

THE
BEST
OF

THE SKYLARKS



The Skylarks

THE STORY OF THE Skylarks of Nashville is a very short but complex one. To explain their involvement we have to turn to Nashville's legendary Fairfield Four whose own beginnings date back to the mid-twenties. The Fairfield Four had become factionalized by the late 1940s due to internal conflict. Two loosely banded groups of that name were active in the Nashville area at the time. In 1949, Sam McCrary, lead tenor and member of the seminal Fairfield Four Quartet since the mid-1930s, decided to compose a super-group of quartet stars from other cities. Baritone James S. Hill was the first to join—he hailed from Bessemer, Alabama and replaced John Battle in the old Fairfield Four of 1946. Edward "Preacher" Thomas from Louisiana came next. He had served in the famous Blue Jay Singers of Birmingham, Alabama. Thomas had a reputation as a "house wrecker" and was also a gifted musical director.

Atlanta's Preston York came to the Fairfield Four via the Reliable Jubilee Singers who recorded for the Apollo label after World War II. Isaac "Dickie" Freeman, originally of Johns, Alabama, was enlisted out of the Kings of Harmony based in Cleveland. (This group later became the National Kings of Harmony.) Freeman was the most charismatic quartet basser in the nation. With utility singer Willie Frank Lewis who had served in former resurrections of the quartet, Sam McCrary had built a formidable line-up of strong singers. With coast-to-coast tours and a regular radio spot on WLAC, the new

Fairfield Four appeared before large audiences.

In February 1949 the group recorded five records for the tiny Delta label. (Most have seen reissue on a handful of other labels.) The most memorable performances were given by "Dickie" Freeman who sang lead on "Tree of Level" and "Ezekiel" (remade later for Nashboro.) Once again, professional differences disrupted the smooth progress of the Fairfield Four. Some members wanted to travel and meet major engagements outside the state. Others, perhaps because of family commitments, did not. A substantial amount of the quartet's funds and aspirations were invested in a funeral parlor enterprise, The Fairfield Four Funeral Home on Lafayette Street.

After a promising start the business went downhill. By the Christmas holiday season of 1949, three severely disillusioned members quit to form their own quartet. These were baritones Edward "Preacher" Thomas and James S. Hill and basso Isaac "Dickie" Freeman. Together with tenors Willie Jefferson and Wilson Paige they founded The Skylarks. Leaving Nashville in pursuit of greener pastures, they headed for Montgomery, Alabama.

By the spring of 1951 The Skylarks had signed with Nashboro Records with whom they were to enjoy an on-and-off sixteen year relationship. Between the summer of 1951 and the early spring of 1954 the group waxed a dozen strong 78s, but none hit the mark. Edward "Preacher" Thomas had left the group by the fifth release and was not replaced. By the spring of 1953 The Skylarks had undergone major changes. Wilson Paige had quit, and Lindsay Starks had replaced

him. An effort was now made to find a singer as formidable and as impressive as Thomas had been.

A replacement was found in the person of Reverend Robert Crenshaw, former powerhouse tenor with The Swan Silvertones out of North Carolina. The Swans were quickly able to replace Crenshaw with the equally awesome pipes of Dewey Young. However, Crenshaw's tenure was short and did little to increase the fortunes of the group. By the close of 1953 Crenshaw had gone. Robert Broussard, plucked out of The Ever-Ready Gospel Singers, replaced him. (As it turned out, Broussard sang in both groups at the same time over the ensuing years.)

In May 1954 The Skylarks hit paydirt with their rousing rendition of "The Baptism of Jesus" lead effectively by the profound tones of Isaac "Dickie" Freeman. The song trundles along to the rhythm metered out by a strident piano. The version is one with organ overdub which adds mood and momentum and does not detract. Freeman's booming cautionary message invokes the fear of the Almighty.

The Skylarks became a quartet some time during the fall of 1955 with the departure of Jefferson and Starks and the addition of Reverend W.L. Richardson. Richardson had served a little more than a year in The Southern Tones. The Southern Tones were set up as a touring group for The Bells of Joy. All but lead singer A.C. Littlefield of The Bells was able to travel so The Southern Tones were used to promote the more successful Bells of Joy records to a wider audience.

"Jesus keeps me alive," backed with "When the world's on fire" are from the summer of

1956. "Jesus keeps me alive" is perhaps one of Richardson's best lead singing efforts. The song's soul-stirring refrain builds to a pop-off ecstasy point in keeping with the sanctified style of the day. "When the world's on fire" finds Freeman back at the helm and working his magic.

From this place in time we jump six years to catch Freeman's impassioned rendition of "Roll Jordan Roll," one of the group's best remembered and most requested numbers. Freeman pulls out all the stops as he lays on the tricks of the trade. "Let's work for Him," the flip of "Roll Jordan Roll," is driven with solid testimony that, to my ear, sounds more like the lead work of Reverend Crenshaw than the softer approach of the Reverend Richardson.

"Someone to care" and "Fly away" are songs from the same 1962 session. "Someone to care" is not the previously issued take, but an alternate, much more convincing, slower version. "Fly away" is another scorcher brought to the boil by front-men Richardson and Freeman.

The Skylarks did not record for three years. The group's initial single release from the 1965 comeback session features a tight, straight-ahead, traditional reading of "Lord, I'm your child" backed with a hard-sung rendition of "My life is in his hands." "When you give" (Parts 1 and 2), taken from the same session date, are beautifully conveyed, first by the group in unison, then strengthened with the sermon-like overlays of Robert Broussard who works the song up to full voltage.

"Gambling man," backed with "Jesus knows," surfaced as a single release toward the

close of 1965. "Gambling man," a lesson on admonishment, is handled with drive and firm stewardship. "Jesus knows" is given the drawn-out, hard-sung treatment. Some time along in 1966 The Skylarks, now composed of William Stratton, Ernest Watkins, Wilson Waters, James Glenn, Joe Whittaker, and James S. Hill, cut their first and only album release for Nashboro at the Woodland Sound Studio in Nashville entitled "Good news."

The previously issued "Gambling man" and "Lord, I'm your child" were gathered with eight freshly minted songs, three of which are offered on this CD in alternate versions. The songs include the soulful "Give God a chance," the rich-sounding "All in all," two power-packed versions of "I John saw," "Remember me," a double dose of "Lord, I just want to thank you," "Eyes have not seen," "Don't let nobody turn you around" plus the declaratory "I'm going to walk."

The collection is beautifully rounded out with five previously unreleased songs, the Freeman-lead "Somebody's gonna miss me" from the 1955-57 era, "The Lord guides my hand," another Freeman masterpiece heightened by palm-pounding enthusiasm, Freeman's touching and delicately rendered version of Sonny Til and The Orioles' 1953 opus "Crying in the chapel," Lucy Campbell's "Something within me," and an exciting interpretation of the traditional "I'm going home on the morning train."

The Fairfield Four quit the road and ceased to be a recording entity in 1961. By the close of the 1960s decade The Skylarks had

followed suit. A renewed interest in traditional acappella gospel singing had taken root in the late 1970s due to the increasing curiosity of a mainly white audience. A Fairfield Four acappella (reunion) Group was put together out of the remnants of both The Skylarks and former Fairfield Four units. The aggregation was composed of the late Reverend Sam McCrary (lead tenor), James S. Hill (baritone), Isaac "Dickie" Freeman (bass), Willie Love (tenor), and Joe Whittaker (utility and guitar.)

By 1988, the late Reverend W.L. Richardson from the 1955 edition of The Skylarks along with Wilson Waters from the 1966 group had replaced Love and Whittaker. Ironically, with recent minor changes in personnel, The Fairfield Four are more widely popular today, particularly in Spain, than they have ever been.

— Opal L. Nations
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