

by Herman M. Gay

If you mention love of God, hard work, a love for family, and a dedication to singing, you have described the foundation on which **The Vines Sisters and Family** have built their success. With such a strong foundation, this Eastern North Carolina singing group of nine members has built themselves into one of the most soul stirring groups to come from the Farmville/ Greenville, North Carolina area.

The group consists of the four sisters, Dorothy, Alice, Mattie, and Audrey; Johnny Ray Daniels, lead guitarist and singer; Curtis Harper, drummer; Frank Smith, guitarist; and Carl Matthews, guitarist. They have been singing together for more than 18 years.

Mattie Vines Harper, one of the lead singers, says that she feels blessed to have the chance to sing. "Sometimes it's hard to believe that we have had the chance to sing in some of the places we've been to. Especially when I think about how things were when we started out. We started at the bottom."

Alice Vines, also assistant manager for the group, explains what starting at the bottom means. "We first started singing for Ma and the family. We would sing at church. " (Their church is Union Grove Baptist near Farmville, North Carolina.) "They called our group the Heavenly Ten. Then people started calling us the Glorifying Vines Sisters. We became the opening performers for established groups."

At that time, two other sisters, Rosa Bell and Margaret were members of the group. They decided to quit to become involved with other things.

Dorothy Vines Daniels, who arranges most of songs, says, "It's been a slow process. For us, it has been like climbing a stairs. Every step has taken us a little bit closer to the top. Because of their success, the Vines Sisters and Family now promote other groups.

Their success also includes four albums. In 1984, they recorded **There's a Blessing Over the Hill**, which includes the often requested song **We Will Work Till Jesus Comes**. In 1986, they released **Robed and Ready**. The most requested songs on this album are **Robed and Ready** and **How Long**.

Wendell Parker, a producer in Atlanta, Georgia, has released the group's music on the Church Door and ShurGold labels.

Alice points to Johnny Ray Daniels as the person who is the guiding force for the group. "Johnny Ray is the one who takes all the punches and knocks for us. He's the one who handles all the business. He makes sure that all the dates are set and that the other things are taken care of. And another thing, he handles almost

all the driving. She laughs and adds, " We get in the motor van and go to sleep. Sometimes, everybody will be sleep except him. I don't know how he does it. I know he has to get tired because he's up there performing too. God is looking out for him."

Johnny Ray, who is married to Dorothy, has been singing and playing the guitar and piano for over 25 years. A member of a gospel singing family, he sang with the Spiritualaires. Serving as the manager means that Johnny Ray has to coordinate a schedule that includes concerts and church performances for almost every weekend.

So far, the group has performed in over 27 states and in front of crowds as large as 20,000. They have presented three performances on a Sunday. During some weekends they return from their performances only an hour or two before some of members in the group have to go to work.

Performing every week is a strain for anyone, but Mattie describes the situation for them as lucky. "Most of us got married early so our families were growing up as we grew and got more involved in singing." Mattie is married to Curtis Harper, the drummer for the group.

Dorothy says that they intend to keep on singing. "Singing is our way of giving it all to God. He gave it to us. When we sing, it's a testimony of what we've done. It's my way of witnessing to the fact that God can do everything that he said."

"It makes you feel good when you get people clapping and praising the Lord and acting like they like what we're doing. When you're singing, you don't worry about nothing," says Mattie. " You feel good knowing that you have helped win people over to the Lord."

Dorothy says that it's hard to say which gospel groups influenced them. " We're close in style to the old, traditional gospel singers. The group's choice of songs support this statement. . Traditional gospel singers would include the **Swanee Quintet, the Five Blind Boys, Mighty Clouds of Joy and the Sensational Nightingales.**

The Vines Sisters and Family have performed in gospel shows with all of these groups. Audiences know what they want to hear the Vines Sisters and Family perform. Alice and Mattie remember when the group decided to change the list of songs for programs at different locations. " We wanted to have some variety, " says Mattie. "But, whenever we would change or not do a song, somebody from the audience would send a note up to the group requesting the songs we had planned not to sing.

The audiences always request **How Long, Robed and Ready, and We Will Work Till Jesus Comes.**

Their songs are played regularly on WOOW in Greenville, WOKN in Goldsboro,

as well as on stations in Windsor, Williamston, Wilson, and Kinston.

Alice speaks with awe and admiration when she talks about members in the group. "I couldn't really sing at first, but they taught me how. " About her sisters she says, " Sometimes, I can't believe how strong Aut's (Audrey) voice is. No matter how much we sing, she just won't get tired. Mattie and Sis (Dorothy) have a big gift for singing and testifying."

The group's plans for the future include keeping the public happy. They will also try to give the public something new, and have already started working on some new songs.

For the Vines Sisters and Family, singing hymns is a joy. It's their way of fulfilling themselves.