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— Ronald Winans



Marvin Winans, the group's principal writer and arranger, stresses "hope and joyfulness" as the message of his music.



Ronald (left) and Michael Winans practice one of the group's gospel songs. Ronald Winans is a resident of Farmington Hills.



Carvin Winans relaxes with his daughter Joy between songs at a recent Winans practice session.

By Carol Azilain
staff writer

THEIR TIGHT harmonies, slick, syncopated motions and funky R&B rhythms make them shine for a Temptations look-alike contest.

But the Winans brothers — Ronald, 30, Michael, 27, and twins Marvin and Carvin, 29 — are singing a different kind of soul than the type usually associated with Motown.

"Gospel music has always been solid as a rock," said Marvin Winans, the group's principal writer and arranger. "It's always been consistent in sales. Now people are finding out there's hope and joyfulness in the message. It's moving. It's emotional."

SO WHO needs Motown magic and Barry Gordy when you've got gospel glitz and Quincy Jones?

This year they won a Grammy Award in the category Best Group Soul Gospel Performance for "Let My People Go," recorded on Quincy Jones' Qwest Records. Last year, they won two Grammys.

Who wants to sing "Ain't Too Proud to Beg" (the Temps' hit) when you can be singing "Ain't No Need to Worry" instead? The latter is the title of their latest single — a trio number with jazz/pop star Anita Baker and another gospel group, the Williams Brothers — to be released May 13 in Christian bookstores and some secular record outlets. The tune is a cut from their new album, "Decision," scheduled to come out in June.

And who needs to guest star on the PTL Club when you can appear on Oprah Winfrey? (They performed on the show April 10 with another Detroit gospel artist, Vanessa Bell Armstrong).

ON EASTER Sunday, they'll stage a concert at 4 p.m. at the Masonic Temple, Detroit. "We thank God for our accomplishments," said Ronald, 30, of Farmington Hills.

And the recording industry.

"A few years back, the quality of gospel music was so low. But now we're just as good as Kool and the Gang."

"We don't write (funky) music as a ploy to get secular airplay," Ronald added. "We just pray and ask the Lord to give us songs. If you can do aerobics to our music, it's not our fault."

There may be little difference between gospel and secular pop, rock, jazz and R&B as far as the technical aspects go, but there's a big difference in the lyrical content.

"We're putting out a more positive message — about building character and having a relationship with God," Ronald said.

SOME WELL-KNOWN artists — such as Aretha Franklin — wind up crossing over from what was once considered a marketing desert to a professional promised land. Not the Winans.

"The only reason people stopped singing

the WINANS

Music for the soul

gospel was because they couldn't make any money.

"We've never considered crossing over," Marvin added. "We've been approached by record companies (to make secular R&B albums), but we've said no, emphatically, simply because we're committed to what we're singing."

"We believe in our music. It's more than a job. It's a mission. We've been called to spread the gospel through music. You can't sing about that on one side of your album and 'My Baby Left' or 'I'm About to Lose My Mind' on the other."

THEY MAY not sing about sex, drugs or

violence. But the Winans did enter the political arena with "Let My People Go," a funky anti-apartheid anthem.

The single peaked at number 41 on Billboard's Top Black Contemporary Charts and the album at 45. It climbed to the No. 1 spot on Billboard's Spiritual chart. The video was ranked in the top 10 on the cable show, "Video Soul."

TO PROMOTE their lyrics and music so other artists can use the material, they signed a six-figure publishing contract with Zomba Productions Inc.

Although no deals have been made, several top pop artists have inquired about perform-

ing their songs, Marvin said.

"We were raised in a Christian home," Ronald noted. "Our dad was really strict. He never allowed us to listen to secular music. Sometimes, we'd hear it at the mall or in a friend's car."

"They (our parents) loved gospel so we had all the latest albums. And, naturally, when we sat down to write songs, we wrote gospel."

THEIR PUBLIC DEBUT was at their great-grandfather's church, Zion Congregation Church of God in Christ, which is still standing. At that time, the group consisted of their older brother, David, who was 8; Ronald, 6; and Marvin and Carvin, 5.

"We're Pentecostal. If you come to our church, you'd see a lot of rocking. We always have a good time," Ronald said.

Mama and Papa Winans booked their sons in other churches and soon their career took off. Then, they got their big break — at the Mumford High School talent competition.

"Everybody else was singing the latest song on WJLB," Ronald recalled. "We were going to find out if we had enough guts to sing gospel."

"Either they were going to love us or kill us. We came out singing 'J-E-S-U-S' and the whole place quieted down. We took a deep breath and went ahead. By the end of the song, they were shouting for more."

Despite their instant popularity, they were forced to take on menial jobs to support themselves.

WHEN GOSPEL STAR Andrae Crouch came to Detroit for his friend's wedding, the Winans had an opportunity to meet him.

"We sang a couple of tunes for him and he enjoyed it," Ronald remembered. "He said, 'I can tell you guys are going places.'"

Crouch invited the quartet to perform at his concert in Ypsilanti and later helped them land a recording contract with his label, Light Records. Their first album, "Introducing the Winans," was released in 1981. One cut, "The Question Is," received airplay on R&B stations.

Their second disc, "Long Time Coming," hit the stands in 1983 and received a Grammy nomination. "Tomorrow" followed in 1984. A year later, they changed labels.

"We felt we had grown as much as we could on Light," Ronald said.

So when they made a concert appearance at the Beverly Hills Theatre in California, they invited Quincy Jones, an artist they had long admired.

"He couldn't come but he sent a representative who loved the show," Ronald said. "Quincy never had a gospel artist on his label, and he was taking a chance."

"We weren't going to compromise our message in any way. Quincy (reassured) us that we didn't have to change our lyrics or style. So we felt the Lord really wanted us there."

"Ain't No Need to Worry" about them ever straying from their gospel roots.



The Winans — Marvin (left), Ronald, Michael and Carvin — work on one of the tight harmonies that have won them several Grammys.

photos by CAMILLE MCCOY/staff photographer