

A&M To Bow Sounds Of Blackness' Latest 30-Member Act Calls For Peace With 'Time For Healing'

■ BY SHAWNEE SMITH

NEW YORK—Even though Gary Holzenthal, owner of Odyssey Records in New Orleans, has not yet heard any tracks from Sounds Of Blackness' fourth album, "Time For Healing," he plans to amply stock his shelves with the May 6 A&M release.

"With the track record they have, it wouldn't be in my best interest not to stock this record," says Holzenthal, who has three stores in the New Orleans area. "They have been very successful with their first records, and I'm looking for this other album to be just like the first [ones]."

Holzenthal's enthusiasm is not dampened by the fact that the 30-member act has undergone some significant changes on this latest set: Ann Nesby, former lead singer for the group, did not contribute to the new album, and producers Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis, who helmed each of the act's previous albums, are also absent.

"I'm not sure that many customers knew that Jam and Lewis even produced the first albums, because it doesn't sound like a typical Jam and Lewis sound," he says. "And I would hate to think that an individual leaving a group of so many would dictate the success or failure of the record."

On the other hand, LeBron Joseph, PD/music director at R&B adult WYLD New Orleans, admits that the absence of Nesby made him a little skeptical at first about playing the act's first single, "Spirit."

"Sounds Of Blackness has always been a good outlet for us—their music has always been spiritually themed, in a very contemporary sort of vein, and of course the vocals and tracks have always been good," he says. "So I was a little apprehensive at first because Ann is not part of the project."

But, adds Joseph, "it was a pleasant surprise when the record began

to move on its own, and response from the listeners has been positive."

On the new album, Sounds Of Blackness music director Gary Hines, assistant director Billy Steel, and band leader Levi Seacer (formerly of the New Power Generation) are controlling the production reins previously held by Jam and Lewis.

In Nesby's absence, lead vocal duties, which were always shared, are



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divided among numerous members, including, most notably, Coree Cotton.

Despite the many changes, the album is as uplifting, spirited, diverse, and musically sound as anything the ensemble has ever produced.

"We have a saying: 'Once a sound, always a sound,'" says Hines. "We've known Jimmy and Terry for most of our 25 years and when [they] first signed us [to Perspective], they said, 'We don't want you to change, we want to present you to the world just the way you are.'" (Sounds Of Blackness later followed Jam and Lewis to A&M.)

Thus far, each of the albums the ensemble has recorded with Jam and Lewis has been derived from a play or musical production the group staged throughout the years: 1991's "The Evolution Of Gospel" (which has

sold 300,000 units, according to SoundScan) and 1994's "Africa To America: The Journey Of The Drum" (330,300 units) began life as concert productions, while 1992's "The Night Before Christmas—A Musical Fantasy" (120,000 units) was derived from a full-blown play.

"Time For Healing" marks the group's first original work recorded for A&M. It also helps mark another milestone: the ensemble's 25th anniversary.

Prior to its introduction to the pop world, Sounds Of Blackness spent much of the '70s touring extensively, performing mostly classic gospel songs in colleges and churches around the States. During the '80s, Hines began to focus the act toward original theatrical and musical productions like "Music For Martin" and "Soul Of The '60s," among others. It was at that point when people like Jam and Lewis began to take notice, and the opportunity to record their original material presented itself.

As the title implies, the new album serves as the group's universal call for peace and self-healing. "It's our cry out to the entire world to stop the madness and come to our senses and come together," says Hines.

"Just looking at the world today and [over] the past year or two, witnessing the breakdown from peace in the Middle East, in Northern Ireland, the Oklahoma City bombings, the Atlanta Olympic bombings—we were on that same stage performing the night before [the bombing], so it really touched home," Hines says. "[Looking at] what happened to Tupac [Shakur], Biggie [Smalls], the situation in urban America and all over the world, it seems like we are constantly being bombarded with pain, so we are lashing out in pain. [We figured] that if open wounds are causing the propagation of pain and keeping it continuous, then it's time for healing. We

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are on a path to destruction, and we're making our cry, our prayer through music."

In an attempt to touch all listeners, "Time For Healing" features the group's usual spiritual, gospel-like tracks, along with a few blues numbers and a jazz track with organ player Jack McDuff. Among other highlights are a cover of the O'Jays' "Love Train"; a rendition of the Pointer Sisters' "Yes We Can Can," titled "U Can Make It If U Try"; and two tracks with Salt-N-Pepa.

Translating the album's words to action, A&M is promoting a "Day of Universal Healing" May 6 at U.S. radio and retail.

"We're using the opportunity to bring focus to what we, as individuals, can do to heal our corner of the world," says Thornell Jones, A&M's director of product development (U.S.).

Stations and retailers are being sent packages that include elements tied into the Day of Universal Healing, such as the album, candles, and signage.

The ensemble will also embark on a Day of Healing mini-tour to major cities during the album release week, with a portion of the performance proceeds benefiting various charities.

The promotion is also being worked at gospel radio, bookstores, and video outlets.

The single went to radio April 1 and its clip was serviced to video outlets March 17. A&M also serviced salons and African-American bookstores with

CDs April 9 for in-store play.

Though Jones believes that format "walls" might prevent the message from crossing over to mainstream radio, the print campaign will include the major dailies and mainstream magazines. A story on the act is scheduled to run in USA Today, and a performance on a major TV morning show is in the works. The single will be poly-bagged with the June/July issue of Vibe

magazine as part of the label's "Urban Renewal" sampler.

Plans for the Day of Universal Healing have not yet been developed internationally, but the single was made available at radio internationally March 24. Sounds Of Blackness is scheduled to tour Japan in July.

A&M is also making "Time For Healing" available through Christian mail-order catalogs.