

FOLKWAYS RECORDS FTS 32426

# *Tommy Brown: Gospel Music* *with the Gospel Now Singers and the Gospel Vessels*

RECORDED AND PRODUCED BY MARC D. PEVAR



THE GOSPEL NOW SINGERS: left to right, Lewis Saddler, Rev. Tommy Brown, Francis Monroe, Attiba Johnson, Terry Quavis, Wendolyn Johnson

COVER DESIGN BY RONALD CLYNE



# Tommy Brown

Introductory Notes by Marc D. Pevar

This album presents two generations of Gospel singing by the Brown family of Wilmington, Delaware. Rev. Thomas H. Brown's choir is the Gospel Now Singers. His daughters' choir is the Gospel Vessels. Both groups represent a contemporary, urban Gospel style. However, Rev. Brown and his daughters are mindful of the origins of their music and understand its function within the religious life of their community.

Rev. Brown's first exposure to Gospel music was through his parents' church when he was a child. However, it was at the August Quarterly celebrations that he became interested in learning an instrument, the baritone horn, so that he could join a marching band. The August Quarterly is one of the oldest continuously celebrated Black street festivals in the United States.

When Rev. Brown was a child, the August Quarterly was the largest and most important public gathering for the Black community in Wilmington, Delaware. There were marching bands, Gospel choirs, prayer meetings, soap box orators, political speakers, and vendors of produce, livestock, fish and prepared foods. It was at these gala annual celebrations that Rev. Brown had his earliest experiences of showmanship and musicality outside of the church.

The first August Quarterly was celebrated in 1813 to commemorate the establishment of the Union Church by Rev. Peter Spencer. He founded what was to become the African United Methodist Protestant church group. Prior to the founding of that church, Blacks had no church or pulpit that they controlled. For many years before 1813, slaves were permitted to travel to Wilmington for prayer meetings and social events on the last Sunday in August. In 1980 Rev. Brown served as talent coordinator and emcee for the August Quarterly, which continues as a powerful force for religious, community, cultural and family continuity over 162 years since its birth.

Rev. Brown's involvement with music continued after his public schooling. He served in the 384th U.S. Army Band. His interest in theology led to studies in Chicago and St. Louis, and the earning of the D.D. degree, and ordination as a minister. His musical skills were sharpened through studies at the New York School of Music, and his production knowledge grew through studies at the RCA studio School and subsequent work in radio and television in New York City.

For fourteen years, Rev. Brown was president of the Rite Enterprise Recording Company in New York. His label was devoted to presenting Gospel music and preaching. Rev. Brown left his managerial work in the recording industry to concentrate on writing and performing in the Gospel music field. He worked with Alvin Ailey, Talley Beatty, Dizzie Gillespie, Earl Garner, May Mercer, Dionne Warwick and Mahalia Jackson.

Appearances in Langston Hughes' gospel musicals, *The Black Nativity* and *The Prodigal Son*, on Broadway and in Europe were high points in his career. Subsequently, Rev. Brown entertained as a soloist in England, France, Haiti, Holland, Israel, and Italy.

During this period, Rev. Brown was raising his family with his wife, Grace. Grace also shared a great interest and talent in Gospel music and sang with many choirs and was very active in her church. In raising their four daughters, they imparted their love and knowledge of religion and of Gospel music to them. It was in this supportive home environment that their daughters learned how Gospel music can sound when worked at with an ear to perfection of detail.

As youngsters, the four daughters were raised in a household where Gospel music and religion were the center of family interest and activity. It was here that they learned their musical standards. Like their parents, Linda, Patricia, Lucinda and Florence also experienced the communal warmth and shared religious expression of Gospel music church services from their earliest years.

Following their parents' example, the sisters are very active in their church choirs. In addition, they have formed the Gospel Vessels, their own group. Through the Gospel Vessels, they spread the joy and inner peace, as well as the human concern, that religion brings to them.

When the four sisters sing their Gospel music, they become totally involved with the message of the lyrics and the power of their heartfelt harmony. There is a vital interaction between the Gospel Vessels and their audience, for Gospel music is a participatory and a cathartic art form. It is a music that invites a release of feeling. The body sways, feet tap, hands clap, and voices sing with unabashed sincerity.

The sisters have invited others to join their choir, and on this album can be heard Patricia's husband, Tyson, and also a friend, Montevilla Anderson. Their organist, Otis Marbury, was unable to be at the performances, and Rev. Thomas Brown filled in for him on piano and with voice.

Rev. Brown formed the Now Gospel Arts Coalition, Inc. in 1978, an organization devoted to the teaching of Gospel music as an art form. His Coalition choir backs his group on several of his selections. Using piano, bass, congas, and a drum kit, Rev. Brown's Gospel Now Singers present arrangements that are closer to a pop-Gospel sound than are the selections by the Gospel Vessels.

In concert, both the Gospel Now Singers and the Gospel Vessels present a warmth, a comfort, a strength and pride that wins their audiences immediately.

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with the Gospel Now Singers and the Gospel Vessels

Raised to the music from childhood and knowing that they are helping other people transcend the problems of everyday life, when the Brown family sings, the feeling is deep, genuine and free. Three of the sisters are raising children of their own. Soon there may be three generations of the family singing together, spreading their musical Gospel mission through this unique medium.

## GROUP MEMBERS

The Gospel Now Singers are led by Rev. Thomas H. Brown, who sings and plays piano on these selections. The following members are heard on various selections, some also playing instruments: Attiba Johnson, congas; Wendolyn Johnson; Francis Monroe; Terry Quavis, drum kit; Lewis Saddler, bass; Mary Stevens. The Now Gospel Arts Coalition mass choir accompanies the Gospel Now Singers on *Lord Revive Us*, *God Is* and *Hold the Light*.

The Gospel Vessels are accompanied on piano and by the voice of Rev. Brown on these selections. Their regular accompanist is Otis Marbury. The other members of the choir are: Montevilla Anderson, Lucinda Brown, Florence Davis, Linda Henry, Patricia Williams and Tyson Williams. Montevilla gives some insight into the motivation of the group. Their motto is "Jesus picked up the pieces and made me a new vessel." However, Montevilla feels that there is also the meaning that "Christ took a small ship and made a large vessel." The group is missionary in spirit, finding individual satisfaction through the group effort and in seeing the effect of their music on their audiences. The sisters' mother, remarried and now Grace Evans, is the general manager of the group.



THE GOSPEL VESSELS: Left to right, standing: Patricia Williams, Tyson Williams, Linda Henry, Otis Marbury; sitting, Florence Davis, Lucinda Brown.

## THE SONGS

### SIDE 1: Gospel Now Singers

1. *LORD, REVIVE US*, public domain. Slow-paced and reverent, this prayer set to music exhorts the singers and audience alike to take their worries, problems and everyday burdens to the Lord through the experience of the Gospel service, and to leave these concerns at the altar. As often happens in a Gospel music service, a prayer of gratitude to God is inserted (by Rev. Elder Daniels) with the music in the background. Found in the Baptist Hymnal, *Lord, Revive Us* is popular throughout the U.S.A. The Gospel Now Singers use this song as an opening and as a closing theme.

2. *SHE COMES BECAUSE SHE'S CONCERNED*, an adaptation by Rev. Brown of Alex Bradford's *We Come Because We're Concerned*, an arrangement dedicated to mothers, praising their devotion to God and family. Religion is often learned through our parents' example. Religious services provide a powerful experience of being a part of the larger community outside of the family circle. Written by the late Professor Alex Bradford only two weeks before his passing and taught by him to Rev. Brown, the song is a pointed reminder of the importance of religion and its practice in the lives of individuals and of the worshipping community.

3. *COME ON IN THE ROOM*, by Rev. Thomas H. Brown. Performed as a medley with the preceding song, this was written by Rev. Brown and has been recorded by Bradford and others. At the time that he wrote it, Rev. Brown had lost his spiritual way, and was down and out. He was taken in by Mr. Coleman in Newark, New Jersey, and was given work playing piano and singing there in Mr. Coleman's hotel. This was Rev. Brown's first professional break, and gave him the opportunity to devote himself to developing his talents as an entertainer.

The song exhorts, praises and offers comfort. At a time when he needed sanctuary from the impersonal coldness of an uncaring world, Rev. Brown reminded himself, and through the song reminds others, that God is a spiritual doctor to all people, if only people will come into the fold and join the worship.

4. *GOD IS*, by Jessie Dixon. This is a popular declaration of the importance of God to each of us. We are reminded that God is the Creator of everything outside us and of everything inside us as well. It is a song that invites the audience to join in. Characteristic of the style of contemporary urban Gospel music, the arrangement starts with a simplicity of melody, harmony and rhythm. As the song unfolds, there is an addition of complexity on all levels, and a controlled, restrained but forcefully increasing tempo.

5. *SIX MONTHS TO MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS*, by Charles Taylor. Performing this song can be difficult, since the message is hardly a warm one. Some listeners will be reminded of their own failings, their own unwelcome interferences in the lives of others. The personal salvation that is the goal of the Gospel music service cannot be completed unless the listener confronts the negative side of human behavior. The shock of reality and the deviation from the more common Gospel theme of praising God all make this song stand out. It is a song that forces a person to take stock of past behavior and to consider the future. Despite the barbs of its lyric, the song is popular and fills an important niche in the Gospel repertoire, carrying some of the flavor of the blues into the sometimes saccharine aura of the Gospel music service.

life. Delivered with great energy, the song communicates the trust and devotion of the Gospel Vessels and encourages others to find the same peace through worship of God. God's promise is to fulfill prayers when they are asked in His name. The lyrics remind us that in the secular world, reliability and constancy are among the highest social virtues, a way that man can imitate God through proper behavior.

3. *LET US ALL GO BACK TO THE OLD LANDMARK*, by Alex Bradford. To Rev. Brown's generation, this song talks about returning to the old time ways of preaching and praying, a time of greater fervor and trust in the Lord. People used to confess Christ more at the altar, roll on the floor and talk in tongues. To Rev. Brown's daughters, the song evokes the days of slavery, when the slaves left the drudgery of work in the fields to return to the dignity of their humble homes and the freedom and hope that they found only through religious worship. Regardless of which image comes to mind, the message of the lyric is that through baptism and confessing Christ, people can find personal salvation. Fast-paced and difficult to sing, this song lets the singers and their audience give their all.

4. *NAKED*, by John Klemmer. Well suited to a dramatic, staccato, a cappella presentation, the song is a reminder that the fine things we have in this world will not go with us after we die. The Bible says that we come from the dust, and return to the dust. The melody is suggestive of the theme used by Quincy Jones in *Roots*, when Kunta Kinte's father lifted his infant son against the starry sky. A starkly direct lyric, the theme is expanded to credit God with having the power to remove our problems.

5. *HIGHWAY TO HEAVEN*, public domain, found in the old popular Methodist hymnal, *The Gospel Pearl*. Originally this song was a processional, used when Gospel choirs entered the church and when collection was taken. The rhythm was slow and stately. The Gospel Vessels have taken an upbeat, syncopated approach to the song and changed the feeling of it. Religion and worship tell people the correct way to live, following the commandments of God. The way is narrow, but it is a straight and true path for the pure of heart.

6. *WORKING ON A BUILDING*, by Bill Moss. The lyrics are suggestive of several levels of interpretation. It is reminiscent of the plight of slaves, whose only secure personal possession was their spirit and character, which they built through their own effort. Theologically, Christ left the world to prepare a way in Heaven, and worshippers are exhorted to keep on trying to build a life that will lead them to the home that Christ has prepared for true believers in Heaven. The song reminds the singers that their mission is to bring people the Gospel through song. In this way, the Gospel Vessels are helping to build the Church of God on earth.

## SIDE ONE 21:43

### Tommy Brown and The Gospel Now Singers

- Band 1. Lord Revive Us (Traditional)
- Band 2. She Comes Because She's Concerned (Alex Bradford)
- Band 3. Come On In The Room (Tommy Brown)
- Band 4. God Is (Jessie Dixon)
- Band 5. Six Months To Mind My Own Business (Charles Taylor)
- Band 6. Hold The Light (Tommy Brown)

## SIDE TWO 20:50

### Tommy Brown and The Gospel Vessels

- Band 1. We Have Come Into This House (B. Ballanger)
- Band 2. He Gave Me Joy (Harper)
- Band 3. Let Us All Go Back To The Old Landmark (Alex Bradford)
- Band 4. Naked (John Klemmer)
- Band 5. Highway To Heaven (Traditional)
- Side 6. Working On A Building (Bill Moss)

All original songs by Tommy Brown are registered with BMI and Brown's Publishing Co.

TOMMY BROWN: TWO GENERATIONS OF GOSPEL MUSIC with the GOSPEL NOW SINGERS and the GOSPEL VESSELS

"When they started Gospel music, the beat came from Africa. They put the beat with the spirituals. That's the roots, back in time when they were in the cotton fields. I'm trying to show you my experience through song. If that song reaches your heart, then do something about it. I've come that way before, and I want you to feel the presence of what I've felt."

Recorded in concert at the Bancroft School, Wilmington, Delaware in 1979 and 1980.

Recorded, edited, written and produced by Marc D. Pevar.

Mix assisted by Brandywine Sound Company. Mastered by Half Track Recording Studio.

All photographs except Gospel Vessels by Marc D. Pevar.

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