Photo 1
Mid 1940 Left to Right: Lonnie Smith (at Piano), Vance Joyner, Joe Williams and Levi Hansley.

THE HARMONIZING FOUR

DISC ONE

RICHMOND'S HARMONIZING FOUR
Thomas Johnson, Lonnie Smith (tenors); Joseph Williams (baritone); probably, Levi Hensley (bass); Vance Joyner; (possibly) John Scott (vocals).
New York June 5th 1943

1. EVERY TIME I FEEL THE SPIRIT DECCA 48108
2. WHO'LL BE A WITNESS FOR MY LORD
3. GREAT CAMP MEETING IN THE PROMISED LAND DECCA 48121
4. KEEP INCHIN' ALONG
5. I DONE WHAT YOU TOLD ME TO DO DECCA 7909
6. WHEN I'VE DONE THE BEST I CAN

RICHMOND HARMONIZERS OF RICHMOND, VIRGINIA
Thomas Johnson, Lonnie Smith (tenors); Joseph Williams (baritone); Levi Hensley (bass) plus others with Lonnie Smith (guitar).
Chicago c. 1947

7. I'M BOUND FOR HIGHER GROUND RELIGIOUS 1004
8. ONE DAY

RICHMOND HARMONIZERS
Thomas Johnson, Lonnie Smith (tenors); Joseph Williams (baritone); Levi Hensley (bass) plus others with Lonnie Smith (guitar).
Newark c. August 1948

9. I CRIED HOLY COLEMAN 5990
10. JESUS GAVE ME WATER
11. BLESSED QUIETNESS COLEMAN 6006
12. HOW FAR AM I FROM CANAAN

HARMONIZING FOUR OF RICHMOND
Griffith Park, Washington July 3rd 1951

13. THANK YOU JESUS DECCA 48272
14. NOAH QUARTET 107
15. PRECIOUS MEMORIES

HARMONIZING FOUR
Line up as above
c. May 1950-1952

16. I AM ON THE BATTLEFIELD GOTHAM 638
17. LORD I'M COMING HOME
18. KING JESUS WILL ROLL ALL BURDENS AWAY GOTHAM 666
19. NEVER TURN BACK NO MORE
20. SILENT NIGHT GOTHAM 677
21. SWEET LITTLE JESUS BOY
22. JESUS IS A FRIEND TO EVERYONE GOTHAM 693
23. WHERE HE LEADS ME I WILL FOLLOW
24. MOTHER'S PRAYER HAS FOLLOWED ME GOTHAM 700
25. PRAY EVERY STEP OF THE WAY
26. GET RIGHT WITH GOD GOTHAM 708
27. WILL THERE BE ANY STARS IN MY CROWN

DISC TWO

HARMONIZING FOUR
Line up as above
c. May 1952-1954

1. MAY THE GOOD LORD BLESS AND KEEP YOU GOTHAM 718
2. SAY A WORD
3. BEYOND THE SUNSET GOTHAM 737
4. GAVE MY HEART TO JESUS
5. MOTHER'S PRAYER GOTHAM 738
6. THIS WICKED RACE
7. I'VE STARTED IN JESUS GOTHAM 744
8. JOY IN BEULAH LAND
9. PROTECT MY LOVED ONES GOTHAM 749
10. WORKING FOR THE LORD
11. WATCH OVER ME GOTHAM 753
12. YOU OUGHT TO KNOW THE LORD
13. LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING GOTHAM 757
14. LET GOD ABIDE GOTHAM 765
15. WHEN I'M GONE
16. I'VE BEEN CHANGED GOTHAM 768
17. TRUST JESUS
18. COME OVER HERE GOTHAM 770
19. WHAT DO YOU KNOW
20. I SHALL NOT BE MOVED GOTHAM 772
21. I'LL GO LORD, SEND ME
22. I TRUST IN GOD GOTHAM 773
23. I WANT TO KNOW
24. I SHALL REST AT THE END OF THE DAY GOTHAM 775
25. THE LORDS PRAYER
26. AMAZING GRACE GOTHAM 779
27. KEEP ME ALL THE WAY

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.

In October 1990 the Harmonizing Four celebrated their 63rd anniversary at the Mosque Theatre in the group's hometown of Richmond. By this time the foursome had become the oldest continuous black gospel ensemble in the country. Yet for all the outfit's many trials and triumphs over this lengthy partnership, very little information except for a handful of newspaper clippings, Billboard announcements, and a slew of sketchy sleeve notes, give any clue as to how this world-famous, close-singing quartet managed to hold together all of this time.

Unlike many who had survived the transition from acappella jubilee to a more extended approach, the Harmonizing Four chose not to "shout the church" or "work the sisters" with vocal acrobatics and fancy showmanship. Much in the style of other celebrated Virginia aggregations, notably the Silver Leafs, Norfolk Jubilees, and Golden Gates, the group opted for a smooth, polished, tight hymn-singing approach to quartet, one which offered sweet, lilting backgrounds behind a tenor's sweeping, dramatic lead, for example, as foil behind the late "Gospel" Joe Williams or to highlight the breathtaking basso plunges of the amazing Jimmy Jones, the comparatively short-serving earth-shaker on the team.

It all started on a hot summer day in south Richmond, Va. when four second and third grade students at the Dunbar Elementary School on 17th & Maury met in the playground and fixed on forming a quartet. The friends had chosen to rehearse at the home of John T. Scott, prospective first and second tenor singer. Other young songsters included Joe Curby, second tenor, Lawrence Hatcher, baritone (born July 4, 1912 in Richmond, Va.) and Willie Peyton, bass (born April 2, 1908, also in Richmond). All sang in local church choirs. Music teacher Lawrence Langhorne, a friend of Scott's and regular coach and supporter at rehearsals, became the group's first manager. After much practice and sustained diligence, Langhorne proposed to name the group the Harmonizing Four. Other teachers at Dunbar, much impressed with the outfit's play-yard concerts, had the fellas sing for the student body at the start of each school day.

By 1930, second tenor Joe Curby had left the group to sing at his family's church in the choral group called the Heavenly Choir. Leon Gibson replaced him. However, Gibson's tenure turned out to be short-lived as his family in 1932 pulled up roots and all moved to a more promising address in New York. Gibson was succeeded by the long-serving talents of Thomas "Tommy" Ellis Johnson 2nd. By the mid-thirties, Levi Hansley (born August 17, 1912 in Richmond) had substituted Willie Peyton, and Vance Joyner had stepped into the shoes of Lawrence Hatcher. It was this combination of Johnson, Joyner, Scott, and Hansley with the addition of baritone/alto soloist "Gospel" Joe W. Williams (who, it is generally thought, joined forces in 1933) that gained considerable attention for the merits of their close-harmony singing. Williams was born in Richmond February 9, 1916.

For sixteen years the group sang hymns and spirituals without accompaniment. Always impeccably dressed, steadfastly conservative in both style and image, the group won the trust and respect of solid church folk. Some confusion abounds concerning the notion that the long-standing Richmond Jubilee Quartet (who recorded one test session for Gennett in August 1929, later for ARC, and is believed to have recorded for the Longo label) is the same group as the Richmond Harmonizing Four. They are not, and neither are they the gospel unit who supported R & B singer Chris Kenner at the dawn of his career. "Gospel" Joe Williams proved to be the group's anchor over the years for he handled general business management. Williams firmly claims Glen T. Settle, originator and guiding light of the

Wings Over Jordan Choir, to be his idol and oratory inspiration.

The American Federation of Musicians called a recording strike beginning July 31st, 1942. The Union wanted a portion of the price of each record to go into a fund for retired musicians. The strike paralyzed the music industry. In New York on Saturday, June 5, 1943, only four months before Capitol and Decca conceded to Union demands, the Harmonizing Four showed up for their first recording session. Billed as Richmond's Harmonizing Four, they cut eight songs for Decca. By 1943 the group had lost its one remaining founder member John T. Scott and had replaced him with Lonnie Smith (father of jazz luminary Lonnie Liston Smith) and his four-string acoustic guitar. Smith, an accomplished musician, also arranged material for the group through a working knowledge of the piano.

Photo 2

Six of the eight songs recorded that June were issued by Decca a good while after the strike. One can surmise from this that the strike set back the label's release schedule. The first song was John T. Scott's prototype of "When I've Done The Best I Can," a slow, melodious Thomas A. Dorsey composition later resurrected in uncanny likeness for Vee Jay in May 1958. The group's follow-up was "Everytime I Feel The Spirit," a tune from the Kenneth Morris songbook. The harmonies are jubilant, the bassing is rock solid, and Johnson's ethereal tenor lead gives the song its grace. On the third and last outing, "Keep Inching Along," the group sound as if plucked out of the 1920s with its solidly dated approach, a tune decidedly campfire warm-up in nature.

Somewhere around this period certain members of the group conducted a little moonlighting. Hansley, Joyner and Lonnie Smith, in league with tenor and pianist James Roots, anointed themselves the Four Jacks. The Four Jacks cut one record in Chicago for the tiny Allen label, entitled "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," whose flip, curiously enough, was a secular tune. However, after the singers' initial Decca session in the Big Apple, they headed back to Richmond where a regular radio slot was obtained on WRNL Monday afternoons at 5:00 p.m.

As the group drew even more listeners to the station, they were rewarded with a Sunday morning opening following the world renowned Wings Over Jordan Choir. The quartet continued touring. The group's first lengthy engagement was a ten-day gig in San Antonio, Texas. On the way, the guys stopped off at the National Baptist Convention in Atlanta where they sang alongside Mahalia Jackson to an audience of 40,000. Their funky old green 1937 Buick loaded down with luggage, crackers, and potted meats barely made the trip to the Lone Star state. It turned out that they were liked so well in San Antonio that the booking was extended to four weeks.

On April 12, 1945 President Roosevelt passed away in Warm Springs, Georgia. At the request of Eleanor, his wife, the quartet was invited to the White House to sing at the funeral ceremony. 1946 saw the departure of Vance Joyner. A year later the group again tried their luck on shellac. With Johnson and Smith sharing leads, Williams's baritone, and Hansley bass, the outfit cut two records for Religious Recordings in Chicago billed as The Richmond Harmonizers of Richmond. The first of these, "Working On The Building," stuck firmly to the old Jubilee tradition, but their second effort, "One Day," offered a glimpse into a smoother-than-silk sound the guys would later make their unmistakable trademark.

When, during the post-war period, touring gospel acts hit Newark, New Jersey, they would invariably stay at the Coleman Hotel, managed by the Coleman Brothers, who not only owned the hotel but were themselves a widely recognized New York quartet. They also ran their own record company, Coleman Records, from out of the hotel basement. (See ACMCD 4080 - the Coleman Brothers - for details.)

The Harmonizing Four, having contracted with Coleman Records, were ascribed on the label as the Richmond Harmonizers. From the one session conducted in August, two releases hit the race-record stores. The first, sung jubilantly, interspersed with handclaps, was "I Cried," a traditional evergreen made popular two years earlier by the Swan Silvertones. The group's second outing, "How Far Am I From Canaan?" was most definitely arranged for the quartet's prevailing style and does not bear any similarity to the Five Blind Boys of Mississippi's hard-sung reading of 1952.

Just before the advent of the 1950s, the nation's major record companies were realizing the possible sales potential of gospel music in an expanding market. One of these was MGM who saw the benefits of consigning from smaller companies. Aside from material purchased by the Fairfield Four, MGM saw fit to acquire (from Super Disc) and release a handful of sides by the Harmonizing Four. "I've Tried" / "Precious Lord" were the first. Having not a clue as to how to promote gospel music back then, MGM probably did little to ensure its quartet recordings' continued success.

In September 1949, Sister Rosetta Tharpe recorded for Decca with The James Roots Quartet. As Roots was known to be associated with the Four Jacks at this time, it is possible that the Roots group was comprised of former members from the Harmonizing Four. Be that as it may, the Harmonizing Four turned up on Decca once more in 1951. The occasion was the live recorded wedding ceremony of Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Russell Morrison at the Griffith Stadium in Washington, D.C. on July 3rd. This was the first time a live gospel performance was recorded remote and issued on album. On the same bill with Rev. Kelsey, Bishop Wells, the Rosettes, and Sunset Harmonizers of Washington, D.C. were the Harmonizing Four who rendered four songs. Two of these, "It's No Secret," backed with the joy-making "Thank You Jesus" were issued in January 1952, the latter appearing since on a number of different formats, including an album on Brunswick out of Germany.

All this was going on while the group was pacted to Gotham. Irvin Ballen, president of Gotham Records in Philadelphia had signed the singers early in 1950. The company had been testing the waters of potential profit a full year before the group had joined. The quartet's initial release was "Lord I'm Coming Home" on which Johnson's emotive tenor is heard shading a sweet hum of harmony while Hansley, the group's prayer-giver, offers a short recitation. On the second release issued in the fall of 1950, the

group renders "Jesus Will Roll All Burdens Away." Here, Johnson's pure-pitched tenor is edged with the sustained chording of an organ accompaniment. The foursome's third waxing, rushed into the stores to catch the Christmas trade of 1950, was their beautiful etching of "Silent Night" which became one of the group's best remembered Gotham sides.

The Harmonizing Four had to wait until the spring of 1952 for their next release - "Where He Leads Me, I Will Follow" backed with "Jesus Is A Friend To Everyone." "Lead Me" is delivered in hallmark style with harmonies as smooth as glass, yet on the other hand "Friend To Everyone" takes us back to the acappella days of the past. On "Mother's Prayer Has Followed Me" Johnson and Williams get sanctified as verses are traded and the heat of the song intensifies by the moment. "Will There Be Any Stars In My Crown," tendered to the public in the spring of 1952, is a quartet masterwork with its tempo changes and mood swings coupled with Johnson's wailing lead and Hansley's peerless narrative. "Say A Word," a song from the call and response catalogue, heightens with vigour as Johnson piles on the emotive fuel.

Photo 3

In May of 1953, a smart, nameless face at Gotham had the group record alongside the famous Trumpeteers of South Carolina for one session. The voices of Robert Johnson (tenor), Joseph E. Johnson and Calvin Stewart (baritones) and William "Pete" Connor (bass) add fire and brimstone as each tries to outdo the other on "This Wicked Race" and "Mother's Prayer," by far the concerted group's most spirited efforts, a record which should have generated more air play than it did.

By contrast, the Harmonizing Four's next solo waxing; "Beyond The Sunset" reverted to the laid-back style of the earlier "Stars In My Crown." Its sugary harmonies, its pretty chord changes and touching poetic narrative (the last by Levi Hansley before quitting the group) make it one of the quartet's most delightful standouts. The narrative itself was added to the song and was not part of the original Virgil P. Brock composition of 1936. The reverse, "I Gave My Heart To Jesus," otherwise known as "I'm Alright Now," marches along stridently in soldierly fashion by the pitch of the bass-line and comes off well as a praise-song.

In late 1953 tenor James Walker was taken into the group, but sadly his tenure spanned only a few months. A more lasting relationship might have taken the Harmonizing Four down an interesting path away from their standard polished perfection. Walker had just spent three years singing lead tenor with Jackson's famous Southern Sons Quartet who recorded for Trumpet Records in Jackson, Mississippi. Walker's smooth, soulful tenor can be heard on "Working For The Lord" and on "You Ought To Know The Lord," a crowd-rouser fuelled by driving support. Walker's third lead vocalization was on "Watch Over Me," an awesomely beautiful ballad sung with firm conviction. By the spring of 1954 Walker had joined the Dixie Hummingbirds for what would become a lasting and magnificent musical partnership.

"Protect My Loved Ones" with its showy organ fills is more a popular ballad than a gospel song but displays the Harmonizing Four's willingness to explore other avenues. On "Lift Every Voice And Sing," a traditional glee-

club-like arrangement is given to James Weldon Johnson's National Afro-American Hymn. "Let God Abide" is yet another touching rendition of a traditional hymn whose bass measure was supplied by Clarence Ross, Levi Hansley's replacement. Ross came aboard in the spring of 1953. During the early months of 1954 the quartet cut "Stand By Me." On this the first lead was taken by Thomas Mobley, but Ballen, for reasons known only to himself, chose not to issue the song until it showed up on a now long out of print Hob album in the early '70s. Mobley's stay in the group was short-lived and lasted only until Tommy Ellison came along, but Ellison, young and ambitious, only settled with the group briefly, during early 1955. Ellison's baritone can be witnessed on "I Found The Lord," a previously unissued song. By the summer of 1955 Ellison was singing with the Chosen Gospel Singers beside Lou Rawls. In 1960 Ellison founded his own group, the Five Singing Stars.

By the summer of 1955 the final ingredient for the Harmonizing Four's winning chemistry was at last added: basso Jimmy Jones, who had sung in the Southern Sons (1953) and the Sons of the South (54-55) and came to the Harmonizing Four in place of Clarence Ross. James Leonard Jones (his birth name) was born in Meridian, Mississippi on July 10, 1928.

1955 saw the release of "I've Been Changed" with Jones's first stab at lead, but it was not until the unleashing of "Come Over Here," Jones's second effort, that the world fully experienced the awesome speaker-shaking power of the man's booming G below G. "Come Over Here" was a dirge at funeral tempo, dragged over the cobbles of Jones's bottomless basement like wet cement through a wind tunnel. A spark of quartet perfection had lit, it seemed, but after one more show of vocal prowess, on the beautifully adapted "I Shall Not Be Moved," Jones split to sing in the Spiritual Five on Nashboro. Clarence Ross again filled the gap.

The group's next waxing proved just how short Jones's absence had been, for he was back in time to conduct lead chores on the flip of the Four's next release entitled "I Want To Know" with a reading flawlessly rendered. The top side, "I Trust In God" had Ross filling in on the bass part. The song was all Johnson's with its beautiful lilting melody and soft harmonic touches.

At the close of 1955 the Harmonizing Four recorded their final two releases for Gotham. The first, "The Lord's Prayer" was interpreted with grace and grandeur marred only by the senseless overdub of chimes, but, as always, Johnson's elegant singing saved the day. The last release, the group's first etching of "Amazing Grace" was for sure the icing on the cake, their most glorious moment, an interpretation unmatched by anyone to this day. During the late '60s, the fellas, then on Atlantic, reinvented the song (on two separate album track occasions.)

On both these versions the basso profundo was substituted for the stinging guitar licks of Jesse Pryor in an effort to hold with prevailing trends. The original gave us Johnson's awesome clear-as-a-bell tenor alternating with Jones's glass-breaking vociferations. (Legend has it his voice shattered stained glass.) In reality, Jones's pipes, although profound, were narrow in range. Stories circulate among older troupers that "Dickie" Freeman, bottom-end for the Fairfield Four, outbassed both Jones and "Willie" Bobo of the Dixie Hummingbirds in open competition. The reverse of "Amazing Grace" - "Keep Me All The Way" was again a ballad-like hymn beautifully realized.

On February 23, 1956, the Richmond Harmonizing Four, at this time made up of Johnson, Smith, Williams, and Robert Lewis graced Decca's New York studios to record their vocal presence behind old friend Sister Rosetta Tharpe. This same set up was repeated on July 5 that very same year but

by now Rosetta had switched from Decca to Mercury. It was fashionable at this time to place prominent gospel divas in front of competent vocal-group backgrounds, a trend which had counterparts in R&B.

At the dawn of 1957 Johnson, Smith, Williams, and Jimmy Jones (now returned to the group) signed with Vee Jay Records in Chicago. Vee Jay, with its penchant for softening vocal group sounds and emphasis on soulful echo-chambered leads, tapped the mood of the times. The Harmonizing Four with thirty years of spiritual and hymn singing under their belts just fitted naturally. With the release of the foursome's first Vee Jay platter - "All Things Are Possible" - their fortunes soared. Gigs at the Apollo, Keil Opera House, and Carnegie Hall were soon to come about. Basso classics, "Go Down Moses" and "Motherless Child" (1957-58) won the group global acclaim. Then, amidst all the adulation, Jimmy Jones decided to quit and form his own quartet, the Sensationals, a short-lived unit who recorded for Savoy at the tail end of the decade.

Some time during the summer of 1958, Tommy Johnson's son, Ellis Johnson, who not only filled Jones's shoes but also possessed a fine bass voice and a broader octave range, replaced Jones. Johnson was born in Richmond in 1934. By 1962, after recording some sixty songs for Vee Jay, a crucial sound changing decision was made. The age of acoustic guitar in black gospel had just about panned out, and Smith's guitar style now seemed outdated. Thus a decision was made that he would simply stick to singing. After Smith had hung up his hollow-bodied instrument, a series of abundantly talented young male electric players were taken on starting with Sterling Holloman (1962-65) who also shared lead singing in the group. When Holloman moved on, the great Jesse Pryor took his place. Pryor's intense guitar figures can be heard on the group's Atlantic sides (circa 1967-68) and on the one King album cut in 1969.

By 1972, a time when the group pacted with Chess, the fancy fretwork was supplied by Clement Burnett, who also served as musical arranger. A mention should be given to Michael Rogers (unrecorded), Larry Russell, Mason and Rickey Monroe, and Jimmy Mays who all played music for the group in recent years. After a stay on Jewel in the late '70s, the group waxed sporadically on a variety of labels.

One day, back in 1975, Ellis Johnson, who was fooling around with his legs dangling over the tailgate of a pickup truck, did not see another vehicle back right into him. One of his legs was completely severed. Sadly, he passed on October 10, 1993 in Richmond. In 1987, "Gospel" Joe W. Williams' ulcerated stomach condition grew increasingly worse. His place was taken by Vance Joyner who served right up to Joe's demise in Richmond on September 7, 1988. Jimmy Jones, a victim of worldly vices, passed away in October 1991 in Chicago. Tommy Johnson Snr. died in Richmond on July 21, 2003.

The Harmonizing Four in their day gave concerts the world over. They were a deeply spiritual group of singers who strongly resisted the change to heavy rhythmic accompaniment. The Harmonizing Four's sound was unique, close-knit and full of heart-felt passion. Their retirement from gospel music meant the end of an era, one unadorned by today's commercial fabrication and musical overproduction.

Opal Louis Nations, 1995/March 2006

Thanks for the invaluable assistance from Rev. David W. Molter

Cover and Back Inlay Photo: Harmonizing Four - Late 1950s (Rev. Stovall)
Photo #1: Harmonizing Four - mid-1940s (Rev. Molter)
Photo #2: Harmonizing Four - 1943 (Rev. Molter)
Photo #3: Harmonizing Four - 1950 (Decca Records)
Inside Inlay Photo: Harmonizing Four - 1960 (Rev. Molter)