



Metro/Religion

Urban gospel demonstrates its important strengths in J2K

CONTRIBUTED STORY
FOR THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Since the mid-1980s when young Gospel groups such as The Winans, Commissioned and BeBe & CeCe began to add their unique sounds to the canon of gospel music, the voice of Urban Gospel has become an increasingly important force in the Gospel music marketplace. While those artists moved from the fringes of Contemporary Gospel to carve out a niche for Urban Gospel, they also spawned a new wave of artists that virtually exploded onto the scene throughout the decade of the 1990s. Many of the very special artists formed in the birthing chambers of that period have come together, loaning their vocal, songwriting and production gifts to create one spectacular event album—J2K. The thirteen original songs included on this project reflect the essence of the timeless message of Jesus Christ, retold in a musical language that is entirely timely.

Men of Standard ("Love") Lowell Pye, Isaac Carree, Bryan Pierce and Michael Bacon were accomplished in the gospel community as individuals years before coming together as an ensemble. Isaac and Lowell were former lead singers with John P. Kee's New Life Community Choir, while Bryan served as a youth minister with Bishop Paul S. Morton, Presiding Bishop of the Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship. Michael sang in a number of local groups in an around Dallas, Texas. When they combined their musical and ministry gifting as Men of Standard, they became one of the most promising new artists of the 1990s.

Building on the rich history of such legendary male vocal groups as Commissioned and The Winans, Men of Standard have firmly established their own place in Urban Gospel history. In just over 3 years as national recording artists, their albums Men of Standard and Feels Like Rain, have spawned numerous hits, including "Winter," and "In Your Will." They have also earned the respect of audiences across the nation appearing in 2 major Gospel tours—Power 98 and Shout 2000—with such well-known artists as Yolanda Adams and Fred Hammond. This year the group won 2 Stellar Gospel Music Awards, including Group/Duo of the Year.

Dawkins & Dawkins ("Enough Said") Since 1993, the brother duo known as Dawkins & Dawkins have been regarded as one of the foremost Urban Gospel artists in the business. Their three albums have yielded such Urban classics as "Everybody Needs Somebody," "Word Up," and "Wrapped Up, Tied Up."

Beyond their work as vocalists, the Dawkins brothers are in an elite category of young songwriter/producers with the uncanny ability to make hits for themselves and other artists. Having begun their industry education as support musicians and vocalists for Fred Hammond's Commissioned in the early 1990s, their current success is not surprising.

While always maintaining a hectic travel schedule of their own headline dates, this year, the brothers were featured in their first major tour, Shout 2000, with Fred Hammond, Yolanda Adams, Donnie McClurkin and Men of Standard.

Anointed ("Help Him Stand") For the better part of the past decade, Anointed has developed a reputation for premier vocals and a unique ability to move seamlessly between a wide variety of musical genres. In four albums they have proved their diversity by interspersing cuts that alternately lean toward Pop, Gospel and R&B influences.

Da'dra Crawford Greathouse, Steve Crawford and "Nee-C" Walls have amassed four dove Awards, two Grammy nominations, two Stellar awards, and numerous chart-topping singles. Their unparalleled vocal and songwriting ability is only superseded by their performance prowess. In recent years the trio has



appeared on several high-profile tours, including the "Big Voice tour", the "Christmas Celebration Tour" and the "Emmanuel Tour." They are currently being featured along with Christian artists, Avalon and Nicole Nordeman on the "A Tour."

Commissioned ("Before It All Falls Down") Gospel's premier male vocal ensemble, Commissioned stands alone as the musical group with the greatest impact on the sound of Urban music today. Combining their unique up-front vocals with live instruments and a huge catalogue of classic songs written and produced by the group's members, the 6-man band from Detroit, MI is credited by many prominent artists in both the Gospel and R&B arenas as their primary influence. Artists like Boyz II Men and Brian McKnight have openly credited the group with the origins of their styles.

In recent years Commissioned has become somewhat of an institution, springboarding many of its lead vocalists into legendary solo careers. Fred Hammond, Keith Staten, Marvin Sapp and Montrel Darrett, have all passed through Commissioned's hallow halls, landing in the hearts of music listeners of all ages, and further honing their special musical gifts to expand the boundaries of gospel music.

Today the sound of Commissioned has been tailored for the next generation. Led by founding members Mitchell Jones and Karl Read, their latest album, Time & Seasons features the notable talents of new members Marcus Cole and Chris Poole. The new Commissioned is poised to re-ignite the excitement and appeal that have made the group one of today's most endearing Gospel talents.

Nancey Jackson ("Praise Awaits") A native of Newark, N.J., Nancey began singing in the choir at Saint John's M.E.R. Church, where her father is the pastor. She recalls her years in the church: "As a preacher's kid, I was raised in the church and knew the church experience before I got saved. I knew when to lift my hands, get my shout on, and respond when I was supposed to respond. But, I didn't have a true relationship with the Lord."

As Nancey grew, she became inspired to develop a closer relationship with the Lord: "I felt hopeless and down in the dumps. But the holy spirit revealed to me that God called me to do His work." That revelation pervades her two solo

projects, 1997's "Free (Yes, I'm Free)", and Relationship with released in 1999. While the flavor of her music is reflective of late 1990's Urban rhythms, her vocal styling carries the unmistakable essence of church Gospel.

Duawne & Tiffany ("Everythang (It's In Me)") Duawne Starling and Tiffany Plamer have graced album projects and Gospel stages around the world with their smooth sound. As session vocalists both together and individually, they have appeared on numerous chart-topping projects with artists including BeBe Winans, Donnie McClurkin, Angle & Debbie, Sandi Patty, Twila Paris, Andrae Crouch, Yolanda Adams and Carmen. As featured background vocalists, they have traveled around the world for artists including CeCe Winans, and Donnie McClurkin.

The duo met while both were students at Oakwood College, the school that served as the seeding ground for such phenomenal talent as Brian McKnight, Take 6 and Virtue. Soon after meeting, they discovered they were in fact cousins.

Their musical skills have proven to be as complementary as their relationship. As songwriters, arrangers and vocal producers, they have a heart to inspire their generation with a message of hope, reflecting their lifestyle of faith in Christ.

Lamar Campbell & Spirit of Praise In the two short years since the release of their self-titled debut album in 1998,

Lamar Campbell & Spirit of Praise have established themselves as one of the bright stars on the horizon of Contemporary Gospel music. While that first album yielded the soon-to-be-classic "He Won't Let You Down," their sophomore release I Need Your Spirit proved they were more than a one-hit choir.

With a sure hand for writing hit songs and a dynamic gift for praise and worship, Campbell is quickly becoming one of the most important young chorale leaders in the industry. His two Stellar Gospel Music Award nominations for 1999's I Need Your Spirit (Contemporary Male Vocalist of the Year and Male Vocalist of the Year) highlighted the strength of his special musical gift behind the microphone as well as in front of the choir.

Kim Burrell ("Woman") The daughter of a pastor/musician father and an evangelist/singer mother, Kim Burrell began her musical career with the Greater Emanuel Church of God in Christ Choir of Houston, Texas. After years ministering in churches and performing on numerous recordings, including Reverend James Cleveland's Gospel Music Workshop of America, Kim recorded her first solo project, Try Me Again in 1995. That project earned her a bit of a cult following among young Gospel listeners, who responded to the album and promoted the project by word of mouth.

With the 1999 release of her major label debut, Everlasting Life, the Gospel community at large got a taste

of Kin's jazzy vocal style and soulful passion. They quickly embraced her. This year her sophomore project was awarded a Stellar Gospel Music Award for Contemporary Female Vocalist of the Year.

Montrel Darrett ("Save a Seat") From the time he was a boy, Montrel Darrett has recorded and performed as a professional artist. First as lead vocalist with his family group, the True Notes, and in later years as the energy behind such well-known

artists as John P. Kee & the New Life Community Choir and Commissioned, Darrett honed his musical and ministry skills.

With the release of his debut solo album, Chronicles of the Soul, in 1999, Darrett carved a unique niche for himself as a songwriter, producer and vocalist. Drawing from influences as varied as Rock, Blues, R&B, Hip-hop and traditional Gospel, he created a truly memorable sound destined to influence the next generation of Urban artists.

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