

GOLDEN GATE QUARTET

Clyde Wright, leader, tenor (since 1954)

Frank Davis, tenor (since 1995)

Paul Brembly, baritone (since 1971)

Anthony Gordon, bass (since 2006)

The Golden Gate Quartet is a part of History, but it is far from being history. Almost eight decades after they emerged in the segregated South of the Depression, the Gates prove their resilience with an album, aptly entitled *Incredible*, that proves as cutting edge as anything they've done before.

In the course of an unwavering career, the Gates have seen members come and go. After all, the group's leader today, tenor Clyde Wright, was only six when the founders of what was then known as a *jubilee quartet* commandeered the name Golden Gate back in 1934; yet the Gates have maintained inordinate cohesion and consistency throughout their career, both in their personnel and artistic vision.

Unlike Motown groups such as the Four Tops and the Temptations whose current traveling versions are only remotely associated with the spirit of their founders, the Golden Gate Quartet is a continuum: every time Orlandus "Dad" Wilson and Clyde Riddick—respectively members from 1936 and 1940 until their demise in 1998 and 1999—hired a new recruit, they taught him the importance of both tradition and innovation.

Wright, a leading actor in the history of the Gates since 1954, is well aware that conciliating those two dimensions is anything but a contradiction. With his cohorts Anthony Gordon, Frank Davis and Paul Brembly ("Dad" Wilson's grandnephew), he makes sure that the music of the quartet remains as relevant today as it's always been.

For the Gates have spent their lives opening doors. Imagined by a neighborhood barber from Berkeley, Virginia, the quartet broke the mould and created a different approach from that of the African-American groups of old. At a time when gospel music—a conjunction of the Holy Spirit with the blues spirit—was breaking new grounds, the Golden Gate revolutionized jubilee, no less, featuring a swing and groove clearly associated with jazz. Patterning themselves after the most popular secular quartet of the day, the Mills Brothers, they also added a sprinkling of pop tunes to their repertoire and introduced the church to vocalized “instrumental” riffs, a technique that allowed them to mimic trumpets, saxophones, and sounds from everyday life.

This original recipe drew the attention of the Victor Company and their very first 78 was an immediate success. Published under the Bluebird imprint, “Golden Gate Gospel Train” was a musical tour de force that put their career in orbit. The Gates soon found in New York an audience well outside the scope of their usual African-American following, especially in the wake of their appearance at Carnegie Hall on Christmas Eve 1939, as part of the “From Spiritual to Swing” program.

Yet the experience that brought the Gates mainstream success on an unprecedented level was their prolonged stay at Café Society, a famous New York cabaret where they became a mainstay until the mid forties, sharing the stage with icons like Big Bill Broonzy, Billie Holiday and Sister Rosetta Tharpe. After discovering them there, then First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt invited the Gates to the White House and they made history when they performed at Constitution Hall for president Roosevelt’s inauguration in 1941.

Two years later, the Gold Gate made the news once again when it became the first Black religious group to appear on V-Discs, the records produced by the US government for the use of military personnel overseas. By the time the war was over, the name Golden Gate Quartet had become synonym with sophisticated harmonies in Europe and Japan. Surfing on their global popularity, the Gates

reinvented themselves as an international act and took Europe by storm, eventually settling in Paris.

Their biggest achievement for the past fifty years has been their unchallenged triumph as ambassadors of Afro-American music throughout the world. With the names of almost one hundred countries stamped on their passports, this is not a mere formula, but a fact confirmed by the large number of concerts they have given over the years at the request of the State Department.

More than anything else, the Gates' résumé displays their will to innovate. At an age when others think of retiring, their current leader, Clyde Wright, still feels the need to move ahead. After bridging the gap between spiritual and gospel, after announcing the hip-hop revolution with the long raps that have been the feature of their preaching style for three quarters of a century, the quartet is eager to demonstrate that modernity, unlike fads and fashions, is a state of mind. The soulful album the GGQ is releasing today is here to prove it.

Sebastian Danchin