THE BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA

Formed some six and a half decades ago, The Blind Boys of Alabama are the Iron Men of the music industry. They predate Elvis, Little Richard and Al Green yet even in their 70s they are still at the top of the gospel charts and have won an impressive four consecutive Grammy Awards over the past four years.

In recent years, The Blind Boys have proven themselves masters of bringing out the most spiritual aspects of mainstream music, while at the same time bringing the music of the church straight to the roadhouse. In the past five years, they’ve recorded moving renditions of songs by everyone from Tom Waits to Prince side by side with their traditional material, and appeared as guests on record and on stage with an equally diverse array of artists, from Peter Gabriel to Ben Harper. During this amazing run, the cover tunes and collaborations have been consistently tasty and organic, seasoned with a time-tested understanding of the sounds that move Man’s soul.

While a huge gospel sensation back in the 1940s and ’50s, The Blind Boys led by founding members Clarence Fountain, Jimmy Carter and George Scott moved into the mainstream in 2001 with the help of Goldsmith, producer John Chelew and engineer Jimmy Hoyson. That year, the band released the Grammy-decorated Spirit of the Century, the first of three consecutive Grammy-winning recordings. Self-financed by Goldsmith, Spirit of the Century was the group’s first album for Peter Gabriel’s Real World label, and it was also the great Blind Boys album that Goldsmith had been hearing in his head for years.

Up to that point, The Blind Boys had spent more than 40 years working mostly in the traditional gospel circuit, since forming at The Alabama Institute for the Negro Blind in 1939. Secular audiences caught a glimpse of the group at the World’s Fair in Knoxville in 1982 and again in 1983, when they appeared in the smash hit musical drama The Gospel at Colonus, an Obie Award-winning Off-Broadway and Broadway production. This modern classic also featured Morgan Freeman and was seen nationwide on PBS Great Performances.
The Boys caught the ears of more mainstream listeners via their Grammy nominated 1992 album *Deep River*, produced by Booker T. Jones and featuring a transcendent version of Bob Dylan's “I Believe In You.” The Blind Boys continued flirting with contemporary sounds with 1995’s roof-raising live album *I Brought Him With Me* and 1997’s funkied-up *Holding On*, but it was *Spirit of the Century* that proved to be the turning point.

That album ignited what has proven one of the busiest and commercially successful periods of The Blind Boys’ career, a period in which the group has reinvented itself while rewriting the definition of traditional Southern gospel. Their first of four albums for Peter Gabriel’s Real World label, all recorded at the historic Capitol Records studios in Hollywood, Spirit featured a stunning version of “Amazing Grace” set to the tune of “The House of the Rising Sun,” as well as carefully selected covers of songs by The Rolling Stones, Ben Harper and Tom Waits.

*Spirit of the Century* was a triumph, a blend of gospel, blues, soul and folk that won the 2001 Grammy for Best Traditional Soul Gospel Album. Featuring such top-shelf players as bluesman John Hammond and multi-instrumentalist David Lindley, the disc became the best-selling album of The Blind Boys’ career, and turned these septuagenarians into folk heroes in hipster circles, landing them the opening slot on Peter Gabriel’s 2002 worldwide arena tour. The Blind Boys’ version of Tom Waits’ “Way Down in the Hole,” featured on *Spirit of the Century*, also became the theme song for the acclaimed HBO series *The Wire*, and on the big screen The Blind Boys performed their version of “Soldier,” also from Spirit, in the 2002 Cuba Gooding Jr./Beyonce Knowles film *The Fighting Temptations*.

Further acclaim and another Grammy win for Best Traditional Soul Gospel Album followed with 2002’s *Higher Ground*, which included songs penned by Jimmy Cliff, Prince, Ben Harper (who added vocals and guitar), Stevie Wonder and Curtis Mayfield. Featuring the backing of Robert Randolph and his Family Band, *Higher Ground* also found The Blind Boys singing the 23rd Psalm to George Clinton’s “You and Your Folks.” Their version of Harper’s “I Shall Not Walk Alone” was recently featured in an episode of the ABC prime time hit *Lost*. That same year, The Blind Boys, rounded out by Joey Williams, Eric McKinnie, Bobby Butler and Tracy Pierce, were inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame and presented with the Dove Award from the Gospel Music Association for Best Traditional Gospel Album.
In 2003, The Blind Boys scored their third consecutive Grammy win for Best Traditional Soul Gospel Album for *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, a star-studded Christmas album. Already considered a holiday classic, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* featured Mavis Staples, Tom Waits, Michael Franti of Spearhead, Chrissie Hynde, Solomon Burke, George Clinton, Aaron Neville, Robert Randolph and more. (A concert version of this album, featuring many of the guests from the CD, was also featured on PBS as a 2004 Christmas special, and a DVD of that concert will be released by Eagle Rock Entertainment in February 2005).

The Christmas album also gave the Blind Boys an opportunity to give something to others in need. With Clarence Fountain, Jimmy Carter and George Scott all suffering from type two diabetes, The Blind Boys donated a portion of the proceeds from the sales of *Go Tell It On the Mountain* to the American Diabetes Association, for whom they became spokesmen in 2003.

In the past five years interest in The Blind Boys of Alabama from other musicians has been at all time high, with the group augmenting its own award-winning albums with appearances on albums from a distinguished and diverse group including Peter Gabriel, Lou Reed, Ibrahim Ferrer (Buena Vista Social Club), Solomon Burke, Asleep at the Wheel and Jools Holland, formerly of Squeeze. They were also tapped by Walt Disney Productions to sing a Phil Collins-penned tune in the animated feature film *Brother Bear*.

In 2004, a session with Ben Harper spilled into a full-fledged album and another hit: *There Will Be a Light*. Once again delivering The Blind Boys heaps of acclaim, the disc found the group joined by Harper's own band, The Innocent Criminals, and combined traditionals with songs penned by Harper. Nominated for an amazing three Grammys this year, the album also saw The Blind Boys break The Billboard Top 100 for the first time in the group’s history.

2004 also found The Blind Boys reprising their role in a new, 20th anniversary version of *The Gospel at Colonus*, which starred Charles S. Dutton and The Soul Stirrers during its late October/early November run at the famed Apollo Theater in Harlem.

While the sound of traditional soul gospel is still unmistakably at its core, *Atom Bomb*, the group’s latest album, includes The Blind Boys’ most adventurous forays into pop music yet, featuring loops, raps and roaring
blues riffs. The disc includes an exuberant version of the Fatboy Slim/Macy Gray tune “Demons,” featuring rapper Gift of Gab from Blackalicious, while Los Lobos guitarist David Hidalgo and blues harp icon Charlie Musselwhite help recast Norman Greenbaum’s gospel-rock classic “Spirit in the Sky” as a raw, Detroit-style boogie.

The 10-track disc also includes a joyous rendition of Eric Clapton/Blind Faith’s “Presence of the Lord,” featuring the legendary Billy Preston on Hammond B3, as well as The Blind Boys’ spin on such traditional tunes as “Old Blind Barnabus” (a song suggested to the group by Tom Waits), “I Know I’ve Been Converted,” “Talk About Suffering” and “Moses.” The title song, meanwhile, is a remake of an early Cold War-era Soul Stirrers tune that proves uncannily relevant some 55 years later.

“What makes Atom Bomb so evocative is that it merges the most traditional, stark and intimate aspects of the Boys with some of the most futuristic trappings we’ve used to date,” notes executive producer Chris Goldsmith.

As they’ve reached new levels of respect, acclaim and commercial success in recent years, one thing has remained: The group’s mission to do God’s work in new and inspiring ways. In doing so, they’re not only expanding the very definitions of gospel and soul, but also bolstering a legacy that is unmatched by any other traditional artist that has remained true to the gospel path.