



# The Soul Stirrers

By Dan Nooger

HAD THE SOUL STIRRERS done nothing more than launch the career of Sam Cooke, they would have more than earned their place in rock & roll history. But for nearly half a century the Soul Stirrers set the pace for both gospel and pop vocal groups with their blend of full, mellow harmonies and sexy, crooning leads delivered by a magnificent succession of singers. Cooke's replacement, Johnnie Taylor, went on to Top Ten pop and R&B success, and the group's original lead singer, R.H. Harris, "simply created the entire gospel quartet tradition," as Tony Heilbut wrote in *The Gospel Sound*.

The Soul Stirrers' career spans four decades. It began on a small Texas farm, where young Rebert Harris sang with a family gospel group called the Friendly Five and listened to the great preacher-guitarist Blind Willie Johnson on radio broadcasts.

"I used to listen to the birds sing," Harris told Heilbut, "and whatever tune they'd make, I trained myself to make." Harris, Jesse Farley, S.R. Crain and T.L. Brewster formed the original Soul Stirrers in Trinity, Texas, and were first recorded by Alan Lomax in 1936 for the Library of Congress.

In contrast to the nineteenth-century spiritual and "jubilee" repertoire of other Southwestern quartets, the Soul Stirrers radically reshaped traditional gospel material and composed many enduring songs of their own. The group introduced the use of two lead singers to create stunning peaks of intensity — one crooned high and sweet, the other shouted hoarse and low — thus providing the model for latter-day secular stars like Sam and Dave and the Righteous Brothers. Harris ad-libbed at will and sang in delayed time, creating irresistible syncopations. "The group would start one meter," he told Heilbut, "and I'd be in and out, front and behind, all across there."

In the late 1940s the Soul Stirrers battled for gospel supremacy with such mighty competitors as the Pilgrim Travelers (with J.W. Alexander, who, in 1959, became Sam Cooke's publishing and record-company partner) and the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi. During World War II the group appeared in many USO shows and even sang on the White House lawn for Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.

The Soul Stirrers made their first commercial recordings for Aladdin Records during 1947-48, at a time when the gospel-quartet style was in transition. The fervor and freedom of Harris's singing, soaring beyond the older and more formal style of the Deep River Boys and the Golden Gate Quartet, was a harbinger of things to come. The Stirrers also backed Brother Willie Eason, an outstanding preacher-guitarist in the Blind Willie Johnson mold, but their own recordings were strictly a cappella, with four-part harmonies so rich as to render any musical accompaniment superfluous. (These recordings, originally released on 78-rpm discs, were reissued in 1971 on a superb Imperial/Liberty LP, *Gospel Music, Volume I: The Soul Stirrers*, now out of print.)

The group cut a few sides for the Specialty label in 1950 — "By and By" remains a classic — but in December of that year, Harris retired from the Soul Stirrers. He went on to form other fine groups, including the Christland Singers (which included former Stirrers Leroy Taylor and James Medlock) and the Gospel Paraders. He also established the National Quartet Convention, which eventually grew to more than 30,000 members and staged annual conventions dedicated to preserving the gospel-quartet tradition.

Harris's replacement, brought in by S.R. Crain, was a Chicago teenager named Sam Cooke, who had been singing with the Highway QC's, a sort of farm-team group sponsored by Stirrers baritone R.B. Robinson. The Cooke-led Soul Stirrers first recorded for Specialty in March 1951, and among the sides they put down were "Jesus Gave Me Water" and "Peace in the Valley." Elvis Presley must surely have been listening: he sang "Peace in the Valley" on Sun Records' legendary Million Dollar Quartet session, reprised the song on his third Ed Sullivan appearance and recorded it for RCA in 1957 in an arrangement close to the original.

At first, Cooke modeled his singing on R.H. Harris's hugely influential style, but he soon came into his own. All of the graceful phrasings and sensual sounds that later took him to the top of the pop world came to flower during Cooke's tenure with the Soul Stirrers. Indeed, many consider this work to be Sam's best. ("I'm not even interested in his pop records," Jerry Wexler once said.)

Sam Cooke soon became the premier sex symbol in gospel music, delighting older fans while sharing a devoted young following with contemporary R&B groups. Cooke made his first secular recordings in 1957, under the name Dale Cooke, while continuing to sing gospel with the Soul Stirrers. Cooke and the group eventually left Specialty, and he achieved pop stardom on Keen Records in 1957 with "You Send Me," inaugurating a fabulous career that ended with his tragic death, on December 11th, 1964.

But Cooke never forgot his gospel roots in the Soul Stirrers. He recorded the group with its new lead singer, Johnnie Taylor, for his SAR record company, and their brilliant "Stand by Me Father" was later reworked by Ben E. King as "Stand by Me." The Arkansas-born Taylor also came from the ranks of the Highway QC's, but he was singing with Chicago's relatively obscure Melody Makers when he replaced Cooke in the Soul Stirrers. "I was singing in this little group," he later told writer Robert Palmer, "and here was this big star asking me if I'd join the biggest gospel group around. Man, I thought I was on Easy Street."

Johnnie Taylor got his first taste of secular success with his SAR and Derby recordings of "Rome Wasn't Built in a Day" and "Dance What You Wanna." When the label shut down after Cooke's death, Taylor signed with Stax Records, cutting many fine, bluesy sides and eventually achieving soul stardom in 1968 with "Who's Making Love." Taylor scored a monster pop hit with "Disco Lady" on Columbia in 1976, but in recent years he's returned to his natural gospel-influenced groove with a series of well-received albums for the Mississippi-based Malaco label.

Despite numerous personnel changes (Jesse Farley was the sole remaining original member), the Soul Stirrers continued to lay down some fine gospel music on Chess Records — including an LP dedicated to Sam Cooke. Johnnie Taylor's replacement, Jimmy Outler, was killed in 1967; he was succeeded by another superb singer from the ranks of the Highway QC's, Willie Rogers.

The legacy of the Soul Stirrers continues to echo through the parallel worlds of gospel and soul music. Their music forms an invaluable part of the gospel tradition — the most vital folk music in the United States today — and their urgent, expressive recordings will never be outdated.

