

SPOTLIGHT



Cameron Whigg

BLIND BOYS OF ALABAMA

Seven decades in, the gospel giants still find a way to inspire

Ricky McKinnie, Paul Beasley, Jimmy Carter, Ben Moore, Joey Williams

"I NEVER EVEN THOUGHT OF LEAVING," says vocalist Jimmy Carter, the sole founding member still touring and recording with the Blind Boys of Alabama, the Grammy-winning gospel supergroup that formed in 1939. "When we started we were determined to go all the way. And when I step down, I'll pass the torch behind me."

It's impossible not to connect the tenacity of Carter and the group to their aptly named new release *I'll Find a Way*. Produced by Bon Iver's Justin Vernon, the album spans a wide array of gospel-inspired numbers, from Nina Simone's performance of "Take Me to the Water" to Bob Dylan's "Every Grain of Sand."

After 70 years, Carter looks back at the group's modest ambitions. "When we started, we had no idea we'd ever get this far," he says of the group that was formed by members of the Glee Club at the Alabama

Institute for the Blind in Talladega, Ala., when Carter was just 12. "We were just really young guys singing in a quartet," he says. "We were fans of the Golden Gate Quartet—they were our idols. We wanted to be like them."

In the years since, the Blind Boys—who have released more than 60 albums—have blazed their own musical path rooted in gospel but often flavored with country, blues and even hip-hop. The creative spark was obvious from the start between Vernon and the group that has collaborated with everyone from Tom Waits and Lou Reed to Willie Nelson, Ben Harper and George Clinton. "I will tell you that Justin knows our music and was so sincere about wanting to work together," says Carter. "He had terrific faith that we could bring something special to these songs."

Vernon chose the songs and worked with friend and collaborator Phil Cook to

select the backing band, with the Blind Boys approving each step of the process. The album boasts high-wattage guests including Shera Worden of My Brightest Diamond, Merrill Garbus of tUnE-yArDs, and Casey Dienel of White Hinterland—and each added a certain spice to the album. "Patty Griffin, she impressed me very much," said Carter of her contribution to the song "Jubilee." "That is a very uptempo song, and to hear her sing all those words that fast, real uptempo, you can't help but be caught up in it."

Although the Blind Boys are all well "over 50," says Carter with a laugh, they're excited to tour behind this album. "We're not spring chickens but we love what we do, and that keeps us going," he says. "I'm sure some kind of tour will be distilled, and I'm looking forward to that. Whatever works out, we want it."

—Nancy Dunham

