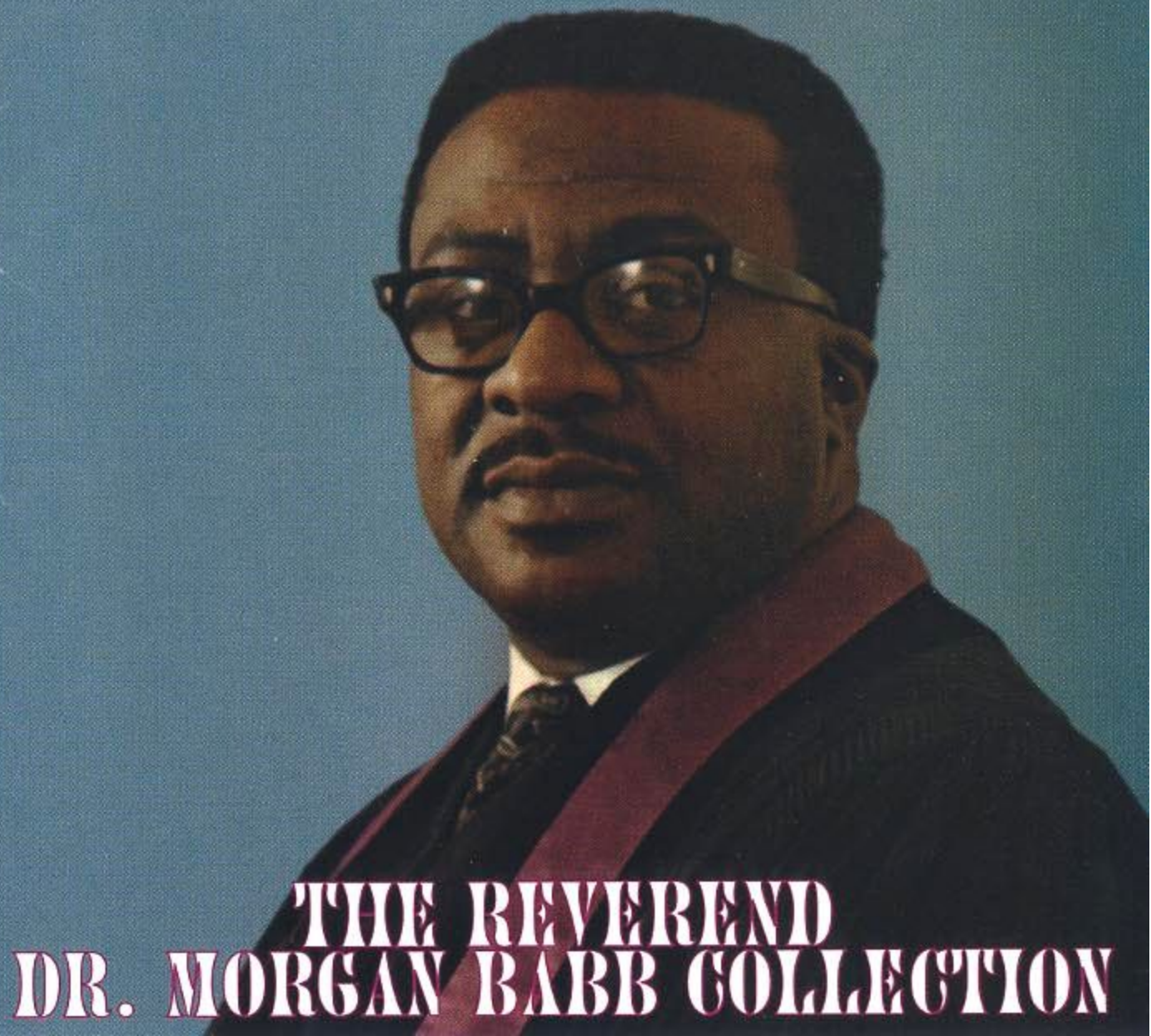


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KEEP FAITH: REV. DR. MORGAN BABB

Dr. Babb is perhaps one of the true fathers of traditional, post-war gospel music. Songwriter, formidable preacher, gospel promoter, influential deejay, record company proprietor, and A & R man, Dr. Babb has done it all. But national acclaim did not come until about seventeen years ago (just before the sale of the Nashboro label to AVI) Babb enjoyed his most widespread success with the release of "Pray for me," a remake of a song written, recorded, and originally made popular by the Reverend Cleophus Robinson on Peacock Records in 1956.

Born in Logan County, Kentucky in 1929, Babb, the youngest of seven brothers (two were old enough to be his father), was raised on a farm. Corn and tobacco were staple crops. The family attended the Mount Zion Baptist Church of Ashburn, Kentucky. Babb played piano, pump organ, and sang in the church choir since his sixth birthday. "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 early attempts at singing were greatly influenced by his parents. His father, Giles Davis Babb, was a deacon at the church and his mother, Jimmie Davis, (both shared the same Davis name but whose families were totally unrelated), was a gospel singer who traveled from church to church, performing at association gatherings and fellowship visitations.

Three of Dr. Babb's older brothers, George, Ray, and James plus Bud Polk had formed a family quartet, The Radio Four, in the late Thirties. Morgan, the toddler, wanted desperately to be in the group and would make a nuisance of himself at quartet rehearsals. "They'd throw me out of one door, but I'd come right back in another," says Dr. Babb. "When I was a little older, and could play a few licks on guitar, they'd let me accompany them and perhaps sing a song on a program." Later on, Babb became a member of the group and was soon elected lead singer. By now, Claude Babb had replaced Bud Polk.

Dr. Babb's pivotal occupation was in radio. "My involvement in radio was the foundation or springboard

from which came other activity," states Dr. Babb. In 1950, Dr. Babb joined CBS affiliate WHOP out of Hopkinsville, Kentucky and hence became the first African-American disc jockey in the state. Except for a twelve month absence, Dr. Babb stayed with WHOP for four years, after which, having moved from Kentucky to Nashville, he hooked up with WVOL (formerly WSOK) at which, as program director, he remained until 1980. In 1983, he built his own radio station, WMDB.

It was in Bowling Green, at the WBDL studios during the spring of 1952, that The Radio Four cut their first record with Ernie Newton on upright string bass. Six songs were committed to tape, five of which featured Dr. Babb on lead. The Radio Four enjoyed six sessions spanning twelve months for Reynolds Babis and Bill Beasley's Republic/Tennessee Record Company. Six months later, The Radio Four sang background for Mdm. Edna Gallmon Cooke on wax. The Radio Four's relationship with Mdm. Cooke stretches back to 1950-51, to a time when the great gospel diva taught school and lived in a seven-room apartment in Washington, DC. The Radio Four rented rooms from Cooke when they came to Washington and needed space to rehearse. The Babb boys encouraged Cooke with her singing career.

In 1954, Dr. Babb tried to interest Ernie Young, president of Nashboro Records, in the possibility of signing Cooke as a solo act, but Young would not sign Mdm. Cooke as a single. Mdm. Cooke had always enjoyed the advantage of quartet backgrounds on her recordings, all of which sold well, and Young did not want to jeopardize this.

Dr. Babb coached Mdm. Cooke and even devised arrangements for her original talking introductions. He also wrote and published songs for The Radio Four. Dr. Babb also introduced The Swanee Quintet, Sister Lucille Barbee, and The Consolers to Nashboro Records during which time he served the company as gospel talent scout and A & R man.

When The Consolers sang "Give me my flowers" at the audition, Ernie Young hated it and thought it would not sell. Dr. Babb who had great faith in the song and the man-and-wife team volunteered to pay half the session in return for half the royalties. The record

became an enormous hit and the deal paid off. Dr. Babb remembers a tour he went on with The Radio Four around 1952, a package deal which took the group up the East Coast. The gospel caravan included The Davis Sisters, The Sensational Nightingales, and The Four Interns who were hot at the time. He recalls going without food in the New England states, being snowbound in Philadelphia, and eventually, after extreme desperation, being able to make enough money to pay for his bus fare home. All this came about through ex-welterweight champion "Jersey" Joe Walcott who organized a concert for the caravan in Newark. Luckily, the program was a sellout.

The last concert Dr. Babb gave with The Radio Four took place in Memphis at WDIA on a goodwill review program alongside Sam Cooke and The Soul Stirrers. This was also to be Sam's last gospel-singing appearance. The Radio Four had shared concert billing with The Soul Stirrers since the Post-war period when Rebert H. Harris captained the group. The dates were usually hospital benefits. Babb gave the six-year-old evangelist Shirley Caesar her first break.

Dr. Babb stayed as member of The Radio Four up until their contract was sold to Nashboro Records in 1954. By then, he and his brothers had sung background on two sessions with Sister Lucille Barbee, three with Mdm. Edna Gallmon Cooke, one with The Gospel Five (composed of Paul and Cephus Babb plus a couple of friends), and had fronted The Radio Four on almost all of eight singles releases.

Settling in Nashville, Dr. Babb went out as a guitar-strumming gospel soloist for two years but sorely missed quartet singing. During this time, he wrote a song called "Miss you so" which became an enormous hit for Lillian Offitt in 1957. In 1956, he showed up sharing vocal chores with Sister Lucille Barbee backed by The Israelite Travelers made up of Clarence Mills and a bunch of local singers from Nashville (all now passed away.)

In late 1956 Dr. Babb put a call out for quartet singers on his radio show over WSOK. He was determined to return to a vocal group format. Five finalists were chosen out of many applicants. Of these, two proved unsuitable. The remaining three, Billy Hill, James Bradley, and John Couch became Dr. Babb's new group, The Philco

Singers, a name dreamed up by Ernie Young (with whom Dr. Babb was still under contract) to cash in on the popularity of Philco radio sets and hi fi equipment. Dr. Morgan Babb and The Philco Singers cut their first of ten shared recordings for Nashboro during the summer of 1957. Eight singles and one album later (some time during 1965), The Philco Singers were gone and replaced by The Voices of Nashville. Babb recalls that he put the group together through contacts garnered during his radio show over WSOK. "I remember," states Babb, "that one of the early members of the outfit was "Sweet" Charles, a tenor singer who had played bass guitar in the James Brown Band." Isaac "Dickie" Freeman, veteran basso with The Skylarks and Fairfield Four, sang lead in the group for a couple of years.

In 1965, Dr. Morgan Babb gave a series of outstanding guest sermons at various churches around the South before finding his own ministry at the King Solomon Missionary Baptist Church situated at the corner of North Tenth and Cheatham Streets in Nashville. Tony Heilbut tells us on one of Babb's album sleeves that through Reverend Howard, Dr. Babb was simply handed the key to the empty, vacant church by Mr. P. V. Fort, the owner. Fort, at a glance, believed on the spot in Dr. Babb's integrity. Here began a series of electrifying live songs and sermons cut for Nashboro Records. These reflected the awesome, superlative talents of this great man of the African-American church.

Having gathered a flock of some nine hundred souls through possession of inspired magnetism, Babb rarely found his match among the preachers of the day.

This collection is a reissue of two fine Dr. Babb albums, "Keep the faith" - Nashboro 7012 (1964) and "Pray for me:" - Nashboro 7194 (1978.) The opening title cut, "Keep faith in God," is a medium tempo boogie-based composition ascribed a level headed interpretation simply accompanied by the preacher's adept touch on the organ.

"Sinner don't wait" is perhaps one of Dr. Babb's prime studio recordings. Its soulful plea and melancholy air are unusually sublime. The marvelous "My God works wonders" finds Dr. Babb back in the quartet mode. A fervent atmosphere is struck as the

backing group builds the song by degrees and Babb sermonizes while his fingers spryly move up and down the piano keyboard. Piano and organ accommodate a lively reading of "This soul of mine" on which the preacher rocks, rants, and reels.

"What is this" is the Willie Morganfield best seller of 1965 given the Morgan touch. Dr. Babb sticks to the original score and gives it his note-bending best. "Don't leave me Jesus" has Babb in the same mood. The song is more a prayer set to music than a song scored to fit lyrics and impresses one with the singer's bounty of majesty and grace.

Dr. Babb has the listener pay heed to the devil who will step in just as soon as the good man turns his back in a short, loping workout of "The devil's on your trail." Piano and organ vie for notice on the rocking "What more can Jesus do." Babb howls and growls his way along as he tells of the Savior's virtues. Babb sings from his soul on the exquisite "In love with Jesus," a song full of sadness and melancholy. "No one knows" is a beautiful personalized reinterpretation of "He cares" with a reading of the Lord's Prayer thrown in for good measure.

Babb creates a delightful organ introduction to "You ought to have been there," a completely different song to the one bearing the same title made popular by The Abyssinian Baptist Gospel Choir of Newark in 1960. An earnest prayer opens "Don't stop serving God" on which Babb tries to vindicate his faith in the lofty one. On Nashboro 7194, Babb is joined by a chunkier rhythm section and choir. The simple, haunting accompaniment and subtle, plaintive vocal nuances evoked on the earlier album have here been substituted for musical backgrounds on a much grander scale.

Thomas A. Dorsey's "What could I do" is loudly thumped out on the bass drum hiding behind which a female chorus tries to add toughness to Babb's already strained delivery. Nice bluesy chording introduces us to "Moving to my heavenly home," loosely reminiscent of the Little Willie John song "Fever." The chorus gives the tune a contemporary feel. Babb brings the whole to a close with a single sustained note. Babb gives an awesome performance of "Pray for me," thus making the song a best seller for the second time. The first

was the original Reverend Cleophus Robinson/Sister Josephine James version on Peacock Records issued in 1956. The song is beautifully augmented by the sweeping female choral background.

Affirmative action is played out in a forthright reading of "Is He yours?" Babb wails and moans politely as the swirling chorus and string-sounding keyboards work the melody up. "There is a fountain" is granted a traditional run-through, although only three of its five verses are redeemed. "Just a closer walk with thee" is executed in an upbeat tempo contrary to how the old traditional spiritual was rendered in the past. Most of the melody is lost under a welter of heavy rhythm accompaniment and over-bearing choral arrangement. However, Babb gives the song his best shot.

Babb provides "All the way" with a soul-drenched, laid-back character. On his own, Babb manages to color the song perfectly, even though a soft, choral background could have added brawn to beauty. The traditional spiritual, "I'm going through," is given mileage, although the interpretation offered here rarely strays from the song's refrain and into the four familiar verses. A robust reading of "Makes me feel like flying away" ends the set on a hopeful, jubilant note.

During the decline of the Nashboro label, Babb formed his own record company, Authentic Gospel, which issued live recordings by Nashboro artists. In 1974, the King Solomon Missionary Baptist Church was visited by a British documentary film crew from the BBC who filmed Babb in action with choir and congregation at his church.

The Rev. Dr. Morgan Babb is as active and striking a figure today as he ever was with the running of his radio station and the guidance of his ministry.

- Opal Louis Nation - April 1995