

# The Radio Four collection





# The Radio Four collection

Between 1952 and 1955, The Radio Four were captained by the Reverend Dr. Morgan Babb (see Dr. Babb's own solo collection in this reissue series for in-depth detail). Babb was also taken on as gospel A & R man by Ernie L. Young, founder and president of Nashboro Records out of Nashville in 1951, a post he held for nine years. The kindly, resourceful Young became a part of the Nashville music scene at an early age and was soon supplying records for the juke boxes he operated around the city. When records were taken off the juke boxes, they were sold at his record store, Ernie's Record Mart at 177 Third Avenue.

Young found that his customers, for the most part African American, were devoted collectors of gospel music, and that the local market for gospel was such that supply undercut demand. To counteract the situation, Young, out of his store location, founded Nashboro Records and Record Distributing in 1951. The Excello label, a secular sister of Nashboro, was set up shortly thereafter to handle the demands of a burgeoning rhythm and blues market. Young, without prior training, undertook all the recording and mixing on primitive, two-track, mono equipment in the dingy attic above the rudimentary mail order department.

The Nashboro/Excello Record and Distributing Company operated on a shoestring budget with just three employees, Dorothy Keaton, Young's devoted and indispensable secretary, Willie D. Hendrix who worked in the packing room and oft-times doubled as a packer and learn-as-you-go sound engineer, and a short, deaf bookkeeper, James Clifton who cussed every time radio dispatched taxi drivers out on the street jammed his hearing aid. The store financed the record company at first, until the

success of Arthur Gunter's (Gunter had sung in The Gunter Brothers Gospel Quartet) enormous hit "Baby Let's Play House" stormed the charts in January 1955.

Young's mail order company expanded to world-wide proportions. Young enlisted deejay John A (Richbourg) known as "the daddy of A & B," to plug Ernie's Record Mart product over CBS-affiliate WLAC. Young found himself in direct competition with Randy Wood who utilized the services of Hoss Allen to promote product out of his retailship, Randy's Record Shop of Gallatin, Texas.

The Skylarks were the first major gospel group to sign with Nashboro Records. The second signees were The Swanee Quintet, and this was due to the mediation of Dr. Babb.

Dr. Babb's parents hailed from Logan county, Kentucky. As corn and tobacco growers, Giles Davis Babb and wife Jimmie Davis, worked a parcel of land that straddled the Kentucky-Tennessee state line. Giles Davis Babb spent his spare time playing in The Cephus and Ray Jug Band. Giles played guitar, mandolin, and harmonica while his two eldest sons, Cephus and Ray, handled the percussion. The jug band played local dances every Saturday night and would not quit until early light. Giles' other hobby was settin up card-playing sessions. Card games were held against a backdrop of riotous music, and sometimes all hell broke loose.

However, all this came to an abrupt halt one night when, during a sudden, heavy lightning storm, Giles saw the error of his ways, nipped his sins in the bud and joined the Baptist church where he ended up a deacon.



Dr. Babb's mother, Jimmie Davis (who died in 1981) sang in the choir of the family church, The Mount Zion Baptist of Ashburn, Kentucky. Jimmie encouraged Morgan's singing and piano playing and by the age of ten, the young lad was playing for local area school closings or graduation exercises, at Cedar Hill, Adams, Fair View, and a handful of other local high schools. While attending Springfield's Bransford High, the young Morgan developed a hankering to sing and play in his family's gospel group, The Radio Four. The Radio Four was organized in the late Thirties, through the encouragement of Rev. Bratton, who dreamed up the name to inspire confidence. Rev. Bratton hoped the group would be good enough to host a weekly gospel radio broadcast.

The original Radio Four were made up of first son Cephus ("Stephaen"), a shy, soft spoken tenor who avoided taking lead, second son Ray, a wild, unruly, hot-headed fellow who sang bass and wanted always to be running the outfit's affairs, industrious tenor singer brother Paul who ended up a wealthy landlord and building contractor having erected the Fort Campbell Hospital, a number of Baptist churches and radio stations, fourth son George, tenor, lead, and manager, plus a farming friend of the family, Bud Polk who not only shared fishing and hunting forays with the Babb brothers but did much to inspire and keep the boys glued together as a group. Fifth son Claude never sang in the quartet during the early years but was later persuaded to replace Cephus. This was before the group had begun recording.

The early January 1950 issue of Billboard magazine announced the formation of Tennessee Records on Fourth Avenue South in Nashville. Founders Alan Bubis and Bill Beasley, formerly distributors of the London label, were reported as being interested in releasing hillbilly records by the likes of

Rick Riddle and Jimmy Sweeney. However, by the summer of 1951, Bubis and Beasley had ventured into fresh territory-black R & B and gospel music. They had also started up Republic Records.

By 1950, Dr. Babb had joined his brothers in The Radio Four, had assumed lead, and was arranging and playing accompaniment. During a four year tenure with WHOP in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, Dr. Babb befriended Ted Jarrett. Jarrett was a deejay on WSOK in Nashville and handled bookings for Bubis and Beasley at Tennessee/Republic Records in the fall of 1951.

The group's initial session which produced "My trouble is hard" backed by "Elijah," was issued as by The Gospel Five. Why they chose to use a pseudonym for their first studio debut remains a mystery to this day.

The Radio Four's second session, embracing the services of bass player Ernie Newton, took place at WBDL in Bowling Green, Kentucky some time during May 1952. The group was now composed of brothers Morgan, George, James, Claude, and Ray Babb. Five songs were recorded, including the exquisitely beautiful "Sending up this prayer, Parts 1 and 2" (reworked later in the fall of 1955 and retitled "An earnest prayer.") Morgan's aching beautiful melismatic sermonette touches the inner spirit with its mournfully tearful message. A second song from this session, "On my journey now" (which was incidentally the group's first release under the Radio Four imprint) is offered here in its revamping of 1963, with Robert "Fleming" Presley's hard singing on lead.

Two more sessions were held in June and July, then in October The Radio Four recorded again. This time they had taken with them Mdm. Edna Gallmon Cooke who, Dr. Babb insists, was presented to the record buying public at this time



under his direction. Babb and the quartet helped write and arrange Cooke's songs and the group aided by supporting her with vocal backgrounds. The session netted three songs for The Radio Four and four for Cooke.

In March of 1952, Dr. Babb and The Radio Four recorded behind the vocally dynamic Sister Lucille Barbee. Sister Barbee, who Morgan had introduced to the label, was Nashville's first African American female men's hair stylist and proudly bore that honor right up to her retirement. In April 1953, Mdm. Edna Gallmon Cooke and The Radio Four repeated the formula that had worked for them in October 1952. The result was four released songs for Cooke and three for the group. One more shared Tennessee/Republic session took place two months later, followed by one on which Dr. Babb shared lead chores with Sister Lucille Barbee (March 1954).

By mid-1955, Dr. Babb had quit The Radio Four to pursue a solo career, and all the hitherto existing Tennessee/Republic masters were sold to Nashboro Records. Sadly, most of the master tapes for the above outlined sessions have either been lost or destroyed. However, The Radio Four's first three Nashboro singles releases plus a song by Mdm. Cooke aided by the by the group and issued at the close of 1955 are believed to have been drawn from Republic masters of an earlier date as Dr. Babb is heard assuming lead on five of the six group titles.

Aside from "An earnest prayer," this CD contains two additional songs from the Republic sessions. The first, "How much I owe," finds brother George at the helm of a mid-tempo scorcher. Heat builds as George toughens his way along. "If you miss me from praying" is given the soulful tremolo

treatment one comes to expect from a masterful Morgan performance. Dr. Babb's first replacement in the group was E.G. Brumfield, a nasal-sounding tenor who sang lead in The Chosen Gospel Singers of Los Angeles both in 1952 and 1963. The restless Brumfield was soon replaced by the Rev. Charles E. Kirby, founder and pastor of a small Baptist church in Louisville, Kentucky. But Kirby's tenure proved little more than temporary. Kirby's replacement was found in Robert "Fleming" Presley who stayed with The Radio Four up until their demise in late 1965. The Radio Four's

first Nashboro session came about in June 1957 and from it two fine singles were issued.

It is not too difficult to imagine The Radio Four as being an embodiment of a gospel singing jug band. After all, their general style stuck to that particular country tradition; one only had to add a truly down-home jug blower to make the point. The material on this CD is taken for the most part from sessions held between August 1958

and somewhere around the close of 1965. This songfest contains twenty-eight cuts in all, eight of which are issued for the first time in the U.S. and four previously unreleased alternates.

By 1963, George had left the group to start up preaching. Fresh faces were in and out of the aggregation, making it difficult to tell who sang lead on what. But the one consistent factor throughout The Radio Four's fourteen year recording span is the fact they almost always stuck to the tenets of their country traditions

Opal Louis Nations, - May 1995

From interviews conducted with Dr. Morgan Babb

