

The Sounds Of Blackness
Testify: The Very Best Of The Sounds Of Blackness

(CD Booklet)

The arrival on the scene of the Sounds Of Blackness was like a breath of fresh air to a segment of record buyers and radio listeners desperate for music that was at once uplifting, joyful, celebratory, positive and soulful. By the beginning of the '90s, the fusion style known as "new jack" (a mix of R&B and hip-hop) was a major force and rap had emerged as a mainstream phenomenon in some ways displacing the dominance of traditional old school soul music. Few new artists in the black music arena were being given the opportunity to show their vocal artistry; rather, most major record labels were focusing on creating a new generation of stars who were at the very least video-friendly. That a teen or young adult could also sing in the traditional sense was a bonus; the emphasis was clearly on sex appeal, being hip and being cool.

The fact that super hitmaking producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis would choose an aggregation of thirty vocalists and ten musicians as their first act for the 1991 launch of their newly-formed Perspective Records venture was an act of courage, bravery and, in the view of hard-edged business folks and naysayers, sheer madness. The Sounds of Blackness would go on to earn two gold albums, a total of five Grammy(r) nominations and three Grammy(r) Awards in the space of their first six years, launching them as a much-loved, critically acclaimed international recording and performing group was a complete validation for the Minneapolis-based duo.

In the face of '91 chart busters like Color Me Badd's "I Wanna Sex You Up," Johnny Gill's "Wrap My Body Tight" and Freddie Jackson's "Do Me Again," how did the Sounds Of Blackness, working with Jam & Lewis and the folks at Perspective and A&M (then Jimmy and Terry's partner in their label) manage the seemingly impossible feat of causing a major stir with the group's musically diverse, genre-defying debut album, *The Evolution Of Gospel*? Simply, it was the sheer power of the music.

When "Optimistic," the first single co-penned by Jam, Lewis and Sounds' founder and leader Gary Hines, hit the urban airwaves and dance floors from London to Los Angeles, it was just irresistible. When journalists and tastemakers delved into the album and discovered gems like "Your Wish Is My Command" and the superb "The Pressure" they ranted and raved. And, witnessing a special performance of the Sounds at A&M's Hollywood lot just prior to the release of *The Evolution Of Gospel* was the icing on the cake. The word was out: Jam & Lewis, already acclaimed for their multi-million selling work with Janet Jackson and hits with Alexander O'Neal (a former member of the Sounds), the S.O.S. Band and Cherrelle, among others, were defying the odds and giving the music world something truly special with their first Perspective release.

"Honestly," Dr. Gary Hines recalls, "the [initial] marketing costs and tour support we got came out of Jimmy and Terry's pockets. A&M was less than thrilled that ours was the first Perspective release. They weren't sure about [the marketability of] the name,

about the expanse of the material, going from spirituals and work songs to gospel, blues and R&B. We were not known nationally or internationally and the question was, 'how are we going to market this?' The truth is that there had been an amazing amount of groundwork that Jimmy and Terry had done, getting celebrity quotes from people like Whoopi Goldberg and Quincy Jones. Donnie Simpson was using our first single "Optimistic" as the theme for his BET show "Video Soul." A&M was caught off-guard by the orders they got for the album in the first week."

The initial reaction to *The Evolution Of Gospel* opened a new chapter in the story of the Sounds Of Blackness. The group was formed as an outgrowth of the Macalester College Black Choir from St. Paul, Minnesota, under the tutelage of New York-born Hines, who assumed directorship of the then-two-year-old choir in 1971. Expanding beyond traditional gospel music, the innovative choir focused on mounting original musical productions that reflected the entire expanse of African-American-derived music. After a name change in the early '70s, the Sounds recorded three albums (*Images*, *Images 2* and *The Night Before Christmas: A Musical Fantasy*) for local distribution and sale at their performances of such shows like *Africa To America*, *The Soul Of The '60s* and *Music For Martin*.

Being based in Minneapolis/St. Paul, it was inevitable that Jam and Lewis, former members of the Time (Prince's early '80s band) would witness performances by the Sounds. After one such show, the pair asked if the group would sing on a fall '88 session for O'Neal for what would be his Christmas album, "My Gift To You." As Hines recalls, "We had been on many of the same stages with Jimmy and Terry. We did one song with Alex for his album and they asked us to do another. On the way out of the door, Jimmy asked us for some paperwork...and that's when they found that we weren't signed to a record label..."

Enter Janet Jackson, in Minneapolis to work on her all-important follow-up to the groundbreaking 1986 album *Control*. On a winter '89 night off from intensive studio sessions on what would be the *Rhythm Nation* album, Jam and Lewis took Jackson to see the Sounds in *Music For Martin*, a tribute to slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. She was bowled over by the group's powerful performance and urged Jimmy and Terry to record the Sounds. At the time, the production whiz team had begun talks with A&M about forming their own label. By the summer of 1989, the Sounds—who had been featured on the soundtrack of the movie *Batman*, courtesy of Twin Cities' superstar Prince—were laying tracks for *The Evolution Of Gospel*, which was based on a two-hour stage production that the group had been doing in Minneapolis. The process took almost eighteen months and in the spring of '91, Jam and Lewis were ready to unleash the Sounds on an unsuspecting world.

"For us, it's not just about record sales but wondering whether we've moved music forward," Jimmy Jam noted in a 1992 interview with Britain's *Blues & Soul* magazine. "With the [Perspective] label, we're trying to make a statement..." Using their onstage musicians as the studio band augmented by special guests such as Lance Alexander from Perspective group Lo-Key, the Sounds were almost finished recording when Jam &

Lewis decided to add three tracks. Vocalist Ann Nesby, the main lead singer on all three songs, recalls, "It started out when I was doing rough vocals for the tune 'Your Wish Is My Command.' Originally, the idea was to have (then-A&M recording artist) Vesta do guest vocals with us. When Terry Lewis heard what I was doing, he decided we were not going to send the song to Vesta and shortly afterwards, he and Jimmy did 'Optimistic,' 'Testify' and 'The Pressure' and I was asked to sing on the three tunes..."

Nesby, a native of Joliet, Illinois, sang in the off-Broadway musical, "Sing Hallelujah" in the mid-'80s and was considering a solo career when her sister Shirley Marie Graham (a member of the Sounds) invited her to visit Minneapolis during rehearsals for The Night Before Christmas show. As Nesby recalled in a 1993 Blues & Soul interview, "After the rehearsal, Gary told the rest of the Sounds, 'Not only is Ann going to read but she is going to sing a few lines a cappella for the group.' Little did I know that was the procedure for auditioning new members..."

Nesby became a member of the ensemble in 1988 and stayed with the group until the 1996 release of her Perspective solo debut album. Unquestionably, her powerful soul-filled upfront vocals helped establish an identifiable sound for the group but, she notes, "The idea was always to pull out different voices from the Sounds and I remember that one of the original goals was to have the group be a springboard for different members to develop as singers, songwriters and producers. From the time we did the sessions for 'Optimistic,' Jimmy and Terry had asked me to sign with Perspective as a solo artist. It was just a matter of time as to when we would work on my first record..."

The immediate reaction to "Optimistic" and to The Evolution Of Gospel led to a flurry of activity. The group went to various cities and performed at local churches, high schools, prisons, colleges, and did a number of in-store and on-air performances. "It was really broad grass roots exposure and promotion on every level," recalls Hines. "Jimmy and Terry helped fund a lot of what we did themselves..." An SRO performance at London's Hammersmith Odeon in the summer of '91 was a highpoint. Nesby remembers, "The audiences in the U.K. were off the chain! They had us sing harder than ever...it was a whole different experience..."

In the fall of 1991, after the Sounds had performed at the annual IAAAM (International Association of African-American Music) conference, "We were approached by Luther Vandross' representatives about being on his Power Of Love tour," says Nesby. That fall, the Sounds were getting standing ovations night after night on shows with Vandross, comedian Sinbad and singer Lisa Fisher. The net effect of the exposure to national audiences was that The Evolution Of Gospel was on its way to gold status and in February of 1992, the group nabbed its first Grammy(r) Award. "In addition to that, I got to meet Aretha Franklin, my all-time favorite singer and we sang behind Aretha and Michael McDonald and then behind Luther on the show itself," says Nesby. "It was more than anyone could bargain for..."

Before 1991 ended, the group had contributed to the successful Mo' Money soundtrack with the cut "Joy" and by February of 1992, Jam, Lewis and Hines were considering their

next move. "We had just finished a black college tour and we decided we should do a Christmas record as our second album," Hines states. "Jimmy and Terry knew about the production we had been doing called *The Night Before Christmas*. We based the album on the play..." There were a couple of additional tunes including Nesby's "It's Christmas Time" and the R&B chart hit "Soul Holidays," (co-penned with Jam & Lewis and Jimmy Wright); as with *The Evolution Of Gospel*, the majority of the material for the album was written by the multi-talented Hines.

In 1992, the group was featured on the Grammy(r)-winning *Handel's Messiah: A Soulful Celebration* and performed at President Clinton's Inauguration. "We were doing a juggling act between television appearances, live performances and studio work. We were crazed out of our minds with all that was going on but so euphoric..." says Hines, who had created a core group of fifteen vocalists and five musicians as the nucleus for the Sounds' live shows. The release of *The Night Before Christmas: A Musical Fantasy* met with critical acclaim and the album achieved Top 20 R&B chart status, re-promoted a year later and once again making the best-selling album listings.

By December 1993, Hines was completing work with Jam and Lewis on the group's third ambitious undertaking. "We had been doing *Africa To America* as a play and we wanted to get as close as we could to replicating it in the studio. We were concerned that there had been too much emphasis placed on the gospel aspect of what the Sounds did," says Hines. "Jimmy and Terry were very sensitive to that and they were like, 'you're an Earth, Wind & Fire...you do jazz, blues, everything.' With recording *Africa To America*, we wanted to do a few things, making the message universal, crystallizing the [musical] scope of the group and shifting away from the primary gospel focus. We also wanted to bring more of our vocal talent out front with people like Billy Steele, [the late] Renee McColl, Big Jim Wright, Cori Cotton..."

Nesby did lead vocals on charted singles like "I Believe" and "I'm Going All The Way" but it was Wright (who established himself as a producer with Flyte Tyme and beyond with his work with Patti LaBelle, Chante Moore, Mary J. Blige and Yolanda Adams among others) who was the dominant voice on the Al Green-flavored "Everything Is Gonna Be Alright." Says Nesby, "The album puts it in a whole new realm. One of my favorites from that album was the song "Black Butterfly" and all in all, the album showed a lot of the talent of the other artists in the group."

Including "African Medley," a poem by Langston Hughes ("You've Taken My Blues and Gone"), a rendition of the Billie Holiday classic "Strange Fruit" and standout vocal performances on tunes like "The Harder They Are, The Bigger They Fall" and "The Lord Will Make A Way," the third album by the Sounds Of Blackness was both an artistic accomplishment and a sales success. Not only did it yield four R&B hit singles, but it also would achieve gold status and earn the group two Stellar Awards, two NAACP Image Award nominations and a Soul Train Music Award.

1994 was a banner year for the group, which marked the first of what would be an almost annual visit to Japan as well as touring with BeBe & CeCe Winans. The highlight of the year undoubtedly was performing in London, Acapulco, Chicago, New York,

Berlin and Washington, DC, for the World Cup. Hines: "We recorded 'Gloryland,' the theme for the games with Darryl Hall and in the summer of '94, we traveled wherever the games were taking place. It was a great experience for us." For Nesby, it was also a profound experience: "I remember flying to Germany and meeting my sister at the center of the plane. We didn't speak but we were both feeling overwhelmed. Who would ever have thought that these two little girls from the projects would be traveling the world and sharing our music. Without the Sounds Of Blackness, I might not have had the opportunity to do that..."

In 1995, the group continued its world travels and also recorded "Children Of The World," a song co-written by Nona Hendryx and Jason Miles who produced the track on The Sounds for a Lightyear Records' album entitled "People" that celebrated the 50th anniversary of the United Nations. While the group did not perform at the U.N., its members were featured on a Christmas At The White House special and by the time 1996 rolled around, Hines was preparing for a fourth Sounds Of Blackness, this time without Nesby who had finished work on her first solo album. Time For Healing reflected a desire on the part of Jam & Lewis "to groom us more as producers which is why different members of the group-Levi Seacer, Billy Steele and I-did the production on the album," says Hines. From a concept standpoint, "there were a lot of situations worldwide which seemed to be calling for healing. The idea of healing was in the air..."

Time For Healing, released in May 1997, included some special guest appearances: famed rap duo Salt-N-Pepa contributed "Hold On (Don't Let Go)" which was produced by the team's Cheryl James; and rapper Craig Mack was featured on "Spirit," a Top 30 R&B hit. Other key tracks included "Hold On (A Change Is Comin')," which still receives a great deal of recurrent airplay, a version of the O'Jays '70s classic "Love Train" and "Love Will Never Change." Once again, the album reflected the amazing musical diversity of the group with everything from a Sly & The Family Stone remake ("You Can Make It If You Try") to Antonio Carlos Jobim's "So Far Away" (with additional lyrics from lead vocalist Patricia Lacy).

Following the release of the album, Perspective's contract with A&M ended, leaving the Sounds temporarily without a recording home. That was remedied in 1999 when the group recorded Reconciliation for former Prince sideman Bobby Z's Zinc Records. By that time, Ann Nesby-who had performed on her last date with the Sounds on a Japanese tour in 1996-had started work on a second solo project which she is planning to release on her own label, It's Time Child Records, in late 2001. Meanwhile, the Sounds Of Blackness are completing sessions for a 2002 release through an as-yet-undisclosed major label. Nesby reflects that her years with the Sounds were "an amazing opportunity to learn. And there was nothing like the bond of love and fellowship between us. The presence of all my friends and family was a great way for me to start my career." For Hines, the continuing work of the Sounds Of Blackness represents "a dream come true. It's been a training ground, a springboard, a workshop, a whirlwind but a dream realized and brought to fruition by blood, sweat and tears." And, we might add, some unforgettable music. Enjoy!

David Nathan
July 2001
(a/k/a "British Ambassador Of Soul")
Author, "The Soulful Divas" (Billboard Books, 1999)

Sounds Of Blackness
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(CD Booklet)

1) Optimistic
(Gary Hines - Jimmy Jam - Terry Lewis)
R&B #3 / charted 5-25-91
Produced by Gary Hines, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis
From the album The Evolution Of Gospel (1991)

2) The Pressure (Part 1)
(Gary Hines - Jimmy Jam - Terry Lewis)
R&B #16 / charted 9-14-91
Produced by Gary Hines, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis
From the album The Evolution Of Gospel (1991)

3) Testify
(Gary Hines - Jimmy Jam - Terry Lewis)
R&B #12 / charted 1-25-92
Produced by Gary Hines, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis
From the album The Evolution Of Gospel (1991)

4) Your Wish Is My Command
(Tim Wortham - Gary Hines - Tony Haynes)
Produced by Gary Hines
Executive Producers: Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis
From the album The Evolution Of Gospel (1991)

5) Joy
(Lance Alexander - Tony Tolbert)
R&B #72 / Charted 1-9-93
Produced by Lance Alexander, Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis
From the original soundtrack album Mo' Money (1992)

6) I Believe
(James Harris III - Terry Lewis - Gregory Webster - Andrew Noland - Walter Morrison -
Marshall Jones - Leroy Bonner - Ralph Middlebrook - Marvin R. Pierce - Norman
Napier)
R&B #15 / charted 4-2-94

Contains samples from "Pain" performed by The Ohio Players/courtesy of Westbound Records

(G. Webster - A. Noland - W. Morrison - M. Jones - L. Bonner - R. Middlebrook - M.R. Pierce - N. Napier)

Produced & Arranged by Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

From the album Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum (1994)

7) Everything Is Gonna Be Alright

(James Harris III - Terry Lewis - Burt Bacharach - Hal David)

R&B #29 / charted 7-23-94

Contains samples of "Walk On By" performed by Isaac Hayes/courtesy of Fantasy, Inc. (Burt Bacharach - Hal David)

Produced and Arranged by Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

From the album Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum (1994)

8) I'm Going All The Way

(Ann Bennett-Nesby - Jimmy Wright)

R&B #39 / charted 12-24-99

Contains samples from "Impeach The President" Performed by the Honeydrippers/courtesy of Tuff City Records

(R. Hammond)

Produced by Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

From the album Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum (1994)

9) Black Butterfly

(James Harris III - Terry Lewis)

RB #86 / charted 8-19-95

Produced & Arranged by Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

From the album Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum (1994)

10) The Harder They Are, The Bigger They Fall

(James Harris III - Terry Lewis)

CHART POSITION XXXXXX

Produced & Arranged by Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

From the album Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum (1994)

11) The Lord Will Make A Way

(Jimmy Jam - Terry Lewis - Jimmy Wright)

CHART POSITION XXXXXX

Produced & Arranged by Jimmy Jam & Terry Lewis

From the album Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum (1994)

12) Spirit - featuring Craig Mack

(Levi Seacer - Billy Steele - Craig Mack)

R&B #29 / charted 5-3-97

Produced by Billy Steele & Levi Seacer

Executive Producers: Gary Hines & Henley Regisford, Jr.

From the album Time For Healing (1997)

13) Love Will Never Change
(Billy Steele - Levi Seacer - David Hughes)
Produced & Arranged by Billy Steele & Levi Seacer
Executive Producers: Gary Hines & Henley Regisford, Jr.
Co-Executive Producer: Leon Saunders
From the album Time For Healing (1997)

14) Love Train
(Kenneth Gamble - Leon Huff)
Produced by Joe Powell, Billy Steele & Levi Seacer
Executive Producers: Gary Hines & Henley Regisford, Jr.
Co-Executive Producer: Leon Saunders
From the album Time For Healing (1997)

15) Hold On (Change Is Comin')
(Billy Steele - Levi Seacer - Willie Clarke - Clarence Reid - Roger Troutman - Larry Troutman)
R&B #22 / charted 11-15-97
Contains elements from A Clean Up Woman (Willie Clarke - Clarence Reid) and elements from Ado Wa Diddy (Roger Troutman - Larry Troutman)
Produced & Arranged by Billy Steele & Levi Seacer
Executive Producers: Gary Hines & Henley Regisford, Jr.
Co-Executive Producer: Leon Saunders
From the album Time For Healing (1997)

16) Soul Holidays
(James Harris III - Terry Lewis - James Wright - Ann Bennett-Nesby - Jamecia Bennett)
R&B #55 / charted 12-26-92
Produced by Terry Lewis, Jimmy Jam, Bradley Yost & Carrie Harrington
From the album The Night Before Christmas: A Musical Fantasy (1992)

Also Available by Sounds Of Blackness:
Africa To America (314 549 006-2/4)
The Evolution Of Gospel (289 681 000-2/4)
Time For Healing (314 548 928-2/4)

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(CD Inlay)

- 1) Optimistic
- 2) The Pressure
- 3) Testify
- 4) Your Wish Is My Command
- 5) Joy
- 6) I Believe
- 7) Everything Is Gonna Be Alright
- 8) I'm Going All The Way
- 9) Black Butterfly
- 10) The Harder They Are, The Bigger They Fall
- 11) The Lord Will Make A Way
- 12) Spirit - featuring Craig Mack
- 13) Love Will Never Change
- 14) Love Train
- 15) Hold On (Change Is Comin')
- 16) Soul Holidays

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Sticker copy

All The Hits From 1991-1997!
Includes "Optimistic," "Testify" & "I Believe"
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