The Radio Four



1952 - 1954

Heritage HT CD 42



- My trouble is hard
- Elijah
- On my journey now
- Get back Jordan
- I'll meet mother
- Leave it here
- Sending up this prayer, Pt. 1 Sending up this prayer, Pt. 2
- Blood done signed my name
- 10) Somewhere
- 11) Seek, seek, seek
- 12) Why not tonight
- 13) God don't ever change
- 14) Help me to run this race
- 15) Never too late
- 16) Walk through the valley
- 17) Amen
- 18) What more can Jesus do
- 19) I've been saved
- 20) What'cha gonna do
- 21) I've got religion
- 22) Come by here
- 23) Beautiful tomorrow
- 24) A little more faith and grace
- 25) Call Him by his name



Sister Lucile Barbee

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The Radio Four



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Tennessee / Republic Sides

The two most important quartets to emerge out of Nashville during the Post-War period were Rev. Sam McCrary and the Fairfield Four and the Radio Four, headed up by Morgan or George Babb. Whereas the Fairfield Four developed an urbanized, loose form of jubilee singing with a well defined top and bottom end, the Radio Four stuck pretty much to their countryside roots, tending to carry over their former jug-band timbres into four- and five-part harmony. McCrary favored technique and note stretching. Morgan Babb preferred an emotive style, one based on soulful persuasion and preacher-like testimony.

This collection gathers together for the first time most of the group's pre-Nashboro sides and reflects how well this tight-knit singing group augmented Morgan Babb's unique, spellbinding brand of melodic intonations.

Tennessee / Republic Records

The Tennessee Record Company opened its doors in early 1950. Managing partners were Bill Beasley, cousins Reynold and Alan Bubis, and Howard Allison. Bubis' and Bill Beasley's interests were principally those which concerned the hillbilly enthusiast. An announcement in January 1950's Billboard stated that Bubis and Bill Beasley started out as local distributors for the London label and that

their initial release would be a hillbilly record by Rick Riddle. Offices were set up at 417 Ash Street. Murray Nash engineered for Tennessee before making a name for himself as proprietor of the B B Country & Western label and A & R man for Springfield's Spangle and Mercury Records in Chicago.

Nashville's two major black producers were Louis Brooks who produced for Jim Bulleit's Bullet and Ernie Young's Excello and Nashboro labels, and Ted Jarrett who produced for most of the independent disceries, including Tennessee. Jarrett states he produced all the talent at Tennessee Records. Dr. Babb contradicts this statement by saying that Jarrett only served as road manager during the Radio Four's tenure with Tennessee. "Ted went out on the road ahead of us to make bookings. He would set up concerts and book hotels. Sometimes we'd meet at the program, but mostly he'd set things up in advance," says Babb.

Jarrett produced R & B singer Christine Kittrell, one of the label's principal moneymakers. But it was Del Wood's piano instrumental "Down yonder" that really put the label on the map in 1951. Babb remembers all the then state-of-the art magnichorder equipment at Tennessee's third floor, Fourth Avenue South and Lafayette studios. Bubis and

Beasley also managed the Dixie Jamboree label out of the same Ash Street offices. WLAC disc jockey Herman Grizzard was paid to play Tennessee's new releases. Grizzard was one of baseball's pioneering radio reporters. During a four-year tenure as disc jockey at WHOP on Third Avenue North in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, Dr. Morgan Babb befriended Ted Jarrett who hosted his own blues & rhythm radio show over WSOK in Nashville. The friendship led to the Radio Four's signing with Tennessee Records in the fall of 1951.

Morgan Babb and The Radio Four

The Babb Family hailed from Logan County, Kentucky. As corn and tobacco growers, Giles Davis Babb and his wife Jimmie Davis worked a parcel of land straddling the Kentucky-Tennessee state lines. Giles Davis Babb spent his off-hours in a jug band formed by his two oldest sons, Sepheus (Cephus) and Ray. The Sepheus & Ray Jug Band featured Giles on guitar, mandolin and harmonica and Sepheus and Ray on percussive instruments. The jug band played local dances every Saturday night. The proceedings would last way into the early morning light.

Giles' other leisure time hobby was setting up card game sessions. Card games were held against a backdrop of riotous jug band music. Sometimes things got so heated that all hell broke loose. However, the bacchanalia and reckless abandon came to an abrupt halt one night when, during a sudden heavy rainstorm and attendant bolts of lightning, Giles saw the error of his ways, nipped his sins in the bud and joined the Baptist church were he ended up a deacon.

Jimmie Davis (who passed away in 1981) sang in the choir of the family church, the Mount Zion Baptist of Ashburn, Kentucky. The Radio Four were organized in the late 1930s through the encouragement of Rev. Bratton who dreamed up the name to inspire confidence. Bratton hoped the group would do well and eventually host its own radio broadcast. The original Radio Four were made up of first son Sepheus, sometimes spelt Cephus and even Stephaen, who often sang lead but with some reluctance. Sepheus was a shy, softspoken, unassuming person. Sepheus was joined by second son Ray, a wild, unruly, hotheaded fellow, the opposite of Sepheus. Ray often tried to assert control over the outfit and repeatedly tried to assume a managerial posture.

Add third son Paul, a brother with a knack for business. His entrepreneurial schemes later made him a wealthy landlord and successful building contractor. Paul built Fort Campbell Hospital as well as numerous Baptist churches and radio stations. Fourth son George managed the group and became first lead after Sepheus stepped down. Paul also assumed lead on occasions. The original Radio Four included Bud Polk, a farming friend of the family. Polk not only shared fishing and hunting forays with the Babb brothers but did much to inspire and keep the boys glued together as a fully functioning unit. Fifth son Claude never sang in

the quartet during the early years but later filled in for Sepheus when the need arose.

By 1950, Dr. Babb had joined his brothers in the Radio Four and was arranging and playing guitar accompaniment. The group was first based in Hopkinsville, Kentucky where Dr. Babb enjoyed hosting a radio show over WHOP, a spot he was to hold off and on for four years. The Hopkinsville lineup of the Radio Four included George H. Babb, first tenor, Ray (Miller) Babb, second bass, James Babb, second lead, Sepheus Babb, baritone, Paul Babb, first bass, and Morgan Babb, second tenor and guitar. By the time of the group's second Tennessee session in June 1952, James Babb had gone. Claude sang in place of Sepheus only for the first session in April 1952.

The Radio Four's first recording date, embracing the services of bass player Ernie Newton, took place at radio station WBDL in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Five songs were committed to tape — the exquisitely beautiful "Sending up this prayer," Parts 1 and 2, whereon Dr. Babb's achingly beautiful, melismatic sermonette touches the inner spirit with its mournful, tearful message, "On my journey now," which almost sounds like a jug band arrangement to a jump song carried over to quartet, George Babb's authoritative "Get back Jordan," "I'll meet mother" and the prayerful "Leave it there."

The June 1952 session yielded the midtempo "Blood done signed my name," the pleading "Somewhere" and "Seek, seek, seek." Henceforth, Radio Four releases were issued on the Republic subsidiary. Three sessions and seven songs emerged over a period of eight months. All followed the same winning formula: soulful ballads sung in simplistic form and jump tunes which sounded like an evolution of the jug band formula. The Radio Four quit Republic to go with Nashboro about the time Kittrell was hitting big in the South and Mid West with "I'll help you baby" (see Krazy Kat LP 7432) and Alan Bubis, having sold his share of the company to Beasley, left to devote more time to other business ventures. Tennessee folded but Republic continued to do well. During the summer of 1954 pop warblers Alan Dale and the wholesome Pat Boone helped keep the company afloat. Republic closed its doors in mid-1956.

When Shannon Williams quit the management of Ernie's One Stop at Ernie's Record Mart to take over the production end of Nashboro Records, Janet Tabor briefly took his place before moving on to GRT. Tabor was in turn replaced by ex-Tennessee partner Howard Allison who ran the one stop until its demise.

Rev. Dr. Morgan Babb

Dr. Babb was born in Russellsville, Kentucky in 1929, the youngest of seven brothers. Both Sepheus and Ray Babb were by then old enough to be his father and sometimes behaved as if it were a fact. Morgan's interest in music started just as soon as he could walk. By his sixth birthday he was playing piano, pumping organ and singing in the Mount Zion Baptist Church Choir of Ashburn. "I remember." recalls Babb,

"that my mother used to carry me, set me down on the piano stool, and swing me around 'till it was raised right up." Young Babb's attempts at singing were greatly influenced by his parents. His mother, Jimmie Davis, was a gospel singer who traveled from church to church, performing at association gatherings and fellowship visitations.

The young Morgan envied the fact that his older brothers all sang in the family quartet. He desperately wanted to be a part of the excitement and would make mischief of himself during rehearsals. "They'd throw me out of one door but I'd come right back in another," says Babb. "When I was eight and could play a few chords on guitar, they'd let me accompany them and then perhaps as their idea of a reward, let me sing a selection on a Radio Four program."

Shortly after Claude replaced Bud Polk, Babb was elected to lead on some songs with the group. Dr. Babb's strongest wish was to be in radio. He was fascinated with electronics and how components worked. "My involvement in radio was the foundation or springboard from which came other activity," says Babb. When in 1950 Babb joined CBS affiliate WHOP in Hopkinsville, he became the first black deejay in the state. Moving to Nashville, he hooked up with WVOL (formerly WSOK) at which, as program director, he remained until 1980. In 1983, he built his own trailer-studio at Stokers Lane. Today, WMDB has 2500 watts and is at 880 on the AM dial. One tall tower carries the signal 125 miles. "We have a clear channel," Babb. "Nobody overrides our transmission." Babb still broadcasts gospel over WMDB, "The Big Mouth," every weekday morning.

During the 1950s, Babb wrote and published songs for the Radio Four, the royalties from which he has never seen. Dr. Babb remembers a tour he went on with the Radio Four in 1952. a package deal which took the group up the East Coast. The gospel caravan included the Davis Sisters, Sensational Nightingales and Four Interns, who were hot at the time, Many trials befell the entourage: going without food in New England, being snowbound in Philadelphia, and eventually after extreme measures of desperation, being barely able to make enough money to pay for bus fares home. Money for fares came via ex-welterweight champion "Jersey" Joe Walcott who organized an emergency concert for the caravan in Newark. Luckily, Walcott's pull resulted in a sell-out crowd.

Through concert promoter Abe Stein, Babb was able to m.c. jazz and R & B programs at the Ryman, home of the Grand Ole Opry. He and Sam McCrary of the Fairfield Four also hosted gospel extravaganzas at the building. When in its former function, it had been a church. The last concert Babb gave with the Radio Four took place in Memphis at WDIA on a goodwill review program alongside Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers of Chicago. This was to be Cooke's first gospel appearance on WDIA. The Radio Four had shared billing with the Soul Stirrers since the Post-war period when Rebert H. Harris captained the outfit. Dates were usually

hospital benefits.

As far back as the end of World War II, Babb had given evangelist Shirley Caesar her initial break. Dr. Babb's first recording session took place in early 1952 with the Gospel Five. It is possible that the session took place at the same time as the first Radio Four date. The Gospel Five were composed of Morgan, Paul and Sepheus Babb plus a group of friends whose names are long forgotten. Babb, through the radio medium, broke Elvis Presley in Nashville in early 1956. Presley at this point was considered an R & B vocalist. This was during a brief two-year period when Babb, having quit the Radio Four, began trying himself as a solo entity.

He went out as a guitar-strumming gospel soloist. Dr. Babb's first replacement in the Radio Four was Edward James Brumfield, a nasal-sounding tenor who sang lead in the Chosen Gospel Singers of LA both in 1952 and 1963. The restless Brumfield was soon replaced by Rev. Chas E. Kirby, founder, family friend and pastor of a small Baptist church in Louisville, Kentucky. But Kirby's many commitments prevented him from touring and being on the road with the group. Kirby's permanent replacement was found in Robert "Fleming" Presley who stayed with the group up until the breakup in 1965.

Dr. Babb took charge of Lillian Offitt's career. For her he wrote "Miss you so." Babb was performing in Gallatin, Texas when he was asked by Offitt's relatives to tutor her and manage her affairs. "Miss you so" became an



enormous hit. But then, as fate would have it, Babb lost Offitt to Mel London's Chief label, and her star descended. Eager to return to vocal group singing, Babb put a call out for quartet singers over WSOK. Five finalists were chosen out of many applicants. Of these, two proved unsuitable. The remaining three — Billy Hill, James Bradley and John Couch — became the Philco Singers, a name used to cash in on the popularity of Philco radio sets and hi-fi equipment. The Philco Singers, with and without Babb, cut many records for Nashboro up until they were finally replaced by the Voices

of Nashville, yet another group put together through similar means. Star performers of the Voices of Nashville included "Sweet" Charles, a tenor singer who had played bass guitar for James Brown, and Isaac "Dickie" Freeman, veteran basso with the Fairfield Four.

In 1965, Dr. Babb gave a series of outstanding gospel sermons at various churches throughout the South before founding his own ministry at the King Solomon Missionary Baptist Church at North Tenth and Cheatham Streets. Anthony Heilbut tells us on one of Dr. Babb's album sleeves that through Rev. Howard, Dr. Babb was simply handed the key to the empty, vacant church by Mr. P.V. Fort, the owner. Fort only had to look at Babb's face to believe, right there and then, in the Doctor's integrity. Once ensconced, Babb recorded a string of electrifying live songs and sermons. These spine-tingling performances reflected the awesome, superlative talents of this great musician and singer of the African American church.

Having gathered a flock of some nine hundred souls, many drawn by his oratory powers, Babb rarely found his match among journeymen preachers of his day. During the late 1960s, Dr. Babb built a series of custommade keyboard instruments. He would use these inventions to both record and accompany himself in concert. The first of these he called an "organo," an organ with a piano attachment creating two electrified keyboards. Dr. Babb had designed a uniquely sprung keyboard. Dr. Babb later approached a keyboard

manufacturer who eagerly expressed interest in building and marketing his invention. A verbal agreement or partnership was entered into. Over a short period of time a series of deceits, coupled with promises unfulfilled, lead to disillusionment. The manufacturer hired a designer by the name of Babbitt who took Dr. Babb's design, developed, and produced it, then kept the patent for the company. Unperturbed, Dr. Babb came up with yet another ingenious instrument, one which only exists in its original. This was a spinet (a harpsichord with a single keyboard), electrified in such a way as to suit his needs.

Mdm. Edna Gallmon Cooke

The late Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke, "Sweetheart of the Potomac," was born in Columbia, South Carolina in 1918. She was an adept practitioner of the song-sermonette, a method of personalizing a song by getting "up close" to members of the audience through speech. Dr. Babb states that he was responsible for teaching Cooke this technique as a way of winning over the church flock. Her early spirituals centered around sickrooms, omens, fables and parables. Her almost morbid expression of death struck a supernatural chord. Her mournful mezzo soprano was exquisitely delicate and fragile at times.

Her untimely demise in Philadelphia on September 4th 1967 drew thousands of devoted fans to her Washington funeral. People came from far away to pay their last respects. Edna was the daughter of a fire-branding Baptist preacher, Rev. Eddie J. Gallmon. She grew up admiring the sanctified vocal strains of pioneer gospel diva Willie Mae Ford Smith of St. Louis who eventually inspired her to take up gospel singing as a profession. The term "Madame" was an honor bestowed upon her by her ministry, The Holiness Church. As a young adult she studied in Washington and Philadelphia, attending Temple University and briefly teaching elementary school. She toured the South Eastern states during the 1940s utilizing the spirituals and sermonettes of her father who influenced her greatly.

Cooke's recording debut took place in 1949 with the Mt. Vernon Men's Choir of Washington, DC. As lead soloist she cut "Angels angels angels angels angels angels are label. "Angels angels angels angels created quite a stir in the mid-South, recalls Dr. Babb. Cooke went on to wax eight live in-church releases accompanied by The Young People's Choir of The Springfield Baptist Church in Washington, DC. under the direction of Rev. J.J. Abney. The first of these, "Glory to his name" / "I've been redeemed," was reissued by Krazy Kat on their vinyl Gotham collection entitled "Amazing Grace" (KK 836, 1989.)

Cooke then married a brick mason. In September 1950, the Dixie Hummingbirds with the Angelic Gospel Singers recorded "Dear Lord, look down upon me" (see Gospel Heritage LP HT 318), a widely popular record which figures in our story a little later on. In May 1952, the Radio Four recorded "Sending up my timber" (Parts 1 & 2), a record that sold

well, especially around the Baltimore/ Washington, DC area. One DC disc jockey, Frances White, took a shine to the double-sided release. White was a black programmer at WSTN on V Street. "WSTN had two stations," says Dr. Babb, "one for whites and white airtime, and one for blacks. We were temporarily based out of Baltimore at the time, and White booked us and found us work around the area." Dr. Babb and Frances White became close friends. The Radio Four wound up renting living space from her. White also taught Dr. Babb radio engineering.

White introduced Dr. Babb to Mdm Edna Gallmon Cooke, and the three of them came up with the notion of making a record with a similar set-up to 'Dear Lord, look down upon me." They came up with 'Walk through the valley" and "Nobody to depend on" plus a song called "Amen" released a while later. "We rehearsed the songs for an entire week," says Dr. Babb. Dr. Babb took Cooke to Tennessee Records who had first moved from Ash Street to Fifth Street South, then on to a permanent location at 535 Fourth Avenue South. The company was enjoying a huge success with Christine Kittrell's "Sitting and drinking" (see Krazy Kat LP 7432, Nashville R & B, Vol. 2) and by the summer of 1952 had set up its Republic Records subsidiary to serve gospel, R & B and country music fans.

"Beasley, Bubis and Allison did not want to take Cooke on as a soloist, at first," says Dr. Babb. "They would only agree to do so if she recorded along with us." Consequently, Cooke did not have her own recording contract when she waxed "Walk through the valley" and "Nobody to depend on" with the Radio Four for the new Republic label in July 1952. Fortunately, this initial release showed promise, and the firm changed its tune.

A December 1952 Billboard announced that Republic Records had signed a long-term contract with Cooke (as a solo artist) along with Kittrell who had switched to the subsidiary. The Radio Four adamantly refused to record with Cooke as her backing group after that, although songs taped at the initial joint session appeared on later releases. Dr. Babb did, however, write "Come by here" for Cooke in 1953. Cooke's second marriage, to Barney Parks Jr., former member of the Dixie Hummingbirds and founder of the (Sensational) Nightingales, brought a wider acceptance of Cooke's work. Cooke quit Republic in 1954 and signed with Ernie Young's Nashboro label where she cut unforgettable best sellers like "Stop gambler" (1961), "Seven steps to hell" (1963) and "Bottles of tears" (1966.)

Sister Lucile Barbee

Sister Barbee, full of sass and spunk, is as active now in the gospel community as she was fifty years ago. She continues to host a regular Sunday gospel program over WVOL in Nashville (a show she has hosted since February 1953) and drives as far as Memphis to sing at church services when invited. Born in Athens or Decatur, north-central Alabama (her mama never made it plain to her which) to LeRoy and Betty Buford, she moved to Nashville with her mother when just a few months old. Her father's sudden death was unanticipated. Mother and daughter became members of The Tabernacle Baptist Church on South Street at Twelfth Avenue South. It was not long before Lucile sang in the choir. At church she loved singing and found great inspiration in the music. She hitched up with the Golden Echoes, a women's acappella quartet out of Evansville, Indiana. Because Lucille was very young, her mother often acted as her chaperone for out of town engagements.

The Golden Echoes ventured into neighboring states and played in Cincinnati, Cleveland and Louisville. Lucile worked as a store clerk in a dress shop for a while. At one point, she learned how to accompany herself on guitar but now she says "she's forgotten how to plunk." In June 1952, her friend Rev. Dr. Morgan Babb introduced Lucile to Bill Beasley at Republic/Tennessee Records on Fourth Avenue South in Nashville. Morgan and his family group, the Radio Four, were also signed with the label. Beasley, like his co-proprietors, were chiefly committed to serving the hillbilly market, as their catalog attests. They used Morgan as advisor when it came to recording talent to fulfill the needs of a large black indigenous population.

After the failure of Lucile's first solo release (accompanied only by piano), Beasley insisted that he record her with a vocal group. Dr. Morgan Babb asserts that his group never agreed to become Barbee's quartet. In fact, the Radio Four were reluctant to back her. Consequently, their name never appeared on her records. "We had agreed to do backgrounding on Barbee's records," says Dr. Babb, "not to have our name identified as being Barbee's quartet."

The Radio Four backgrounded on at least five songs recorded at two sessions dates in an Eighth Avenue studio during 1953 and 1954. When Lucile went over to Nashboro Records in 1956, she encountered the same backgrounding problem with Ernie Young. She cut at least twelve songs at Nashboro, only half of which saw release. Most were backgrounded either by Clarence Mills and the Israelite Travelers or by Bobby Jones and the Royal Gospel Singers. Bobby Jones got his start on "Gospel Train," a thirty-minute Sunday morning gospel show Barbee hosted over WVOL between 1955 and 1990. Barbee played all kinds of gospel and sometimes stepped up to the mike to sing a song



herself. Jones is currently host of Bobby Jones Gospel broadcast over BET. He earned a Grammy last year for one of his many albums with the New Life Singers and has just had a gospel-related book published with Simon & Shuster.

Barbee's 1950s recordings never sold very well nationally. She garnered far more acclaim as radio host and did well at barbering. Barbee rented a storefront on Jefferson Street in the early 1950s and set up Lucile's Barbershop with no prior formal training. Barbee trimmed and processed the hair of every local male and female gospel singer and touring act that hit town. She plastered the shop walls with a collage of photographs given to her by her patrons. After Barbee's last Nashboro release, she took up with the Spiritual Four of Nashville. This outfit never recorded. In the 1970s, she recorded four songs with The Starlight Jubilees on Jim Stanton's Champ Records. She waxed

with and without the Bobby Jones group on Carrie (a label owned by R.D. Hunt and James Hendrix of the famous Hendrix Singers on Excello) out on Hawkins Street. This was followed by a single song release on an Ernie's Record Mart album. The album featured golden era recordings and was released in 1974.

In 1988, she guested on a "Saturday Night Live" gospel collection financed by Bishop Jewel and the Church of the Living God. Barbee's most favorite recording is her 1954 rendition of "Beautiful tomorrow," a song she reworked into "The beautiful garden of

tomorrow" at Carrie Records for a 1970s release. When Republic Records closed its doors in 1956, Ted Jarrett along with Alan and Reynold Bubis founded Calvert and then Champion Records on which the Fairfield Four recorded. After this, Ted Jarrett, Alan Bubis and Bill Beasley set up a variety of small labels to promote Nashville soul music soldiers. In the early 1960s, Alan Bubis and Bill Beasley set up Hit Records, a budget line on which Earl Gaines and Lucille Johns enjoyed an enormous

hit with the Ray Charles arrangement of "You are my sunshine."

A short while back, Dr. Babb changed the name of his church from The King Solomon Missionary Baptist to the Babb Memorial Baptist, thus becoming immortalized in stone.

Opal Louis Nations, March 1999

With special thanks to Dr. Morgan Babb, Mike Babb, Sister Lucile Barbee, Shannon Williams, Martin Hawkins and Bob Laughton

Discography

as The Gospel Five (Morgan, Paul & Sepheus Babb plus others) (May 1952)

My trouble is hard

Elijah

as Morgan Babb & The Radio Four (Morgan, George Ray, James & Claude Babb) (May 1952)

On my journey now

Get back Jordan

I'll meet mother

Leave it here

Sending up this prayer, Pt. 1

Sending up this prayer, Pt. 2 as Morgan Babb and The Radio Four (Morgan, George, Ray, Paul & Sephus Babb) (July 1952)

Blood done signed my name

Somewhere

Seek, seek, seek

Why not tonight

as Morgan Babb and The Radio Four (Morgan, George, Ray, Paul & Sephus Babb)

(November 1952)

God don't ever change

Help me to run this race

Never too late

as Mdm Edna Gallmon Cook & The Radio Four (personnel as above) (November 1952)

Walk through the valley

Amen

as Morgan Babb & The Radio Four (personnel as above) (April 1953)

What more can Jesus do

I've been saved

What'cha gonna do

as Mdm Edna Gallmon Cook & The Radio Four (personnel as above) (April 1953)

I've got religion

Come by here

Sister Lucile Barbee with backgrounds by The Radio Four (personnel as above) (March 1954)

Beautiful tomorrow

A little more faith and grace

Sister Lucile Barbee & Morgan Babb & The Radio Four (March 1954)

Call Him by his name