

Sounds of Blackness

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Spotlight on Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis

As executive producers of the album and owners of the newly formed Perspective Records label, the phenomenally successful production team of Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis are the creative force behind bringing *Sounds of Blackness* to the attention of the American public.

A list of the artists and the hits produced by Jam and Lewis would read like a who's who of contemporary music. Jam and Lewis are also the production team responsible for the overwhelming success of Janet Jackson's last two albums, *Control* and *Rhythm Nation*. They've worked with artists as diverse as George Michael, Prince, New Edition, and Gladys Knight, just to name a few.

But out of all of the artists with whom they could have formed an alliance, Jam and Lewis chose *Sounds of Blackness* to be the first project to be released on their own label. "We grew up listening to *Sounds of Blackness*, and a lot of times would even play on the same shows," states Jam. "So we were very familiar with what they did. We also believed in what they did as a unit. They also embody what the label stands for—diversity, positivity, and artistry. *Sounds of Blackness* has all of these things wrapped into one package."

"Different companies began talking with us about doing our own label about five years ago, and at the time we didn't feel like we were ready to take on the responsibility of doing that. However, about a year and a half ago, A&M approached us, and we told them that we weren't really ready to do a label. Their response to that was 'Fine, but when you are ready to do it, let us know because we want to do it.'"

Jam and Lewis began working on the *Sounds of Blackness* record before obtaining a label deal and basically decided to go through with forming an alliance with A&M because, "We thought that if we had a label, that it would be the best home for the group." Coincidentally, the label deal came together the same time the record finished up, and they were in the record business.



Jam and Lewis have a vision for the label. "As Black entrepreneurs, we have a responsibility to our people to try to promote positive Black images and in the *Sounds of Blackness*' case, to glorify God and reclaim our Black musical heritage, because all music came from Black music."

Though produced by persons outside of the Gospel community, the tremendous success of this very contemporary Gospel offering has got to be sending some very strong signals to persons within the Gospel industry. Says Jam, "I hope that it will have a very positive impact on the Gospel community. The group has sung in a lot of churches, and the response has been very positive from the Gospel community, which makes us very happy."

"One of the nice things we've heard about the album is that it's one of the few that kids listen to that parents approve of and enjoy as much as the kids do. That's very important because kids and parents have to have things in common."

"A lot of times, traditional Gospel tends to lose the kids. We think of this album as very contemporary, but with a lot of traditional elements. So, it actually brings the age groups together as does the makeup of the group itself."

"The people in the group range in age from seventeen to well into their fifties. For people to see all the age groups and people from different backgrounds working together really promotes a nice image of unity." ▲

says Hines. "But, Ann didn't join the group until almost three years ago. She had expressed an interest over the years in the group, and of course when she auditioned, you can imagine she passed. And the rest is history."

The group established them-



selves during the '70s and '80s as an important fixture on the Minneapolis music scene and caught the attention of some of the area's more prominent musical personalities with their elaborate musical and theatrical productions. Among their original productions are *Africa to America*, *Music for Martin*, *The Night Before Christmas—A Musical Fantasy* (a comical Black musical adaptation of the classic poem), and *Soul of the '60s*.

In fact, the material on *The Evolution of Gospel* is actually a subdivision of the *Africa to America* production, which traces the overall evolution of Afro-American music. According to Hines, the group chose to do the evolution of Gospel as their debut project because, "We wanted to start things by first giving thanks to the Lord for all we've been blessed with in our relationship with Terry and Jimmy. We wanted to do all things in order, and that's why *The Evolution of Gospel* definitely had to be first."

Hines sees the future of Gospel music as heading "to the streets where it belongs." Says Hines, "I'm hoping and imagining that other artists will also explore the range and wealth of music that has been given us as a people if for no other reason than to provide a different fresh sound to get to the ears of the people."

"Traditional Gospel will always remain. It's the foundation. But in terms of the contemporary direction, we need marketing and a musical style to reach people that probably won't be in church on Sunday."

Of their future projects Hines says, "We'll always acknowledge and perform the full range of Black music. For we always want to show the interconnection of the various family members (musical styles)." ▲