March 7, 1994, at the House of God Church, Perrine, Florida.

(C) **Willie Eason**—steel guitar and vocal. Recorded January 16, 1994, at the Eason resi-

dence, St. Peterburg, Florida.

(D) **Willie Eason**—steel guitar; **Furdell Baxter**—drums. Recorded July 13, 1996 at the University of Florida's Harn Museum.

(E) **Sonny Treadway**—steel guitar; **Ronnie Mozee**—electric guitar; and **Laban Burns**—drums (#10-13). **Fayette Coney**—lead vocal (#10); **Chief Overseer Bishop N.A. Manning**—lead vocal (#11, 13, & 14). Recorded February 20, 1994, at the Jewel Dominion state assembly, Church of the Living God, Deerfield Beach, Florida.

(F) **Henry Nelson**—steel guitar; **Aubrey**

**Ghent**—steel guitar; **Rev. Bessie Brinson**—lead vocal; **Terrence Elliott**—electric bass (#15-16); **Lejena Manning**—drums; and **Francine Jones**—electric keyboard. Recorded December 26, 1993, at the House of God Church No. 2, Ocala, Florida.

(G) **Aubrey Ghent**—steel guitar; **Timothy Williams**—drums; **Karenski Brown** and **Carlos Fox**—electric keyboards; **Terrence Elliott**—electric bass; lead vocals by **Trial Elder Eugene**

### Discography

**Eason, Willie C.** (*vocals and steel guitar*) With the Gospel Trumpeters, probably King Recording Studios, Cincinnati, OH, June 1946: *Oh Lord What a Time*, Parts 1 & 2, Queen/King 4130. *Remember Me Lord/ No More, No More*, Queen/King 4131. *Standing on the Highway/ Does Jesus Care?*, Queen/King 4145 *I Thank You Lord/If I Could Hear My Mother Pray Again*, Queen/King 4146.

With the Soul Stirrers, Chicago, IL, June 2, 1947: *Why I Like Roosevelt*, Parts 1 & 2. Aladdin 2018, Imperial LM 94007. *Pearl Harbor*, Parts 1&2. Aladdin 2025, Imperial LM94007.

As Brother Willie Eason, Atlanta, April 30, 1951: *There'll Be No Grumblers There*. Regent 1043. Reissued on Gospel Heritage HT CD 09.

**Manning**, (#18) and **Bishop James C. Elliott**, Chief Overseer and Senior Bishop of The House of God, Which is the Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground of the Truth Without Controversy, Inc., Keith Dominion with **Trial Bishop G. M. Dozier**, vocals. Recorded September 5, 1993, during "Family and Friends Day," Howard Johnson Motor Lodge, Daytona Beach, Florida.

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**Lee, Glenn R.** *Always By My Side*. Cassette album. Blessed Records 9991. Distributed by Young Lord Music Company, P.O. Box 11247, Baltimore, MD 21239

**Nelson, Henry.** Accompaniment on Mahalia Jackson's *To Me It's So Wonderful*. Columbia CS 8153. Reissued on *Mahalia Jackson, Volume 2*. Columbia Legacy C2T 48924.

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A slightly different version of this collection was first released on a cassette (with booklet) by the Florida Department of State-Division of Historical Resources, Tallahassee, FL 32399-0250. The cassette is no longer available. This CD version was re-edited in 1996 by Chris Strachwitz and Bob Stone.

## Additional credits:

Photo processing Black Dog Labs, Jacksonville; Lightwork Labs, Gainesville; and Maddock Professional Photography, St. Petersburg (cover photo copy).

Cover Photo Restoration: Dix Bruce.

Session C recorded by Michael Stapleton and Robert Stone.

Session D recorded by Paul Butterfield, with sound reinforcement by Michael Stapleton.

All other recording sessions by William Dudley.

Technical assistance: Karla Brandt, session G; Dwight Devane, session F; Michael Stapleton, sessions A, B, E and F.

### *The Florida Folklife Council*

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Florida's folklife reflects the historical depth and exciting diversity of our state's cultural heritage. The traditional arts are a source of pride for all Floridians.

African-American musical tradition is a significant component of the state's heritage. This compact disc and booklet present a first survey of a previously unheralded type of African-American music: sacred steel guitar. The music has its roots in the 1930s, when the electric steel guitar was in its infancy. It has been refined and passed down through three generations of guitarists.

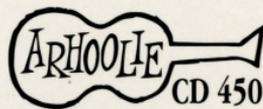
The Department of State is pleased to present the sacred steel guitar tradition, illuminate its sources, and make it more available to the public.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sandra B. Mortham".

Sandra B. Mortham Secretary of State

*Sacred Steel* Traditional Sacred African-American  
Steel Guitar Music in Florida. Recorded 1993-1996



**Part I: Instrumentals and Concerts**

**SONNY TREADWAY**

1. DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE (2:59)
2. IN THE GARDEN (3:04)
3. AT THE CROSS (2:45)

**GLENN LEE**

4. CALL HIM BY HIS NAME (3:32)
5. PASS ME NOT, OH GENTLE SAVIOR (2:31)
6. JOYFUL SOUNDS (4:23)

**WILLIE EASON**

7. JUST A CLOSER WALK WITH THEE (4:55)
8. LITTLE WOODEN CHURCH ON A HILL (4:24)
9. FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, A POOR MAN'S FRIEND (5:55)

**Part II: Live Religious Services**

**SONNY TREADWAY** (Jewel Dominion)

10. THIS IS A HOLY CHURCH (7:17)
11. AT THE CROSS (2:17)
12. AMAZING GRACE (1:50)
13. GOD BE WITH YOU (:55)
14. CLOSING PRAYER (:21)

**HENRY NELSON**, (Keith Dominion)

15. PRAISE THE LORD EVERYBODY (7:51)
16. AMAZING GRACE (4:43)

**AUBREY GHENT**, (Keith Dominion)

17. PRAISE MUSIC (4:21)
18. FATHER IN JESUS' NAME (3:12)
19. HOUSE OF GOD MARCH (4:28)
20. GOD BE WITH YOU (1:42)

Total time: 74:27

Producer: Robert Stone.

Executive producer: Chris Strachwitz

Includes a 32 page booklet with photos, biographies and history of Sacred Steel

Cover: *Willie Eason in the 1940s* (photo courtesy Willie Eason)

**Other CDs of Sacred Steel available:**

CD 461 Campbell Brothers with Katie Jackson  
"Pass Me Not"

CD 462 Sonny Treadway "Jesus Will Fix It"

CD 463 Aubrey Ghent "Can't Nobody Do Me Like Jesus"

CD 472 Various Artists "Sacred Steel - Live at the  
House of God Church" (available Fall of 1998)

File under: GOSPEL/BLUES/FOLK



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