

George Banton - The Soul of Toronto - Returns to Gospel Roots

by Carole Walker

Known in Toronto as Mr.Soul, few people are aware of the deeply religious roots of the man with the most sought after voice in the region. The man who gives his listeners goose pimples on just about any number he touches, be it Reggae, R&B, Gospel, or C&W. Whatever genre, you name it, and he is capable of touching deep into your emotions. After taking on the challenges and proving himself able and proficient at all levels, George Banton has returned from his musical sojourn and is back in the comfort of his beloved Saviour and gospel music. Passionate about gospel music, the production of his new gospel CD affords him a peace of mind after trying it all and he is back where he wanted to be in the first place.

This superbly talented singer was born under the astrological sign of Gemini in the Parish of St.Elizabeth, Jamaica. George Banton's musical career began in childhood in his hometown church choir at the United Brethren in Christ. Later, he sang solo in numerous churches throughout the island including the Church of God of Prophecy, the New Testament Church of God, and the Santa Cruz Baptist Church, to name a few.

At age 18 years, George formed his own gospel group - "The Hope Brothers". However, after two years George left the Hope Brothers and moved to Kingston, where he developed his skill at playing the guitar to compliment his solo act. Not one to be appeased by mediocrity, George launched into song writing and production and soon wrote and produced his first song "I'm A Lonely Boy". Disappointed when the song did not make the chart, he returned to the area where his strength lie - soul and gospel music.

One faithful night, while in attendance at a concert at the Maxfield Avenue Church of God of Prophecy, the music director of the number one gospel group in the Island - "Gospel Light" - auditioned George and immediately signed him to the group. This was the turning point in Banton's musical career. He remained with the Gospel Light for two years before joining the Grace Thrillers in 1972, as their lead singer.

In 1973, the Grace Thrillers recorded their first gospel hit single "Too Late Shall Be Your Cry" - written by George. The song went on to become the #1 hit song in the Jamaica. The group, went on to record five additional singles, including their second hit song - "Just About Time".

In 1974, the Grace Thrillers produced their first gospel album titled: "I've Got A Love", this album was released throughout the Caribbean, Canada, USA and Europe. During this period, George also continued to work on his solo career. He had now begun to earn respect as a serious songwriter, arranger and producer. He arranged and produced a solo single titled "No Not One". The song was released on George's own "Love-Light" label. And, later that year, members of George's former group - the Gospel Group - formed a new group called the Insights. George continued to sing with both groups until he migrated to Canada in 1976.

Upon his arrival in Canada, George Banton maintained his original direction and committed himself to working diligently at his career, donating his time and al proceeds from the concerts to various Church charities.

In 1977, George formed a 7-piece gospel band called The Bantons. The group recorded and

released their first single - "Glory To His name" - on the Love-Light label. As it turned out, the group soon disbanded in 1980. Not to be dithered, George decided it was time to take on additional challenges. He ventured outside of his comfort zone and tested his skills in other genres. His natural versatility allowed him to succeed at whatever genre he chose. It continues to be a difficult task attempting to "pin" George to any one style or genre. He is electrifying and soulful on his first R&B cover song "Faithful and True" which was first recorded by ZZ Hill and Percy Sledge. This single stayed at the #1 spot on the Canadian chart for ten weeks and was #1 on FM 108 and AM 790 for over nine weeks. The single also sat in the number one slot on many other radio stations in North America.

1981 saw the release of George Banton's debut solo R&B album titled: "If You Don't Love Me, Leave Me Alone." The album released on Banton's Lovelight label also contained his first hit single, "Faithful and True". In 1982, he released the cover song, "How Could I Let You Get Away" which was previously recorded by the Spinners. It made the #1 slot on the Toronto music chart and received regular rotation on WBLK in Buffalo, New York.

In 1983, Banton released his version of the cover - "Burning Fire" on the S.I.G.H.T. Label. The song was previously released by Arthur Conley. In 1984, Banton wrote and produced "Honey I Will Survive", another single on the Lovelight Label which again made it to #1 on the charts in Toronto. In 1985, he released a medley on the Soul Survivor label titled "Don't Lie To Me". He also produced his second album "You're All I Need" on which he wrote five original compositions. His third single on the S.I.G.H.T. Label "Let Me Sing You A Love Song", was released in 1986. Later that year, his song "No One Can Love Me Like You Do", earned him a nomination for the Canadian Juno Awards.

In 1987, he released his third album "The Soul Of Toronto (TSOT)" on the S.I.G.H.T. Label. "How Could You Get Away" was a run away hit single that earned him another nomination for the 1990 Juno Awards in the R&B category. An outstanding singer with extraordinary vocal ability an range from gospel, R&B, Reggae, Country & Western, Jazz and Classical, his level of versatility and style has critics and fans alike pondering where to place him. He is said to be a cross between Joe Tex, Otis Redding, ZZ Hill, Jerry Butler and Don Covey among many others. If such is possible, then surely you can imagine the sweet sound such a person exudes. George Banton's musical and spiritual depth and authenticity are conveyed with warmth and soul - the hall mark of George Banton's music.

Having gone full circle, George has come home to gospel with the release of his latest CD. This very powerful, soul quenching CD has taken the North American market by storm There is no doubt you will be hearing a lot from and about if you haven't already. Canadian Connection will review this latest piece of work by Toronto's musical maestro in the next edition - stay tuned!