THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around

The Fairfield Four are perhaps one of the six most significant jubilee quartets to come to prominence in the Southlands during the 1940s. [Note: our Acrobat gospel series also features the excellent material recorded by all but one of the aforementioned (See ADDCD3007–Spirit of Memphis; ADDCD3004–Swan Silvertones; ADDCD3003–Blind Boys of Mississippi, and ADDCD3005–Harmonizing Four. Of the top six jubilee groups, only the Dixie Hummingbirds have been excluded because of availability elsewhere.)

The evolving development of the Fairfield Four dates back to May 20, 1921 when a threesome of young men was organized to sing harmony at the Sunday School attached to the Fairfield Baptist Church on Hermitage Avenue in Nashville. Rev. J.R. Statton presided as pastor. Vocal training was given by noted music instructor Rev. J.R. Carrethers who served as assistant pastor. The seminal group consisted of Carrethers' two sons Rufus (born November 21, 1912), a bass singer, and Harold (born July 25, 1914), a tenor, plus the minister's neighbour, John Battle (born February 12, 1912) who sang the lead tenor parts.

The trio became a quartet with the addition of tenor Lattimer Green, thought to have emigrated from South Africa. The foursome sang for church services and began to build a solid reputation. Rufus, the outfit's basso, was outstanding. Rev. Statton and Annie Clay, a church mother, christened the quartet the Fairfield Four. Soon they were going out to sing at local churches, teas and socials for friends and acquaintances.

Some time during the late 1920s Lattimer Green's family relocated to Jacksonville, Florida taking Lattimer with them. His place was filled temporarily by James Dotson. William Malone took Dotson's part in the early 1930s. He, in turn, was replaced by Nathaniel Irvin in the late 1930s. By 1940, the young Sam McCrary, an excellent tenor lead in Nashville, was taken aboard. McCrary was born in Christina, Tenn. On October 27, 1913. George Gracey joined the group in 1941.

One of Rev. Statton's most popular sermons was "Dry bones in the valley," better known today as one of Rev. C.L. Franklin's best-selling pulpit thrashers. The sermon was delivered annually on the third Sunday in October. On October 19, 1941, the sermon was recorded for the music department of The Library of Congress by musicologist John Work III. Work's father, John Wesley Work II, had sung first tenor, along with the great tenor Roland W. Hayes, with the Fisk University Jubilee Quartette on cylinder in 1912.

Before the sermon and prayer by Rev. Cobyn, the Fairfield Four were recorded singing "Don't let nobody turn you around," a song first waxed by the Dixie Jubilees in 1924. But it is the Fairfield Four's version that has drawn the most attention and is remembered as being the group's signature theme. They waxed it again in 1947 for Dot and on the group's Old Town album (their final sides) in 1960. Rev. Sam McCrary leads, with "wind-up" vocal effects on all three versions.

In July 1942 the Fairfield Four won a promotional contest sponsored by Colonial Coffee. First prize included a spot on the powerful, clear channel, 50,000 watt WLAC. The show reached an even broader audience with a national hook-up over the CBS network. The program ran for almost a decade and was sponsored by Sunway Vitamins for many years. Col. Herman Grizzard was the show's long-time announcer who developed a close and lasting friendship with the group.

The Fairfield Four became national celebrities and were henceforth known as "The South's Famous Fairfield Four." Although the Golden Gate Quartet, Southernaires and Wings Over Jordan also enjoyed airtime, only the Fairfield Four sang with emphasis on feeling and emotion. Church brethren in the South and Midwest were particularly sympathetic to this exaggerated emotional style. Many listeners would write to the show to have the group appear on programs at their churches. Requests to appear led to extensive tours.

In 1944, Willie Frank Lewis joined the group for a short while in place of basso Rufus Carrethers. Lewis also sang baritone very well. The highly acclaimed Lewis became the model for Isaac "Dickie" Freeman, the group's current and best known basso who joined the outfit in 1949. Freeman, born June 20, 1928, took Lewis's pumping basso lead parts and made them into his own.

Harold Carrethers, who had by 1944 become the group's piano accompanist, took on managerial responsibilities. John Battle took care of the musical arrangements. Both became increasingly essential as the group had to rehearse daily to build enough repertoire for their frequent radio broadcasts. The Fairfield Four sang a differing variety of music on their programs – gospels, spirituals, jubilees and folk melodies – to meet listeners' requests.

The Fairfield Four, in league with the Radio Four (Babb Brothers), Nashville's second leading quartet, sometimes booked major, out of-town groups to appear on programs with them at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium, then a gospel-concert venue and not the famous country music hallowed hall-of-fame it is today. Harold and the Babb brothers hoped to gain added acclaim and financial gain by doing this and of course the ploy worked.

By early 1946, the Fairfield Four had reached a point where local, independent record companies came knocking at their door. One of these was the fledgling Bullet Recording & Transcription Corporation at 424 Broad Street, operated by Jim Bulleit and C.V. Hitchcock. Bullet was Nashville's first significant independent, incorporated in April 1946. Bulleit created his sepia or race series a month earlier, in March 1946. Although Cecil Gant dominated the series because of his outstanding sales, the Fairfield Four were able to record four well-received songs for the label in

April 1946. The line-up included McCrary, Battle, lead tenors, George Gracey, tenor, Rufus and Harold, bass and baritone.

The recordings were cut at a time of great turmoil in the group. With celebrity and increasing popularity came inflated egos. This lead to a rift in the group. Harold, the outfit's manager, quit the quartet in early 1946 following a financial dispute. The disagreement was over an extremely lucrative Sister Rosetta Tharpe concert the group had brought to the Ryman.

In 1947 John Battle was stricken with T.B. He sang his final program in Birmingham, so weak that other soldiers had to prop him up on their shoulders. Battle was the glue that held the group together. He died on April 24th, 1947. Now that he was gone the group lost its crucial and unifying element. The Fairfield Four split into two groups. Both were active on the church circuit. It was McCrary's faction that retained the radio spot over WLAC, and it was this group that prevailed.

By 1949 McCrary had put together an "all star" outfit recruited from major quartets in other cities. First of these was baritone James Samuel Hill from Bessemer, Alabama. He replaced Battle when he became seriously ill. James Hill was born on July 25, 1916. Then came "house-wrecking" tenor Edward "Preacher" Thomas from New Orleans, Louisiana. He had had considerable experience singing lead with the Famous Blue Jay Singers. Thomas, born September 11, 1922, took over the musical directorship that Battle had managed for many years. Talented tenor lead Preston York from Atlanta was also added. He had sung in the Reliable Jubilees and was also a skilled musical arranger. Finally super-basso Isaac "Dickie" Freeman from Johns, Alabama was commandeered. He was plucked out of the Kings of Harmony of Cleveland. Freeman was, and still is, the heaviest, longest-serving rhythm bass known to man. With utility singer Lewis and lead tenor McCrary from the original line up, this fresh set of soldiers could match any quartet at any singing battle, any time. In fact, the Fairfield Four were invincible in "Battles of Song."

They toured from coast to coast, appearing in huge auditoriums and vast outdoor stadiums. Back in 1943, Battle had set up strict "legislation" for the group to adhere to called "The By Laws of the Fairfield Four." Among the sixteen precepts were fines for anyone caught drinking eight hours before a program, for failure to show up at rehearsal and dockings of pay for not showing up at the broadcast studio thirty minutes before going on the air. All laws were strictly enforced. This did not stop the ongoing professional differences that disrupted the smooth progress of the quartet.

Three more Bullet sessions were conducted in Nashville. The sessions dates were set up in April 1948 and July and December 1949. Fourteen songs were committed to 16" master disc, including the first remake of "Don't let nobody turn you around" with Willie Frank Lewis assuming second lead. Between the above first and second Bullet sessions, the Fairfield Four waxed for Jim Bulleit's Delta subsidiary. Many of these sides plus a few from earlier sessions were later sold or leased to Dot, MGM and Nashboro Records, some showing up on 45s, others on 12" albums.

By October 1950, Randy Wood at Dot Records in Gallatin, Tennessee had acquired the Fairfield Four's contract. The straw which broke the camel's back occurred shortly before Randy Wood's purchase of the group's contract. The outfit's more professional-minded members, those with prior experience with other groups out of state, wanted a firm, dedicated commitment, one which

included long and far tours across the nation. The local members, who had ties to Nashville either by family or business arrangement, wanted to devote time to these other commitments and not stay away from home for too long at a stretch. A substantial amount of the quartet's assets were invested in a funeral parlour enterprise called the Fairfield Four Funeral Home on Lafayette Street. Group members' time was devoted to running the place.

After a promising start, the business started losing money. The end came during the winter of 1949-1950. Disillusioned by failure, Thomas, Hill and Freeman quit the Fairfield Four to form a new group called the Skylarks with the addition of tenor singers Willie Jefferson and Wilson Paige. McCrary was forced to rebuild the Fairfield Four a second time. All-round utility singer Willie Frank Lewis had remained along with second tenor Willie Love who had just quit the Flying Clouds of Detroit. To them McCrary added his first cousin, baritone Clarence "Baby" Brooks from the Fireside Singers of Nashville and bass "Oopee" George McCurn from the Golden Harps (Jubilee) Singers of Oakland.

In October 1950 the newly constructed Fairfield Four recorded at least sixteen songs for Randy Wood. Aural evidence reveals that basso Freeman and not McCurn was heard singing on "Don't drive your children away," the third of eight singles stretching from November 1950 to December 1951. The volume of releases reflects the magnitude of the group's widespread popularity.

By December 1951 Willie Frank Lewis had defected to the Skylarks and his place had been taken by Wilmer "Little Axe" Broadnax from the Spirit of Memphis. The group continued to tour far and wide. Their radio work also carried on. Three more sessions were conducted for Randy Wood dated December 1951, January 1953, and October 1954. Right after this McCrary retired from the group to take up the ministry. By 1955 he was pastoring St. Mark's Missionary Baptist Church. But the fans would not let the Fairfield Four go down, and efforts were made to reform the group with various members coming and going. Short tours and personal appearances took place on a semi-professional level. Willie Love was the mainstay of the always evolving Fairfield Four. "Star" singers were rounded up on occasion. These included baritone Thomas Huggins and basso Ben Vaughn.

In July 1959 the Fairfield Four got a chance to record for Alan Bubis at Champion Records on Hermitage Avenue. The session was arranged by old friend and colleague, Dr. Morgan Babb, lead tenor and manager with the Radio Four. Babb also served as talent scout for Alan and Reynold Bubis. Only one release saw light of day. A last ditch effort to resurrect the Fairfield Four came about in May 1960. At the beginning of 1960, McCrary brought an extremely competent young group, the Silver Quintet of Gary, to perform at his church. After the program, McCrary invited the group members into a new Fairfield Four quartet he was putting together. The Silver Quintet had recorded for Vee Jay Records, lead by the great Roscoe Robinson. With Clarence Mills and Sam McCrary as lead tenors and Roscoe Robinson gone to the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi, the freshly christened six-member Fairfield Four that included Willie Williams, Huey Brown, David Aron and basso Joe Henderson of "Snap your fingers" fame recorded one album for Hy Weiss's Old Town label at the RCA studios under WLAC disc jockey Bill "Hoss" Allen's supervision. Allen had long been a fan and friend of the group.

The record failed to ignite and the group disbanded shortly thereafter. Following a long hiatus, a special quartet reunion program in Birmingham, Alabama in October 1980 brought renewed interested in the quartet, an

interest that led to the resurrection of the group. Although older members pass and younger ones replace them, the Fairfield Four still soldier on in the spirit that reflects the good old times.

Both Harold and Rufus Carrethers died in Nashville, Rufus on July 5, 1975 and Harold on March 11, 1998. The great Samuel H. McCrary also passed in Nashville, on July 3, 1991. James Samuel Hill died in the country music capital on July 6, 2000. Edward Thomas moved on to glory in New Orleans on June 4, 1988.

Demand for the Fairfield Four's music has grown by leaps and bounds and continues to do so to this day.

– Opal Louis Nations and Doug Seroff

Sam McCrary, John Battle (lead vocals); George Gracey (tenor); Rufus Carrethers (bass); Harold Carrethers (vocals). Nashville early 1946

1. BETTER LEAVE THAT LIAR ALONE BULLET 253
2. WHO STOLE MY OLD SHOES
3. DON'T YOU WANT TO JOIN THAT NUMBER BULLET 254
4. WHERE SHALL I GO

Sam McCrary (lead tenor); Edward Thomas (tenor); James Hill (baritone); Willie Frank Lewis (bass/utility); Rufus Carrethers (bass). Nashville c. 1947/48

5. DON'T LET NOBODY TURN YOU AROUND BULLET 284
6. STANDING IN THE SAFETY ZONE
7. AMAZING GRACE BULLET 292
8. WHEN I GET UP IN HEAVEN

As above except Isaac 'Dickie' Freeman (bass) replaces Carrethers. Nashville c. 1949

9. CANAAN LAND BULLET 307
10. I'M GOING TO LIVE THE LIFE I SING ABOUT
11. JUST ONE MOMENT IN GOD'S KINGDOM BULLET 308
12. YOU'VE GOT TO MOVE

Rev. Sam McCrary (lead tenor); Edward Thomas (tenor); James Hill (baritone); Willie Frank Lewis (utility); Isaac 'Dickie' Freeman (bass). c. February 1949

13. DIG A LITTLE DEEPER IN GOD'S LOVE DELTA 201
14. SAVIOUR DON'T PASS ME BY
15. JUST A LITTLE TALK WITH JESUS DELTA 207
16. LIFT HIM UP
17. JESUS MET THE WOMAN AT THE WELL DELTA 210
18. TREE OF LEVEL
19. EZEKIEL DELTA 212
20. ROLL ALL BURDENS AWAY
21. IN THE WILDERNESS DOT 1011
22. LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT JESUS

Rev. Sam McCrary (lead tenor); Willie Love (second tenor); Clarence 'Baby' Brooks (baritone); Willie Frank Lewis (utility); George McCurn (bass). October 1950

23. I'LL TELL THE WORLD DOT 1015
24. IN THE UPPER ROOM
25. DON'T DRIVE HER AWAY DOT 1073

Rev. Sam McCrary (lead tenor); Willie Love (second tenor); Clarence 'Baby' Brooks (baritone); Willie Frank Lewis (utility); George McCurn (bass). December 1951

26. ANGELS WATCHING DOT 1082
27. WAITING FOR ME
28. I'M IN YOUR CARE DOT 1083
29. ALL THE WAY DOT 1110
30. I'LL BE SATISFIED DOT 1111

This CD derives from very rare and old 78rpm recordings many of which were originally manufactured in small quantities. There will therefore be a significant amount of surface noise audible. Whilst we have removed much extraneous noise it was considered that any further use of noise reduction programmes would compromise the integrity of the original recordings.