

JAMES CLEVELAND

The King of Gospel

The Early Years 1951-1962





JAMES CLEVELAND 1951-1962

par Jean Buzelin

L'ASCENSION D'UN ROI

James Edward Cleveland naît à Chicago le 5 décembre 1931. Trop jeunes pour l'élever, ses parents Ben L. Cleveland (13 ans !) et Rosie Lee Brooks le confient à sa grand-mère. Celle-ci est membre de la chorale de Thomas A. Dorsey, le père du gospel moderne, à la Pilgrim Baptist Church. Il ne tarde pas à intégrer la chorale des jeunes et, encore enfant, chante en solo *All I Need Is Jesus* soutenu par toute la congrégation. Il s'immerge totalement dans la communauté gospel de Chicago au point d'abandonner ses études en route. "James, jeune homme, adorait Roberta Martin, nous dit Robert Marovich, et il voulait absolument jouer du piano comme elle. L'idée de chanter ne lui est venue que plus tard." Il est pourtant fasciné par la voix de Mahalia Jackson, qui n'habite pas loin de chez lui, et impressionné par Eugene Smith, le baryton des Roberta Martin Singers.

Au milieu des années 40, encore adolescent, il rejoint les Thorne Gospel Crusaders, une chorale de 50 jeunes. Sa jeune voix de soprano va brusquement muer et se changer en un baryton du genre *foghorn* (corne de brume) comme il le dira lui-même. Il perfectionne son jeu de piano et accompagne une chanteuse de son âge, la soprano Imogene Greene qu'on retrouvera plus tard dans

quelques-uns des plus grands groupes féminins de gospel.

À 16 ans, Cleveland propose sa première composition, *Grace Is Sufficient*, à Roberta Martin qui la publie dans sa maison d'édition, *The Roberta Martin Studio of Music*. Cette chanson bénéficiera d'un important éclairage lors de l'annuelle National Baptist Convention en septembre 1958 lorsqu'elle sera interprétée en soliste par Delois Barrett Campbell, des Roberta Martin Singers, soutenue par 1000 chanteurs au Chicago Coliseum. En attendant, il continue d'alimenter le catalogue de Roberta en lui proposant de nombreuses œuvres que celle-ci lui paie 25 dollars pièce.

Au milieu des années 40, James Cleveland et Imogene Greene intègrent les Lux Singers, un ensemble mixte du *South side* que dirige Beatrice Lux. Contrairement aux Roberta et Sallie Martin Singers dont les interprétations sont très arrangées, les Lux offrent des performances nettement plus débridées comme on les chante dans les églises sanctifiées. Cleveland apprendra beaucoup de cette pratique. Il effectue avec les Lux son premier déplacement à Détroit, mais leur prestation est annulée, déboire auquel va remédier le révérend James Lofton qui les accueille dans son église. Surtout, James va faire la connaissance du

directeur musical de la Spiritual Church of Our Prayer, Charles Ashley Craig dont nous reparlerons plus loin.

James Cleveland revient à Détroit à la fin de la décennie et est hébergé quelque temps dans la famille du révérend C.L. Franklin qui lui demande de devenir le directeur musical de sa New Bethel Baptist Church. Il n'a que 18 ans et donne des leçons de piano à la fille du révérend, Aretha Franklin, et à d'autres jeunes qui fréquentent la maison; il leur montre les "bons" accords, se souviendra Aretha qui aimait aussi le côté "terrien" de sa façon de chanter. Il va l'aider à monter un groupe féminin avec sa sœur Emma et deux autres chanteuses qui va se produire durant huit mois dans les églises locales.

De retour à Chicago, le chanteur-pianiste de 19 ans est un jeune homme ambitieux et décidé, même s'il vit toujours dans sa famille. Il réunit ses premiers James Cleveland Singers et, surtout, "débauche" deux membres des Roberta Martin Singers, la contralto Bessie Folk et le ténor Norsallus McKissick pour former un trio, **The Gospelaïres**. Roberta accepte d'autant qu'elle publie les compositions. Les Gospelaïres décrochent deux séances d'enregistrement à New York pour Apollo, la maison de disques de Roberta. La seconde fait entendre pour la première fois la voix de Cleveland en soliste dans *Oh What a Time*. Mais après quelques prestations publiques et trois disques publiés, l'aventure du trio

s'arrête. James continuera à enrichir le répertoire des **Roberta Martin Singers** et sera souvent présent lors des séances d'enregistrement (sans chanter), prenant la place de Roberta au piano; son jeu étant tellement calqué sur le sien qu'il est très difficile d'identifier qui joue lors des séances de 1952 à 1955¹.

Parallèlement, James retourne à Détroit en 1952 et se joint aux **Meditation Singers**, ensemble fondé en 1947 par Ernestine Rundless, dont il devient le pianiste et accessoirement le chanteur soliste masculin.

Les allers-retours Chicago-Détroit se poursuivent, et c'est dans la Cité du Vent, en 1954, que Cleveland entre chez **The Caravans**. Fondé par une amie d'enfance, la chanteuse Albertina Walker en 1947 pour accompagner Robert Anderson, ancien chanteur des RM Singers, le groupe vole ensuite de ses propres ailes et devient l'une des formations féminines les plus populaires du pays. Engagé comme pianiste et arrangeur, James Cleveland chante quelques morceaux en soliste dont *What Kind of Man Is This* et *The Solid Rock*, une adaptation d'un vieil hymne du XIXe siècle. Diffusés par les radios, ces titres sont très bien reçus. Le 22 juillet 1955, les Caravans sont au programme d'un extraordinaire concert qui a lieu au Shrine Auditorium de Los Angeles, point d'orgue d'une tournée à succès. Elles partagent l'affiche avec les plus célèbres chanteurs et groupes de gospel de l'époque, les Soul Stirrers

avec Sam Cooke, les Pilgrim Travelers, Dorothy Love Coates & les Original Gospel Harmonettes entre autres². Cleveland les quittera en 1956.

À cette époque, un trio féminin se forme à New York, **The Gospel All Stars** avec notamment la contralto Ella Mitchell que complètent les deux sopranos Dorothy Crookshank et Rose Hines. James Cleveland les entend alors qu'il est invité à diriger la chorale du Rev. A.A. Child's Faith Temple Church of God in Christ. Cleveland enregistre avec elles *That's Why I Love him So*, inspiré du *Hallelujah I Love her So* de Ray Charles avec Imogene Greene qui s'est jointe au groupe. Ils partent ensuite en tournée au sein d'un package qui comprend notamment C.L. Franklin et sa fille Aretha et le chanteur Little Sammy Bryant.

À l'automne 1956, James organise un ensemble mixte, **The Gospel Chimes**, destiné à l'accompagner. Il dirige alors la chorale du Rev. B.F. Paxton's True Light Baptist Church, située dans le quartier sud de Chicago, là où vit la majorité de la population noire. L'occasion de remarquer qu'il collabore indifféremment avec les église baptistes (dont il est issu) et sanctifiées.

C'est durant cette période que l'on retrouve Charles Ashley Craig, rencontré lors de sa première venue à Détroit. Le 4 août 1958, Craig a fondé la Prayer Tabernacle Spiritual Church et il propose à Cleveland d'assurer la direction musicale de ses **Voices of Tabernacle**, une grande chorale

dont les effectifs, 50 membres au départ, vont plus que doubler pour atteindre 125 chanteurs et chanteuses. Incorporant des éléments du jazz, de la pop et du classique dans son fonctionnement, les Voices deviennent un phénomène national. Craig est un peu le "père" de cette grande famille que Cleveland mène à la baguette ! À force de répétitions et de travail acharné ils mettent au point des formes complexes et des accords inusités en gospel.

On commence alors à appeler James Cleveland le "Ray Charles du Gospel", et pas seulement à cause de sa voix rauque, moins flexible et dramatique que celle du Genius.

Sur le label HOB (House Of Beauty) nouvellement créé, les Voices of Tabernacle enregistrent le contenu d'un premier album 33 tours. Deux titres paraissent sur un 45 tours dont *The Love of God*, un arrangement de Cleveland d'un *bit* des Soul Stirrers sorti en 1958 qui obtient un succès national considérable. Le magazine *Billboard* écrit: "L'un des plus grands chœurs religieux entendus à ce jour." Cette grande chorale est la première à concurrencer les quartettes masculins, ensembles féminins et solistes qui règnent alors dans l'industrie de la musique sacrée. Maintes fois repris par le chanteur, ce titre restera l'un de ses plus grands succès.

Parallèlement à ses multiples activités, James Cleveland renoue avec les Meditations Singers mais un seul *single* sera publié et leur collaboration va cesser. Toutefois, le chanteur-pianiste-arrangeur



n'est pas inactif en studio en ces années 1959/60. Il enregistre à nouveau avec les Gospel All Stars (*Meetin' Tonight*), composant souvent spontanément en studio, comme l'a raconté Ella Mitchell qui mettait parfois la main à la pâte³. Tandis qu'un nouvel album des Voices of Tabernacle, "Today" paraît sur le marché, il est bientôt suivi par deux 33 tours "The Great JC." et "Give Glory to God" où apparaissent pour la première fois sur disque ses Gospel Chimes (*Good Enough for Me*), son ensemble mixte remarquable qui comprend notamment Jessy Dixon, son "disciple" appelé aussi à une belle carrière (on l'entend en soliste dans *Yes Lord*). Son amie Imogene Greene est de la partie et deux superbes interprétations sont offertes à la pionnière Sally Martin.

Son homonyme Roberta, quant à elle, mise sur la visibilité croissante de James pour éditer un *songbook* titré "Roberta Martin Sings from the pen of James Cleveland".

En 1960, James Cleveand commence à prendre son envol irrésistible : les Voices of Tabernacle réalisent coup sur coup trois albums, "Yes, God is Real", "He's so Divine" et "Sing Glories of Gospel", et se produisent au Madison Square Garden de New York. Lui-même est programmé à l'Apollo de Harlem en même temps que Sister Rosetta Tharpe, et il signe un contrat avec Savoy, l'une des maisons de disques les plus importantes dans le domaine du gospel. Un premier *single* est enregistré en mai 1960 par les Gospel All Stars (*Oh Lord, I'm Satisfied*). Une seconde session réalisée en février 1961 complètera un album "Out on a Hill". Les Gospel Chimes prennent le relais en septembre 1961 et janvier 1962. *He's Sweeter than the Day Before*, basé sur une composition écrite en 1936 est particulièrement apprécié, de même que le 45 tours *What a Mighty God*, que plébiscite la communauté afro-américaine. Ils sont programmés à plusieurs reprises à l'Apollo Theater, le temple de la musique noire. Cleveland et ses Gospel Chimes effectuent également une grande tournée dans les villes du Sud où règne encore la ségrégation la plus rude : Jackson (Mississippi), Memphis (Tennessee), Mobile (Alabama), Atlanta (Géorgie), dans le Kentucky, les Carolines... Jessy Dixon assurait le leadership

lorsque Cleveland était occupé sur d'autres terrains. Les Gospel Chimes resteront en activité jusqu'à la fin des années 60.

Vers janvier 1962, James Cleveland quitte Détroit pour Los Angeles. Il s'est expliqué sur les raisons de ce déménagement surprise : "J'étais au milieu de tous ces géants du gospel, Mahalia, Roberta... j'avais mon propre groupe, plus les All Stars, mais cela ne me semblait pas suffisamment satisfaisant. J'ai donc démenagé en Californie avec l'idée de trouver des opportunités professionnelles et d'intégrer une église avec laquelle travailler"³. C'est Annette May Thomas, fille du grand chanteur Brother Joe May, directrice musicale, pianiste et accompagnatrice de la Rev. T.M. Chambers Jr's New Greater Harvest Baptist Church à Los Angeles, qui lui propose immédiatement son poste de direction. Le jeune prodige Billy Preston (16 ans à l'époque) en est l'organiste. De son côté, Savoy espère que Cleveland pourra produire le même effet magique auprès du public californien que les Voices of Tabernacle, s'il a la possibilité de réaliser un disque avec une chorale. (Il n'était évidemment pas question de faire venir toute la troupe de New York à Los Angeles qui par ailleurs enregistrerait pour HOB). James se rapproche alors du Rev. Lawrence C. Roberts, depuis peu directeur artistique chez Savoy, pour lui demander d'emprunter sa chorale, **The Angelic Choir**, qui constitue le département musical de la First

Baptist Church of Nutley (New Jersey). Une chorale de 70 ans d'ancienneté mais qui vitote avec une douzaine de membres. Lawrence Roberts, qui en a pris les commandes en 1960, la renforce avec le chœur de sa propre communauté, les Voices of Faith of Newark, un ensemble beaucoup plus jeune. Quelques mois plus tard, une Angelic Choir rajeunie sort son premier album chez Savoy. La seule condition qu'on impose à Cleveland stipule que le disque soit réalisé en public à la First Baptist Church, les membres de la chorale n'ayant pas le professionnalisme des Voices pour enregistrer en studio. Réticent, James accepte néanmoins la proposition et refait le voyage sur la côte Est. Le 1er juillet 1962, chœur et soliste sont au diapason. La direction de la chorale est assurée par Lawrence Roberts et Thurston Frazier⁴, collègue californien de Cleveland, Alfred White au piano, Billy Preston à l'orgue et Joe Marshall à la batterie constituent le trio instrumental.

L'album "Sunday – In Person" qui en résulte transporte l'auditeur dans l'atmosphère vivante et passionnée des églises noires; un document suffisamment apprécié pour que l'expérience soit renouvelée quelques mois plus tard et fasse l'objet d'un second volume. La forte présence et les dons de *preacher* de Cleveland improvisant devant un public conquis font de ces deux disques des événements exceptionnels.

Le chanteur termine l'année dans une ambiance



toute différente. S'accompagnant au piano, il a choisi la narration pour interpréter une série d'hymnes et de pièces populaires sur des arrangements parfois un peu pompiers. Heureusement, Billy Preston sait faire résonner l'atmosphère recueillie de ces chants d'église avec les grondements de son orgue. Avec ce disque, "The Soul of JC", s'achève la première partie de la carrière musicale et vocale de James Cleveland qui, à 31 ans, a atteint sa pleine maturité⁵.

TRENTE ANNÉES DE RÈGNE... EN RÉSUMÉ

Vers la fin de l'année 1962, "The King of Gospel" fait sa première apparition à la télévision dans l'émission *TV Gospel Time*, la première à présenter uniquement des artistes afro-américains.

En mai 1963, The Cleveland Singers, un quintette mixte, enregistre avec lui son premier disque. Il ne sortira qu'après l'album suivant, "Peace Be Still", qui va propulser James Cleveland au sommet ! Enregistré avec l'Angelic Choir en septembre 1963, le disque comprend le titre éponyme, *Peace Be Still*, dont les origines remontent à 1874. Sorti également en 45 tours, ce morceau devient N°1 au *Billboard's Hot Spiritual Singles* en 1965. Le 33 tours se vendra à 800 000 exemplaires jusqu'en 1970 et deviendra le plus gros *hit* de toute l'histoire du gospel avant d'être détrôné en 1972 par "Amazing Grace" d'Aretha Franklin dont Cleveland sera le maître d'œuvre.

La carrière du chanteur-pianiste-compositeur-arrangeur-directeur musical ne constituera qu'une suite de succès. Durant les *sixties*, il continue bien sûr à enregistrer – 26 albums ! – avec l'Angelic Choir, les Gospel Chimes, les JC Singers et les Gospel Girls, un quartette féminin où figure Annette May. En 1966, il effectue avec ses Singers son seul et unique voyage à Paris au sein de la tournée "Young America" qui est programmée deux semaines à l'Olympia à partir du 15 juin. Il enregistre un 45 tours *Martin Luther King*

Memorial en juin 1968, peu après l'assassinat du grand leader noir. La même année, il fonde, dans la lignée de Thomas Dorsey, le *Gospel Music Workshop of America* (GMWA). Des conventions annuelles organisées dans des villes différentes réservées aux grandes chorales vont rassembler des milliers de participants et délégations. Il organisera lui-même l'année suivante une GMWA Mass Choir, rassemblant 250 chanteurs et chanteuses. Il fonde sa propre Église, la Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church et devient le Révérend James Cleveland. Il met sur pieds les Voices of Cornerstone et surtout, en 1969, The Southern California Community Choir, chorale mixte à l'effectif modeste mais sélectionné parmi les meilleurs interprètes. C'est elle qui accompagnera Aretha Franklin pour l'enregistrement d'"Amazing Grace".

En 1971, Savoy lui donne carte blanche pour une série de disques "James Cleveland Presents" qui mettent en valeur des chanteurs, groupes et chorales choisis par lui-même ; il en produira une quarantaine. Celui consacré à Harold Smith & The Majestics sera classé N°1 *au Billboard Top Gospel LP*. Il n'oublie pas non plus les Voices of Tabernacle, N°2 à l'*Ebony Music Poll*.

En 1976, avec ses groupes, il participe à un double-album d'Elton John, et en 1977, collabore avec Quincy Jones à la bande sonore de la série "Roots". Ce ne sont que quelques exemples de trois décennies de succès dans tous les domaines, ponctués par 25

nouveaux albums sous son nom. Il reçoit quatre *Grammy Awards* (1974-77-80-90) et, nommé artiste gospel de l'année 1981, il est le premier du genre à recevoir une étoile sur le Hollywood Walk of Fame. Mais la santé de ce travailleur et entrepreneur acharné se dégrade après son dernier disque en mai 1990, et cette immense figure musicale, inventeur du gospel contemporain et promoteur infatigable des *mass choirs*, rejoindra les étoiles en un dernier envol, le 9 juin 1991, à Culver City dans le comté de Los Angeles.

Jean BUZELIN

Jean Buzelin est l'auteur de *Negro Spirituals et Gospel Songs, Chants d'espoir et de liberté* (Ed. du Layeur/Notre Histoire, Paris 1998) ; il collabore à la *Gospel Discography* de Cedric J. Hayes & Robert Laughton (rubriques *Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Golden Gate Quartet, etc.*).

Notes :

- 1 Voir *The Roberta Martin Singers* (FA 5737)
- 2 Les Caravans ne figurent pas dans le disque-souvenir du concert mais s'ajouteront au CD paru en 1993
- 3 In Robert M. Marovich, *The King of Gospel Music* (Malaco Press, 2021).
- 4 Voir *Complete Mahalia Jackson Vol. 18 & 19* (FA 1328-1329) pour avoir une présentation de Thurston Frazier.
- 5 La loi sur l'exploitation des œuvres dans le domaine public ne nous permet pas de dépasser l'année 1962.



JAMES CLEVELAND 1951-1962

by Jean Buzelin

THE RISE OF A KING

James Edward Cleveland was born in Chicago on 5 December 1931. His parents were too young to raise him (Rosie Lee Brooks gave birth to him when his father Ben L. Cleveland was only thirteen) and they entrusted his care to his grandmother, a member of the Pilgrim Baptist Church choir led by Thomas A. Dorsey, the father of modern gospel. James soon joined this young people's choir, and while he was still a child he sang *All I Need Is Jesus* as a soloist, backed by the whole congregation. The boy immersed himself in Chicago's gospel community, and then quit school. According to Robert Marovich, "As a young man, James adored Roberta Martin, and really wanted to play piano like she did. The idea of being a singer only came later." Even so, he was fascinated by the voice of Mahalia Jackson, who lived nearby, and also by Eugene Smith, a baritone in the Roberta Martin Singers who made a great impression on him.

While still a teenager in the mid-forties, he joined the Thorne Gospel Crusaders, a choir of fifty youngsters. When his own voice broke abruptly, James changed into what he later called a "foghorn" baritone. He perfected his piano playing and started accompanying a young girl singer of his own age named Imogene Greene, who sang

soprano and came to people's attention later in some of the greatest female gospel groups.

James Cleveland was 16 when he proposed his first composition *Grace Is Sufficient* to Roberta Martin herself; she published it through her own company, "The Roberta Martin Studio of Music." The song became a major highlight of the annual National Baptist Convention held in September 1958, when it was performed at the Chicago Coliseum by The Roberta Martin Singers (Delois Barrett Campbell was the soloist) with a choir of one thousand singers. Meanwhile, James Cleveland continued to add to Roberta's catalogue with numerous works for which she paid him 25 dollars apiece.

In the mid-forties, Cleveland and Imogene Greene became part of the Lux Singers, a mixed ensemble from the South Side of Chicago led by Beatrice Lux. Unlike the Roberta and Sallie Martin Singers, whose performances closely followed written arrangements, appearances by the Lux group were much less restrained, singing as if they were in Christ's Sanctified Holy Church. Cleveland would learn a lot from that practice. His first trip out of town with the Lux singers ought to have taken him to Detroit, but their visit was cancelled; it was an annoyance but Reverend James Lofton would make up for it by inviting them to his own church... where

James made the acquaintance of the music director of the Spiritual Church of Our Prayer, a certain Charles Ashley Craig, about whom later.

James returned to Detroit at the end of the decade and stayed awhile with the family of one Reverend C.L. Franklin, who offered him the post of musical director at his New Bethel Baptist Church. James was just eighteen, and he began giving piano lessons to the Reverend Franklin's daughter, a girl named Aretha... Other young pupils came to the house, and Aretha would remember James showing them "the good chords"; she also liked his "earthy" singing. James would help her set up a girl-group with her sister Emma and two others, and they appeared in local churches for eight months.

When he returned to Chicago, James the pianist-singer was 19. He was also an ambitious, determined young man, even if he still lived at home. He set up his own group, the first James Cleveland Singers, and above all he "poached" two of Roberta Martin's Singers, contralto Bessie Folk and tenor Norsallus McKissick. They formed the trio **The Gospelaïres**. Roberta went along with it because, after all, she was still publishing the compositions. The Gospelaïres secured two recording sessions in New York for Apollo, which was Roberta's record label. The second session marked the first time Cleveland had been heard as a soloist («*Ob What a Time*»). The trio's adventure stopped, however, after only a few appearances and three records.

James continued to enrich the material sung by the Roberta Martin Singers, and he was often present at sessions (but not as a singer) when he would replace Roberta at the piano. His playing was so like her own that it is very difficult to tell them apart on sessions organised between 1952 and 1955¹.

In parallel, James returned to Détroit in 1952 to join **The Meditation Singers**, a group founded in 1947 by Ernestine Rundless; he became their pianist (and their only male soloist.) Trips between Chicago and Detroit continued, and it was in 1954, in the Windy City, that Cleveland joined **The Caravans** in 1954. This group had been created in 1947 by a childhood friend, singer Albertina Walker, as a backing chorus for Robert Anderson (a former singer with Roberta's group) and The Caravans went their own way to become one of the country's most popular female groups. James Cleveland was hired as the group's pianist & arranger, and he sang a few tunes as a soloist, including "*What Kind of Man Is This*" and "*The Solid Rock*", which adapted an old 19th century hymn. Both titles were extremely well received by radio jockeys.

On 22 July 1955, the Caravans were booked to appear at an extraordinary concert at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, the highlight event of a successful tour. They shared the bill with the most famous gospel singers and groups of the period, among them Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers, the Pilgrim Travelers, Dorothy Love Coates & the

Original Gospel Harmonettes.² James left them in 1956.

At that time there was a new female trio in New York, **The Gospel All Stars** with notably Ella Mitchell singing contralto, alongside the two sopranos Dorothy Crookshank and Rose Hines. James Cleveland heard them when he was invited to lead the choir at the Reverend A. A. Child's Faith Temple Church of God in Christ. And with them James made a record: *That's Why I Love him So*, inspired by Ray Charles's *Hallelujah I Love her So*. Imogene Greene had joined the group, and they went on tour with a package that included notably C. L. Franklin and his daughter Aretha, plus singer Little Sammy Bryant.

In autumn 1956, James set up a mixed group, **The Gospel Chimes**, whose object was to accompany him. At the time he was leading the choir of the Reverend B. F. Paxton's True Light Baptist Church located in the South Side of Chicago, where most of the black population lived; it shows how James had collaborations irrespective of religion or faith, working with his own Baptist Church as well as the Sanctified Holy Church.

It was in this period that Charles Ashley Craig come back into the story (James had met him on his first visit to Detroit.) On August 4th 1958, Craig founded the Prayer Tabernacle Spiritual Church and offered Cleveland a post as musical director of his **Voices of Tabernacle**, a large choir that had 50 members

in its early days before it more than doubled in size to include 125 singers, both men and women. Incorporating elements of jazz, pop and classical music, the Voices choir became a national phenomenon. In a way, Craig was the "father" of this big family, and James was showing them who the boss was! One rehearsal after another, they worked hard together and put finishing touches to the complex forms and unusual chords of gospel songs. People began calling Cleveland "The Gospel Ray Charles," and not only because of his throaty singing, which was less fluid, less dramatic than the voice of "The Genius."

On the recently created HOB label (for "House Of Beauty") the Voices of Tabernacle recorded enough titles for a first LP. Two were released on a 45rpm single, and one of these was *The Love of God*, a Cleveland arrangement of a 1958 Soul Stirrers hit, and it became a considerable hit. In *Billboard* magazine one could read, "One of the greatest religious choirs heard to date." This large formation was the first to rival with the male quartets, girl groups and solo singers who made up the church music industry. Taken up many times by the singer, it would remain one of his greatest hits. In parallel with his many activities, James Cleveland rejoined The Meditation Singers but only one single was issued before he left. Not that our singer-pianist-arranger was inactive in the studios. In 1959/60 he recorded again with



the Gospel All Stars (*Meetin' Tonight*), often composing spontaneously in the studio according to Ella Mitchell, who sometimes lent a hand.³ A new album from the Voices of Tabernacle appeared in stores ("Today") and it was soon followed by two LPs, "The Great JC." and "Give Glory to God," on which his Gospel Chimes appeared on disc for the first time (*Good Enough for Me*). They were a remarkable mixed ensemble that included notably Jessy Dixon, his "disciple" who was also destined to enjoy a fine career (cf. his solo in "*Yes Lord*."). His friend Imogene Greene also participated, and there are two superb performances from the pioneering Sally Martin. As for her namesake Roberta, she took advantage of James's growing visibility to publish a songbook entitled "Roberta Martin Sings from the pen of James Cleveland".

In 1960 Cleveland began his irresistible rise: the Voices of Tabernacle made three successive albums—"Yes, God is Real", "He's so Divine" and

"Sing Glories of Gospel"—and they appeared at New York's Madison Square Garden. James himself was booked to sing at the Apollo in Harlem at the same time as Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and he signed a contract with Savoy, one of the most important record labels in the gospel domain. A first single was recorded in May 1960 by the Gospel All Stars ("*Oh Lord, I'm Satisfied*") and a second session in February 1961 would complete the album "Out on a Hill". The Gospel Chimes took over in September '61 and January '62. "*He's Sweeter than the Day Before*", based on a composition written in 1936, was especially appreciated, as was the single "*What a Mighty God,*" which had the favours of the Afro-American community; and they were booked several times to appear at the Apollo Theater, a temple for black music. Cleveland and his Gospel Chimes toured the cities of the South where segregation was still at its most basic: they went to Jackson (Mississippi), Memphis (Tennessee), Mobile (Alabama), Atlanta (Georgia), plus Kentucky and the Carolinas... Jessy Dixon took over as their leader when James Cleveland was busy elsewhere. The group remained active until the end of the sixties. Sometime in January 1962 Cleveland left Detroit for Los Angeles. He would give his reasons for the surprise move: "I was in the middle of all the gospel giants, Mahalia, Roberta... I had my own group plus the All Stars, but to me that that didn't seem satisfying enough. So I moved to California

with the idea to find professional opportunities, and join a church where I could work.”³ He found it through Annette May Thomas (the daughter of the great singer Brother Joe May) who was music director, pianist and accompanist for the Rev. T.M. Chambers Jr’s New Greater Harvest Baptist Church in Los Angeles. Annette immediately offered James an executive post. The young prodigy Billy Preston (then aged 16) was the church’s organist. As for Savoy, they hoped Cleveland would work the same magic for a Californian audience as the Voices of Tabernacle, if given a chance to make a record with a choir (but obviously there was no question of bringing the whole group from New York to Los Angeles, and they were recording for HOB anyway.) So James approached the Reverend Lawrence C. Roberts, the recently appointed A&R director at Savoy, to ask if he might borrow his choir, **The Angelic Choir**, which constituted the music department of the First Baptist Church of Nutley (New Jersey). It was a choir with 70 years of experience, but it was now struggling to get by with only a dozen members. Lawrence Roberts, who’d taken over in 1960, reinforced the existing choir with that of his own community, the Voices of Faith of Newark, which was a much younger group. A few months later, a rejuvenated Angelic Choir released its first album for Savoy. The only condition imposed on Cleveland was that he record the album in front of the congregation at the First Baptist

Church, since the members of the new choir, unlike the Voices, were not professional enough to record in a studio. James hesitated but finally accepted the offer and went back to the East Coast. On July 1, 1962, the choir and the soloist were in tune. The choir was led by Lawrence Roberts and Thurston Frazier⁴, a Californian colleague of Cleveland, with a trio of Alfred White (piano), Billy Preston (organ), and drummer Joe Marshall.

The resulting album, “Sunday – In Person,” transports listeners into the vibrant, impassioned atmosphere inside a black church, and the recording was sufficiently appreciated for the experiment to be repeated: a few months later they recorded a second volume. The strong presence and preaching gifts of James Cleveland addressing a conquered audience made both these records exceptional events.

The singer brought the year to an end in quite different circumstances. Accompanying himself on piano, he chose to narrate a series of hymns and popular pieces with arrangements that were sometimes a little slushy... But fortunately Billy Preston was there to enliven the meditative atmosphere with the rumbling sounds of the organ. The record “The Soul of JC” closed the first chapter of the musical and vocal career of James Cleveland. At the age of 31 he had reached full maturity.⁵

A THIRTY-YEAR REIGN... IN A NUTSHELL

Towards the end of 1962, “The King of Gospel” made his first television appearance. The show was *TV Gospel Time*, the first to present Afro-American artists alone. In May 1963, The Cleveland Singers, a mixed quintet, made its first record with James. It wasn’t released until after the following album entitled “Peace Be Still,” which would catapult James Cleveland to the top of the sales charts. Recorded with the Angelic Choir in September ‘63, it contained the song that gave the album its name, *Peace Be Still*, whose origins dated back to 1874. It was also released as a single, and it went to N°1 in *Billboard’s Hot Spiritual Singles* in 1965. The 33rpm album would sell 800,000 copies by 1970, and that made it the greatest hit in the history of gospel music, until it lost its crown in 1972 to Aretha Franklin’s “Amazing Grace,” which Cleveland supervised.

The career of the singer-pianist-composer-arranger & musical director would from then on contain nothing but hits. In the course of the sixties, he continued to record of course—26 albums!—with The Angelic Choir, the Gospel Chimes, the JC Singers and the Gospel Girls, a girl quartet that featured Annette May. In 1966, with his own Singers, he made his only visit to Paris with the “Young America” package that was billed for two weeks at The Olympia Theatre, beginning on 15 June. He recorded a single in June 1968 (“*Martin Luther*

King Memorial,” shortly after the assassination of the great black leader). That same year, following Thomas Dorsey’s example, he founded the *Gospel Music Workshop of America* (GMWA). Annual conventions held in different cities and reserved for the great gospel choirs drew thousands of participants and delegations. The following year, James himself organised a GMWA Mass Choir that gathered 250 singers, men and women. He founded his own church, the Cornerstone Institutional Baptist Church, and became the Reverend James Cleveland. He set up the Voices of Cornerstone and, above all, in 1969, The Southern California Community Choir, a mixed group with singers who were modest in number but chosen from among the most talented. It was this choir that accompanied Aretha Franklin to record “Amazing Grace”.

In 1971, Savoy gave James *carte blanche* for a series of records entitled “James Cleveland Presents” that featured singers, groups and choirs that he selected; he would produce forty of them. The record devoted to Harold Smith & The Majestics sold enough copies to reach N°1 in the *Billboard Top Gospel LP* chart. Nor did he forget the Voices of Tabernacle, who were voted N°2 in the *Ebony Music Poll*.

In 1976, together with his groups, he appeared on a double album with Elton John, and in 1977 he collaborated with Quincy Jones on the soundtrack for the television series “Roots”. The above are just a few examples from three decades of hits in every

domain, interspersed with 25 new albums that bore his name. He received four *Grammy Awards* (1974-77-80-90) and when he was named Gospel Artist of the Year in 1981, he became the first artist in the genre to have his star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. But after his final record in May 1990, this hard-working entrepreneur saw his health decline. An immense figure in music, the inventor of contemporary gospel and tireless promoter of mass choirs rejoined the stars of heaven. James Cleveland died on 9 June 1991 in Culver City in Los Angeles County.

*Adapted by **Martin DAVIES**
from the French text by **Jean BUZELIN***

Jean Buzelin is the author of *Negro Spirituals et Gospel Songs, Chants d'espoir et de liberté* (Ed. du Laveur/ Notre Histoire, Paris 1998); he contributed to *Gospel Discography* by Cedric J. Hayes & Robert Laughton (notably the sections devoted to *Mabalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Golden Gate Quartet, etc.*).

Notes :

1 Cf. *The Roberta Martin Singers* (FA 5737)

2 The Caravans do not appear in the souvenir recording of the concert but are included in the CD issued in 1995.

3 In Robert M. Marovich, *The King of Gospel Music* (Malaco Press, 2021).

4 Cf. *Complete Mabalia Jackson Vol. 18 & 19* (FA 1328-1329) for an introduction to Thurston Frazier.

5 The laws concerning works in the public domain works do not permit the exploitation of recordings made after 1962.

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Disques des collections/Records from collections : Jean Buzelin, Julien Crué, Robert Marovich, Friedrich Mühlöcker, Per Notini, Étienne Peltier, Robert Sacré que nous remercions chaleureusement.

Sources consultées/Works consulted :

Robert M. Marovich, *The King of Gospel Music*, (Malaco Press, Jackson, MS, 2021)

Robert M. Marovich, *Peace Be Still* (University of Illinois Press, 2021)

Julien Crué, *Interview de Robert Marovich* (2021)

Photos & collections : Jean Buzelin, Julien Crué, Robert Marovich, X (D.R.)

Remerciements/Thanks: Joël Dufour, Monique Pouget

Nous dédions ce coffret à la mémoire de notre ami Robert Sacré qui avait mis à notre disposition, comme toujours, les disques rares de sa collection.

DISCOGRAPHIE

JAMES CLEVELAND

1951-1962



CD1 - 1951-1960

- | | |
|--|----------------|
| 1 OH WHAT A TIME (John Springer) | Apollo 242 |
| 2 WE'RE MARCHING TO ZION (Alex Bradford) | De Luxe 6012 |
| 3 TROUBLE IN MAY WAY (James Cleveland) | Apollo 305 |
| 4 WHAT KIND OF MAN IS THIS (Roberta Martin) | Gospel 3001 |
| 5 THE SOLID ROCK (Edward Mote - William B. Bradbury - H.E. Singley) | Gospel 1044 |
| 6 LORD REMEMBER ME (Myrtle Jackson) | Apollo 312 |
| 7 THAT'S WHY I LOVE HIM SO (James Cleveland) | Apollo 312 |
| 8 THE LOVE OF GOD (Leroy Crume) | Hob /113LP 233 |
| 9 CALVARY (Traditional) | Hob LP 233 |
| 10 I KNOW IT WAS THE BLOOD (Traditional) | Hob LP 233 |
| 11 MEETIN' TONIGHT (James Cleveland) | Holy Hour 714 |
| 12 MY SOUL LOOKS BACK AND WONDERS (James Cleveland) | Specialty 919 |
| 13 IN HIS ARMS (Clara Ward) | Hob LP 235 |
| 14 GOD CAN DO ANYTHING BUT FAIL (Ira F. Stanphill) | Hob 119/LP 235 |
| 15 GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME (James Cleveland) | Hob 115/LP 237 |
| 16 TRY JESUS (Roberta Martin) | Hob LP 237 |
| 17 YES LORD (Traditional) | Hob LP 237 |
| 18 HE'S GOT HIS EYES ON YOU (Traditional) | Hob LP 237 |
| 19 ONE STEP AT A TIME (Sallie Martin) | Hob LP 237 |
| 20 I WON'T LET NOTHING TURN ME AROUND (Sallie Martin) | Hob LP 237 |
| 21 DEEP RIVER (Traditional - arr. Cleveland) | Hob LP 239 |
| 22 ONE MORE TIME (Traditional - arr. Cleveland) | Hob 117/LP 239 |
| 23 SOON I WILL BE DONE (Traditional - arr. Cleveland) | Hob 117/LP 239 |
| 24 JUST WHEN I NEED HIM MOST (William C. Poole - Charles H. Gabriel) | Hob LP 239 |
| 25 COME LORD JESUS (James Cleveland) | Hob LP 239 |

- (1) **Gospelaire**s: James Cleveland (lead vo, p), Bessie Folk (contralto vo), Norsallus McKissick (tenor vo); prob. Lucy Smith (org). New York City, January 1951.
- (2) **The Meditation Singers**: Ernestine Rundless, Della Reese (soprano vo), Marie Walters (contralto vo), Herbert S. Carson (baritone vo), James Cleveland (lead vo, p). Detroit, MI, ?late 1952.
- (3) **Roberta Martin Singers**: Delois Barrett (soprano vo), Roberta Martin, Bessie Folk (contralto vo), Norsalus McKissick (tenor & lead vo), Eugene Smith, Willie Webb (baritone vo); Roberta Martin or poss. James Cleveland (p), Willie Webb (org). NYC?, ca. mid-1955.
- (4-5) **Caravans**: Albertina Walker, Cassietta George, Iris Humble, Gloria Griffin, Johneron Davis (vo), James Cleveland (lead vo, p); unk. (org). Chicago, Ill., October 5, 1954, & January 18, 1955.
- (6-7) **Gospel All Stars**: James Cleveland (lead vo, p), Ella Mitchell (contralto vo), Imogene Greene (vo, 2nd lead on 6), Rose Hines, Dorothy Bates/Crookshank? (soprano vo); Herman Stevens (org). NYC, 1956/57.
- (8-10) **Voices of Tabernacle**: From 50 to 125 voice Choir from Faith Tabernacle Church, Detroit. Incl. Rev. Charles Ashley Craig, Cleavant Derricks, Naiomi Browne, Louise McCord, Richard Roquemore (vo), James Cleveland (lead vo), Hulah Gene Dunklin Hurley (soprano vo, 2nd lead on 9); Herbert "Pee Wee" Pickard (p), Alfred Bolden (org). Chicago, 1958 or 1959.
- (11) **Gospel All Stars with James Cleveland**: Same or similar vocal group with Ella Mitchell (contralto vo), James Cleveland (lead vo, p); unk (org) (dm). ca. late 1950's.
- (12) **The Meditation Singers**: Ernestine Rundless (2nd lead vo), Lorraine Vincent (soprano vo), Laura Lee Rundless, Marie Walters (contralto vo), James Cleveland (lead vo, p); unk (org). Chicago, July 8, 1959.
- (13-14) **Voices of Tabernacle**: Choir incl. Rev. Charles Ashley Craig, James Cleveland (lead vo), Hulah Gene Dunklin Hurley, Richard Roquemore (2nd lead on 13), Naiomi Browne, Louise McCord (vo); Herbert Pickard (p, cel), Alfred Bolden (org). Chicago, 1959/60.
- (15-18) **James Cleveland & The Original Chimes**: James Cleveland (lead vo, p?), Jessy Dixon (vo, 2nd lead on 17), Dorothy Norwood, Imogene Greene (vo); unk. (p?), Alfred Bolden (org). Detroit, 1960.
- (19-20) **Sally Martin & The Gospel Chimes**: Sally Martin (lead vo), same or similar group (vo); poss. James Cleveland (p), unk. or poss. Alfred Bolden (org). Detroit, 1960.
- (21-25) **James Cleveland & The Gospel Chimes**: James Cleveland (lead vo, poss. p), Jessy Dixon (vo, 2nd lead on 23), Imogene Greene, Claude O. Timmons, Lee Charles Neeley (vo); unk. (org), add. celesta (on 25). 1960.



DISCOGRAPHIE

JAMES CLEVELAND

1951-1962

CD2 - 1960-1962

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| 1 I'M A SOLDIER IN THE ARMY OF THE LORD (Robert Earl Arnold) | Hob LP 240 |
| 2 THERE IS NO GREATER LOVE (Isham Jones - Marty Symes) | Hob LP 240 |
| 3 SOMETHING GOT A HOLD ON ME (James Cleveland) | Hob 139/LP 242 |
| 4 GREATER DAY (James Cleveland) | Hob 139/LP 242 |
| 5 HE'LL SEE YOU THROUGH (Jessy Dixon) | Hob LP 242 |
| 6 I'M SATISFIED WITH JESUS (B.B. McKinney) | Hob LP 245 |
| 7 IT IS WELL (H.G. Spafford - P.P. Bliss) | Hob LP 245 |
| 8 OH LORD I'M SATISFIED (James Cleveland) | Savoy 4154 |
| 9 THERE'S A BRIGHTER DAY SOMEWHERE (James Cleveland) | Savoy 4154 |
| 10 HE'S ALL RIGHT WITH ME (James Cleveland) | Savoy 4141/LP 14045 |
| 11 JUST TO BEHOLD HIS FACE (Lucy E. Campbell) | Savoy 4146/LP 14045 |
| 12 OUT ON A HILL (James Cleveland) | Savoy LP 14045 |
| 13 DRIVE THE DEVIL AWAY (James Cleveland) | Savoy LP 14045 |
| 14 DEEP DOWN IN MY HEART (James Cleveland) | Savoy 4166 |
| 15 WHAT A MIGHTY GOD (Roberta Martin) | Savoy 4166 |
| 16 WALKING WITH THE KING (Traditional) | Savoy LP 14052 |
| 17 HE'S SWEETER THAN THE DAY BEFORE (James Cleveland) | Savoy LP 14052 |
| 18 SIT DOWN SERVANT (Traditional) | Savoy 4176/LP 14052 |
| 19 HE'S SO GOOD (James Cleveland) | Savoy LP 41059 |
| 20 I WON'T TAKE IT BACK (James Cleveland) | Savoy LP 41059 |
| 21 I'M HIS, HE'S MINE (James Cleveland) | Savoy LP 14063 |
| 22 REDEEMED (Fanny Crosby - William Kirkpatrick) | Savoy LP 41063 |
| 23 YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE (Richard Rogers - Oscar Hammerstein II) | SavoyLP 41068 |
| 24 OLD SHIP OF ZION (Thomas A. Dorsey) | Savoy LP 41068 |

(1-2) **Voices of Tabernacle & James Cleveland:** Choir incl. Rev. Charles Ashley Craig, James Cleveland (lead vo), Richard Roquemore, Louise McCord (2nd lead on 2), Hulah Gene Dunklin Hurley, Caroline Hurley, Albert Moorman, C. Allen Chierley (vo); Herbert Pickard (p, cel), Alfred Bolden (org), add. tambourine (on 1). Detroit, 1960.

(3-5) **Voices of Tabernacle:** Choir led by Rev. Charles Ashley Craig (2nd lead on 3), James Cleveland (lead vo), Richard Roquemore, Louise McCord (2nd lead on 5), Hulah Gene Dunklin Hurley (vo); Herbert Pickard (p, cel), Alfred Bolden (org), add. tamb (on 4). Detroit, 1960.

(6-7) **Voices of Tabernacle:** Choir led by Rev. Charles Ashley Craig (2nd lead on 7), James Cleveland (lead vo), Louise McCord (2nd lead on 7), same or similar to last; add. tamb. Detroit, ca. 1960.

(8-11) **James Cleveland with The Gospel All Stars:** James Cleveland (lead vo, p?), Ella Mitchell (contralto vo), Dorothy Crookshank, Rose Hines (soprano vo); unk. (p?)(org)(dm). May 27, 1960.

(12-13) Same. February 1st, 1961.

(14-15) **James Cleveland & The Gospel Chimes:** James Cleveland (lead vo, poss. p), Jessy Dixon, Dorothy Norwood (2nd lead vo), Imogene Greene, Claude O. Timmons, Lee Charles Neely (vo); unk. (p?)(org)(dm). September 18, 1961.

(16-18) Same; unk. (g) added. January 6, 1962.

(19-20) **James Cleveland & The Angelic Choir:** Rev. James Cleveland (lead vo & speech), with large mixed voices dir. Rev. Lawrence Roberts & Thurston Frazier (choir lead); Alfred White (p), Billy Preston (org), Joe Marshall (dm). First Baptist Church of Nutley, Newark, NJ, July 1st, 1962.

(21-22) **James Cleveland & The Angelic Choir:** Rev. James Cleveland (lead vo & speech), with large mixed voices dir. Rev. Lawrence Roberts; acc. same or similar. Newark, December 9, 1962.

(23-24) **James Cleveland** (narration, p); Billy Preston (org), Barney Richmond (b), Joe Marshall (dm). December 12, 1962.



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FA1305



FA1306



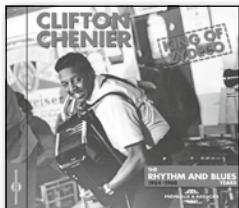
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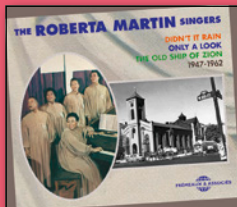


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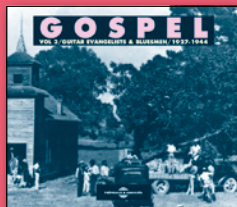
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