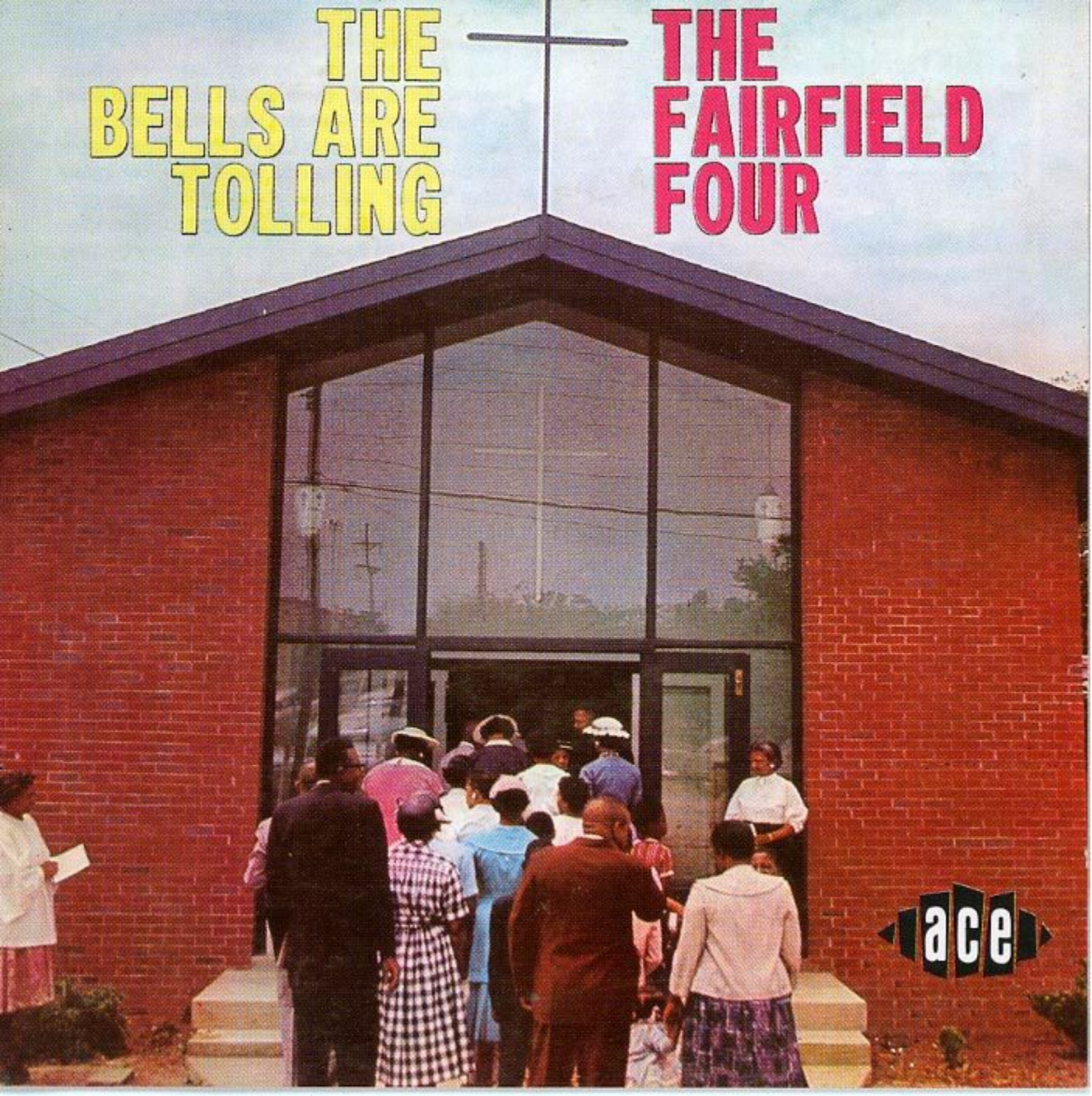
THE BELLS ARE TOLLING

THE FAIRFIELD FOUR



ace

THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

"The Bells Are Tolling": The Old Town Collection by Opal Louis Nations

The Fairfield Four are perhaps Nashville's best known, most influential and certainly longest public performing African-American a cappella gospel quartet. Currently signed with the Keith Case Agency under the guidance of Jerry Zoltan, the group continues to please audiences in the US and around the world. The outfit's roots date back to late 1921 when the Rev J R Carrethers, assistant pastor and musician to Rev J R Statton of Nashville's Fairfield Missionary Baptist Church, organised and trained a trio of young boys from the Sunday School to sing during services and special programs held at the church.

At first the trio, composed of Rev Carrethers' two sons Rufus and Harold plus a neighbour, John Battle, sang at local churches and at teas and social gatherings for friends and acquaintances. In 1925 African-born Lattimer Green joined the group. Rev Statton along with church mother Annie Clay christened the new quartet the Fairfield Four. James Dotson served in the group for a while as did William Malone. When Nathaniel Irvin and Sam McCrary joined in the late 1930s the quartet was broadcasting regularly over WSIX.

In late 1941 Fisk University, Nashville educator and musicologist John Work III recorded McCrary leading the Fairfield Four in a song called 'Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around' for the Library of Congress in Washington. The song gained so much popularity over the years it became synonymous with the group. By 1942 they were broadcasting nationally over the mighty 50,000 watt WLAC. This was to go on for ten years. The group's style was described as pressing and emotional. They toured throughout the US and after more personnel switches signed with Jim Bulleit's Bullet label on Lower Broad Street, Nashville in 1946. This was when John Battle, a cornerstone and stabilising force in the group, died.

Battle's death led to a rift in the group that culminated in two Fairfield Four groups. Thus the Fairfield Four Juniors were born. Sam McCrary's constantly evolving unit, however, prevailed into the winter of 1949. A substantial amount of the quartet's funds were invested in the Fairfield Four Funeral Home on Lafayette Street. Business dropped off after the venture's promising start. Severely disillusioned, baritone Edward "Preacher" Thomas and James S Hill with bass singer Isaac "Dickie" Freeman broke away from the group and, with two other soldiers, formed the Skylarks. The Skylarks built a solid reputation and toured the nation and cut for Ernie Young's Nashboro label.

THE 1960 SESSIONS

McCrary's Fairfield Four, after waxing for Bullet (1946-49), Dot/Nashboro (1949-1954) (see Ace CDCHD 449) and for Champion in 1959, recorded an album for WLAC disc jockey Bill "Hoss" Allen at RCA Victor Studios in April and May 1960. The evolution of the Victor Studios group dates back to late 1958 when McCrary, wearied of membership shuffles, made a final stab at reorganising a full-time Fairfield Four aggregation. Rev McCrary brought an extremely competent young group, the Silver Quintet of Gary, Indiana, to Nashville. When they arrived in the Volunteer State they became the Fairfield Four, in company with Willie Love and Clarence Mills.

The arriving Silver Quintet, who had recorded for Vee Jay in 1956 and 1957, included the great Roscoe Robinson, lead baritone (who within two years would take Archie Brownlee's place in the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi); Huey Brown, tenor; David Aron, tenor; Willis Williams, baritone; and Como, Mississippi-born bass singer/guitarist Joe Henderson. Henderson later crossed over to secular music and struck paydirt during the early summer of 1962 with the Brook Benton-like 'Snap Your Fingers', a #8 Pop hit for Todd Records.

By the time the RCA studio sessions rolled around, Roscoe Robinson and Willie Love had gone and Rev Sam McCrary was fully ensconced as lead mentor and manager. The first "Hoss" Allen RCA Studios session took place on 20 April 1960 for a single release. The topside was the awesomely beautiful 'Memories (Of My Mother)' which Robert Blair and the Violinaires grabbed for their arrangement of 'Three Pictures Of

Above: THE FAIRFIELD FOUR circa 1947-8 - photograph courtesy of Opal Nations
Top row l-r: Rufus Carrethers, Willie Lewis, Rev EJ Thomas
Front row l-r: Rev Samuel McCrary, James S Hill and George Gracy

Above: GOSPEL GROUPS, 1946 - photograph courtesy of Opal Nations
Back row left: Heavenly Gospel Singers Of Alabama with Leo Manley & Porterfield Lewis
Top row right: The Fairfield Four: l-r John Battle, Harold & Rufus Carrethers, George Gracey, Rev Sam McCrary & Ed Gibbins (manager)
Front row centre: The Original Gospel Harmonettes in "box suits" (before Dorothy Love Coates joined and signing with RCA Records)

The Lord' (Checker LP 10020, 1966). The eerily rendered ballad was coupled with a remake of the Fairfields' old signature opus 'Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around' which they update with McCrary's long-drawn phrasings, Henderson's blow-bass and crisp accompaniment.

The month of May marked the album session which produced the hard-sung, rapid paced 'The Bells Are Tolling', the lilting 'What Are They Doing In Heaven?' Henderson's basso impresso 'Every Knee Has Got To Bow' on which he opens a full bag of epiglottal trickeration, the throat-busting, mid-tempoed 'Wait On The Lord', a breakneck rendering of 'I John Saw The Number' (a tune still listed in the songbook of the current Fairfield Four configuration), the lovely, melodic 'In The Old Time Way' on which Henderson stretches out beyond the usual boundaries of quartet bottom-singers, the burning tambourine-driven 'At The Gates Of The City', the sermonly 'My Work On Earth Will Soon Be Done' with its Blind Boys of Alabama-like sweeps and moans, the waltzy-timed 'I'll Be So Happy' which is a reworking of the traditional 'If I Can Hear My Mother Pray Again', plus the soul-stirring 'Hide Me In Thy Bosom'.

Apart from Henderson's two impressive charts, Clarence Mills and Rev. Sam McCrary share most of the lead-work. Through a deal "Hoss" Allen made with Hy Weiss in New York, the RCA masters were purchased by Old Town Records who first tested the waters by issuing the 'Memories (Of My Mother)' / 'Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around' single (Old Town 1081) in 1960. Weiss was planning a gospel album release series and assigned the Fairfield Four material the kick-off 100 number. For some reason, Weiss backed away from issuing gospel albums, and the Fairfield Four tapes ended up on the shelf for two years. The material was finally released in 1962 as "Bells Are Tolling" - Fairfield Four (Old Town 103). The album (which included both sides of the released single) met with poor reception; few were sold and copies are extremely hard to find in their original pressing. This writer has only seen one copy in a Hollywood record collector's emporium.

In 1973 the album was brought back from obscurity with the release and its re-title to "The Famous Fairfield Four with Rev Samuel McCrary" on WLAC Radio's Athens label run by Bob Jennings and located on Twentieth Avenue South in Nashville. The availability of Athens LP 100 seems to have been an improvement over the Old Town one since most gospel collectors were able to pick it up. The original Old Town release probably never made its way beyond deejay copies. Be that as it may, Old Town 103 was the Fairfield Four's last great recorded work. Although this was the group's first recording with rhythm backing (Joe Henderson, guitar with Nashville sessioneers Bobby Moore, bass and Buddy Harmon, drums), the Fairfield Four was principally an unaccompanied quartet - and by 1960-61 a cappella quartets no longer dominated the gospel music landscape. The public demanded a more sophisticated approach, not one that reminded the black middle classes of former enslavement. After a poorly attended tour through Pennsylvania, the Fairfield Four disbanded. Except for the occasional performance, the soul and passion of the Fairfield Four was not heard for twenty years.

RENEWED INTEREST

An opportunity to re-unite the Fairfield Four came when they were invited to attend a special Quartet Reunion program in Birmingham, Alabama in October 1980. Rev Sam McCrary and Willie Love, along with ex-Skylarks defectors James Hill and basso profundo Isaac "Dickie" Freeman, plus guitarist Joe Whittaker took part in the reunion. A renewed interest in old-time quartet began to take shape as the music reached beyond the African American experience. They were invited to perform at The Smithsonian as part of the institution's "Black American Quartet Traditions" in November 1981.

By 1982 Elder WL Richardson, who had sung in the Bells Of Joy, and Wilson Waters replaced Love and Whittaker. Robert Hamlett joined in 1984. Because McCrary served a ministry in Nashville and could not travel for extended periods out of town, James Hill assumed business management of the group. Touring for the Fairfield Four reignited in 1989, the year the group was awarded the prestigious National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Fellowship (for outstanding work in the American Folk Arts).

Rev Samuel McCrary died in 1991 and was replaced by Walter Settles. The group continued to cut paths to even greater glory when they were

chosen as part of the Carnegie Hall centenary celebrations.
The following year saw the release of their first CD collection on Warner Brothers. Today the group is as alive and well as ever, touring and recording when they can. The current line-up includes James Hill (baritone), Isaac "Dickie" Freeman (bass) with Wilson Waters, Robert Hamlett, Nathan Best and Joseph Rice. Go out and see them whenever they come to your town.

Opal Louis Nations, May 2000

With invaluable help from Doug Seroff

Reference: "Gospel Records 1943-1969: A Black Music Discography" by Cedric J Hayes and Bob Laughton (Record Information Services)

'Hoss' Allen

THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

THE BELLS ARE TOLLING

1. THE BELLS ARE TOLLING (David Aron) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1962
2. WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN HEAVEN TODAY? (Charles Tindley) Copyright Control Ⓟ 1962
3. MEMORIES OF MY MOTHER (Willis Williams) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1960
4. EVERY KNEE HAS GOT TO BOW (Joe Henderson) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1962
5. DON'T LET NOBODY TURN YOU AROUND (Sam McCrary) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1960
6. WAIT ON THE LORD aka HE'S MY ROCK, MY SWORD, MY SHIELD aka WAIT ON JESUS (Kenneth Morris) Copyright Control Ⓟ 1962
7. I JOHN SAW THE NUMBER (David Aron, Henry Brown, Isaac Watts, Clarence Mills) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1962
8. IN THE OLD TIME WAY (Joe Henderson) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1962
9. AT THE GATES OF THE CITY (Joe Henderson) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1962
10. MY WORK ON EARTH WILL SOON BE DONE (Isaac Watts, Hoss Allen) Campbell Connelly & Co Ltd Ⓟ 1962
11. I'LL BE SO HAPPY aka IF I COULD HEAR MY MOTHER PRAY AGAIN (James Vaughn, James Rowe arr Fairfield Four) Copyright Control Ⓟ 1962
12. HIDE ME IN THY BOSOM (Thomas Dorsey) Carlin Music Corp Ⓟ 1962

Old Town
OTLP 103

Old Town
OTLP 103

The Bells Are Tolling

THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

1. I JOHN SAW THE NUMBER—969
2. IN THE OLD TIME WAY—970
3. AT THE GATES OF THE CITY—971
4. I'LL BE SO HAPPY—972
5. DON'T LET NOBODY—963
6. HIDE ME IN THY BOSOM—973
7. WHAT ARE THEY DOING IN HEAVEN—964
8. THE BELLS ARE TOLLING—965
9. MEMORIES—962
10. EVERY KNEE—966
11. WAIT ON THE LORD—967
12. MY WORK ON EARTH WILL SOON BE DONE—968

It might at first seem incredible but the unalterable truth is that this production—this really tremendous album of Gospel music—was nearly **forty years** in the making!

How? How, you ask, can this be so? How can one devote four decades to the production of one record album?

Let me begin with this conclusion: This program of gospel music sung by the amazingly great **Fairfield Four** is one of the finest recorded performances extant!!

And it all began nearly forty years ago when the original **Fairfield Four** first banded together, back in '21, at the Fairfield Missionary Baptist Church down in Nashville, Tennessee. No one knows for certain whether the original four men deliberately set out to establish an institution. Chances are, they simply formed a group to sing, for the pleasure of singing, that new kind of music that came into being about that time—Gospel music. It soon became apparent however, that Rufus and Harold Caruthers, John Battle and Samuel McCrary (now Rev. McCrary)—the original Fairfield Four—were something more than just another quartet. It soon became obvious that this group was developing something that would endure far beyond the life spans of the men themselves. And so it was that nearly forty years ago, the remarkable sounds indelibly preserved in this album, were born.

Back then in time, Gospel music was indeed a new and fledgling thing. Spirituals, that branch of folk music stemming from the early slave and plantation days, was already an established and pretty generally accepted part of Music Americana. They (spirituals) were being sung by some of the most accomplished and practiced choirs and choral groups in the country. They were oftentimes as embelished and polished and embroidered as any European music, frequently all but losing most of their original identity. Too, a great number of spirituals have a sad theme—almost akin to the blues. Not so with the jubilant jubilee music—

—Or the joyous strains of good Gospel music!!

The great Mahalia Jackson once said, defining this new way of singing, it's "sort of 'making a joyful noise unto the Lord' as David said."

Yes, Gospel music came into existence to fill a need for joyful music in the churches and homes of the thousands of people to whom, as Langston Hughes says, "religion is a joy."

Musicologists and critics (and their tribe increases) have very thoroughly dissected, appraised and neatly cataloged our music. So much so that a discussion of the technological aspects of Gospel here is redundant.

It is far more important to discuss our singers—the remarkable FAIRFIELD FOUR. This "institution" has of course undergone several personnel changes since the original Four began their rhythmic harmony in 1921. That original quartet, which did remain intact until the death of Mr. Battle necessitated the first change, gained immediate and widespread fame via their daily morning broadcasts over WLAC and WSIX. These broadcasts which continued for nearly ten years, were extremely well rated in and around the Nashville area. Production of these early broadcasts was largely handled by Paul Olivet and Herman Grizzard. And as is usual with exciting radio shows, the entire staff soon absorbed the enthusiasm of the artists making for remarkably well aired broadcasts that are still remembered by those thousands of Tennesseans who faithfully dialed them in at 6:45 each morning.

The present FAIRFIELD FOUR, with Rev. McCrary of the original group now assuming the functions of guiding light and director, continues in much the same tradition and pattern as the original. They were, and are, young men devoted to the Baptist Church; they were, and are, young men who grew up in the Sunday School and the Baptist Young People's Union; they were, and are, young men to whom singing is a most important means of translating the feeling of religion into David's ". . . joyful noise unto the Lord." **Henry Brown, David Aaron, Willis Williams,** and **Joseph Henderson** are the voices of today's **FAIRFIELD FOUR.**

It all began nearly forty years ago—this uniquely infectious sound of The FAIRFIELD FOUR—when Mrs. A. S. Cosby in Nashville, Tenn., fussing and fluttering like a mother hen, foresaw in that young brood, an instrument destined to become one of America's greatest Gospel quartets and so actually began the production of this album—one of the finest recorded performances extant!!!

Old Town RECORD CORP., 1697 BROADWAY, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.