1 CARMENA WALTZ SONG
2 WHO'LL JINE DE UNION
3 I AM SEEKING FOR A CITY
4 I AM BOUND FOR SWEET CANAAN LAND
5 I GOT A HOME IN DAT ROCK
6 IN DAT GREAT GETTING' UP MORNING
7 YOU TALK TOO MUCH
8 A ZOOT SUIT
9 CASTLE ON THE RIVER NILE
10 COUSIN JEDIDIAH
11 A LITTLE JIVE IS GOOD FOR YOU
12 GET ON BOARD LITTLE CHILDREN
13 WE ARE WALKING IN THE LIGHT
14 SWING LOW SWEET CHARIOT
15 OH FREEDOM
16 I'M TRAMPIN'
17 WHAT DID HE SAY
18 GET UP THEM STAIRS MADEMOISELLE
19 THAT'S WHAT YOU NEED TO SUCEED
20 PURGATORY
21 WRAPPED UP IN A DREAM
22 AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'
23 BY THE LIGHT OF THE SILVERY MOON
24 TWO BLOCKS DOWN TURN TO THE LEFT
25 CHARGE IT TO DADDY
26 TUXEDO JUNCTION
27 MY GUYS COME BACK
28 SOMETIMES I FEEL LIKE A MOTHERLESS CHILD

THE DEEP RIVER BOYS

Let's Go

DEEP RIVER BOYS (clockwise from top)
Harry Douglass, Edward Ware, Charlie Ford, Vernon Gardner, George Lawson
1937 (Photo courtesy George Moonoogian)

Any U.K. listeners in their sixties will remember catching the weekly fifteen-minute Deep River Boys radio programmes on Radio Luxembourg, recorded in 26-week blocks to enable the "Deeps" to tour during broadcast. Will we ever forget Harry Douglass's treacly intro – "Hello everybody!" – the start of a quarter-hour of jolly tunes. What many of us did not know is that the Deeps were born into the college glee club tradition, went out singing jubilee gospel, flirted with jump & jive and R&B for awhile, then cosied up as background singers behind notable soloists before venturing to English shores to share their confection of negro folk tunes and pop music with the Brits (see Acrobat ADMCD 5001.)

Back before the axe cut school music classes, the major black colleges of the 1920s and 1930s were ablaze with glee club singing, choirs and choruses. Fisk had its Jubilee Singers, Tuskegee fostered its Institute Choir (as did Dillard) and Wilberforce gave birth to the illustrious Dixie Songsters, a.k.a. Charioteers (see Acrobat ACRCD 285.)

The evolution of the Hampton-sponsored Deeps is almost a carbon copy of the Charioteers in that both groups were able to easily and skilfully adapt to prevailing popular music trends over a lengthy period of time. Our founding focus for the Deeps is Harry Douglass, born in Bridgeville, Delaware on May 6, 1916. He entered Hampton College in the fall of 1934, having first sung tenor in the Dover High School glee club and choir. Bridgeville had only one high school which was restricted to whites.

Douglass's family was poor but they sent him to board at Dover some 27 miles from home. Douglass's great grandmother was a slave house worker used by her holders for breeding purposes. His real family name was Blockson. His gifted older sister played piano in church and at school. His grandmother was a trained concert singer.

Enrolled at Hampton's School of Education, it was Douglass's intention to major in Social Studies. He was at first relegated, against his better judgment, to the baritone section of the school choir. He sang in the glee club and played E-flat alto horn and alto sax in the school band. But he preferred singing and creative dance and let his band membership slide. Not enrolled in Hampton's School of Music, Douglass had to audition. Hampton sponsored a three-tier vocal quartet system. One started in the Armstrong League Quartet, a proving ground for moving up into the Junior and Senior Quartets. The Senior Quartet was a paid graduate group that travelled on world-wide venues to raise money for the school.

In 1936 both Douglass and basso Edward Ware (born in New York on May 20, 1914) were singing in the Armstrong League Quartet when they were approached by two older classmates, second tenor George Lawson (born in New York May 23, 1913) and first tenor Vernon Gardner (also born in New York, on December 26th 1911). Lawson, a drop-out and college radical, provided the initial impetus to the quartet that would later evolve into the Deep River Boys. Lawson enrolled at Hampton in 1931 and was expelled in 1932. He was in and out of Hampton for various misdemeanors over the following five years.

In 1936 both Lawson and Gardner were singing in the Junior Quartet. At Lawson's suggestion the foursome teamed up and rehearsed a few vocal standards in a dormitory room. Lawson thought the group sounded good and persuaded the others to try their luck at finding vocal work up in New York during the summer. In June the boys, billed as the Hampton Institute Junior Quartet, entered Major Edward Bowes' Amateur Hour Radio Show and won first prize, $100 split four ways. Frank Sinatra, Gladys Knight and Pat Boone all won grand prizes on the show which switched to T.V. for the last twelve years of its run (1948-1960).

Learning that Rex Ingram (star of "Green Pastures" and "Cabin in the Sky") was holding auditions at the Suffern Summer Theatre for "Emperor Jones," the boys rushed over and gave a persuasive dressing-room performance for producer Josh Logan. They won a five-minute pre-performance spot singing traditional spirituals for $40 apiece per week. Ingram was impressed and invited the boys onto his "Green Pastures" promotion tour. During Suffern appearances the boys were billed by Ingram as the Deep River Boys after one of their best rendered traditional spirituals, "Deep River."

The group returned to Hampton in September 1936, but six weeks into the semester Ingram called from New York with an offer to work with one of Eddie Dowling's Caravans, fielded by the N.Y. State Democratic P.C.C. The decision to quit school for showbiz was cemented by the fact that Lawson was about to be expelled yet again. Sticking with Lawson, who could now

DEEP RIVER BOYS, circa 1940
TOP: George Lawson, Harry Douglass, Edward Ware
BOT: Vernon Gardner, Charlie Ford

really launch the group, looked like a winning ticket to singing success. But things did not quite turn out that way. After working on Roosevelt and Lehmen's election campaigns the boys were reduced to washing dishes and walking the streets. They were caught in the midst of the Depression. The foursome figured that in order to find work, they would have to quit spirituals and broaden their twenty-song repertoire to include standards and popular songs.

During 1937 they worked at gaining a foothold in the Catskills at clubs as well as churches. They again won first prize on Jay C. Flippen's amateur talent programme. Up to this point the boys had worked in a-cappella, but now, having gotten into trouble with downstairs wannabes at rehearsals for foot-stomping to keep time, they felt they needed accompaniment. This was when pianist Charlie Ford came aboard. Ford, a brilliant graduate from Hampton's School of Music, started teaching the group musical theory and arrangements. The Deeps improved their act. Their increased professional musical ability lead to an appearance in the Broadway production of "How come, Lawd," arranged by the star of the show, Rex Ingram, who had become the Deeps' unofficial manager.

The show flopped, but the press wrote rave notices about the group. This caught the attention of CBS who, after a short audition, offered the Deeps a programme with a salary of $25 a man per show, a goodly sum of money in those days. The show lasted almost two years, over which time they learned twenty to thirty songs a week to keep fresh. (CBS would not allow

the group to repeat a song more often than every two weeks.)

1940 turned out to be a pivotal year. Ray Duran (born Horatio A. Duran in Panama on April 19, 1910) replaced Charlie Ford at the keyboard, and the group moved from CBS to NBC's Blue Network. Local programmes were aired in addition to broadcasts over network lines from WJZ in New York. (The Golden Gate Quartet replaced the Deeps at CBS.)

Confusion exists over the dating of the Deeps' first transcriptions for Langworth. Transcriptions were made as demos to secure work at radio networks. The Hayes / Laughton Gospel Records Discography dates the Langworths to February 1943, yet by that time group personnel had changed from that given for the session. It is my guess that the transcriptions cut by Gardner, Lawson, Douglass and Ware were made before 1937 when Charles Ford joined the outfit as pianist. This would make the transcriptions the group's first recordings.

Officially, the signing with Bluebird in January 1940 marked the Deeps' first commercial recording date at which they produced two secular songs with Leo Reisman's band. Continuing in stage work, the Deeps appeared with Louis Armstrong, Maxine Sullivan and Benny Goodman in the Center Theatre production of "Midsummer Night's Dream" at Radio City, then onto Loew's State for Ed Sullivan's Variety Show. After touring with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson they participated in a closed-circuit T.V. show with Byline mystery star Betty Furness.

The Deeps continued to record for Victor and Bluebird into 1942. In July 1941 the Deeps were fortunate enough to record behind Bea Wain which resulted in the charmingly rendered "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." In January 1942 the group garnered rave reviews for their appearance at the Paradise Lounge in Detroit. "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" was particularly well received. Some time during this period the Deeps filmed four "soundies" (short telescriptions made for "video-jukeboxes"). The group, clad in biblical robes, cut in one day at the Astor Studios "Shadrack" plus "Hark, Hark, The Lark," "Toot That Trumpet" and "Boogie Woogie Piggy" in which the group, dressed in farm clothing, chased live greased pigs around a sound-stage.

Douglass also remembers filming "My heart At Thy Sweet Voice" from the opera "Sampson and Delilah" but no evidence exists to suggest it was ever commercially released.

The Deeps toured and recorded with Fats Waller whose manager, Wallace T. "Ed" Kirkeby, also took on the Deeps' growing management duties. When the US joined World War II, the Deeps lent their talents to the U.S.O. where, billed as the Army Quartet, they performed spirituals and popular songs. In June, Douglass and the group received induction notices. Only Douglass and Duran passed their physicals. It was off to Fort Dix for them. Baritone Leroy Wayman was called to replace Douglass, and Cameron Williams filled Duran's piano stool.

Kirkeby was not altogether happy with Leroy Wayman and in 1944 replaced him with Rhett Butler (in no way related to the fictional character developed by Margaret Mitchell.) Meanwhile, Douglass was assigned to the Special Services Division under the command of John Reed Kilpatrick, president of Madison Square Garden. Douglass was given the task of forming singing groups to entertain embarking troops. One group, composed of eighty gospel voices, became Armed Forces Champions, another labelled the Camphill Quartet ran the gamut of East Coast Armed Forces camps and bases. Some quartets made it onto V-Disc. The erstwhile Deeps were continuously touring but unable to make up in popularity for the disappearance of Harry Douglass. In July 1945 the group waxed a 4 x 78 r.p.m. gospel set for The Pilot Radio Company in Long Island City. These amazingly exquisite a-cappella sides are some of the quartet's finest spiritual work and would perhaps have garnered more attention had they been better recorded.

Two months later, the Deeps were collared to background behind Thelma Carpenter for one of former New York mayor Jimmy Walker's Majestic sessions in New York. A disastrously gruelling fifteen state tour of one-nighters was set up by Kirkeby in November-December 1945. Two men fell ill and in the sudden emergency Harry Douglass had to get leave to fill the engagements. When Douglass received his discharge in March 1946, Kirkeby was ready to drop the group's management. Work was thin on the ground. With a little cajoling, Douglass was able to persuade Kirkeby to stay. A strong group would surface again, promised Douglass. With this in mind, Kirkeby secured a contract with RCA Victor.

Thelma Carpenter

As you will hear on this CD, the Deeps sing at the peak of their power over this period, April 1946-February 1950. Ballads were tightly rendered and on the jumps the group really swing. Coast-to-coast tours resumed in theatres, clubs and hotels.

During 1948 Dan Grissom enjoyed a measure of success with his recording of "Recess in Heaven." Spin-offs by the Ink Spots and Deep River Boys drew some coin away from Grissom's original. This is to say that the Deeps probably sold more records with this song than any other due to its chart-climbing popularity.

Despite failure to produce out-and-out hits, radio and

T.V. appearances resumed as did a guest spot on the Ed Sullivan, Kate Smith, Morton Downey, Jack Smith and Milton Berle Shows. "Bojangles" Robinson had them tour with him again as well.

In July 1949, trade indicators showed a decline in the Deeps' style of music. They made their first overseas tour, appearing for two weeks at the London Palladium, followed by an amazingly successful six-month tour of the Moss Empire and Stoll Theatre chains throughout the U.K. Critics acclaimed the Deeps as being a livelier version of the Mills Brothers and Ink Spots.

Recordings were cut for HMV on this trip as they were during the return engagements that followed. The Deeps realized that support for their music back in the States was waning. Bookings and personal appearances dipped to a new low. The Deeps had found a way to combat this, however. As with the Delta Rhythm Boys, and the Golden Gate Quartet, Europe was a perfect second base of operations for them. (They wound up spending six months a year in Europe.)

The Deeps returned to the Palladium five successive years and was the only black group to claim this singular honour.

The Deeps had successfully crossed over into the popular mainstream, and they had the experience and professional wherewithal to do it. In 1951 they recorded briefly for Joe Davis's Beacon and Jay Dee labels where they enjoyed a short measure of success with "Truthfully" which Davis issued twice. On November 3, 1952 the Deeps were selected to appear on a Royal Command Variety Performance at the London Palladium for the Queen.

Incredibly, the outfit's membership remained unchanged for fifteen years. The Deeps continued to record for Victor, Vik, Gallant, Seeco, Wand and Michelle. In 1950 George Lawson retired from singing and joined the Post Office. He died in Woodbridge, Va. on January 26, 1995. Vernon C. Gardner retired from the group in 1956 when the Deeps were reduced to a trio. He died in Queens, New York on February 14, 1973. Harry M. Douglass left this life on June 5, 1999 in Calverton, New York and was buried at Calverton National Cemetery. The Deep River Boys Trio disbanded after Douglass's death.

In 1955 The Deeps were invited to appear at the White House at the request of President Dwight Eisenhower. With the exception of first tenor Al Bishop, all the members were those in the 1950 line-up, the group that waxed the righteous version of Erskine Hawkins' "Tuxedo Junction" for RCA Records (and earlier on transcription). It must have been a joy to see them swing.

--- Opal Louis Nations, July 2007

Based on an interview with Harry Douglass conducted by Peter Grendysa for Goldmine Magazine, July 1979. With thanks to the George Moonoogian Estate for photos, Eric LeBlanc for personnel statistics, and Peter Grendysa for rare recordings.

DEEP RIVER BOYS
Original 1936 group Hampton Institute Junior Quartet / Deep River Boys: Harry Douglass (baritone & basso), Edward Ware (basso), George Lawson (2nd tenor) and Vernon Gardner (1st tenor)

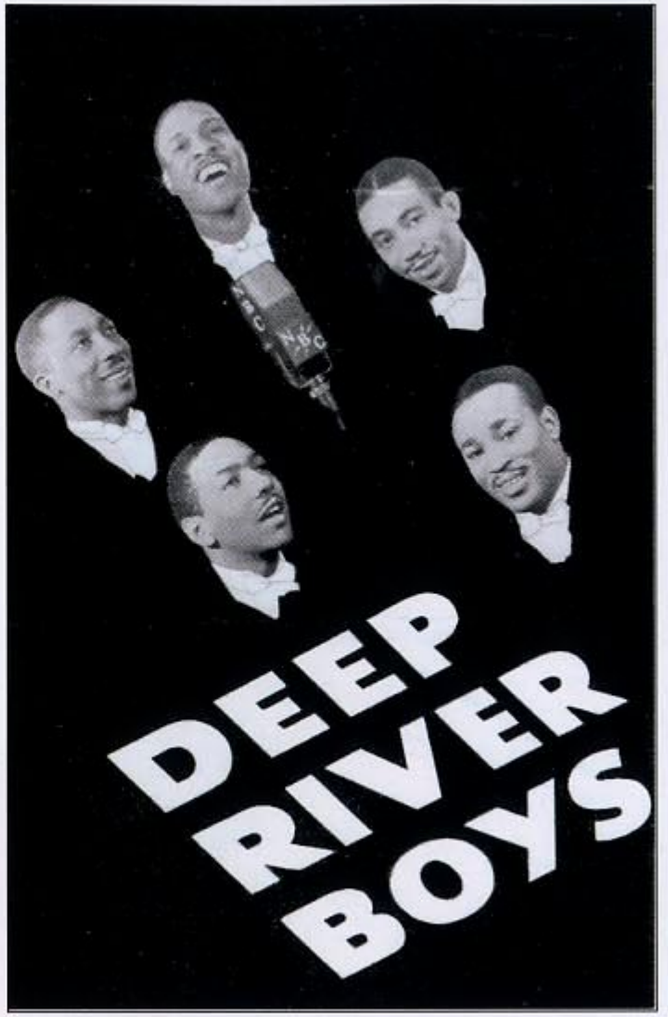
1937 group:
As above (add Charlie Ford, pianist)

1940 group: Bluebird / first RCA Victor recordings:
As above (Ray Duran replaces Charlie Ford)

1943 group:
Leroy Wayman (baritone), Edward Ware (basso), George Lawson (2nd tenor), Vernon Gardner (1st tenor) and Cameron Williams (piano)

1944 group: Majestic & Pilotone recordings:
As above (Rhett Butler replaces Leroy Wayman)

DEEP RIVER BOYS
circa 1944



1946 group: RCA Victor
As above (Harry Douglass replaces Rhett Butler & Ray Duran replaces Cameron Williams)

1950 group: Last RCA Victor recordings:
As above (Jimmy Lundy replaces George Lawson)

1951 group:
As above (Carter Wilson replaces Jimmy Lundy)

1956 group:
Harry Douglass (baritone/bass), Jimmy Lundy (2nd tenor), Vernon Gardner or Al Bishop (1st tenor) and Ray Duran (piano)