

Biography

The Gospel Hummingbirds

The Gospel Hummingbirds are synonymous with tight harmony, creating outstanding inspirational and gospel music with urban rhythm and blues overtones. James Gibson, Jr. spokesperson for the group, coined their style as “Rhythm and Gospel or R&G for short”. Audiences from all over the world have marveled at the way the Hummingbirds effortlessly bring them to an inspirational frenzy, leaving them clamoring for more.

To see these seven musicians on stage is an experience you’ll never forget. The show begins with the band setting the tone with music that gets the audience rocking. Then the vocalists start singing with soulful sounds that leave no doubt that you are in for a treat. In no time the Gospel Hummingbirds will have you clapping your hands, dancing in the isles, and maybe even singing along. In the end, you will be exhausted, but thoroughly entertained.

Joe Thomas, Sr. founded the ‘Birds in the early 1960’s. Soon they became known all over the world as one of the most elite musical groups in their field. Since their inception they have recorded five albums. “Route 66 To Heaven”, “Signs of Revelations”, “Steppin’ Out”, “Taking Flight”, and their latest compilation, “Live In Paradise”. In 1993, The Gospel Hummingbirds album “Steppin’ Out” earned them a Grammy Nomination in the category of “Best Traditional Soul Gospel Album”. That same year it received the French “Jazz Academy Award” as best gospel album of the year.

Although they started performing in the “Church” and they still do, in 1987 they were invited to perform at the famous Eli’s Mile High Club, a blues nightclub in Oakland, Ca. Since then they have successfully taken their music to rock, blues, and R&B fans in nightclubs, blues and jazz festivals here in the U.S., Canada, Australia, Japan, Italy, France, and Belgium. The group has shared the bill; The Five Blind Boys of Alabama, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, The Dixie Hummingbirds, John Lee Hooker, Little Milton, B.B. King, Etta James, The Persuasions, Commissioned, Huey Lewis and The News, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Pop Staples, Otis Rush, Clifton Chenier, and Joe Louis Walker.

Over the years, as with any group with longevity, there have been personnel changes. The current Gospel Hummingbirds are; James Gibson, Jr. vocals, Morris LeGrande guitar and vocals, Juan Stewart vocals, Mark Kenoly vocals and bass guitar, Kirk Williams bass guitar and keyboards, Clifton Gamble keyboards, and Wilson Brooks drums and percussions. Billboard Magazine has spoken of their music as “Not just for sacred music lovers, but for anyone with an abiding interest in great roots sounds”. Downbeat Magazine says “This is a must-listen for folks who still equate heavenly music with harps and wings”. It has been suggested that they perform other kinds of music, but The Gospel Hummingbirds remain true to their Faith, and true to “R&G”.



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Critics Quotes

Gospel Hummingbirds

This music is for all people, and you shouldn't have to go to a black church in a black neighborhood to find it... The Scripture says. "go into the hedges and highways and work."

Gospel Hummingbirds

The Hummingbirds' propulsive, soulful gospel that is beautiful even while capturing the edginess of urban life.

The Denver Post

Where have these guys been? \

The Los Angeles Reader

Like the Neville Brothers, the Gospel Hummingbirds know that the best R&B has one foot firmly in the church.

Fred Shuster / Los Angeles Daily News

...Their harmonies are pure and sure, and their rhythms combine the street and the pulpit into an effortless puree.

Philadelphia Inquirer

Gospel music is about making a joyful noise, ...The Hummingbirds practically raise the roof with their sweet harmonizing.

Chicago Tribune

What's extraordinary about this group is that they have managed to carve a niche in both worlds, singing their impeccable and ebullient vocal harmonies in neighborhood churches as well as concert halls, blues festivals and smoky clubs.

Dan Ouellette - Downbeat

In my opinion, if God could sing he's sound like the Gospel Hummingbirds. And when they ask, 'Does anybody here/Know something about the Lord?', the answer is obvious- *they* do.

Beverly Mire / The Gavin Report

Not just for sacred music lovers, but for anyone with an abiding interest in great roots sounds.

Billboard



Gospel Hummingbirds

STEPPIN' OUT—Blind Pig BP74691: *THAT SAME THING; DON'T LET THE DEVIL RIDE; DON'T MOVE THE MOUNTAIN; CHANGE; JUDGMENT DAY; STEP OUT; HE'LL BE YOUR FRIEND; HERE I AM; SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT; AIN'T NOBODY'S BUSINESS; SAFETY ZONE; ANY DAY.* (48:00)

Personnel: Roy Tyler, lead vocals; Clarence Nichols, background vocals, lead vocals (cuts 2, 7, 9); Joe Thomas, first-tenor vocals, rhythm guitar, bass guitar, lead guitar (6); James Gibson, Jr., tenor and baritone vocals; Josh Lowery, first- and second-tenor and baritone vocals; Jimmy Pugh, keyboards; Kevin Hayes, drums; Tim Katsuhatsu, lead guitar (2, 8); Steve Ehrmann, bass (4, 8, 10, 12).

★★★★½

Most of the best r&b soul singers got their starts in the black church choir. Some were forced to abandon gospel because of perceived contradictions between the sacred and secular while others settled into the practical side of a devotion to music, eschewing the pulpit for the bucks and larger audiences. Then, of course, there were the career gospel singers who rarely ranged far from church settings. What's extraordinary about the Gospel Hummingbirds is that they have managed to carve a niche in both worlds, singing their impeccable and ebullient vocal harmonies in neighborhood churches as well as concert halls, blues festivals, and smoky clubs.

The Oakland quintet has been rocking Bay Area churches for the past two decades and over the last four years has garnered fans in pop and r&b quartets thanks to background vocal gigs with Huey Lewis and the Fabulous Thunderbirds. On its third album and first for Blind Pig, the Gospel Hummingbirds deliver a spiritually-charged, jubilantly rhythmic collection of Christo-Afrocentric tunes that both unashamedly testify to the Lord and exuberantly rock the house.

The lead-off number, "That Same Thing," gets church time soaring with its sweet vocals and energetic rocking beat; "Judgment Day" lifts off into the ecstatic rhythm & gospel zone with heavenly falsetto vocal flights; and "Safety Zone" cools the proceedings down momentarily with its jazz tones. There's also a spine-tingling arrangement of the traditional "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" and a soul stirrer ("Change") that's as moving as anything in the Stax catalog. The omnipresent groove is supplied by Robert Cray's rhythm section, including impressive keyboardist Jimmy Pugh, who co-produced the album with singer/songwriter Bonnie Hayes. This is a must-listen for those folks who still equate heavenly music with harps and wings. (reviewed on CD)

—Dan Ouellette

GOSPEL HUMMINGBIRDS - STEPPIN' OUT (Blind Pig Records, P.O. Box 2344, San Francisco, CA 94126)

In my opinion, if God could sing he'd sound like the Gospel Hummingbirds. And when they ask, as they do on "That Same Thing": 'Does anybody here/Know something about the Lord?', the answer is obvious—they do. The Oakland-based Gospel Hummingbirds have sung together in church for twenty years, and for the past four have made the earth quake at clubs, rock concerts and blues festivals. Each of the five members has celestial vocal ability, and lead is traded between Clarence Nichols and Ray Tyler. Produced by Bonnie Hayes and keyboardist Jimmy Pugh (The Robert Cray Band), *Steppin' Out* is a mix of Hummingbird-penned songs. The only tracks not written by different combinations of the Hummingbirds are "Here I Am" and the traditional "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." For airplay, try the aforementioned "That Same Thing," "Judgment Day" and "He'll Be Your Friend." True story: One Sunday evening at New St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church in West Oakland, the congregation was rockin', rollin', waving white handkerchiefs, slapping tambourines and shouting amen along as the church choir shouted praise to the Lord. Sitting in front of me, head bowed slightly, hands jammed in between knees clenched together was a man who seemed out of place. I thought to myself, "What's that white guy doing here?" Fifteen minutes later that white guy was playing righteous keyboards for the Hummingbirds. It was Jimmy Pugh. Don't miss this one. BEVERLY MIRE



BLIND PIG

Gospel In the Night Spots

BY LEE HILDEBRAND
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

OAKLAND'S Gospel Hummingbirds were rather apprehensive the first time they stepped onto a San Francisco nightclub stage. Their mood turned to shock when members of the audience began dancing to their decidedly religious quartet-style music.

"I was nervous and couldn't hardly sing," recalled Clarence Nichols, one of the group's two lead vocalists. "I was leery about what that person with that beer can was gonna say. But I was going at it wrong, because I wasn't supposed to worry about how he was gonna act. I was supposed to have been worried about how I was gonna act, because I was there to deliver a message to him."

Originally formed in 1962, the Gospel Hummingbirds had spent two decades performing mostly at Sunday afternoon church programs. An engagement at Slim's, where they opened for the Five Blind Boys of Alabama three years ago, paved the way for more club bookings. They quickly became a fixture at other South-of-Market clubs, especially the trendy Paradise Lounge. The gospel group also has appeared at the San Francisco and Monterey blues festivals and last July traveled to Italy to sing at the Ravenna Blues Festival.

"We are rock-solid in our faith and our approach to gospel music, but we are taking our music to people who wouldn't otherwise be exposed," explained group manager and co-lead singer Roy Tyler. "This music is for all people, and you shouldn't have to go to a black church in a black neighborhood to find it."

The Hummingbirds have not only attracted secular music fans to their music, but also a number of prominent blues and rock musicians. Three members of the Robert Cray Band appear on their recently released third album, "Step-Plan' Out" on the Blind Pig label, which was co-produced by rock

singer-songwriter Bonnie Hayes and Jimmy Pugh, the keyboardist they share with Cray and Chris Isaak.

The back of the CD box carries glowing endorsements from Cray, Huey Lewis and Carl Wheeler of the funk group Tony! Toni! Tone! Last year, the Hummingbirds added background harmonies to albums by the Fabulous Thunderbirds and Lewis, and they backed Lewis in concert and appeared as extras in one of his videos.

Pugh met the Hummingbirds five years ago when he was a member of Etta James' band. A producer had hired him to play at a Hummingbirds recording session. Pugh was so taken with what he heard that he began performing church engagements with them.

"To me, the best singers and musicians in the Bay Area are in churches," he stated. "They get up in the morning and go to work, and on Sundays they sing, but they happen to sing as well or better than people that do it for a living."

"I'd do rehearsals with them in East Oakland, and I'd be almost weeping from the soaring ballad harmonies of the songs they'd written. They'd ask, 'Was that OK, Jim? Do you think that sounds

right?' It was like no big deal to them."

The group's harmonies, marked by the frequent use of high, double falsetto, are arranged by Joe Thomas, the Hummingbirds' guitarist and musical director. At 35, Thomas is the youngest member but has been with the group the longest. His father, Joseph Thomas Sr., was the group's original leader and guitarist. Joe Jr. joined as a bassist at age 6 and switched to guitar as a teenager when his father retired from performing.

Thomas' musical approach was greatly influenced by the Swan Silvertones, a prominent gospel quartet of the '50s and '60s. "They had a very silky, smooth style that I really liked," he explained.

Like Pugh, Thomas also plays with secular groups. He's worked as a bassist with John Handy, Joe Henderson, Chuck Mangione and others, and continues to accept r & b and jazz engagements.

"My gospel guitar playing enhances my other styles of playing and my other styles of playing also enhance my playing with the Hummingbirds," he stated. "I try to make the Hummingbirds music a little more challenging and en-

joyable for us to perform by adding different chord progressions so it's not so straight and traditional as gospel quartet music has been."

The Hummingbirds have refused to secularize or downplay the religious content of their lyrics, as one leading record company that had been interested in signing them had requested they do. The music they perform on the current album and in person is the same as they used to serve up in church.

TILL, some gospel music fans have been critical of the group for performing at clubs and blues festivals. "We do get a lot of scandalizing from people," admitted Nichols.

"I guess I got to go to church and sit beside them," he added. "When the preacher says, 'All Christians raise your hands,' all hands are raised. There's no work for him to do. He might as well take his seat."

"Now if you go out in a club or a park and say, 'All Christians raise your hands,' you don't see that many hands go up. Are you gonna tell me that ain't a place to be working? The Scripture says, 'Go into the hedges and high ways and work.'"

The Gospel Hummingbirds appear tonight at New George's, 842 Fourth Street in San Rafael; on Wednesday at Slim's, 333 11th Street in San Francisco; and next Sunday at Freight and Salvage, 1111 Addison Street in Berkeley.

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