

# **SOUNDS OF BLACKNESS: Gary Hines speaks of his love for Africa**

29 April 2006 Deborah Gabriel

## **A Household name that has stood the test of time**

Sounds of Blackness are a household name and deserve due credit as ambassadors for gospel who have helped to bring about its resurgence and integration into the mainstream since 1971.

With inspirational and uplifting songs like **I Believe, Optimistic** and **We're Going All The Way** delivered by some forty vocalists with some of the most talented soloists in the business, Sounds of Blackness have touched hearts and minds across the globe.

With three grammies, a Soul Train Award, an International Time for Peace Award and many other accolades, they are also one of the most successful gospel groups who have stood the test of time – 35 years in fact.

Sounds of Blackness have appeared and recorded with a bevy of stars including: Anita Baker, Patti LaBelle, Earth Wind and Fire, Kirk Franklin, BB King, Aretha Franklin, Luther Vandross, Stevie Wonder, Quincy Jones and many others.

They have just released a new album called **Unity** and will be appearing at the Jazz Café in Camden Town On Sunday May 7 and Monday May 8.

Weekend Black Britain caught up with the group's leader, Gary Hines to talk about a common love of Africa and how this is reflected through Sounds of Blackness' music. Hines said that first and foremost:

**“We sing the message and bring the music of the whole African Diaspora, whether it's the islands of the sea, (as WEB Dubois called the Caribbean); whether it's the UK or South America, or in the US. We reflect all of that in our music and in our message.”**

Weekend Black Britain asked:

How are you able to speak to the experiences and issues affecting the global African Diaspora in your music?

**“We are a part of that experience and so being involved adds to a legacy, not only of our own culture, but of course with the political, economic and social realities that make up the US. We live that in our everyday experience individually and collectively as a people.**

**“So our outlook, our perspective and our world view and our daily life, you can't help but be influenced by that and of course since music emanates from life experience and from the soul and from the spirit, and the music in the lyrics are influenced by that. So it's not something that is apart from us but something that we experience and that we see and react to, and our souls and spirits react to in terms of musical creations and what the direction of that music and lyrics are.”**

You won the International Time for Peace Award in 1995 for **A Time for Healing**, were you on a mission of global healing with the song?

**“Oh absolutely. Our lyrics and especially mine – I happened to the writer on that song – my lyrics are never in the abstract. With time for healing, we said we have got to learn to live together all as brothers and sisters or we will perish alone as fools. That’s a paraphrase of some of the words of Dr. Martin Luther King.**

**“But also, what we talk about – even in our CD before the last one: Soul Symphony, what the meaning of soul symphony for Sounds of Blackness is that the world is a symphony and we all are members of this universal family.**

**“A lot of people think of that concept as utopian or idealistic but it’s only of that’s what we say that it is. I mean, we are all – as another one of our songs say, Children of God, regardless of our faith, tradition, ethnicity or nationality.**

**“So we feel that Sounds of Blackness’ unique message is not only to inspire people but to unify people. Of course our current CD is called Unity and it’s unity from the African and Afrocentric experience but beyond that to people of all backgrounds.**

**“We look at the family of humankind as being exactly that and so our music is trying to wake people up and drive that point home – that we are all brothers and sisters and the sooner we start acting like that the better off we’ll all be.”**

### **Most music has its origins in Africa**

Your music has crossed all genres from jazz, blues, rock and roll to rhythm and blues and reggae how has this come about?

**“People ask: what type of group is Sounds of Blackness? Are you gospel? Are you jazz? Are you R&B? There’s only one answer to that question. We are a black music group and we do the music of the black experience: jazz, gospel, R&B, hip hop, reggae, ragtime, rock and roll – a lot of people forget that rock and roll was black music; spirituals, work songs, field hollers – we do the music of the African Diaspora.**

**“So that’s what everybody hears. We always make sure that the lyrics to those different musical styles are always inspirational and motivational for people of all backgrounds – but we do the music of the black experience. It’s a family of music. We could not call ourselves ‘The Sounds of Blackness’ if we only did one sound. So that’s what the meaning of the name is and we present every sound of the black or African experience to the world.”**

When you did the Africa to America album back in 1997, it seemed to me to be something that put the African consciousness to the forefront. It was almost like saying it’s great to be African – Was that the thought behind it?

**“Oh absolutely. Africa to America; The Journey to the Drum was really saying as so many people are saying from Stevie Wonder to Quincy Jones and Carlos Santana. (Whenever he receives an award he always thanks Mother Africa and people wonder**

why this Latino is thanking Mother Africa) – as do Sounds of Blackness.

**“It’s because so much of the music that we hear today is based from the African Continent – in terms of the polyrhythms, including hop hop. I remind my hip hop brothers that hip hop is not new – it’s centuries old as African people have always done word and rhyme to the drum, to the rhythm. This is currently just a modern take on it. And so hip hop owes its origins to Africa - as does R&B, gospel, rock and so many other different genres of music that we hear today on the radio and in the movies and see and hear on television.”**

It’s so great to hear you give Africa it’s rightful credit for its contribution to music as so much that is associated with Africa today is negative – it is portrayed either as the continent of starving people or the continent of corrupt leaders – so it’s so good to see Africa being given credit for positive things.

**“Beyond music, too often historians to this day still don’t credit Mother Africa with being the birthplace of humanity; the first university system at Timbuktu was there and the origins of what we call modern education: medicine, science, all have their origin in Africa. They try to separate Egypt from Africa but all of that is from the African continent and so much more.”**

It’s great to see that we have common views in terms of the way we see Africa!

**“Oh definitely. The Motherland, birthplace of humanity, cradle of civilization and one of the songs that we’re going to sing next week is called Kingdoms and talks about the Motherland and the great Kingdoms and the positive realities of the Motherland that oft times are either hidden or obscured. So we hope to see you there and to all the listeners – be listening for that song Kingdoms and we will be featuring the glory of Africa.”**

You’ve just released a new album – Unity – what else can we expect from Sounds of Blackness in the future?

**“As part of our activity we do musical productions and plays, we do one that I know would be great in the UK – Soul of the Sixties, where we perform an entire review tribute to the classical R&B soul artists Otis Redding, James Brown, Ike and Tina Turner, Sam & Dave, all the Motown groups and we do this in full costume with our band and we hope one day soon to do this in the UK.**

**“ We also have a Christmas Production called The Night Before Christmas. Our stage plays and musicals are something that we’re going to bring to the forefront and we’re currently in talks with different studios about it in terms of having them developed for either TV or film. That’s our next area of focus in addition to always trying to expand what we do in our recordings.”**