

THE MUSIC-MASTER

The Miles Grayson Story

by Opal Louis Nations



The Continentals, 1956-1957. Left to right: Bobby 'Lorenzo' Adams, 2nd lead tenor; Edward DeVold, baritone; Earl Williams (in back), tenor; Miles Grayson, 2nd baritone; Everett Williams, lead tenor. Photo taken at baseball diamond at Fremont High. Courtesy of Miles Grayson.

The making of music, says Miles Grayson, "is all I ever wanted to pursue in life." Although his school buddies entered into solid, stable professions, Miles, true to his goal, stuck to the pursuit of music. At first a singer and performer in doo-wop aggregations, then over into the mechanics of putting sounds together as writer, producer and arranger, Miles became one of Los Angeles's most significant masters of soul grounded composition.

As founder of Grayson Productions and The Respect Music Company, Miles has been part of more than 1,000 recording sessions covering all streams of popular music from urban contemporary to pop, rock and country. He worked with The Beach Boys as an independent with ERA and A&M during the mid 1960s and as arranger for Jefferson Starship and Papa John Creach during the 1970s. He has worked with Z.Z. Hill, Ted Taylor, Mary Wells and Johnnie Taylor, to mention just a few. His production activity alone would fill a coffee table sized book.

However, this article explores Miles, the performer, and covers the years 1956 to 1965 in an attempt to chronicle the period up to the Watts Riots, an event which profoundly changed Miles Grayson's career. His music then began to reflect the voice of the oppressed.

Harold Lee Grayson was born in Los Angeles on 10th September, 1939, "the exact same date, time and hospital that Roy E. Ayers, vocalist and vibes maestro, was born," says Miles (although Leonard Feather's 'Encyclopedia of Jazz' states that Ayers was born on that same date a year later).

Harold did not start using Miles as a Christian name until 1960, when he knew for sure he had

a calling for musical invention. His father Henry was born in Oklahoma, his mother Lula Smith was from Mississippi. Miles does not know for sure when his parents moved out to 4210 Zamora Street in Los Angeles, California. He did know that Henry attended Jefferson High and, like Miles and his grandson (also Miles) had a natural talent for athletics, namely track. Later on at Fremont High, Miles got himself the upper achiever end of the Jefferson High track team.

Lula Smith Grayson was an amateur pianist with a penchant for gospel music. She spent seventy years of her life raising money for her church and was awarded a plaque for her contributions. All three sons played music. Eugene, the youngest, played violin and later guitar, and middle son Leroy took up trumpet. Leroy became a professional night club musician and his son Michael took up bass. Miles Snr studied keyboards as did one of his two grandsons, a child prodigy living in Oklahoma, the home of his first wife Peggy Grayson.

As a child, Miles adopted three pursuits: piano playing, biking for miles to purchase the latest music trade magazines, and box cart racing. He even raced his wagon in the local soap box derbies. The family moved to 1239 E. 58 Drive, and Miles began taking piano tutorials from a Mr. Johnson who charged fifty cents a lesson. Much to Miles' dissatisfaction, Mr. Johnson failed to teach him the nuts and bolts of musical composition. This only came about at Edison Junior High where Miles studied music theory through the works of J.S. Bach.

The only music Miles heard about the house was country music. His father adored it. He began listening to borrowed jump and jive music on the family phonograph. He remembers one of the speakers blowing out and having to put his ear almost down to the grooves to catch the song. He sensed that music might be his

calling then and there. One day his family set up a concert recital in the parlour. Miles sat at the piano while Leroy and Eugene took up trumpet and violin. Mother wanted to hear the kind of music Mr. Johnson had tried to teach his pupil. But Miles, as a little stubborn, thought not to go along with the request, instead opting to charge into a thundering rendition of Jack Fina's 'Bumble Boogie'. This angered Lula so much she chased Miles straight out of the house and into the street. "I just had to let it all out," says Miles. "I had to make it known that I had all this pent up expression inside me that wanted to get out."

His mother used to take Miles to church, but her denomination, The Christ Temple, metered out services that were rigid and joyless. "I remember sneaking out to that old Baptist church on the corner to hear music that had a little more feeling" says Miles. On one of his first days at Edison Junior High, Miles encountered a bunch of girls in the hall all singing and harmonising a new kind of music they called 'race music'.

He did not know what race music really was and certainly could not imagine a clear political distinction between what was considered acceptable and what was not. The girlshipped Miles to the shows on the local r&b radio stations. It didn't take long for Miles to get hooked.

When Miles graduated to South Central's Fremont High he played in a few bebop groups. He soon realised that doo-wop singing was the order of the day. Miles got himself involved in three doo-wopping groups over the course of approximately two-and-a-half years. All three existed at the same time. Two, the Echoes and the Poets, were basically the same group with a slight change in membership. The school's own group, the Continentals, all decked out in the school colours, definitely had a fluid membership. Fremont High used the group out on the football field to 'pep-up' the ball team. The team itself of course was called the Continentals.

The Continentals vocal group during Miles' tenure was made up of Edward DeVold, baritone; Earl Williams, tenor; Miles Grayson, second baritone; Everett Williams, lead tenor and Bobby 'Lorenzo' Adams, second lead tenor. Adams also sang second tenor with the Calvanes, a bunch of high school students over at Manual Arts on South Vermont. Bobby 'Lorenzo' Adams, who later spent twenty years in security working with Major Tom Bradley, is currently retired and living in Tennessee.

One of Miles' first live appearances was with Don Julian and the Meadowlarks, who had just put out 'Heaven And Paradise' on Dootone Records. Miles and Don Julian were close friends and ran track together. Julian needed a third background singer and called upon Miles to fill in. During the gig Miles came down with asthma and lost his voice. Not knowing what to do, he pantomimed himself to make it seem he was singing. He simply stuck to mouth movements. "What the heck," said Miles afterwards, "the girls were all screaming and out of control anyway."

Both Miles and DeVold wanted to start up their own group. Things gradually came together in the usual loose kind of way. Doo-wopping wannabes hung out at the Glee Club or on school grounds. Whoever showed up got to join in the singing and by degrees those who

gelled were kept and those who did not were dropped. This was how the Poets came to be. The original group consisted of Miles Grayson, Elmo Jones Jr., Edward DeVold and Earl Williams. All except Elmo Jones Jr., a tenor singer and pianist, sang in the Continentals.

The quartet, usually decked out in white jackets and black pants, played teen-clubs and socials. The Continentals were acappella; now with the addition of Jones, The Poets were blessed with piano accompaniment. The Poets soon evolved into a five-member outfit with the addition of Ron Mosely. Earl Williams dropped out and was replaced by Earl Peterson. As was usually the case, group members or families had little money, so the guys usually ended up at J.C. Penney's to buy uniforms, in the Poets' case sharp-looking short-sleeved shirts. The Poets rehearsed either in members' living rooms or garages. Miles insists that they spent ten percent of their time learning songs and ninety percent fooling with choreography to hook the girls.

Edward DeVold asserts that it was the Poets (and not the Echoes) who



The Original Echoes, 1956. Top row, left to right: Edward DeVold, baritone; Mosby Carter, lead; Front row, left to right: Miles Grayson, 2nd tenor; Elmo Jones Jr., 1st tenor. Courtesy Edward DeVold.



The Poets, second group, 1957. Top row, left to right: Edward DeVold, Ron Mosely, Elmo Jones Jr. Front row, left to right: Miles Grayson and Earl Peterson. Courtesy Miles Grayson.

entered the Rocket To Stardom television talent show. The Poets came in second place. The group was noticed by Mabel Weathers who managed Tony Harris and Little Clydie and the Teens. Mabel contacted Elmo and he got the Poets together. They rehearsed different kinds of material to make themselves as employable as possible. Elmo and DeVold usually wrote and arranged material. The Poets also auditioned without prior arrangement for Johnny Otis on his television show at KFOX on Adams near Western. But Johnny Otis was not looking for talent; he was looking for fresh ways to promote himself. In short, nothing much seemed to be happening for the Poets.

Miles and DeVold imagined that if they created two groups they might increase their chances at finding work, or girls, or both. So they created the Echoes (Miles thinks that the name might have had something to do with Echo Park). The original quartet included Miles, DeVold, Jones and Mosby Carter, who sang a strong

lead tenor. But Carter's tenure was short as he was soon called for the Service. During this short period, Miles and the group masqueraded as both the Poets and Echoes by switching jackets (appearing on Huggy Boy's shows at the El Monte Stadium). "Nobody could tell the difference," said Miles.

Miles was a close friend of Kenneth Sinclair, tenor singer with the Six Teens who attended Compton's Centennial High. Other members attended Fremont High.

The Six Teens got together in 1956. The group was novel in respect to gender: three males and three females. The Six Teens had a fresh sound which appealed to Miles who was considering going in the same direction by adding females to the Echoes' all-male lineup. And so a second Echoes group came together with Miles, DeVold and Jones plus the addition of the extremely talented Marzetta Freeman, who had had gospel choir experience singing in church with her sister and Darlene Love (then Darlene Wright) before stepping over to the Blossoms and greener pastures at Capitol in 1958.

Miles claims that he was responsible for bringing Love to the group, although it seems likely that Mabel Weathers had a hand in it as she held Love under a management contract. Mabel Weathers got the Echoes a one shot deal with Jake Porter's Combo Records in early 1957. Four songs are known to have been cut. The one and only single release featured the loping 'Aye Senorita' lead by a cool Marzetta and the cheery 'My Little Honey' with Miles'



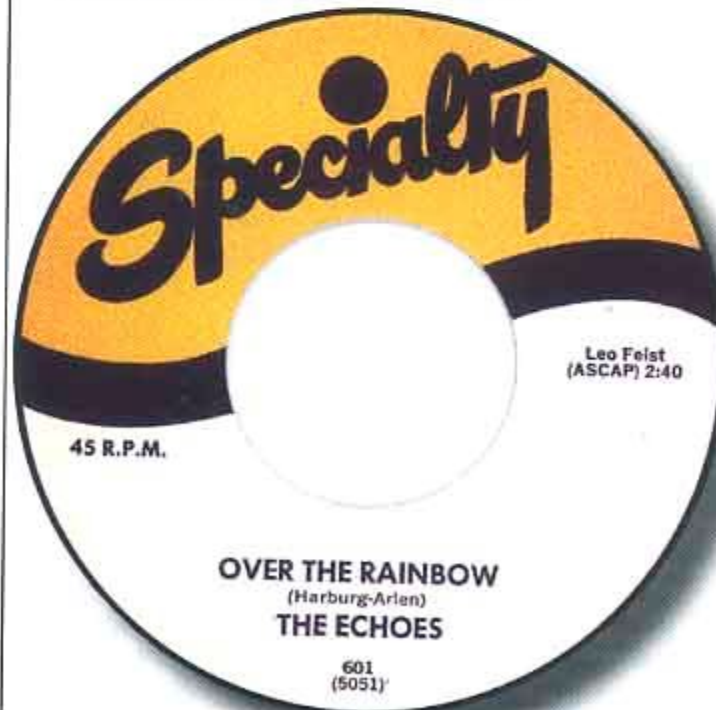
comic remarks, Marzetta's sultry lead and a fine honking sax break. The third song, the weepy and somewhat uninspired 'Take My Hand' first saw the light on a Relic Combo collection (Combo Vol. 2, Relic 5070). The fourth chart, 'Have A Heart', again spotlighting Marzetta with Darlene's support, is a jazz-inflected ballad with soft and tender lyrics. The song first showed up on Combo Vol. 1 (Relic LP 5069) and was issued again by Ace on CD 852. The 'Aye Senorita' single, lacking sufficient promotion, sunk without trace.

Only weeks after the Combo session, Mabel Weathers snagged a second one shot deal for the Echoes with Art Rupe at Specialty Records. This time the Echoes did far better. Working with Bumps Blackwell, who had a business arrangement with Mabel Weathers, the group cut a feisty, impressive cover of the Harburg-Arlen chestnut, 'Over The Rainbow', backed with the achingly beautiful 'Someone', its intro based on 'The Moonlight Sonata'.

The original 'Someone' is this writer's favourite Echoes etching. Both sides were led by the angelic Marzetta. But it was not the infectious 'Someone' that drew attention; it was 'Over The Rainbow' that funnily enough was awarded one less star than 'Someone' in the late April 1957 *Billboard* 'New Release' review column.

Through Specialty's more effective distribution set-up, the Echoes gained wider attention. They were now playing in Van Nuys alongside Jesse Belvin and with the Penguins, and the Platters in San Diego. They had even gotten an offer to play at Harlem's famed Apollo Theatre, which the Echoes would have jumped at had it not been for one condition: the group had to come up with the front money and nobody had that kind of cash. Sadly, the deal fell through.

The Echoes were always plagued by the lack of money to get them to gigs. At one time they needed a car to make a job. Miles approached his parents for a down payment on a station wagon. His father told him that work needed to be done on the family Ford to make it road worthy. How was he going to be able to lend him the money to buy a station wagon?





The Poets, first group, 1957. Left to right: Miles Grayson, Elmo Jones Jnr., Edward DeVold, Earl Williams. Courtesy Miles Grayson.

Although Mabel Weathers could not persuade Art Rupe to record the Echoes again under their own name, she did manage to have them background behind Miss Clydie King, another of her artists, on 'Our Romance'/'Written On The Wall'. 'Our Romance' was a standard teen ballad with some fine background warbling

as a junior high school counselor, which put her in touch with what was going on in the music department. When Little Clydie King quit Specialty she joined the Raelettes after which she changed her name to Brown Sugar and recorded for various labels in the early 1970s.



The Echoes, second group, 1957. Top row, left to right: Elmo Jones Jnr., Darlene (Franklin) Love, Edward DeVold. Bottom row, left to right: Marzetta Freeman and Miles Grayson. Courtesy Miles Grayson.

by the Echoes. 'Wall' was a dance ditty with Echoes backgrounding.

The Echoes' work on this is more interesting than enduring Little Clydie's chirpy lead. Little Clydie was discovered by Richard Berry, who took the teen to Modern where she made her debut with a cover of the Six Teens' 'A Casual Look'. *Billboard* reviewed 'Our Romance' in early June 1957 and awarded it a three-star rating. The record was issued at the same time as Little Richard's 'Jenny Jenny'. One can imagine that Art Rupe's promotional energy was primarily focused on the heavy sales potential of the not so little 'Little' person named Richard. However, 'Our Romance' did very well locally.

Not only did Mabel Weathers run a management agency, she worked as a junior high school counselor, which put her in touch with what was going on in the music department. When Little Clydie King quit Specialty she joined the Raelettes after which she changed her name to Brown Sugar and recorded for various labels in the early 1970s. During the early part of 1958 Mabel Weathers set up Impala Records at 1736 South LaBrea Avenue. The label's one and only release was 'I'll Never let You Go'/'Honey Chile' by Sonny Roberts and The Echoes. The Echoes were fine harmonists. Why were they being used as background singers? This was a waste of good talent.

'Never Let You Go', written by Jones, is a fine ballad with ample musical support. 'Honey Chile', penned by DeVold, was far more dramatic with its stompin' beat, honking sax, wisecracks and hand claps. Everyone had faith in 'Honey Chile' which had all the makings of a hit record, but, because the slice lacked promotional push, it never broke nationally. Sonny



Roberts was a fresh talent who never recorded again. The record has since become a prized collector's item.

Miles' first production experience came quite accidentally. Either through Mabel Weathers or on his own initiative, he walked into a Sam Cooke rehearsal session. At this time Cooke was with John Siamas's Keen Records on West Third Street.

A&R man Bumps Blackwell was still in the picture. Rehearsals were in full swing and the usual set of session musicians, including Earl Palmer on drums and Irving Ashby on guitar, were in place. During a run through Miles came up with a few of his own embellishments which Irving Ashby thought were definite improvements. Pleased by the input, Ashby gave Miles ten dollars. After this positive encouragement Miles seriously thought about making and producing records a full-time profession.

Also during the early part of 1958, Effie Smith, long time singer, comedienne, writer, producer and label owner, started taking an interest in the Echoes. Effie and her husband, singer and writer John Criner, proprietored the Shade and Spot labels at 3747 Ruthelen Street in Los Angeles.

It was likely that the Echoes were still under contract with Mabel Weathers at the time and for this reason Smith might have had the Echoes revert back to their former identity as the Poets. But this did not make too much sense either, because a second bunch of singers calling themselves the Poets out of Jefferson High were on the scene at that time. The Poets of Jeff High recorded for Charlie 'Flash' Reynolds of Flash Records on East Vernon Street at approximately the time the Echoes recorded for Impala. To make matters even more interesting, Roy C. Ayers Jnr., close friend of Miles Grayson, sang in the Jeff High Poets.

Why would Effie Smith think that by recording the Echoes as a second L.A. Poets she could avoid chaos and confusion? Did Smith and Reynolds have a deal going that would allow one group to go out as the other? Did they think by so doing they would be able to double their chances at being able to do better with each of their investments?

Be that as it may, 'I'm In Love'/'Honey Chile' was released on the Smith/Criner Spot imprint, label-copied as by the Poets. 'I'm In Love' is a remake of 'Someone', in this case lead by Elmo Jones Jnr. The reverse, 'Honey Chile', was a slowed down version of the original 'Honey Chile' on Impala. Aurally speaking, one can hear only four male voices on both sides of this record. We can assume that Darlene Love had moved on and that Marzetta Freeman had moved to Las Vegas at this point.

The release was sold to Dot Records, which re-released it in 1960. This record, put out after the group had disbanded, is considered one of the Poets/Echoes' finest efforts and fetches a princely sum on the collectors' market.

Edward DeVold describes the Smith/Criner period as a rough and rocky one. "Effie



The Gay Clefs in 1960. Top: Alfred Green, guitar and vocal; 2nd row, left to right: Benny Huey, bass, Lerman Horton, drums; Front row, left to right: Miles Grayson, keyboards, Bobby Lester, baritone, sax and leader, Andrew Heard, tenor sax and vocal. Courtesy Miles Grayson

Smith," says DeVold, "was trying to groom us for professional stardom, and all the while the members of the group were struggling to decide whether to go with the group, or to spend more time at school in order to make it to college." This eventually led to the disintegration of the group in late 1958, quite possibly before the release of the Spot single.

Miles moved on to City College in 1959 to study music formula. It was his desire to graduate with an AA degree in music, but the problem was that English and History were

requirements as well. He lacked interest in these subjects and should have chosen a business major. He stuck it out for eighteen months.

Then one day he got a call from baritone sax player Bobby Lester to join his Gay Clefs band. Miles had gigged around with Lester before. Gay Clefs members included Alfred Green, guitar and vocals; Benny Huey, bass guitar; Lerman Horton (who had worked with Miles a lot over the years), drums; Miles, keyboards; Bobby Lester, leader and notorious ladies man, and Andrew Heard, tenor sax and reluctant second vocalist. I say 'reluctant' as Heard refused to sing if the house raised a poor showing. Lester disliked Harold as a Christian name and insisted it be changed to Miles. Miles, who wanted a band job badly, put up no resistance. The band

had so much work Miles had to quit school altogether.

The Gay Clefs had a slick act, put out a few fancy moves and went through four uniform changes per show. Shortly before a four month stint with the band in Hawaii, Miles set up the Respect Music Publishing Company and wrote a song called 'The Girl From Chandler' (quite possibly after his first wife, Peggy) and another entitled 'Roasted Peanuts', which ended up on Hunter Hancock and Roger Davenport's 'Swingin' label on the lower deck of 'One Week Romance' by the Calendars. Miles took 'Roasted Peanuts' with him to have it played on Hawaiian radio stations. The outfit at this point had evolved into the Bobbie Lester Band with Miles, Lester and Heard, Pete Fox on guitar and Mickey Conway on drums.

The work schedule in Hawaii was grueling, 9pm to 3am, seven nights a week. Feeling he needed to keep up with his music studies, Miles took day classes in the music department at the University of Hawaii. When Miles returned to Los Angeles he set up a band called the Milestones.

He was now feeling confident enough to step out front and sing. His five-piece combo featured Lonnie Nelson on baritone sax, Pete Fox on guitar, Leroy Grayson on trumpet



The Milestones circa 1963-1964. Courtesy Miles Grayson.



and his old pal Lerman Horton on drums. The Milestones played night clubs. These included the California Club, Rubiyat Room, West Covina Bowling Alley, different Norwalk venues and well-paid gigs in suburban L.A. locations.

Leon Foster took care of managerial duties. "I'd get up there and sing popular soul hits by James Brown and do a few up-tempo tunes by acts like Don and Dewey and Little Richard," says Miles. He still found time to write songs for Debra Johnson, Leonard Wayne and Henry Houston among others. He started working for Z.Z. and Matt Hill at the Brinson studio at 30th and Western and formed the Miles Grayson Trio with his old pal Lerman Horton at the drums, Ted Brinson doubled as both engineer and bass player, while Miles sat at the keyboards.

In 1964, Z.Z. wrote the funky, soulful 'You Were Wrong', an instrumental which Miles recorded with his trio for Hill Records. The single sold very well – well enough for Hill to keep Miles on a retainer. The favour was returned in 1971 when Miles wrote 'Don't Let Me Pay For His Mistakes', which Z.Z. Hill recorded for Hill. "The record sold over 700,000 copies," says Miles. During the close of the 1950s, Nancy Gilpen managed John Dolphin's 'Dolphins of Hollywood Record Store' on South Central Avenue. Not too long ago, Nancy Gilpen became Miles' second wife.

Over the course of the last forty years, Miles Grayson's song-writing has become so prolific, even Miles does not remember how many songs he has written.

Ady Croasdell adds that Miles Grayson is a legendary name among European soul collectors. His productions and arrangements for Lynne Varnado, the Penetrations, Hayes Cotton, Z.Z. Hill and indeed his own Milestones have given him cult-hero status on the Northern Soul scene and his later jazz-funk work with his own trio and Brenda George has recently converted a whole new set of British black music aficionados.

With unbridled assistance from Miles Grayson and Edward DeVold. Label shots: Opal Louis Nations.

