Four Knights 1945-1950

Recording Data:

All sessions recorded in New York, for transcription disks except tracks 08, 23 and 26 (for Decca).

1 May 1945	Track 04
2 May 1945	01, 05, 11, 29, 30
2 August 1945	15, 28
20 August 1945	19, 21, 22
8 March 1946	26
12 March 1946	03
12 July 1946	14, 17
8 August 1946	10, 16, 20
27 August 1946	08 (with Billy Kyle Trio)
2 December 1946	23 (with Andy Kirk Orchestra)
20 December 1946	13
10 March 1947	02
22 May 1947	27
18 July 1947	06, 07, 25
unknown dates in 1949	12, 18, 24
21 August 1950	09

Heritage

HT CD 49

LC 5390

©2004 ℗2004 MCPS

Made in the Czech Republic

Product of
INTERSTATE MUSIC LTD
20 ENDWELL ROAD
BEXHILL-ON-SEA
EAST SUSSEX TN40 1EA,
ENGLAND

Four Knights

1945-1950

THE FOUR KNIGHTS
- The masters of breathless harmony
by Opal Louis Nations

During the late 1930s and 1940s it was generally considered a wise move for a black tight-harmony, non-church affiliated Afro-American quartet to incorporate folk, pop, novelty, spiritual and jive-swing music into their repertoires. We are speaking, of course, of self-contained units like the Jubalaires, Delta Rhythm Boys, Deep River Boys and the Southland Jubilee Singers, a.k.a. the Four Knights. Those wanting professional advancement in entertainment sought exposure over the burgeoning medium of radio and favored the services rendered by transcription companies to secure work in public places, sell War Bonds or to promote commercial products.

For first-account details of the Four Knights' early career, we have only Rick Whitesell's interview with Clarence Dixon, published in Goldmine Magazine in September 1979. Clarence T. Dixon was born in Charlotte, N.C. on June 4, 1923 and grew up listening to the sweet vocal refrains of the Ink Spots, Mills Brothers and Norfolk, Virginia's Golden Gate Quartet. A natural baritone singer, Clarence joined the Southland Jubilee Singers in early 1944. At that time the group was made up of local church choir members: first tenor and accomplished whistler Eugene "Gene" Alford, born October 27, 1922, second tenor and guitar accompanist John M. Wallace, born March 4, 1912, and basso Oscar Alexander Broadway, born July 7, 1910.

As senior members with experience, John and Oscar handled the musical arrangement and business affairs for the gospel group. Clarence explained that before the War, John and Oscar had enjoyed tenure as members in another outfit. Gene had also had prior singing experience. Oscar, who worked as a janitor at Clarence's high school, brought him into the Southlands who initially came together in Charlotte during 1943. In no time at all, the Southlands had landed a singing spot on WSOC Charlotte, an NBC affiliate. After approximately six months, the group switched to CBS's WBT, also of Charlotte.

WBT was a 50,000 watt clear channel radio station and the home of the prestigious "Carolina Hayride" program. Back in the 1930s, the Golden Gate Quartet regularly appeared on the show as featured quartet. In 1939, after "The Gates" move to New York, Bill Langford's Southern Sons Quartet took their place. In late 1944, the Southland Jubilees replaced

Langford's group. Clarence stated that the sudden move from small radio station to large network broadcast was a scary situation for the guys who had only been working together for less than a year. The Southlands' strongest competition at this time was Nappy Brown and the Golden Bell Quintet. Apart from sharing Charlotte airtime, the two groups often "battled" to gain the most attention in public.

While guesting on "The Carolina Hayride," the guys were noticed by Cy Langois, co-owner with Ralph Wentworth of Lang Worth Feature Programs Inc. on West 57th Street in New York. Cy, who had high hopes for the group, insisted on becoming their manager. The Southland Jubilees accepted his offer. Back in February 1943 Cy cut a number of secular transcriptions and at least twenty-six gospel titles on the Deep River Boys before their debut on RCA Records. He was looking to do the same for the Southland Jubilees.

In early May 1945 Cy began cutting gospel sides on the Southland Jubilee Quintet while at the same time recording secular material on the group. He insisted on renaming them the Four Knights. At least thirty-two spiritual and gospel sides, four novelties, one Christmas song and more than forty popular or folk songs were cut on the group. Some ended up on eight inch blue plastic 33 1/3 rpm pressings, with between four to six songs on each side. Lang Worth then leased the discs to various radio stations across the country. Rick Whitesell adds that when the sides were played on the air, the announcer added patter to give the listeners the false impression of hearing the group on hand in real time. Recordings were made every two or three weeks with the idea of building an extensive library.

Standouts included a fine version of "Gospel train" that holds up against renderings by the Golden Gates and Selah Jubilees, just about the best waxing of "Jezebel," not to be confused with the Frankie Laine opus, a really fine, rambunctious reading of "Darktown Strutters Ball, recorded by sepia-artist Luis Russell in 1936, plus a fine, infectious cover of the Mills Bros.' 1944 nugget "Till then." The Lang Worth transcriptions, in particular the gospel sides, were some of the group's finest moments, bereft of sweetening and commercial manipulation. Speculation exists that suggests some of the Southland Jubilee transcriptions date back in origin to the time Lang Worth cut the Deep River Boys sides.

In 1946, after the Four Knights disbanded, the transcriptions ended up in the hands of Ray Norman Productions Inc. in New Jersey. Many of the secular sides were transferred to E.P. format by Robbie Romesburg during the 1980s and commercially issued in a limited edition

on the pink Monogram label. The gospel transcriptions, the group's finest and most neglected work, remained unreleased. During this period the Four Knights cut two prerecorded "Jubilee Shows" (numbers 375 and 411) for the Armed Forces Radio & Television Services based in L.A. and hosted by the jive-talking Ernie "Bubbles" Whitman. These thirty-minute transcriptions were pressed on 15" discs at 33 speed and shipped to shortwave radio stations in the U.S. and overseas.

The principal reason for the Four Knights' move from Charlotte to New York in 1945 was to appear on the Arthur Godfrey radio show. Besides competing with the Jack Benny Show, the folksy Arthur Godfrey hosted one of the top rated musical variety radio programs on CBS. In public the Four Knights incorporated a lot of "simulated instrumental" technique (the vocal rendering of brass instruments using cupped hands and pinched noses, as was the custom of the Mills Brothers.) On record the group opted to disregard these effects for fear of being mistaken for the Mills Brothers.

In early 1946 the Four Knights signed with Decca on West 57th Street. The group's first release that April was a cover of Deek Watson's "Just in case you change your mind," a plaintive ballad originally rendered by Pat Best and the Brown Dots, an offshoot of the Ink Spots. Gene did a truly heartfelt job on the almost note-for-note arrangement.

The following release in November, the equally plaintive "Walkin' with my shadow" backed by the Billy Kyle Trio, sounded like a winner but failed to really take off. Both were trademarked with Gene's whistling.

On the road the Four Knights toured with Benny Moten (Clarence Lemont) and dancer / comic Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, said to have been moody and egotistical. But the Four Knights needed not to worry about this. They did so well on the Arthur Godfrey Show that they were asked to fill in for the resident group, the Jubalaires, when the fellows went out of town: (Hear them on Heritage CD 48). By now the Four Knights could sing well enough to be able to switch parts. Each could also play backup guitar chords. Clarence had taken charge of musical arrangements and maintained authority to give the last word.

Decca's third release of January 1949 was one of the group's most impressive waxings, a gospel record with the traditional Southern Sons classic "Lead me to that rock" on the topside and Lucie E. Campbell's moving "He'll understand and say well done" on the flip. It is perhaps the Four Knights' best loved Decca release among collectors. Written in 1933, the Four Knights' version (which they also previously transcribed for Lang Worth) is one of the earliest known and certainly one of the most remarkable African American renderings of the song. Decca, disappointed with sales, probably insisted that the group stick with the smooth and romantic as the following release of August 1947 put us back in the stable of love ballads, this time supported by the prestigious Andy Kirk Orchestra.

The topside, "So soon," works well with big band accompaniment. There is certainly more to engage our interest aside from the joy of hearing good, tight harmonies. But somehow things did not click and the group was relegated to the label's Coral subsidiary where they cut two singles, including the inspiringly beautiful "Wrapped up in a dream." Unfortunately for the Four Knights, the competing Do Ray & Me version on Commodore drew the most coin. Here again the Four Knights cut their original "Wrapped up" on transcription for Lang Worth.

Rick Whitesell declares that their big break came in 1948 when the quartet attained a residency on the Red Skelton Show, filling musical interludes. The group had switched from CBS to NBC. Red Skelton, the son of a circus clown, was one of the brightest stars during the radio heydays of the 1940s. Red was big on sight gags which helped enormously when the transition came to move his show to NBC Television in September 1951. With Lang Worth arranger Jimmy McDonald, the Four Knights left New York for Los Angeles. Nine months of the year would be spent preparing and appearing on the Skelton Show and the remaining three on tour, interspersed with now-and-again weekend gigs in Las Vegas.

Red Skelton's universal popularity really put the Four Knights on the map. After two seasons

with Red Skelton, Cy Langois, who at that time still managed the group, wanted more money for appearances. Langois had asked for a five hundred dollar raise, but the show was operating on a tight budget and could not afford to pay more. Langois was insistent and this lead to the quartet being dropped from the show.

The Four Knights saw this as a big mistake and fired Langois as their manager. They then hired Jimmy Johnson, an African American promoter who loved and understood the music the Four Knights had to offer. Jimmy Johnson also managed a number of gospel groups as well as singer Roy Hamilton. The Four Knights were replaced by the new up and coming sensation-seeking Congo Rhythm Boys on the Red Skelton Show. The Congo Rhythm Boys were a Lionel Hampton discovery who recorded for his own Hamp-Tone label.

In mid-1951 the Four Knights contracted with Johnny Mercer at Capitol Records. Early recordings, usually supported by just John on guitar, included widely-selling charts like "(It's no) Sin," (#14) and "Charmaine." In late 1952 Gene's health started to deteriorate. Being an epileptic and constantly out on the road added up to frequent physical exhaustion. To compensate, the group took on a fifth member, George Vereen, who filled in at studio sessions and did some lead work on live gigs. George Vereen, a North Carolina native, was born March 2, 1923 and had worked as a standby for the group since 1945.

At Christmas 1952 the Four Knights scored with Don Howard's "Oh happy day" which they took to number eight on the pop charts the following year. "I get so lonely when I think about you" (oh baby mine) reached the number two slot and ran for twenty-four weeks in late 1953. By now the group was recording with full orchestral support. They played clubs that stretched from Montreal to The Thunderbird in Las Vegas and down to Sao Paulo and Rio in Brazil, interspersed with appearances on the Perry Como, Ed Sullivan and the Red Skelton shows. A revolution prevented them from appearing in Argentina.

On August 27, 1954 they headlined Harlem's Apollo Theatre. They were awarded a thirteen week stint on Russ Morgan's radio show. By 1955 Gene Alford's medical professionals were advising him to quit the rigors of nomadic life in the music business. Ex short-serving Delta Rhythm Boys' first tenor Cliff Holland was taken on as Gene's full-time replacement. Los Angeles native Clifford Ernest Holland was born September 15, 1919. During the mid 1950s Capitol's biggest black entertainment draw was Nat King Cole from Montgomery, Alabama. One day the two artists' Capitol sessions dates were booked coincidentally. Nat caught the

group and liked what he heard. He opted to have the quartet background him on some of his sides. The first pairing was entitled "A blossom fell." A second collaboration in January 1956 rendered "That's all there is to that" which climbed up the pop list to number sixteen.

In November that year Nat was asked by the NBC television network to host a fifteen-minute variety show on Monday evenings. To my knowledge, the Four Knights did not appear on the Nat "King" Cole Show which lasted well into 1957. Nat and the Four Knights waxed the beautiful ballad "My personal possession" in May 1957. The song peaked at number twenty-one on the pop charts. Despite Nat's broad popularity, the show lacked adequate sponsorship. This was the first time a black entertainer had hosted his own variety program and sponsors were wary of supporting an unproved endeavor, especially an African American one. His show was taken off in December 1957, long after it began losing money.

The Four Knights might have been able to gain even greater success had the show stayed in the black and perhaps given them a chance to appear. However, they had to wait more than a year before hitting the charts again (this time without Nat) with "O falling star" which emerged on the Coral imprint. The Four Knights re-signed with Coral in late 1957. "O falling star: was the group's third and next to last Coral release. By now the switch to lead vocalist Cliff Holland had altered the quartet's basic signature style. On April 2, 1960 Gene Alford died at his home in Los Angeles County. He had just finished up recording on a soundtrack for "Panic in the streets" (not, of course, the original Elia Kazan movie score of a decade earlier) and making a trip to Japan. Clarence left the group in 1963. he died in Los Angeles on January 25, 1992. The outfit called it quits in 1966. John M. Wallace passed March 2, 1978 in Los Angeles, and half a year later Oscar Alexander Broadway died, also in the City of Angels.

Clifford Ernest Holland and George W. Vereen (who had moved back to North Carolina) passed in 1990, six months apart. Although the Four Knights became extremely popular during the 1950s, very little has been written on them. Their one Capitol and two Coral albums have remained un-rereleased these past forty plus years although Capitol collections on CD turn up sporadically, the last being on the Acrobat label.

The Four Knights' style was made sweet and quite unique by the tender tones and whistling refrains of Eugene "Gene" Alford. Gene often sounded perfectly balanced and in synch with the group's oft-lilting harmonies. This was especially so when his voice was added to that of Oscar Alexander Broadway's rhythmic bass refrains.