



Jones Family Singers
By Michael Corcoran

It had been a pretty stressed-out week, with Hurricane Rita threatening to postpone the fourth annual Austin City Limits Music Fest in September 2005. Just three weeks after Katrina, no one was taking a chance, so the largest evacuation in U.S. history—more than three million people—was headed inland.

But the 180 mph winds that had uprooted trees near the Gulf Coast took a turn before Central Texas and instead of a storm, Austin got a heat wave, with temps reaching 108 degrees. I'd come early to Zilker Park that Friday, more to report the situation for the Austin American Statesman, where I worked as pop music critic, than to review bands.

At just past noon, I sought refuge from the burning sun at the only stage with a roof that extended over the public. My program told me that a group from Bay City, Texas called the Jones Family Singers had just come onstage. An older gentleman with a James Brown step to his drawl introduced the group as his five daughters, two sons and a grandson. Then 12-year-old drummer Ian Wade kicked it off with a fierce snare, the sisters in matching lime green shirts and jeans skirts started swaying as if being moved by a spiritual wind, and for the next hour I was transfixed. They were a forest of soul with a live volcano in the middle, and when Alexis Jones reared back and erupted with all the passion a voice could hold, I felt as if I was watching the Caravans with Shirley Caesar in the 1960s. In an era when popular religious music often sounds like reworded Mariah Carey songs, this family band took it back to the days when the songs of praise were the soundtrack to a struggle against oppression. The JFS packed the power of vintage black gospel, a style I thought lived on only in records.

When the Jones Family played South by Southwest the next year, *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* music critic Chris Reimenschneider said they rocked harder than any young guitar band he'd seen at the fest.

Good black gospel is music's highest power. Get past the lyrics and you'll hear all the passion, all the love, all the supernatural talent that says "tell me there's not a God."

I'm a lifelong rock and roll fan, with Chuck Berry a part of my biology. But in the mid-'90s, I started waking up to find the Soul Stirrers, not the Rolling Stones, the Staple Singers, not AC/DC, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, not Prince, in my CD player after a night of partying. You know those times when you're playing music and you just want to keep adding power, energy in that hour before the heap? The unbridled jubilation of black gospel was becoming my night-melter of choice.

But I thought my chance of ever experiencing that music live had passed me by. All the greats were dead or dying. And the best music reinforced the idea that what happens in church, stays in church.

The Jones Family had been singing and playing gospel music on the COGIC (Church of God In Christ) circuit for 20 years before they torched the groove fields of ACL like it was gospel night at the Apollo. All the trepidation I had coming through the gates of Zilker that morning was a burden lifted. "Amid the day's sweat, you can be sure a few tears welled up," I wrote, in a review that just broke out like all that dancing in front of the stage. "It just didn't seem possible that music could be more passionate, more joyful, more of a reason to come out on a hot and windy morning."

That was eight years ago and I've seen the Jones Family Singers dozens of times since, in church and in nightclubs, at festivals in front of thousands and in big, empty rooms. These women who work fixing hair or in child care jobs became my Pentecostal Phish. I'd drive hours to see them because they had something I needed. Some shows were musically better than others. Sometimes the crowd got into it and sometimes they didn't know what to make of all that preaching. But there's not been a time I've seen the Jones Family where they looked like they'd rather be anywhere else. Or a time when I didn't walk away feeling a little more alive. Here was a family of poor people from a dumpy suburb of Houston caravanning to Smithville or Fredericksburg or Driftwood for almost no money to sell a pure love onstage. There's nothing on TV on nights like that.

Gospel is freedom music, evolved from the songs the original African Americans would sing in the fields of the antebellum south to soothe their souls. While they couldn't sing openly about their own desire to be free, the slaves could rejoice in the story of Exodus, when the children of Israel yearned to be liberated from bondage. When slaves sang "Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land/ Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go," they did so with a vigor that suggests deep personal connection. Heavenly salvation and earthly freedom became intertwined. Those who embraced Christianity were told that great rewards awaited believers who endured great tribulations.

The roots of the "hard gospel" style of the Jones Family can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century, when slave songs became "shout songs." After the Pentecostal movement of Holy Ghost soul possession was born on Azusa Street in Los Angeles in 1906, churchgoers spoke in tongues, rolled in the aisles and clapped their hands in sanctified percussion. Musical instruments, once considered the tools of the devil, were

used to punctuate the testimony and wild, foot-stomping dances broke out at will. This was the roots of rock 'n' roll. A one-eyed black man from Houston named William Seymour preached the message of Pentecost in Acts 2:4 of the New Testament, which tells the story of the Holy Ghost descending on a gathering of Christ's disciples in the form of tongues of fire.

Another favorite Bible story of the early Pentecostals was that of Dry Bones coming to life in the 37th chapter of Ezekial. "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live," God said after reassembling scattered dead bones, which represented those not fully committed to complete sanctification. It's a traditional theme the Jones Family interprets in its own way on "Bones In the Valley," one of several grasps to gospel's past that are reinvigorated on "The Spirit Speaks." Bishop Fred Jones Sr. wrote new lyrics in the studio when the band realized they'd forgotten the song they hadn't played live in over 10 years. "I haven't heard such clever Bible rewrites since the glory days of Reverend (W. Herbert) Brewster," gospel historian Anthony Heilbut wrote in an email after hearing an advance copy of "Bones."

He grew up Baptist, where the dignified worship services were aimed at reversing Jim Crow era preconceptions of ignorance and savagery, but Fred Jones Sr. became intrigued with the emotionalism of "sanctified" services in his hometown of Lake Charles, LA. "They were dancing and shouting and playing guitars and rub boards with spoons," he recalls of what he saw when he first peered in the window of COGIC services. "They were just makin' some 'Holy Noise' and it registered with me inside." After going back to his Baptist church, where "we were told to be reverent, to be quiet, just to look and listen," a young Bishop Jones longed to become a Pentecostal "saint," as parishioners call each other. He joined COGIC when he turned 18 and moved out of his parents' house.

While the "holy rollers" of the early 20th Century were a national joke, today the Pentecostal doctrine of speaking in tongues as the only true evidence of being baptized in the Holy Spirit, is followed by an estimated 600 million people worldwide.

The musical legacy of COGIC, the first black denomination founded in the U.S., includes piano thumper Arizona Dranes, bottleneck gospel-blues icon Blind Willie Johnson, guitar whiz Sister Rosetta Tharpe and many more. The Jones Family carries on the tradition by losing themselves in the music to find what they've got inside.

Raised by a father whose life was forever changed after hearing a record by the Mighty Clouds of Joy in the late '50s, the seven brothers and sisters of the JFS were born into gospel music the way a Kennedy is born into politics. Their first family group was the Sensational Zionaires, named after the patriarch's Mount Zion COGIC. When Fred Sr. married Lady Sarah nearly 40 years ago, she had four children from two previous marriages—daughters Ernestine, Sabrina and Velma and son Kenny. Fred Sr. is the father of Theresa, Alexis and Fred Jr. After he married their mother, Fred Sr. took the four

oldest kids outside and pointed to the front of the porch. “Those are the only steps in our house,” he said. “You’re not my stepchildren, you’re my family.”

As the teenaged Sensational Zionaires, the Jones family played churches in and around Houston beginning in the late '80s and recorded an album with original lead singer Cynthia Fray. When she moved back to Florida with guitarist-husband Eddie Fray, the band, wanting to separate itself from all the other Zionaires in the gospel field, became the Jones Family Singers. That was in 1998, when Alexis, now 37, was 21. Toiling without complaint in faith that God’s plans for them will finally catch up to the talent onstage, the Jones Family Singers exemplify the anonymity that makes the history of gospel so fascinating. The enthusiast becomes a prospector for golden echoes.

But the breakout time could finally be here. Like so many indie, metal, hip-hop and rock acts through the years, the JFS were “discovered” at South by Southwest. The thing that frustrated me about many of the magical JFS performances I’d seen since 2005 is that there was no record of this family getting completely lost in the music, aside from some shaky footage the Bishop would capture on his phone and post to YouTube. I was determined to get someone to film the Jones Family’s SXSW showcase, so I asked filmmaker Alan Berg (*Outside Industry: The Story of SXSW*) if he knew any film students who might want to make a documentary about gospel music for a school project. Instead, Berg sent a small crew from his Arts+Labor production company and sat in the audience with his wife Kristin. The Bergs were impressed, especially after meeting the family backstage. The Jones clan are always laughing, always smiling, and you just can’t help being wrapped in that warmth of family love. Berg decided to make a documentary about the struggles and triumphs of the Jones Family and sent a bigger crew to Bay City to capture the family at home. There was Alexis Jones, a world class soul singer, sleeping on a mattress on the floor of her parents’ modest house. There were stories of divorce, the street life, mental illness, poverty, church politics. A real family going through tough times and living for those hours of playing music together. The doc will be out in the spring.

Since the Jones Family hadn’t made a studio album in years and Berg wanted freshly recorded material for the soundtrack, he enlisted producers John Croslin and Eric Friend, members of indie rock band the Reivers, who had never produced a gospel record before.

Croslin had seen the JFS wreck a church at SXSW a few years earlier, so he was in. But he didn’t really know the power of this church family until he and Friend, the former Spoon keyboardist who does a lot of musical supervision work on Mike Judge projects, came to Bay City in late 2012 to listen to the band perform at a rehearsal at Mount Zion. I sat in the back row and proudly watched the Jones Family destroy Croslin and Friend for almost two hours. They had no idea the JFS were that good and, frankly, neither did I. Sometimes you get so close to a band you can no longer judge them. But on that Friday night in Markham, without an audience, the Jones Family Singers were just about perfect, blending rock and soul thump with the soar of heavenly gospel. At dinner afterwards, Croslin could only say he was completely blown away.

Croslin and Friend made the wise decision to concentrate on the talents of the singers and musicians and songwriters, instead of trying to recreate the explosion that is JFS live. The result is an album in which the producers were able to get all those wild gifts to come together as one. Musical director Fred Jones Jr.—the group’s most valuable player—deftly handles guitar and keyboards and his sisters lock in on harmonies like God’s own Vandellas.

The JFS can be wonderfully all over the place in concert, with Alexis and the Bishop both slowing down tunes to make observations and the group sometimes leaping from song-to-song like it’s one hourlong medley. But “The Spirit Speaks” contains 10 songs that each have a distinctive personality. It’s an album you’ll want to spend time with, a record this group has been waiting 30 years to make.

In preparation for the February 2013 sessions at Jim Eno’s Public Hi-Fi studio in Austin, Croslin and Friend listened to all the band’s previous LPs—most recorded live in church—and chose what they felt were the best songs. “Some of these songs we haven’t played in 20 years,” exclaimed Bishop Jones, as the band had the task of relearning material they performed when they were teenagers. But the memories came surging forth and the band became young again, though with decades of experience to draw from. “Made Up My Mind” and “Preacher Man” are from the Sensational Zionaires days and were written by Eddie Fray.

“You Woke Me Up This Morning” goes back more than 30 years, when Bishop Fred Jones Sr. was just guitarist Fred Jones of the Gospel Messengers out of Houston. Revived delightfully by the almost-giddy harmonies of the Bishop’s daughters, “You Woke” is the first single of an album that should appeal to both black church audiences and nouveau soul enthusiasts.

While the record was up in New York being mastered, the Jones Family volunteered their services to play a Fourth of July festival in Brazoria, about 30 miles outside Bay City. With the temperature at 103 degrees and no shade for fans, the Jones Family Singers played to a “crowd” of seven. This from a 8-foot high stage in a field that could hold 10,000. But the JFS put on a show as if there were people as far as they could see.

They sang, they danced, they vamped and even pulled out their encore number “(You Make Me Want To) Shout,” usually reserved for when the crowd just won’t leave until they hear one more. The smiles onstage were as broad as I recall eight years earlier at ACL Fest and although I can’t speak for the other six in the audience, I can testify that, once again, they brought out chills in the triple digit heat. That’s why the Jones Family is one of the best live groups in gospel/soul music. They play for the people, yes. But more importantly, they play as a family and for their Creator.

In this purity of purpose comes a simple truth: They can't be tamed, those voices reaching out to Heaven's gate. The spirit can't be contained.

Both gospel and blues came from the "Negro Spirituals" sang in the fields to keep the misery at bay. But the Jones Family and other gospel musicians point out the huge difference in the genres. The blues singer is alone in this world; nobody knows the trouble he's seen. But the gospel voices are a family of faith that anyone can join. You just have to believe there's a force out there greater than you. Sometimes music is all the proof you need.

1. Down on Me (Fred Jones Jr., Alexis Jones)
2. Going Home (Jones Jr.)
3. Bones In the Valley (traditional, arranged by J.B. Allen)
4. Made Up My Mind (Eddie Fray)
5. Leaning On You (Fred Jones Jr. and Fred Jones Sr.)
6. I Am (Velma Davis, Alexis Jones)
7. You Woke Me Up This Morning (Fred Jones Sr.)
8. Preacher Man (Eddie Fray)
9. Through It All (Velma Davis)
10. Try Jesus (Fred Jones Sr.)

CD CREDITS

Recorded at Public Hi-Fi, Austin, TX

Engineered by Brad Bell

Mixed by Brad Bell, John Croslin, Eric Friend

Mastered by Emily Lazar at The Lodge, assisted by Chris Allgood

Produced by John Croslin, Eric Friend

Executive Producers: Alan Berg and Kristin Johansen-Berg

Art Direction: Luther Himes and Bradley Parrett

A&R Administration: Ryan McAdams

Photography by Lauren Reynolds

The Jones Family Project Team: Craig Parks, Erik Horn, Yuta Yamaguchi, Christina Lucero, Kyle Cockayne, Lauren Sanders, Andrew Logan, Wylie Earnhart, Scott Hamilton, Cody Ground, Paul Rios Jr, Robin Schwartz, Stephen DeGennaro(CK), Martin Peterson(CK), Erik Duemig

Special Thanks JDK Design, Marsha Milam

For nearly 30 years Bishop Jones has presided over the Mount Zion COGIC in Markham, TX, just outside Bay City, where the family lives and works day jobs. Until weekend soul-saving performances give sweet release.