

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ANNIE & THE CALDWELLS

Annie Caldwell says, “My family is my band,” and so naturally the history of the band—and their music—dovetails with the family’s real life. ANNIE & THE CALDWELLS are a family that plays a powerful disco soul from West Point, Mississippi. When Annie was 16 years old, in Aberdeen, Mississippi, she played in a band with her brothers (they were called the Staples Jr. Singers, a group of teenagers with a single album recorded in the 1970s). One day, the Staples Jrs. were singing on a church program in West Point, when a guitarist who played with one of Annie’s brothers in another band heard her and said, “Who — is that?” That moment Annie met Willie Joe Caldwell, Sr., her husband of the last fifty years, and the co-founder and guitarist for the Caldwell family who supports his family’s high-flying vocals with fuzzy, psychedelic riffs.

Annie and Joe got married so young that their parents had to sign for them. They started their own family, and Annie opened a store on Main Street in West Point called Caldwell Fashions—which has been a beloved staple for women dressing for COGIC ([Church Of God In Christ](#)) convocations and church anniversaries since the '80s. Things changed for the Caldwell family when their eldest daughter was old enough to be invited to sing at a high school talent show. The Caldwell family was shocked that their daughter was singing the blues—“the blues!” for Annie, means any music of any genre that doesn’t speak the gospel.

“We thought, if we don’t do something, the devil’s going to get her,” Annie said. “We decided we better get these children because people wanted them to sing in places where they played the blues, and I didn’t want that.”

So Annie and Joe started their own group, which pulled from the music their kids loved — The Gap Band, Chaka Kahn, Bootsy Collins. “We started singing ‘Is My Living in Vain’ by the Clark Sisters,” Annie said, illustrating how the group infuses gospel with grit and street savvy. Two decades later, the constellation of family members in The Caldwell family is more or less the same: Annie is backed by their daughters Deborah Caldwell Moore and Anjessica Caldwell and goddaughter Toni Rivers; their eldest son Willie Jr. is on the bass and youngest son Abel Aquirius is on the drums. Their real troubles and experiences—as an intergenerational family run by women—are at the center of their music: Memories of a daughter’s birth or a brother’s recovery from an illness spill into transcendent moments onstage.

“I feel like the message is often for me first,” Annie said about the songs she writes. “But so many ladies come up crying and say, ‘I feel like what you were saying was for me.’”

“What does it mean to seek God as a woman?” Danielle Amir Jackson, who wrote the liner notes for Annie & The Caldwell family’s new record *Can’t Lose My (Soul)* (out via Luaka Bop on March 21), asked Annie’s daughter Deborah this potent question after listening to her song, “Wrong.” Deborah is a hairstylist in West Point—she styles the group’s hair in jazzy side swoops before their shows. Between Deborah’s work and Annie’s styling of the girls in royal blues and purples, gabardine fabric and peplum accented by gold jewelry and bright-red nails, the Caldwell sound is married to a vision of opulent feminine power, unflinching, honest witness, and devotion.

She wrote “Wrong” as a testimony after a tumultuous period in her marriage to her beloved late husband. Reeling from a betrayal, Deborah believed that getting revenge on her

husband might improve the balance of tensions between them — but getting revenge only left her feeling depleted. “Being a married woman / experiencing heartache and pain,” Deborah sings in a performance that is raw and direct. “Girls, I was wrong.” The song is a confession, and just as it happened in real life, her family’s voices answer her call: “Wrong! Wrong!” her mother and sister sing behind her. That’s the family dynamic at work.

“I sing about my life. I don’t just sing to be singing,” Deborah said. “A lot of women liked it and a lot of men didn’t like it. The women can relate. But we wouldn’t be in this position if men didn’t put us in this position.”

Can’t Lose My (Soul), is twenty years in the making. They recorded it in West Point down the street from Annie and Joe’s house—at a church where Joe plays guitar every other Sunday, and where his father used to be a deacon. It was produced by Ahmed Gallab, the artist Sinkane, who together with the engineer Albert DiFiore drove a mobile rig down from Nashville and turned the back room of the church into a control room.

As a producer, Gallab saw his role there as making sure that “each song felt as powerful, as raw, and as genuine as the family dynamic behind it. The goal was always to stay true to the feeling behind the music,” which is why “everything was tracked live, in their church, together as a family.”

From a practical level, a big part of Gallab’s job was to get out of the way. When the band was in a groove, he would stick his head out of the control room and frantically swing his arm around like a pinwheel and stage whisper, “Keep going!” and “More! more! more!”

“Hearing Annie’s voice for the first time was like witnessing something rare,” Gallab said of the recording session, “Like you’re in the presence of a force of nature that’s been here long before you. It’s visceral, almost like it’s coming from her soul. You can feel every part of her life, every little piece of her journey, in each note she hits. It’s pure talent: no effort, no pretense, just real and raw.”

“And working with Deborah was like tapping into pure fire,” he said. “She’s feisty, no doubt! That spark, that intensity she brings, spills right into her music. The tough love that these girls gave each other. Calling each other out when one wasn’t in key. It was pretty funny.”

In November 2024, ANNIE & THE CALDWELLS travelled to Utrecht in the Netherlands to perform at the prestigious Le Guess Who? Festival, where MOJO caught their showstopping performance and reviewed it as, “The most exciting, most dynamic family of faith imaginable: their rhythm section (dad and two sons) would give the Family Stone a run for its money; the front line (mum and daughters) have unquenchable sass and spirituality, and the crowd doesn’t need persuading to crash the stage and be saved by songs. It feels like 2025 may already be their year.” Amen to that.

THINGS THAT WILL MAKE YOU LOVE THE CALDWELLS EVEN MORE

- All the kids in the family have day jobs:
 - Willie Jr. is a fork lift driver in Tupelo
 - Abel Aquirius drives hospital patients to their appointments
 - Anjessica works in customer care for an insurance company
 - Deborah is a beautician (she's available if you're ever in West Point!)
 - Toni is an elementary school teacher
- Caldwell Fashions is still open five days a week, and by appointments, when Annie and her family aren't travelling to shows.
- The album cover was taken from the film [All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt](#) by Raven Jackson, which takes place in a Mississippi town that looks uncannily like West Point.
- They have a short tour of Europe in February, stopping in Bremen, Cologne, Barcelona, and Lisbon. Find the dates [here](#).

Read the entire glowing review of their Le Guess Who? performance in [MOJO](#) [here](#).