



Sandy Foaster Jr and Five Blind Boys of Mississippi

"A lot of people ask me, 'What's the most exciting thing that's happened to you since you've been with the group?' I tell 'em, the first time I performed at the Apollo Theater.' That was really exciting to me."

The man speaking is Sandy Foster, and the group he's referring to is the Five Blind Boys Of Mississippi, the legendary gospel group he joined as featured lead singer. The group's current line-up features six "blind boys", actually: Foster and the 38-year veteran of the group, Lewis Dicks - neither of whom is blind, James Turner, Joe Watson (who joined in 1972), Rev Olice Thomas (a charter and long-time member of the Five Blind Boys Of Alabama) and J T Clinkscales (who's been aboard since the mid-40s), each of whom is blind.

In September 1992 they released an album of new material called 'Counting On Jesus', and earlier that year they celebrated the group's 52nd anniversary by playing Los Angeles and other major California cities still reeling from the riots evoked by the verdict in the Rodney King trial - "We're calling that our 'Peace Among The Nations' tour," Foster says -but on this morning Foster's recalling previous career highlights.

"I has been reading all my life about the Apollo Theater. Sam Cooke at the Apollo. James Brown at the Apollo. I had heard so much about the Apollo Theater. And that first time I went in there, I was really nervous. It was an Easter Sunday morning at five o'clock. They had a sunrise service and it was packed. It was PACKED.

"I guess that was in the early 70s. I've been there many times since then. That and singing on Broadway were two of the most exciting times that ever happened to me."

Of course, you don't perform with one of the top black gospel groups of all time for 22 years without some personal highlights to go with the professional ones. And like the story Foster's cousin and Mighty Clouds Of Joy lead singer, Joe Ligon, tells at the beginning of the song "I've Got One Thing You Can't Take Away" on the Mighty Clouds' 'Pray

For Me' album - the story where a man comes backstage and tells Ligon that the music of the Mighty Clouds kept him from killing his children and himself -Foster has such a highlight.

"We was singing in Lima, Ohio. We was at a church there and we was on the show with the Violinaires. I met the man in the restroom and when I come out he wanted me to pray for him. And I said, 'OK, I'll pray for you.' "I asked him what was wrong and he was talking about how his wife had left him and took the kids and this and that, you know. He was crying. And I prayed for him. Some of the group was out in the lobby and they saw me praying for him and they thought it was a big joke.

"But I prayed for that man. He wasn't saved. He had been drinking. You could smell it. But you know, usually, when a thing like that happens, the first place a person will come to is the Church. And I prayed for him and prayed with him. The next time I came back to Lima, that man had his family with him, his wife and his kids, and he was saved and his wife was saved. And that was something big in my life. That really did me a whole lotta good."

When Foster joined the [Five Blind Boys Of Mississippi](#) - aka the Blind Boys Of Mississippi, the Original Blind Boys Of Mississippi and the Original Mississippi Blind Boys - the group had already earned its place in history, and the story of the group's original transformation from a quintet of gospel-singing students from the Piney Woods (Mississippi) School For The Deaf And Blind to a congregation-slaying group of hard gospel pioneers that rivalled, and some would say surpassed, contemporaneous acts like the Soul Stirrers, the Dixie Hummingbirds, the Pilgrim Travelers and the Spirit Of Memphis has been told many times.

Still, the 46-year-old Foster, who wasn't even born when Archie Brownlee, Lloyd Woodard, Isaiah Patterson, Joseph Ford and Lawrence Abrams got together under the group's original name, the Cotton Blossom Singers, has been more than filled in over the years by those who were there.

"What I've been told by members of my group," Foster explains, "was that 50 years ago there wasn't no radio like we have now for gospel. So the way they would promote themselves was they would go into areas, and whoever the promoter was, he would have a loudspeaker or something on his car and go around in the neighborhoods of the country towns and advertise what group was coming."

Needless to say, times have changed. And these days, a good quarter of a century past what many consider the group's prime, the [Five Blind Boys Of Mississippi](#) have less trouble than ever packing auditoriums both small and large with SRO audiences eager for their fervent, hard-edged shows.

"We was in Albany, Georgia, Sunday night. Standing-room-only crowds. It was really nice," Foster says, proudly. And was that the exception or the rule?

"Here now lately, it seems like everywhere we go it be sell-out. I just called a promoter in Atlanta to schedule a show, and he said he was so glad I called because he knows with us he'll have a standing-room-only crowd. We was in Detroit last month," Foster continues, "at (the late) Rev C L Franklin's church and the fire department had to come for putting too many people in the place. Somebody called the fire marshal. They just wouldn't let nobody else in."