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One brilliant bird is migrating north this winter.

In the early 1970s, a New Orleans disc jockey hung the name "Tan Canary" on soul singer Johnny Adams in an effort to describe his candied vocal versatility. Adams rings up high and low registers with a warble and throws in a whistle for a tip. He is the eighth wonder of the world.

"I guess I do so much with one voice," Adams said in an interview before hitting the golf course near his Baton Rouge home. "Some people call me the 'Tan Canary,' others call me 'The Songbird of the South.' I take whatever it is."

After 42 years of singing spirituals and soul music, Adams finally will make his Chicago area debut tonight and tomorrow at FitzGerald's in Berwyn. He'll be supported by his five-piece New Orleans band, featuring former Bobby "Blue" Bland guitarist Eugene Ross. Chicago's numero uno soul singer, Otis Clay, will share the spotlight with Adams, making for an unforgettable rhythm and blues twin bill.

Adams will open the show, followed by a long set from Clay and a set closer with Adams. A high-five to club owner Bill FitzGerald, who salvaged the Adams gig after the rest of the singer's tour fell apart.

"About three years ago I came through Chicago on Mother's Day and we jammed at B.L.U.E.S.," Adams said. "That's the only place I've performed. Even when the Burning Spear was open, we just passed through. I'm looking forward to it. One time I made my mind up to move to Chicago. But I couldn't handle the weather."

Adams broke into music as a teenager by singing spirituals. "It was old-time stuff," said Adams, who just turned 57. Between 1947 and 1959 he sang with New Orleans gospel groups such as the Spirits of Kenner and the Soul Revivers, becoming the lead singer of the latter group.

In 1959, Adams scored his first secular hit, the sweeping blues-tinged "I Won't Cry," which was produced by Mac "Dr. John" Rebennack. New Orleans songwriter Dorothy Labostrie (who wrote Irma Thomas' "You Can Have My Husband, But Don't Mess with My Man" and Little Richard's "Tutti Frutti") and Adams lived in the same apartment building. For months, Labostrie tried to persuade Adams to record her song. The ballad was a heavenly vehicle for Adams' cresting spiritual style.

"I was curious about the blues," he said. "It took me awhile to make up my mind to do that song. Then, out of curiosity, I decided to stay with it for a while. A good old spiritual is like the blues. It depends on the soul you put in it. Even a good country-

western song - if you don't know how to twist it around, all you get out of it is country. It comes from the inner self. You can't get anything out of the blues or spirituals if you don't put something in it.

"I didn't get better by staying with rhythm and blues, but I enjoyed it," he continued. "So I decided to hang with it. Even at this late date of my life, if I decide to go back to gospel, you couldn't get me in a barroom anywhere. A lot of guys go to choir rehearsal one night and a club gig the next night. I just can't feel that way."

That kind of integrity is the centerpiece of Adams' soul. I saw him sing a long stretch of material such as "Neither One of Us (Wants to Be the First to Say Goodbye)" to the funky "Body and Fender Man" last summer at Snug Harbor in New Orleans, and Adams' smoothness was consistently ironed out with a religious reverence toward his songs. "Oh, yeah, I have one thing in mind," he said. "Do it well. I'll go to the moon if I figure it's going to be right. I don't like listening to excuses."

There will be no excuses for this weekend's sets. Simply put, there are not many songs Adams' all-encompassing ear cannot catch.

"Whatever the song is, I have to do it well," he said. "You have to make an old song sound like a new one. You can't learn just one song. I try to deal with rhythm and blues, jazz, gospel and country."

For example, Adams next project for Rounder Records is a compilation of low-note Percy Mayfield blues tunes scheduled to be recorded this spring.

"If you got the voice to sound like the original artist, you might as well do it," he said. "You're going to draw some criticism but who cares? It's like this last album ('Room with a View of the Blues' on Rounder), a couple of reviewers talked about this, that and the other thing, but they never said once they enjoyed it. Until such time I can't sing, then I have to disagree with them. But when the time comes I think they're right, then I'll have to stop."

"Nobody should continue something if it's not there."