



ARCHIE REYNOLDS, far left

## The Archie Reynolds Story

by Opal Louis Nations

Archie Reynolds was born at Gulfport, Miss. in 1921 and raised in New Orleans. Reynolds' earliest recollections were of his Grandmother walking him to church every Sunday morning and evening. "I was about two years old, and the journey took us through scary piney woods," says Reynolds who recalls that the distance covered was five miles there and back. His grandmother stood him up on the church bench so he could see what was going on. Reynolds' father was a chef-cook and had to go where he could find work. The first relocation came in 1928 when the family moved to New Orleans where Reynolds attended school. The family church was The Rose Hill Baptist pastored by Reverend McPherson.

In 1932, Reynolds' father managed to get chef work at a boys' arts college in Bay St. Louis, Miss., so the family was again uprooted. The clan lived on campus among a mainly white student body. Reynolds' mother was a fine, strong singer who sung solo at church every Sunday. Like Reverend Cleophus Robinson, Reynolds idolized his mother for her singing and no doubt inherited much of her talent. Reynolds' mother sang in a group composed of cousins and other relatives. The group took his mother's maiden name and billed themselves as The Davis Singers of Hansborough, Miss. Reynolds remembers vividly his gospel singing debut. "My

mother urged me to choreograph a number she did with her group. The song was "Play on your harp, Little David," and she wanted me to do the shunting of steam and to move my arms and feet, as if I were a moving steam locomotive. When the time came for me and her group to do the number, I was petrified. There was my mother flailing her arms, trying to get me to move, and all I could do was to stand there frozen like a statue."

In 1935, the family returned to New Orleans and again became regulars at The Rose Hill Baptist Church. The first quartet that Reynolds joined was a group of elderly church members managed by a Mr. Fuller. The group sang traditional jubilee, acappella fashion. In 1936, he teamed up with a bunch of teens calling themselves The Golden Bells of New Orleans. His stay with them lasted two years. Reynolds had always sung the tenor part, right up to the reformation of The Paramount Singers in 1976, when through necessity he switched to bass. In 1938, Reynolds hitched up with another quartet whose name he does not recall. In August 1943, Reynolds, his wife and two children moved to San Francisco. "When I came to California," states Reynolds, "people had not heard tenor singing like my tenor singing, so high and so strong." Years later, in the mid-Fifties, The Blind Boys of Mississippi had made remarks of this nature at a concert he had promoted.

It did not take long for Reynolds to start organizing. "One day, I took a trip down to Collins barbershop down on Sutter Street. Collins had a customer, a serviceman named Jack. Jack was holding a conversation with Collins and telling him how he sure would like to sing bass in a group when he got out of uniform," relates Reynolds. Jack apparently had been singing bass in the Army. Reynolds inquired as to how long he was going to be in service. Noting that Jack's release was imminent, Reynolds got the notion of forming a quartet. During the ensuing months, Reynolds attended various churches in the San Francisco area scouting for talent. Eventually, Reynolds found good enough singers, brought them together, and named them The Swanee River Quartet. None of the original members stayed long enough to appear on any of the group's recordings. Eventually Jack was replaced by Lenny Wallace. Reynolds sang in The Swanee Rivers for awhile but grew despondent as the outfit did not seem to get anywhere.

It would be another two years before the group would have a chance to make their initial recordings for Ollie Hunt. Sadly, Reynolds handed over the management of The Swanee River Quartet to Lenny Wallace. Reynolds was denied national service due to poor eyesight. Turning his back on the church, Reynolds hitched up with an acappella secular group known as The Symphonic Harmonizers. They were comprised of R.B. McClendon (bass and guitar), Louis \_\_\_\_\_ (tenor and lead), \_\_\_\_\_ Hamilton (baritone), and Archie Reynolds (first and second tenor.)

The group played the night club scene. This included the New Orleans Swing Club on Third Street and The Golden Gate Theatre. The group was "fathered" more than managed by Sy Hartman, a wealthy Jewish businessman who bought them uniforms and even helped pay the members' house rent. Reynolds had landed a day-job as a Navy electrician down at the Oakland Naval Supply Depot, so he was better able to support his family. The group had a music teacher by the name of Mrs. Sy Nacosta. Hartman took The Symphonic Harmonizers to a recording studio to cut a vanity single. Two Nacosta songs were recorded acappella -- "Silly quarrels bring heartbreaks" / "San Francisco." Reynolds swears the record was pressed but no evidence has been found of it ever reaching the commercial market.

While a member of The Symphonic Harmonizers, Reynolds was heard by Gino and Kermet Terrell and Victor Mederos of The Paramount Singers. Prior to this, Gino had been told stories of Reynolds' extraordinary gospel tenor singing with The Swanee Rivers, but he had not actually witnessed Reynolds' singing first hand. However, a number of events took place before Reynolds permanently joined The Paramount Singers. Reynolds with his wife Pauline and family were living in a housing unit at Third and Army Street at the time. Pauline had never liked the idea of Reynolds singing in night clubs and was somewhat pleased to hear that he was planning to return to his first love--gospel singing and management. Some time during 1947, Reynolds joined The Skylarks (a local group not to be confused with the famous quartet out of Nashville.) The Skylarks were partly made up of members from The Swanee Rivers, including a baritone singer originally from Chicago by the name of J.C. Coney. Here starts the saga of one of the greatest shouting tenor leads--Tiny Powell--who was considered by many to rival the awesome pipes of the great Archie Brownlee, tenor lead legend of The Blind Boys of Mississippi during the Fifties.

Vance "Tiny" Powell was born in Warren, Arkansas on May 17th, 1922. In 1943, he married Edna Knight, this a year before serving briefly in the Army. He sang with The Kansas City Gospel Singers and, according to Larry Stickman, in The Christian Travelers out of St. Louis.

J.C. Coney had heard Tiny Powell's singing and sent for him to come out from St. Louis to join the Skylarks. After Powell joined The Skylarks, James Wilkes, the manager of the Rising Stars, wanted Powell in his group. Powell sung in The Rising Stars for a few weeks, but he did not fit in. The Rising Stars sang in an outmoded style of "jubilee", and Powell was accustomed to singing "sanctified" in noisy groups. When and wherever Powell sang in the Bay Area, people filled up the churches. Powell then joined The Golden Harps, taking Archie Reynolds with him. Members at this time differed from the personnel listed on their one recording for Har-Tone. Reynolds remembers the group members as follows: George McCurn (bass) from the famous Pilgrim Travelers, \_\_\_\_ Banks (baritone), Ed Lacy (tenor), and himself (tenor). The group was managed by a businessman named Harley. Reynolds' reason for enlisting was that The Skylarks were falling apart. When Ed Lacy quit The Golden Harps to move back to Arkansas, his place was taken by another Pilgrim Traveler stalwart, baritone Jesse Whitaker. Paul Foster also served briefly in The Golden Harps before being hauled off by The Soul Stirrers who had appeared in the Bay Area at the time and had plotted to spirit him away. Harley, like Sy Hartman, was able to support certain members of the group in times of need. With both Foster and Powell, The Golden Harps could sing anything. "We were very, very powerful," states Reynolds. "Tiny could sing rhythm and spirituals real fast as well as sing gospels, and he liked the strong backgrounds," adds Reynolds. On the one Har-Tone record (Har-Tone 105) "Music in the air" / "My record will be there," members are credited as being Reynolds, Powell, Whitaker, and McCurn.

The Golden Harps broke up when Foster left to join The Soul Stirrers shortly after the death of James Medlock. Reynolds also asserts that it was about the time Roscoe Robinson had come out to join The Paramount Singers. Robinson signed no contract with the group and was in and out of The Paramounts throughout the Fifties. "Roscoe was not dependable," states Reynolds who claims he suffered from acute instability. "Roscoe never knew what he wanted and was in and out of groups constantly." Roscoe Robinson served with many outfits, including The Silver Quintette, The Southern Sons (on Trumpet) and later The Five Blind Boys of Mississippi and The

Clefs of Calvary. Robinson grew particularly skittish with The Paramounts as they never traveled very much and were tied to families. Reynolds remembers a time when both Powell and Robinson sang together in The Paramounts.

According to research conducted by Ray Funk, The Paramount Gospel Singers originated in Austin, Texas and had built quite a reputation there before World War II. In 1941, they were recorded for The Library of Congress. The Texas Paramounts were blessed with the fine lead singing of James Medlock who defected to The Soul Stirrers in 1943. Remaining members migrated to The Bay Area around 1944. (The group should not be confused with The Paramount Gospel Singers who waxed for Jewel in 1967.) Not long after World War II, The Paramounts recorded for Ollie Hunt's tiny Olliet label, a West Oakland one-man enterprise. Hunt sold his recordings (some pressed by Bob Geddins at Big Town) from out of the trunk of his car. Like an ice cream vendor, Hunt did the rounds of the East Bay African American neighborhoods. Legend tells he recorded most of his issue on a portable reel-to-reel tape machine.

With The Paramounts, Hunt journeyed to Gino Terrell's home, then on Underwood Street in San Francisco, to record the quartet. Six sides by The Paramounts were recorded but only one record was issued on Olliet in the late Forties. Two songs, "Heaven in my view" / "He means so much to me," both with Tiny Powell on lead, were sent as a demo to Art Rupe of Specialty Records in Hollywood. Ollie Hunt sent a 7" tape without the group's knowledge.

Reynolds and Powell joined The Paramounts around 1948. Reynolds remembers the group at that time as being made up of Gino Terrell (former manager and tenor), Ben Williams (bass), Kermet Terrell (baritone), Reverend Victor Mederos and Reverend Sam Reece (tenors.) Mederos was in the process of leaving to join the ministry as pastor of The Double Rock Baptist Church. E. Morris Kelly (baritone) came aboard in 1949. Joe Dean who was plucked from The Lovely Four Quartet of Richmond joined around 1950. The classic line-up of Reynolds, Powell, Terrell, Dean, Williams, and Kelly then took shape.

The group stuck basically to church engagements. With Powell on lead, the group worked regularly and built a reputation for themselves. When the notorious Reverend Carl Anderson came to the Bay Area, he set himself up in a tent. The Paramounts and other local quartets sung for Anderson to help raise money to build him a church. Soon, Anderson was able to find a building and quickly established himself. As Anderson became entrenched, his conservative and somewhat bizarre attitudes turned against the very folk who helped put him on his feet. Anderson no longer allowed groups to sing in his church. A certain degree of professional rivalry may of course have made up part of the picture, but quartets during that time were certainly more popular than choirs are today.

Reynolds tells of a meeting conducted by James Wilkes to probe the problems quartets encountered when finding work in the churches. "A minister took the floor and said, 'I don't mind singers coming to my church, but it just got to the point where I can't understand these 'singings' (sic.) talking about ah-hoomba, ah-hoomba.' (The minister was mimicking a quartet singer's rhythmic vocal effects.) 'I just can't understand, what does that mean?' 'Well, sir,' came the reply from the quartet singer, 'you tell me what 'aarh-haah' (the throat-clearing rasp a preacher makes to heighten the effect of his sermon) and 'God said aarh-haah' means, 'cause if you tell me what aar-haah means, I'll tell ya what ah-hoomba, ah hoomba means'."

During the summer of 1950, Tiny Powell grew restless. He never liked working much in regular jobs like the other guys. Reynolds, for example, worked mainly for the

post office until 1957. Powell wanted to make a living out of singing professionally. He thought he could best do that by joining a major group. When The Blind Boys invited him into their group, he jumped at the chance of being able to travel and enjoy a slightly more lucrative standard of living. Powell joined the Blind Boys of Mississippi for one session in Houston for Don Robey's Peacock Records during September of 1950. He shared lead with Archie Brownlee on three of six selections. But The Blind Boys only brought frustration and disillusion to Powell. The group was not earning the sums of money they were alleged to have earned at the peak of gospel's golden age.

Powell returned to the Bay Area in 1951 and resumed lead in The Paramount Singers. He also got himself a sky-cap job out at San Francisco's International Airport. Resuming ties with religious endeavors, Powell became a member of The Star Bethel Missionary Baptist Church in Oakland and sang in Lawrence Stickman's Oakland All Stars, off and on. Powell left gospel music in 1956 to sing rhythm and blues and was later taken under Bob Geddins' wing. Geddins shaped Powell's career and for a time released a handful of much-prized soul singles.

The Paramounts enjoyed a weekly radio broadcast, first over KWBR (1948-1955), then KRE (1955-1957) out of Berkeley. Powell was replaced by Reverend Robert Hartfield who stayed for a short while before joining The Golden West Singers of Richmond, Ca. as the group's lead singer. Roscoe Robinson was in and out for awhile later on. Some time during the spring of 1951, The Paramounts were on a singing concert tour in Los Angeles. It was during one of these concerts that they were heard by a Decca talent scout rendering a mighty pleasing version of Thomas A. Dorsey's "Peace in the valley." Red Foley had recorded the initial version for Decca, and the company had done exceptionally well by the song. Wanting to capture sales in the "race-record" market, they thought it a good idea to record a black gospel quartet version of the song. The Paramounts were Decca's choice.

When the scout tried to find the group in San Francisco, he did not have much luck. Here was a contract with a major label, and the group was out of town. When The Paramounts returned to the city, they were contacted by Big Dave's Record Store on Fillmore. Dave told Reynolds that Decca was looking for them to record, and he could not find a single record by them in the store to play to the agent. (The Paramounts had recorded "Peace in the valley" in 1948 for Trilon.) The group's earlier recordings plus their original version of "Peace in the valley" were long gone. Dave did not know whether they had a contract or a recent record release. Decca finally got with the group and had them drive to L.A. for sessions which took place in August 1951. Coral, the Decca subsidiary, paid the group a pre-session fixed amount, but, as with all The Paramounts' records, no royalties were ever paid. The group ended up with seven songs from two sessions. Three excellent records were issued in 1951 and 1952, a time when The Paramounts were at their peak. Lack of promotion and failure to understand the market for black gospel recordings lead to the records' commercial failure.

During the mid-Fifties, Archie Reynolds took to sponsoring and promoting special gospel star package shows at the Oakland Auditorium. The Paramounts not only created their own engagements but helped major acts find a venue in the Bay Area, thus killing two birds with one stone. The Paramounts shared billing with The Soul Stirrers, Blind Boys of Mississippi, Pilgrim Travelers, Brother Joe May, Ethel Davenport, Gospel Harmonettes, Bradford Singers, Caravans, James Cleveland, and Reverend Charles L. Franklin and his daughter Aretha. Reynolds introduced Paul Reid of Reid's Records and Record Store in Berkeley to the business of promotion, and it

was he who took control of booking the acts, when Reynolds left the business of gospel to pursue other of his enterprises. Rumor has it that Reid recorded Aretha Franklin at The Oakland Auditorium when she appeared there in 1955 (which would pre-date her Battle sides.) But evidence of this is yet to see light of day.

Reid went on to record local groups and choirs on his own label, well into the Seventies. Having major talent appear in the Bay Area paid off, not only in financial terms but because the artists left town with a favorable opinion of The Paramounts as performing artists. Groups like The Blind Boys of Mississippi would inevitably pass through Houston and on their way pass words of praise for The Paramounts to Don Robey at Peacock Records. So much rave notice was given that the group landed a front payment of \$6,000 and a chance to record for Robey's Duke subsidiary.

In June 1955, The Paramounts cut one session in Houston. Two excellent singles were issued that year. Both sold reasonably well on the Southern market. In 1957, with personnel business acumen and knowledge gleaned from his father, Reynolds opened The Bay View Barbeque on Third Street in San Francisco. "When the groups came to the Bay Area," Reynolds asserts proudly, "they'd stop by and sample my barbeque." He soon found his venture growing by leaps and bounds, and this took him away from the business of managing a gospel group. Consequently, The Paramounts worked less and less.

In 1961, under the corporate name of Reynolds Enterprises, Reynolds started up Pauline's Records, The Archway Record Company, Bridge View Publishing, and Archie's Hickory Pit and Catering Service. Archie's Hickory became more successful than Bay View ever had and was often written up in Herb Caen's column in the San Francisco Chronicle. "I catered for Bill Graham, Albert King, you name 'em," boasts Reynolds. He perfected his own barbeque sauce, "Archie's" (of course), and at one point opened a bar right next door. Pauline's Records faired well, although it had to band together with other local, small, independent retailers to compete in business and offer chain store prices. Pauline's serviced The Hudson Shoe Store chain and kept them supplied with piped music.

Archie's Archway Record Company issued an album on comedian Howard Eubanks (currently residing in Texas.) He also cut a soul single on himself and Larry Coney, his old friend from The Swanee River Singers. The two songs, "More time to explain" / "Lenient with my love," were recorded at The Roy Chinn Studio at 5112 - Third Street in San Francisco. The record did not do too much, as Reynolds could not afford to promote it well enough. "More time to explain" is today a coveted item by Northern-soul collectors.

In 1973, Reynolds bought "The Horse and Cow" sailors' bar. "I wanted to ease out of the barbeque business and into bar-keeping because crime was on the rise and my catering truck drivers kept getting mugged," explains Reynolds. In addition, the government started closing down the naval shipyards out at Hunter's Point, and this had an impact on the business. Some time towards the close of 1975, Reynolds sold the bar and barbeque and opened a travel agency, "Archway Travel." He sold the business and retired in 1976. "Retirement gave me more time to work up a new Paramounts group," says Reynolds. The old group had faded into almost total oblivion.

"We started back up with two members of The Gospel Trumpets--Reverend Otis Brown and J.B. Williams. With Gino and myself we went out as a foursome. I had kept up the copyright on The Paramounts' name and we soon found that people had not forgotten us. This really encouraged me," states Reynolds. In 1990, The Paramounts put out a vanity cassette simply entitled "The Paramount Singers." It became obvious

that the group could sing close acappella skillfully and well. The Paramounts gradually found more and more work and with it wider recognition.

In 1992, the group was signed to Chris Strachwitz's independent Arhoolie label in El Cerrito, Ca. A CD entitled "Work and Pray On" ensued after which The Paramounts have appeared on many major venues statewide.

-- Opal Louis Nations

Based on an interview with Archie Reynolds, February, 1994

### Archie Reynolds Discography

#### **Symphonic Harmonizers:**

Quarrels bring heartbreaks / San Francisco	1946 No commercial release
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#### **The Golden Harp Gospel Singers:**

Music in the air / My record will be there	1947 Har-Tone 105
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#### **Paramount Singers (without Reynolds):**

In that awful hour, Pts. 1 & 2	1947 Olliet 1001
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He means so much to me / I got heaven in my view	1947 Olliet (unissued)
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He means so much to me / I got heven in my view (could possibly be the same as the Olliet)	1947 Unissued, Specialty demo
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Jonah / Never turn back	1947 Olliet (unissued)
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Dig a little deeper / Low down the chariot	1948 Trilon 232
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Peace in the valley / Standing in the safety zone	1948 Trilon 233
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Working on the building / Will the circle be unbroken	1948 Trilon 235
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#### **Paramount Singers:**

Peace in the valley / Run along for a long time	1951 Coral 65066
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Standing in the safety zone / Oh Noah	1951 Coral 65076
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Let the healing waters move / 1952  
You've got to bow down before God Coral 65100

Work and pray on / 1955  
My Jesus is all the world to me Duke 211

Shall we meet / 1955  
Mother Duke 212

**Archie Reynolds & Larry Coney:**

More time to explain / 1975?  
Leanient with my love Archway (unnumbered)

**Paramount Singers:**

Jesus is all this world to me / 1990  
My soul is got to move / Mother / Paramount Sgrs (unnumbered)  
Deep river / Work and pray on / (cassette only)  
Close to Thee / Place your hand in  
the hand of God / We've come this  
far by faith / Peace in the valley /  
Give yourself to Jesus

We've come this far by faith / Jesus 1992  
is all this world to me / There's a leak Arhoolie 382  
in this old building / He looked beyond (CD & cassette)  
my faults (Amazing Grace) / Jesus  
gave me water / Oh rocks / Child of the  
King / He'll work it our (Problems) /  
Great day / Mother / It's gonna rain /  
Deep river / Work and pray on / If I  
could hear my mother pray again /  
Ezehiel (Dry Bones) / Out of the depths  
of my soul