



MARCH, 1981

PASSAGE

Louis Johnson, the bass-playing brother of the Brothers Johnson, has made his production debut with a soulful, celebrative album called *Passage*. Louis produced the album and collaborated in its other aspects with his wife, Valerie, and their close friend, Richard Heath, the percussionist in the Brothers' band. The music ranges from roaring, punchy R&B to country-tinged ballads, but there is what will be for some fans an unexpected new wrinkle. Richard explains: "Most younger people buy records because of the musical beat and not necessarily for the lyrical content. Later on, after they have gotten into the music, they start listening to the words. But the unusual thing about *Passage* is that every song on the album is expressing our love for God the Father through Jesus Christ. That's a message that has not really been exposed like it should in the secular market.

For music fans, especially those enamored with the "party" side of the Brothers music, the idea of the "musical ministry" brings to mind an image of lifeless piety, preachiness, and earnest but poorly-made records. *Passage* is anything but that. From the explosive, toe-tapping energy of its opening cut, "Have You Heard the Word," to its closing, the album fairly vibrates with joy and wonder, and Louis' production frames it all with vigor and grace. For these musicians, the idea was not to preach but to celebrate the happiness they have found. "All we're trying to do is create music that is putting across something more positive than the norm," said Richard, prompting Val to comment: "We're not saying there isn't any positive music out there. Songs, for instance, about the love between a man and his woman are certainly positive. It's a matter of going a step further and writing about not what you can have in this life, but what you can have for all eternity."

Passage is an album that can only be called the most contemporary gospel music in the world. In fact, it challenges the very definition of the term. Heath again explains: "The traditional black gospel sound was fine in its time. It blessed and saved many, many people; but times and people have changed. In order to get the message through, you have to present it in a way people can relate to. The younger crowd is just not into choir-type music. It's the contemporary sound that touches them. That's why we wanted *Passage* to be as hip and professional as any record out there. God is going to use all kinds of music to get His message across."

The inspiration for this project came from the deep Christian faith of Louis, Richard and Val. Richard found Christ first and brought the message to the others. "Ricky and I were both searchers," Louis said. "We'd read about everything from Scientology to astrology, both western and Chinese. Finally, we ran into the Bible and found a lot of truth and peace in it. It was the only thing I'd read that said, 'This is *THE* way.'"

Heath has been with the Brothers Johnson band since its beginning five years ago and has enjoyed the exhilarating success they have had. He felt, however, a need for something more. "The Creator," he said, "is not going to ask you about how many gold albums you had on your wall or how many fancy cars you bought. He's going to ask you about the number of people to whom you proclaimed His Word. *Passage* is our musical ministry."

In reference to combining his career and secular music Louis said, "At first, it was difficult. I asked myself, 'how am I going to do this without being hypocritical.' I decided the way was to write songs about good things. The Brothers Johnson has never been an anti-God group. We even had a note on our last album that said, 'Stop messin' with dope.' To me every song you write doesn't necessarily have to have God or the name Jesus in it to make it a good, clean song. I feel as long as the message is a positive and constructive one, that's what makes a good song."

One of the most compelling aspects of *Passage* has nothing to do with religion but a lot to do with talent. Valerie Johnson has been Louis' wife for five years, and sang back-up with the Brothers. She emerges on this album as a singer to be reckoned with. She has all the aplomb of a consummate professional, and tremendous fervor. And on top of all that, she's now expecting their third child. As a child in Los

(over please)



Angeles, she used to memorize record albums—her favorites were Sarah Vaughan, and the Mickey Mouse Club—and later sang with the high school band. She and Louis first met when they were twelve and then met again eight years later when, shall we say, they saw each other in a different light.

As for working with her husband as producer, she smiled when she said: "Well, we both learned more about each other through the experience. There were difficult times while we were making the record, but you have to stand back and not get emotional. That's hard though with someone who you're living with twenty-four hours a day."

Val, Richard and Louis all agreed that this was the easiest album any of them had ever made. "There was not one wasted day," Louis said, "and recording was broken up by a Brothers tour. It was all calm, unpressured and smooth."

"The music expresses the joy we now feel in our lives," said Richard. "We're not trying to shove anything down anybody's throat or preach at them or condemn anything. For us, it is just sharing with people who are willing to listen. If it's not your thing, it's not your thing." Val, Richard and Louis are all very warm, tolerant people and used many musicians in making *Passage* who do not share their fervent faith. "Nobody's ever listened to a record," joked Richard, "and said, 'Now, *that* sounds like a Christian drummer!'"

Passage is an excellent album by any standard: It pleases the ear, the feet and the heart. The rewards it offers in this world alone are more than enough to recommend it.