

First Annual Gospelfest Contest Ends Upbeat

By MARK R. MOSS
Chronicle Staff Writer

From a 12-year-old contestant, who deserves an "A" for chutzpah, to a quintet whose a cappella renderings of gospel songs earned them a first-place prize, everyone who participated in this year's *Chronicle* Gospelfest '93 competition gave their best and helped to make the first-time event a success.

Last Thursday night was the final night of a four-day contest in which the participants offered their best in the hopes of coming out on top. The first-place winners of this year's contest were: WCTS (Witnessing for Christ Through Song), a quintet; Ruby Glaspy, a soloist; and, Christ Rescue Temple, a choir. Each received \$300 and a plaque.

Amid the cries of barkers trying to get your money and dance tunes blasting from stomach-churning rides at the Dixie Classic Fair, came the sweet sounds of gospel — the roots of which go back much further than the perennial spectacle that seduces residents of Northwest North Carolina.

Mel White, circulation manager for the *Chronicle* and a key organizer of the event, said one of the goals of bringing the gospel contest to the fair was to have an event that would attract older African Americans. There wasn't an overwhelming majority of senior citizens on hand last Thursday, but as White was quick to point out, this was the first event of its kind in the area, and overall it was a success.

"I was extremely pleased with the way things happened," White said. "Now we've got something to build on."

The contest, which was also sponsored by Russell's Funeral Home and the Dixie Classic Fair, featured 18 groups and five show-casiers, or semi-professionals, who were there to help bring in the crowd. The three judges, whose identities were kept secret until Thursday night, were Cynthia Wooten, Alma Barber and Bennie Plowden.

Thursday night's opening act featured the Rev. John Heath, a solo act who at one point had the crowd on its feet and shouting "Amen!"

Heath, pastor of the Righteous Church of God in Midway, also performed a bit of "Holy Ghost rap."

Carmen Russell Bonham of Russell's Funeral Home and Al Martin, a radio personality well-known for his gospel programs, emceed the final night.

Christ Rescue Temple was accompanied by a saxophonist who blew riffs reminiscent of jazz great Charlie "Bird" Parker.

Kristy Belton, the young white girl with a lot of brass, was one of three solo contestants — all of whom returned for a second look by the three judges after performing Tuesday night.

Jamera McQueen, another soloist, walked off with the runner-up prize and \$200.

One of the event's highlights was the performance by a group of elderly men who called themselves "The Friendly Five." Dressed in gray suits matching shoes and maroon ties, they offered sometimes harmonious tunes in an exhibition that was climaxed by one member who appeared to have gotten carried away by the spiritual messages his group delivered.

But it was WCTS, a quintet of three men and two women, who brought the house down. They sang a cappella, didn't miss a beat, and walked away with the first-place prize money.

Randy Dulin, a member of the group, said that WCTS is composed of members from two East Winston

churches. They have been together for 10 years, and frequently perform out of town. The money they won will go into the group's treasury, he said.

"I would hope that the sponsors continue to put this on," said Shedric Adams, who attended all four nights. He confessed to being a

gospel lover and attributed that to being raised in a holiness church where "congregational singing and old spirituals" were part of the services. "The singing itself helps me."

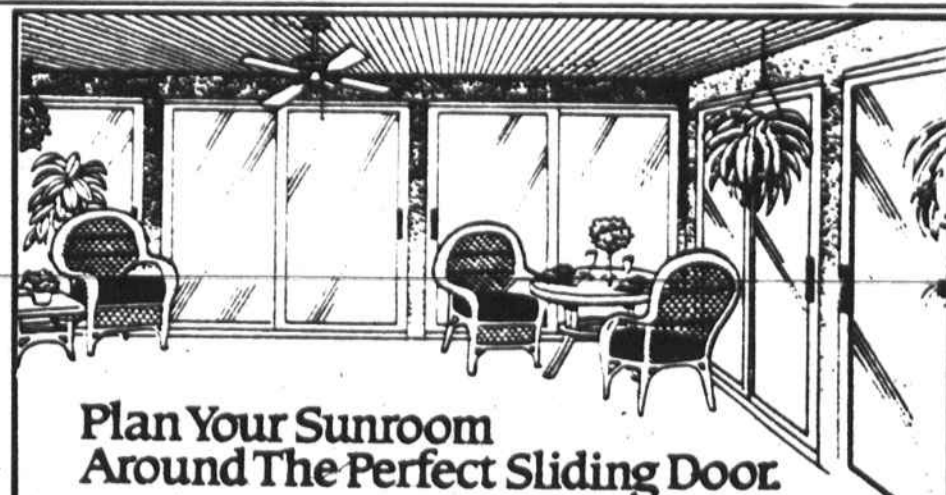
White said the contest would not have been successful without Martin and Maxine Gwynn, the co-chairpersons — both of whom have

links to the gospel community.

White said next year there will be some changes made, but the overall structure of the contest will remain the same. There were some minor glitches in the process, he said, but as a result of those problems "we can prepare for a bigger and better experience for next year."



The Friendly Five performs Thursday at the Chronicle Gospelfest (More photos page B6).



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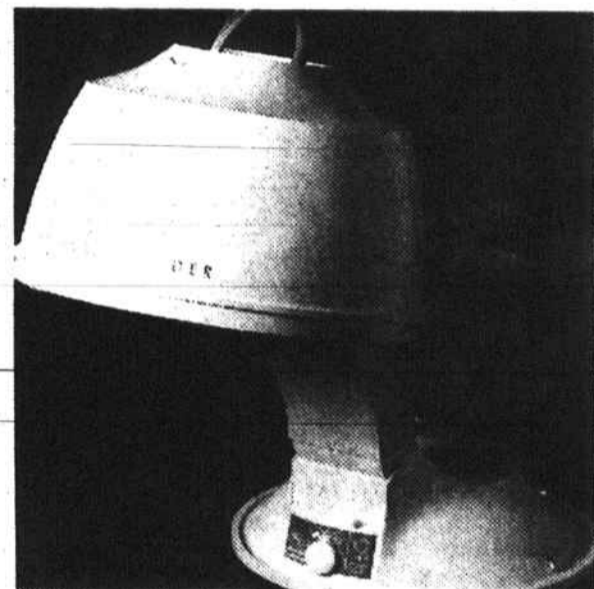
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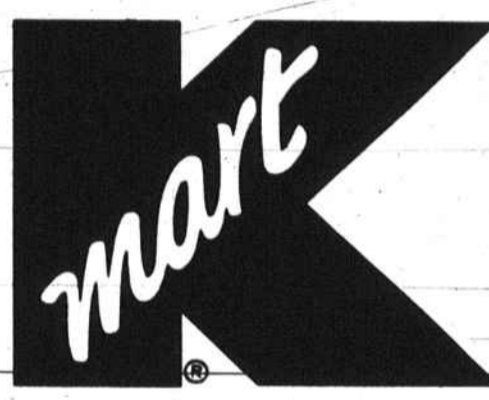
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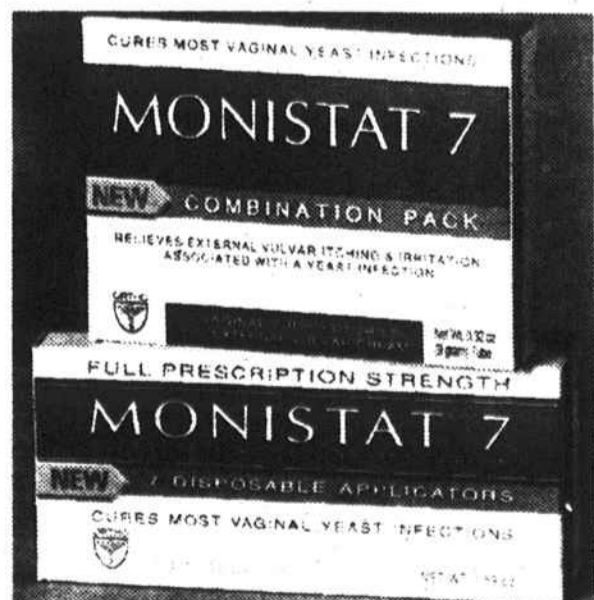


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