

THE HARLEM GOSPEL TRAVELERS

“When everything was stripped away, all we had left was the music,” says singer Thomas Gatling. “Difficult as it was, we realized that God was opening a door, and it was up to us to walk on through to the other side.”

It’s on the other side that we meet a transformed Harlem Gospel Travelers, complete with a new album, a new lineup, and a new lease on life. Produced by Eli Paperboy Reed, *Look Up!* marks the group’s first full-length release as a trio, as well as their first collection of totally original material, and it couldn’t have come at a more vital moment. The music still draws deeply on the gospel quartet tradition of the ’50s and ’60s, of course, but there’s a distinctly modern edge to the record, an unmistakable reflection of the tumultuous past few years of pandemic anxiety, political chaos, and social unrest. The songs here are bold and resilient, facing down doubt and despair with faith and perseverance, and the performances are explosive and ecstatic, fueled by dazzling vocal arrangements punctuated with gritty bursts of guitar and crunchy rhythm breaks. It’d be easy to classify the album as “retro” or “vintage,” but the truth is that the young men of The Harlem Gospel Travelers aren’t just reviving sounds from the past, they’re revitalizing them for the present and reminding us just how relevant this music is (and always has been) in times of hardship and uncertainty.

“Gospel’s at the root of everything,” says Gatling. “Country, folk, rock, soul, blues; we love it all, and it’s all in there.”

Gatling and his fellow Travelers—singers George Marage and Dennis Bailey—were all familiar with gospel music to one degree or another growing up, but it wasn’t until their introduction to Reed that they began to learn about the rich history of the gospel quartet and timeless groups like The Soul Stirrers, The Dixie Hummingbirds, and The Swan Silvertones. See, back in high school, Gatling and Marage were participants in a non-profit music education program known as Gospel For Teens, which invited kids from all over New York to come to Harlem and sing after school.

“I was invited to visit the program and I thought it was great,” says Reed, who was signed to Warner Brothers Records at the time, “but it was all choir music. I asked if they’d ever consider doing a quartet program for young men, and they told me they’d love to but they didn’t have a teacher.”

So Reed became the teacher, working with five or six teenagers at a time for semester-long programs focused on widening the students’ perspective of what gospel music could be and tapping into the true power of their voices. Participants came and went over the years, but some stuck around and began to suggest the kind of talent and ambition that reached beyond a simple afterschool program.

“I started working with Thomas when he was 13 or 14,” recalls Reed, “and he was the driving force behind this turning into more than just a class. He was bringing in song ideas of his own, and as he and George and some of the guys in the group began to age out of the program, I realized we needed to get them into the studio.”

Thus, The Harlem Gospel Travelers were born. Backed by Reed and an all-star band, the group put out their debut LP, *He's On Time*, to rave reviews in 2019, with *Pop Matters* hailing the album's "musical transcendence" and *AllMusic* praising it as "dreamlike and joyous." The record charted on *Billboard*, earned the Travelers high profile fans like Elton John (who invited them to appear on his Rocket Hour radio show on Apple Music), and landed them festival slots everywhere from Pilgrimage to Telluride Jazz. By the time 2020 hit, the wheels were in motion for a breakout year of touring and recording. Instead, the entire world came to a screeching halt.

"On top of everything else that was hard about it, the pandemic was particularly tough from an artistic perspective," says Bailey. "It kind of felt like shadowboxing. You can do it on your own for a while, but you don't know what you're really capable of until you get into the ring with an opponent who can hit back."

Bailey, a college friend of Gatling's, had joined the group after the release of *He's On Time*, fleshing out a new lineup that saw the Travelers evolving from a quartet into a trio. And while Bailey's bandmates may have had more experience in the studio and on the road, all three shared a similar sense of frustration with being stuck at home.

"I had to learn to use that time to work on myself and see what was getting in the way of my ability to create," says Gatling. "When I learned to let go of those negative parts of myself, that's when I started to write again and feel this sense of rebirth."

The songs Gatling found himself writing were righteous and uplifting, reaching back into the past but keeping their sights set firmly on the future. Bailey and Reed contributed originals to the mix, as well, and when it came time to record, they had a batch of songs on their hands unlike anything else they'd ever heard, a collection that at once harkened to the golden era of the gospel quartet and simultaneously tipped its cap to the likes of The Staple Singers and Curtis Mayfield, all while keeping its feet planted firmly in the 21st century.

"When we got back into the studio again after all that time, it felt like I was back home with my family," says Marage. "I was in tears by the end of it because I could hear how far we'd come and how much we'd all put into this. It was an elevation in every sense of the word."

That elevation is clear from the start on *Look Up!*, which opens with the exhilarating title track. Like so much of the album, the song insists on hope and believing in a brighter tomorrow. "You've got to raise your gaze above the haze and find yourself some better days," Gatling and Marage sing, alternating back and forth on the lead. "And if you search your heart you'll finally start and be on your way / Look up!"

"At the time, I was writing a lot of this material as encouragement to myself," Gatling explains. "The songs were like a journal where I could work out my feelings in a really therapeutic way, where I could be uplifting without sacrificing any honesty or vulnerability."

The fervent “Hold On (Joy Is Coming)” finds strength in a moment of weakness, while the blistering “God’s In Control” (written by Bailey) surrenders to a higher power, and the blissful “Nothing But His Love” embraces joy and gratitude. Upbeat as the record is, though, the Travelers don’t shy away from the painful truths of the modern world, tackling racism and injustice with a fierce sense of determination and pride on tracks like the funk-tinged “Hold Your Head Up” and stirring “Fight On.”

“I love those old Negro spirituals like ‘We Shall Overcome’ and ‘I Shall Not Be Moved,’” says Gatling, “but that’s not what I wanted to do here. I wanted to write songs that would make us feel empowered and call us to action, battle cries in the war against white supremacy, against division and hatred and oppression.”

The only way to fight those battles, as history has shown us time and again, is with love and faith and community. We’re stronger together—in song and in life—and *Look Up!* revels in that sense of belonging and inclusiveness. The stirring “Let Me Tell You” showcases the mesmerizing bass vocals of 18-year-old North Carolina vocalist Kendall Kent, who guests throughout the record; the tender “Help Me to Understand” shines a spotlight on drummer Aaron Frazer (Durand Jones & The Indications, Yola), who sat behind the kit on the first record but returns to lend his soulful vocals here; and the high octane “I’m Grateful” raises the rafters with a little help from Gatling’s mother, Pastor Cynthia McCants.

“I grew up singing with my mom and she’d always take me preaching with her,” Gatling explains. “Getting her into the studio to capture our relationship and what we do on Sunday mornings in church was a really special thing.”

Perhaps no track better encapsulates the album’s spirit, though, than the waltzing “God Will Take Care Of You.” Building from a spare, near-sermon of an intro into a feverish frenzy in less than three minutes, the song showcases the full width and breadth of the group’s remarkable range as it promises: “He’ll never leave you / Never forsake you / God will take care of you / I know that He will.”

“I was in such a deep dark place when I wrote that song,” reflects Gatling. “I was in the wilderness and I needed that comfort. Whether you believe or not, I know that when you hear us sing it, you’re going to feel something.”

And that’s what The Harlem Gospel Travelers are all about. They’re here to move you, to lift you up, to free you from your burdens and take you someplace higher. Because even when the world seems its darkest and everything else gets stripped away, the music still remains. It always does.