

Organized in Nashville in the 1920s, the Fairfield Four became one of the most popular black gospel groups in the South as a result of their nationally syndicated WLAC radio broadcasts. For almost twenty years they toured from coast-to-coast, appearing in large auditoriums and outdoor stadiums. However, in the 1960s, quartets struck a "hard place," as Fairfield Four baritone and manager James Hill described it. The gospel audience turned away from a cappella quartets, and record companies and disc jockeys quit promoting them in favor of female ensembles and choirs. Consequently, the members of the Fairfield Four, along with a legion of other veteran quartet singers, were forced to come off the road and take jobs outside of music.

At the same time, blues singers and old-time country musicians were in the midst of a revival supported by folklorists, festival promoters, and arts agencies; but traditional quartets by and large did not benefit from those initiatives until decades later. Apropos of this, Fairfield Four basser Isaac "Dickie" Freeman recounted a conversation he had with Ira Tucker, the late great lead singer of the Dixie Hummingbirds, at a public arts event in the 1990s:

He [Tucker] said "Dick, we should have started this twenty five years ago." I said "Yeah, but it wasn't ready for us twenty-five years ago. The

time wasn't right. It's just now getting right." Festivals and stuff, that's what he meant, that we should have been doing that kind of work twenty five years ago... [Tucker] laughed; he said, "Yeah, well you got a point there." He said "We just now getting old, and we just now getting right."

Sam McCrary, legendary lead singer of the Fairfield Four, began to ease out of the quartet business in 1955, when he became pastor of St. Mark's Missionary Baptist Church in Nashville. Twenty-five years later, his singing voice still retained much of its famed vitality and silver-toned quality. Interviewed in the late-1970s, Rev. McCrary expressed his longing to get the Fairfield Four back together. A similar idea had been percolating in the mind of former Fairfield Four baritone James Hill. Bass singer Isaac Freeman was somewhat intrigued by the prospect; and former lead singer Willie Love, who was singing with the Voices of Nashville, said that he would be willing to participate if something could be arranged. These four men had not sung together since 1950 when Hill and Freeman left the Fairfield Four to organize the Skylarks. McCrary and Love had kept the Fairfield active until 1960. In the long interim, time had healed all wounds and nothing stood in the way of a Fairfield reunion but a suitable opportunity.

In October 1980, with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, a musical program was staged at the City Auditorium in Birmingham, Alabama, featuring local gospel quartets who were still performing in the traditional style, along with illustrious quartet veterans brought together from across the country. This program, titled the "Jefferson County Quartet Reunion," provided an opportunity to reignite the Fairfield Four. By this time the once flourishing a cappella quartet singing tradition had been firmly rejected by the core black gospel audience. The reorganized Fairfield Four felt obliged to enlist Voices of Nashville guitarist Joe Whittaker. These were the actual conditions that the Fairfield Four faced when they attempted their comeback.

The following year, the Smithsonian Institution staged a "Black American Quartet Tradition" program at Baird Auditorium in Washington; and the Fairfield Four -- the same membership that had participated in the concert in Birmingham -- was among the headliners. These two events, in Birmingham, and D. C., generated just enough momentum to encourage the reorganized Fairfield Four to keep pressing on.

After a couple of years Willie Love and Joe Whittaker dropped out, to continue their service with the Voices of

Nashville. By that time, McCrary, Hill and Freeman had determined to go back to the old-time a cappella quartet form. In 1982 James Hill drafted tenor Wilson "Lit" Waters and leader W. L. "Preacher" Richardson into the rejuvenated Fairfield Four. Critically, these talented, experienced singers enabled the quartet to regain a cohesive close harmony blend. This time the folklore community took notice. The Fairfield's appearance at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in 1986 was so well received that they were invited back to perform the following year, an almost unprecedented honor. Soon every major folk music festival in the country wanted them.

Things really began to improve for the Fairfield Four when the Nashville booking agency Keith Case and Associates took over their professional management. The quartet gained access to a new and enthusiastic fan base. The young-to-middle-aged white folks who made up the mass of the Fairfield's audience during the 1980s and 1990s were excited to be exposed to a form of traditional music that was previously inaccessible. Pop music celebrities including Elvis Costello, Lyle Lovett, John Fogerty, Steve Earle and Marty Stewart also appeared gratified to be associated with these "living legends" of African American gospel. The Fairfield Four's protracted collaboration with

the Nashville Bluegrass Band was not unlike a mentorship, and it had significant benefits for both groups.

In their hometown the Fairfield Four were in constant demand for festivals, academic conferences, and music industry events. They were the honorees at the 1988 Gospel Arts Day program at Fisk University, and in 1989 they were awarded a National Heritage Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Arts. They subsequently appeared in a major motion picture, "O Brother Where Art Thou," and gave concerts at Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center in New York City. They made two tours of Spain, were received with great enthusiasm in Japan, and performed in England. During the 1992 presidential campaign they sang for then-candidates Bill Clinton and Al Gore at a fund raiser at the Grand Ole Opry House.

Their 1992 Warner Bros. LP "Standing in the Safety Zone" was nominated for a Grammy Award, and in 1997 their second release "I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray" was a Grammy winner. They became valued Nashville session musicians, singing back-up on several country music hits.

By the time the Fairfield Four hit their stride all the members were in their seventies. The exhilaration of unexpected recognition so late in life was part of what James Hill intended to signify when he so often introduced

the Fairfield Four on stage as "the oldest teenage group in America."

The music on the enclose CD was recorded in 1989, three years prior to the Fairfield Four's first session for Warner Bros., at Nixon Studio in Nashville. It was produced by James Nixon and James Hill's son Wayne. No celebrity guest musicians were involved; these recordings, which were originally issued on cassette only, reflect the group's own sensibilities. Significantly, they are the last recordings of Rev. Sam McCrary, who died in 1991. They are also an important recorded legacy of the incomparable Rev. W. L. Richardson, recorded not long before he was weakened by illness. Preacher passed away August 17, 1993; Wilson "Lit" Waters died November 24, 2005; James Hill died July 6, 2000. Isaac Freeman and Robert Hamlett survive. Hamlett is still singing with a version of the Fairfield.

1. The Fairfield Four typically opened their concerts with the song **Hallelujah**. Four different voices take turns singing brief solo "features" on the chorus. Rev. Richardson leads the verses.
2. This original arrangement of the enigmatic Negro Spiritual ***I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray*** interpolates a verse

of "The Lord's Prayer." "Preacher" Richardson brought the song arrangement to the Fairfield. He had previously sung it with the Bells of Joy.

3. ***His Love Is Like A River*** was one of Rev. McCrary's signature songs, first recorded for Dot Records in 1950. This 1989 rendition preserves the charming sincerity of Rev. McCrary's delivery, and reverberations of his celebrated trumpet tones.

4. ***Talk To The Man Above*** is a fine example of the emotive phrasing and velvety voice of Rev. Richardson. According to Isaac Freeman, the trademark "whoo-hoo" ending originated with the Skylarks.

5. Robert Hamlett leads the popular rhythmic spiritual ***Noah***. It takes a nimble mind and tongue to narrate a jubilee tune in a way that the story will retain its dramatic impact.

6. Before Isaac Freeman brought ***Walk This Road To Glory*** to the Fairfield Four he sang it with his church choir at St. Paul Primitive Baptist Church, 1625 Patterson Street in Nashville. Many knowledgeable people credit Freeman with being the first gospel quartet basser to successfully lead a whole song.

7. James Hill sings a couple of verses in lead on ***Dig A Little Deeper***, before Rev. Richardson comes on like a house

afire. Anyone blessed to have seen and heard Richardson and the Fairfield Four in person must remember this song.

8. Rev. McCrary's virtuoso vocal acrobatics on ***Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around*** were first recorded at Fairfield Baptist Church in 1941 by John Work III, then again on the Fairfield Four's first commercial session for Bullet in 1948, and yet a third time for a 1960 Old Town LP. In later years, as Rev. McCrary began to show his age, his audience held its collective breath, rooting for him to accomplish his ostentatious feat of "extreme melisma." Meanwhile, Isaac Freeman dramatized the "siren effect," by standing next to McCrary and pantomiming "winding him up!" It was an entertaining exhibition, but there was history and tradition in it too.

9. Rev. Richardson's estimable lead vocalizing on ***Leaning And Depending*** is augmented by handclapping rhythm and the characteristic Fairfield ending.

10. Robert Hamlett brought the song ***You Can't Beat God Giving*** to the Fairfield Four. He learned it from the Kings of Harmony during one of their visits to Nashville. Hamlett sings the lead partly in falsetto, with tastefully measured bass "fills" by Freeman; and a neat, if uncharacteristic, unison passage.

11. ***Swing Low Sweet Chariot*** is actually two songs combined.

It begins with a "long-meter" excerpt of the traditional spiritual from which the title is taken, and then breaks into the rhythmic "Swing Down, Chariot," a popular Golden Gate Quartet invention from 1940. The Gates recorded two different versions of "Swing Down, Chariot," one with, and one without the "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" introduction. Rev. McCrary said the Fairfield sang this arrangement on their WLAC radio show. Richardson leads the "Swing Low" section and Freeman picks up the "Swing Down" portion.

12. Freeman said the Fairfield Four had ***Thank You Jesus*** in their repertoire when he joined the group in 1948. At that time Edward Thomas was singing the lead.

13. ***Shadrack*** was composed by Robert MacGimsey in the 1920s; but the best known interpretation was recorded two decades later by the Golden Gates.

14. ***Roll Jordan Roll*** was published before the end of the Civil War. The Original Fisk University Jubilee Singers performed it on their first tour north in 1872. A cylinder recording of "Roll, Jordan, Roll" by the Kentucky Jubilee Singers dates from 1894. The Fisk Jubilee Quartet may have made the first disc recording of "Roll, Jordan, Roll" in 1909 for Victor Records. It was also recorded by the Tuskegee Institute Singers in 1915; Lt. Jim Europe's

Singing Serenaders in 1919; the Norfolk Jubilee Quartet in the 1920s; and the Southernaires in the 1930s. Isaac Freeman said he was inspired to sing "Roll Jordan Roll" after hearing it performed on television by the Fisk University Jubilee Singers. He recorded it with the Skylarks in 1962 and it became one of his most famous songs.