

## BLIND BOYS AND REAL WORLD GIVE CONTEMPORARY VOICE TO OLD-TIME GOSPEL

(Continued from page 11)

amazing musical moment," Goldsmith recalls. "From there, I felt like that intersection of spiritual music—blues and gospel—needed to be explored further." He approached Chelew, who had teamed the Blind Boys with Bonnie Raitt on the 1994 Richard Thompson tribute album *Beat the Retreat*.

Goldsmith says, "I thought he had a good sense of how to make the Blind Boys accessible to an adult-alternative audience."

Chelew, whose first producing credit was John Hiatt's acclaimed 1987 album *Bring the Family*, sought to introduce a sense of Southern gothic mystery that he felt was lacking in the Blind Boys' previous albums. He envisioned a record "that could reunite them with Delta blues and the real scary gospel background—that ghostly aura that original gospel has. My mission was to bring the sound of the Blind Boys up to the current moment by going back into their past."

But the Blind Boys were skeptical of the old-fashioned recording techniques Chelew wanted to use.

"He wanted to go back and get an old thing like we used to do—get everybody behind one mike," says Fountain, the Blind Boys' charismatic front man. Fountain prefers to record with more "modern" techniques like recording each voice on a separate track. "I told them, 'Your way is not the way to do it, but I'll try it.'"

Chelew was amused that the singers were "trying to update their sound—to the '70s." He recalls that during the recording session, which took place in Los Angeles over four days in March 2000, "Clarence would phone me every day at 7 a.m. and say, 'I could sell you a record right now that has a drum machine on it. You know, a drum machine never makes a mistake.'"

The Blind Boys have been singing *Spirit of the Century* numbers like "Nobody's Fault But Mine," "Good Religion," and "Motherless Child" since the '40s. They also interpret four songs with a gospel slant by high-profile rock'n'roll writers: Waits' "Jesus Gonna Be Here," from his album

*Bone Machine*, and "Way Down in the Hole," from his *Frank's Wild Years*; Harper's "Give a Man a Home," from *Fight for Your Mind*; and, perhaps most remarkable, the Rolling Stones' "Just Wanna See His Face," from their 1972 classic *Exile on Main Street*.

Some of the contemporary material made the singers suspicious. "They wanted to know the reason for every song," Chelew says. Before recording Harper's "Give a Man a Home," one of the singers said, "What are you talking about here, 'Give a man a home?' Is someone going to give me a home?" Chelew recounts, "We had a big discussion about the meaning in the studio lounge. Then someone else said, 'I see. A man is saying he could have a fine house but is still homeless in his soul.' I said, 'Bingo!' And we went and did the track."

The Blind Boys' "skepticism was one of the linchpins of the whole thing," Chelew says. "They wouldn't go ahead with anything until they were really feeling it." Goldsmith, who also participated in the recording, adds, "It was a leap of faith—that's the theme of the record. We almost called it that."

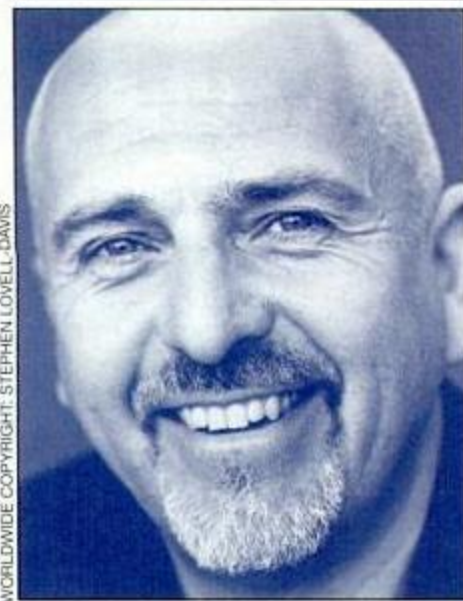
"I can't stress enough how important it is that the album was funded privately," Chelew notes. "It gave us the freedom to do whatever we wanted without A&R executives who have too much time on their hands coming by to 'help.'"

Goldsmith says he approached half a dozen labels with the project without success. Then the bass player from the recording, Danny Thompson, who has worked on several Real World projects, provided

the entree to Gabriel's label.

*Spirit of the Century* will be serviced to commercial and non-commercial blues, gospel, and triple-A stations, according to Real World U.S. label manager

REALWORLD



*'Gospel isn't my normal diet, and I'm not a practicing Christian. But when people sing from their souls, it*

Cheryl McEnaney (who is based with the company's U.S. distributor, Narada, in Milwaukee).

"I don't know how we could ignore this record," says Laura

Ellen, PD/music director at KPIG, a commercial roots-music station in San Francisco that already supports such artists as Hammond and Lindley. "We'll use it without question."

Real World's retail approach will focus on keeping the record out of the gospel section and onto the more mainstream blues shelves, according to McEnaney. A poster resembling a 1940s vintage street sign will be placed in stores to direct buyers to the blues section. She says, "We'd like to cross this over to the blues audience, to the Americana and the roots audiences, and the world and folk audiences, where these guest musicians have great cachet."

The *Spirit of the Century* band will be reassembled for two shows on May 8 at New York's Bottom Line, with dates perhaps to follow in Los Angeles. TV appearances also are in the works.

Meanwhile, the Blind Boys will continue touring with their regular band, which includes singer/guitarist Joey Williams (who also appears on *Spirit of the Century*) and drummer Ricky McKinnie. The group's youth crossover appeal was highlighted by a recent invitation to open for hot jam band the String Cheese Incident in Boulder, Colo.

Fountain, sitting backstage at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., before a February performance, told *Billboard* that the Blind Boys will keep working as hard as ever and pray that the high expectations of those around them prove well founded. "My theory has always been just do what we can while we can. And in return, the Lord will make a way."

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## Blind Boys Of Alabama Running Down A Dream

Tom Petty Toured With The Gospel Act, 'Who Shook The Building Every Night'

When it comes to having friends who are up high in the pop music world, the Blind Boys of Alabama are particularly blessed—which may help the gospel singers' crossover dreams come true.

Peter Gabriel is releasing the Blind Boys' new album, *Spirit of the Century*, on his Real World label (see story, page 11). Bonnie Raitt and k.d. lang have recorded with the group. Anthony Keidis of Red Hot Chili Peppers has turned up at their shows. And Tom Petty invited the Blind Boys to join him on tour with the Heartbreakers in 1999.

The Blind Boys "did quite a few dates with us—and they were just amazing," Petty says. "They shook the building every night. I sort of got fascinated with seeing if there was a crowd that they couldn't just absolutely slay. And it really didn't matter. Every night, they just tore the place up."

Onstage, Clarence Fountain plays the charismatic front man as he mugs for the crowd. His voice is equally impressive,



PETTY

switching from tenor to baritone with ease. Every Blind Boys concert culminates with group member Jimmy Carter running through the audience, shouting praises. Seemingly propelled by the Holy Spirit, Carter leaps high in the air as stage handlers try to restrain him. Then, James Brown-style, he breaks free of their grasp and continues jumping for glory.

Like Gabriel, who signed the Blind Boys to his label sight unseen, Petty had never been to one of the group's shows when he invited them on tour. He had collected a few of their records starting in the late '60s. Then in 1998, when his manager, Tony Dimitriades, suggested having the Blind Boys open for his next Heartbreakers tour, Petty "fell out of my chair," he recalls. "I said, 'They're around? They're working? Definitely. Get 'em.'"

Petty says that he "just took a chance. It was totally that me and the Heartbreakers wanted them. I was pleasantly overtaken with how great a show they had, so we kept extending the engagement." The Blind Boys ended up doing nearly 30 dates with Petty from August to October of 1999.

On behalf of *Spirit of the Century*, the Blind Boys of Alabama—booked by the Rosebud Agency—will perform high-profile gigs with the star backing musicians from the album sessions, as well as continue touring with their own band. SCOTT AIGES