

(Ed. note: This is the first of a two-part exclusive interview with Clara Ward and The Ward Singers, number one Gospel-singing group in the world.)

The Holy Bible says one should "make a joyful noise unto the Lord," but it doesn't say it has to be done strictly in churches.

And Clara Ward, a small, slender woman with a large, rich voice, sees nothing incongruous in singing the gospel in Las Vegas cabarets, Disneyland's Golden Horseshoe, at jazz festivals and theatres from Broadway to Paris.

We managed to catch the busy singer for the briefest of moments recently just prior to her leaving for a six-week engagement in Sydney, Australia--an engagement which carried an additional six-week option, which was picked up in advance without the Aussies even having seen The Ward Singers.

After Australia, the group planes back to the States for a stint at two top hotels in Vegas, a trip to the Far East, then back to L.A. for a stay at Disneyland. Last year they were in Viet Nam from Thanksgiving to New Year's eve and ran into a Holiness minister who had a Hammond organ "right in the middle of nowhere."

IF THIS consistency of being in demand is any indication, then no one makes a more joyful noise than Clara Ward and The Ward Singers, who have been raising their voices the world over since they hesitantly ventured out of the Negro church circuit in 1957 to introduce Gospel singing--that lively first cousin to jazz, rhythm-and-blues and rock 'n roll--to the Newport Jazz Festival.

The Ward Singers wore long choir robes then. They still wore them two years later when they made Europe aware of the rhythmic beat of Gospel singing in a triumphal swing through London, Brussels, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo, Frankfurt and at the German Jazz Festival in Essen.

By 1961, when they hit New York's famed Village Vanguard, they'd blossomed into rich silks and brocades and the fabulous hairdos which have become their trademark.

Clara Ward and Mahalia Jackson are rated as the two top Gospel singers of today, and the Ward Singers are the top group. "One would willingly listen to them for hours and hours, even overnight," said one Paris newspaper after their '66 engagement at the French capital's Olympic Theatre.

AND THE Los Angeles Times welcomed their return to Disneyland this year with "When it comes to rafter-rockin', foot-stompin', hand-clappin' music, none come close to the special brand of excitement generated by the Clara Ward Gospel Singers."

It is hardly surprising when Miss Ward says that Gospel is my whole life." She sang her first solo in public at the age of five at Philadelphia's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where her mother, Gertrude Ward, was soloist.

When Clara was nine, her mother formed a Gospel-singing trio consisting of herself, Clara and 13-year-old Willa and, billed as Gertrude Ward and Daughters, they took to the Negro church circuit. On Willa's retirement a few years later in favor of marriage, two non-relatives joined Gertrude and Clara Ward and the nucleus of The Ward Singers was formed.

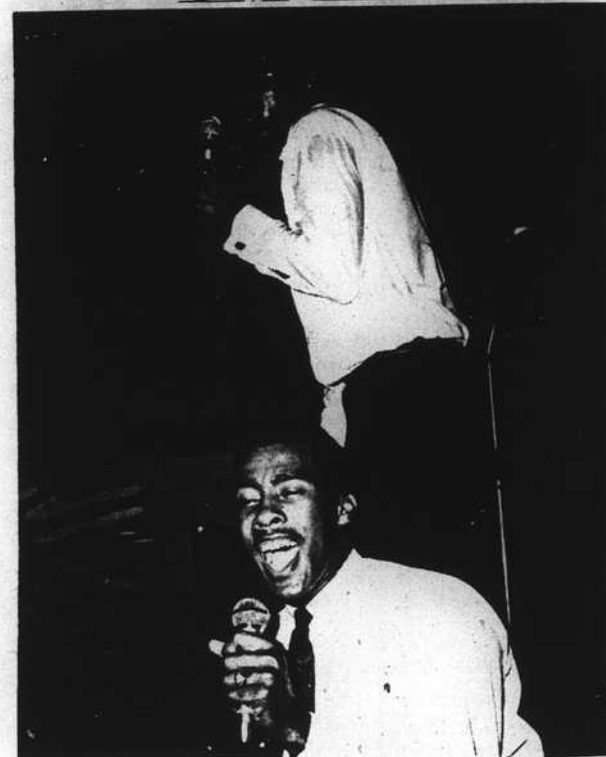
Next week: Fame comes to The Ward Singers and they pick up an impressive list of fans. Also, Miss Ward discusses how new members are added to the group.

Making A Joyful Noise



CLARA WARD - Leader of World's top Gospel group is subject of Walter Burrell's "Hollywood Happenings", this page.

Swinging AF Duty



THEY ARE THE ESQUIRES, a popular twosome which has played several night clubs in Germany during the past year. Both U.S. soldiers, they are, from top, Airman Second Class James Rhodes, Jamaica, N.Y. and Airman Second Class Ronnie Swinson, Norfolk, Va. Both are with the Ground Electronics Engineering Installation Agency (GEEIA). (NPI Photo)

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WIESBADEN - (NPI)--The "in crowd" of West Germany has been swinging to the sound of soul music for the past year as performed by the Air Force's newest unofficial musical ambassador, Airman Second Class Ronald Swinson.

An administrative specialist with Headquarters, European Region, Ground Electronics Engineering Installation Agency (GEEIA), Swinson is the lead singer of a rhythm and blues combo known as the Esquires.

The group is a vocal contingent composed of Swinson and fellow Airman Second Class James Rhodes, an administrative specialist with the 7260th Support Squadron. Both have been singing in local German clubs for the past year.

In addition, they have cut two records in London and Berlin, entitled, "Just A Fantasy--Booking Up" and Memories--So Much Soul. The four items were written by Swinson and Rhodes.

Swinson's singing career dates back to the second grade music class at Douglas Park Elementary school, Norfolk, Va. He started singing solos when 13, and organized the first Esquires. The group performed at talent shows and socials in and around his home town.

THE FIRST professional training in his career came when he attended Booker T. Washington High School, Norfolk. At that time, he met I. Sherman Green, the school's music director, from whom he took voice lessons.

Upon graduation, Swinson enlisted in the Air Force, receiving his basic training at Lackland AFB, Texas and attended technical school at Amarillo AFB, Texas.

He arrived in Germany in May, 1965 and was assigned to his present post, where he posts regulations, evaluates mail, and proofs correspondence. It was also here that he met Rhodes, who hails from Jamaica, N.Y., and the two decided to re-form the Esquires.

After a few rehearsals, they began their new career at the Park Cafe, in Wiesbaden, where they were an instant success. Although they have since appeared at many clubs, including the famous Kurhaus and Rhein/Main hall, Wiesbaden, their biggest job to date was at the Star Club, Hamburg--which has the reputation of being one of the swiftest clubs in the country and usually features such stars as the Rolling Stones, James Brown, Chuck Berry, and Freddy and the Dreamers.



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