
A CAPSULE HISTORY OF THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

THE EARLY DAYS

A vocal trio of young men was organized in the Sunday school of Fairfield Baptist Church. The time was the early 1920s, the church was located on Hermitage Avenue, and its pastor was Rev. J.R. Statton. This trio was under the training of Fairfield's assistant pastor, a noted music instructor Rev. J.R. Carrethers. The group consisted of Rev. Carrethers' sons Rufus and Harold, and a neighbor John Battle. In 1925, the trio became a quartet, with the addition of young Lattimer Green. It is said that Green and his family came to Nashville from Africa. This young quartet showed great promise and it was a matter of considerable pride when Rev. Statton and Mrs.



Fairfield Four. (left to right): John Battle, Harold Carrethers, William Malone, Rufus Carrethers.

Annie Clay, a Mother of the church, gave them the name Fairfield Four. They sang in their home church, at other local churches and at "teas" and social gatherings for friends and acquaintances.

Eventually, Lattimer Green's family moved to Jacksonville, Florida and the quartet began to search for a replacement. James Dotson served



Fairfield Baptist Church (1988), Fain Street, Nashville.

for a while, and William Malone found a place with the Fairfield Four for several years during the early 1930s. Nathaniel Irvin was present with the group in the late 1930s, when they secured their first radio broadcast over WSIX. Samuel McCrary was also with the quartet by this time. His silver-toned tenor voice, a marvel of projection and control, set the Fairfield Four apart from other local gospel groups. Young Sam McCrary was the most outstanding gospel quartet lead singer Nashville has ever produced. Tenor George Gracey joined the group in 1941.

Annually, on the third Sunday in October, Rev. Statton delivered his sermon "Dry Bones In The Valley," which drew hundreds of people to Fairfield Baptist Church. Among those in the church on October 19, 1941, was Fisk educator and musicologist John Work III, whose father had been director of the turn-of-the-century Fisk Jubilee Quartette. Work was present for the purpose of recording Rev. Statton's sermon for the Library Of Congress in Washington. When the sermon was concluded, the Fairfield Four rendered a selection. John Work recorded Sam McCrary leading a song that had already become his signature, "Don't Let Nobody Turn You Around." It was the first recording ever made of the Fairfield Four.

THE PRIME OF THE ORIGINAL FAIRFIELD FOUR

1942 was a signal year in the history of the Fairfield Four. In July, the group won a promotional contest held by Colonial Coffee Company. the prize included a spot on WLAC, a powerful 50,000 watt, clear channel station, with a national

THE SOUTH'S FAMOUS FAIRFIELD FOUR

WLAC RADIO AND CONCERT ARTISTS

NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

HEARD FROM COAST TO COAST



Left to Right: Standing, Samuel McCrary, First Tenor and Soloist; John H. Battle, Alternate First Tenor; George Gracy, Second Tenor. Seated, Harold L. Carrethers, Baritone and Pianist; Rufus L. Carrethers, Bass.

hook-up over CBS network. Their broadcasts were so well received that the quartet remained on WLAC for almost a decade. The Fairfield Four's program was sponsored by Sunway Vitamins for many years. Announcer Herman Grizzard created a fine atmosphere in the studio and was a great friend of the group. This extremely popular radio show, which effectively blanketed the U.S., transformed the Fairfield Four into national celebrities, henceforth known as "The South's Famous Fairfield Four."

There were other black religious singing groups on the radio. The Golden Gate Quartet, Southernaires, Wings Over Jordan all had nationally popular broadcasts, but the Fairfield Four was the only group heard nationally who sang in the pressing, emotional *gospel* quartet style. They found a highly receptive audience, particularly in the South and Midwest, and

acquired a prestige with the public which no other quartet could match. Calls for personal appearances came from all over the nation, and the group began to make extensive tours.

In 1944, Willie Frank Lewis joined the Fairfield Four. Lewis was a remarkably versatile singing talent; he could handle bass or baritone parts with equal ease and he was especially skilled at rendering "bass features" (bass lead parts). Harold Carrethers served as manager for the Fairfield Four at this time, and John Battle directed their song arrangements. To fulfill the requirements of a regular radio broadcast, the group had to develop an extremely large repertoire, one that did not rely on "gospel" styled numbers exclusively, but also included "jubilees," ala the Golden Gate Quartet; and traditional folk spirituals such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers performed.

Along with their other professional activities, the Fairfield Four booked "major groups" from other cities into Nashville for big programs, sometimes held at the Ryman Auditorium. The Five Blind Boys, Soul Stirrers, Famous Blue Jay Singers, Flying Clouds of Detroit, Heavenly Gospel Singers of Birmingham and many other top groups of the day came to Nashville under the sponsorship of the Fairfield Four.

Capitalizing on Nashville's emerging independent recording industry, the Fairfield Four launched their commercial recording career in 1946, with sessions for Bullet Record Company on Lower Broad. During the next fifteen years the Fairfield Four recorded more than one hundred titles, released on Bullet, Delta, Dot, Champion and Old Town labels. However, only the very first session, from 1946, featured the classic early line up of McCrary, Battle, Lewis, Gracey and the Carrethers brothers.

Instant celebrity had its strains and hazards. At the height of their popularity, conflict within the membership resulted in a split in the Fairfield Four. Harold Carrethers left the group early in 1946, when a dispute arose following an especially lucrative program with Sister Rosetta Tharpe at the Ryman. Later that year John Battle was stricken with tuberculosis. Battle sang his last program in Birmingham, Alabama, so weak that

other members of the group had to prop him up on their shoulders. John Battle was in some ways a crucial stabilizing force in the Fairfield Four organization. After his death the group membership factionalized, and for a period of time there were two Fairfield Fours active in Nashville.

THE SUPERGROUP

It was Sam McCrary's Fairfield Four that retained the WLAC radio spot and his group that ultimately prevailed. By 1949, McCrary had composed a supergroup of quartet stars recruited from other cities. James Hill was the first to join; he was a baritone from Bessemer, Alabama, brought in to replace John Battle in 1946. Edward "Preacher" Thomas came next, a Louisiana native who had been singing with the Famous Blue Jays. Thomas was a legendary gospel lead singer, a "consummate "house wrecker" who was also a gifted musical director. Preston York, one of Atlanta's favorite sons, came to the Fairfield Four from the Reliable Jubileé Singers, he was one of the most talented tenor singers in the South. Young Isaac "Dickie" Freeman, originally of Johns, Alabama, was enlisted out of the Kings of Harmony in Cleveland, Ohio. There was no "heavier" or more charismatic quartet basser in the country than Dickie Freeman. With Willie

DON'T DRIVE YOUR CHILD AWAY

1st VERSE

(Lead) Sometimes I stand I stand with folded arms,
 (Bass) Well, well Lord, Lord, I'm standing with folded arms,
 (Lead) And think think think upon my way
 (Bass) I'm telling you I'm pleading now, I am thinking upon my way,
 (Lead) My heart Stricken sorrow and tears come streaming down
 (Bass) Well, well Lord, Lord Lord, the tears come streaming down,
 (Lead) my knee knee knee bone smote the ground,
 (Bass) I'm telling you, I'm pleading, Lord my knee bone smote the ground,

CHORUS

(Lead) Lord don't drive your child away,
 (Bass) Lord don't drive your child away.
 (Lead) O, Lord Lord Please don't drive me away,
 (Bass) I'm begging you, Im pleading, Lord, don't drive your child away
 (Lead) Because I'm meek and lonely down in my heart
 (Bass) Lord, Lord Well, well, I'm lonely down in my heart
 (Lead) O, Lord Lord Please don't drive me away
 (Bass) I'm begging you I'm pleading, Don't drive your child away

2nd VERSE

(Lead) Before this time another year
 (Bass) Well, well Lord, Lord, this time another year
 (Lead) I may may may be dead and gone
 (Bass) I'm telling you, I'm pleading, I may be dead and gone
 (Lead) My body will be in some lonesome grave
 (Bass) Well, well Lord, Lord, well, I'll be lying down in my grave
 (Lead) Heaven Heaven will be my home
 (Bass) I'm telling you I'm pleading, well up in heaven will be my home.

PRAISE THE LORD IN SONG
 "Don't Drive Your Child Away," as sung by
 WILLIE F. LEWIS



Alternate Lead Baritone-Bass Singer of the Famous Fairfield Four, Radio and Recording Artists of WLAC-CBS.
 For personal arrangements call 5-1852.
 For copies of this and other songs write:
 WILLIE F. LEWIS, (Enclosing 25 Cents)
 1400 South Street Nashville, 4, Tenn.

Frank Lewis and Sam McCrary remaining from the earlier group, they were, voice for voice, the strongest Fairfield Four lineup ever. With the prestige and exposure the radio show brought, this group was invincible in "Battles Of Song" with the premier gospel groups in the nation. They toured from coast-to-coast, appearing in huge auditoriums and outdoor stadiums.

Once again professional differences disrupted the smooth progress of the Fairfield Four. Some members, particularly the out-of-towners, pressured to keep the quartet at a peak of professional activity, while others were satisfied with a more leisurely touring schedule. A substantial amount of the quartet's funds and aspirations was invested in a funeral parlor enterprise, the

Fairfield Four Funeral Home on Lafayette Street. After a promising start the business failed during the winter of 1949-1950. Severely disillusioned, Edward Thomas, James Hill and Isaac Freeman broke from the Fairfield Four to form a new quartet, the Skylarks. In the spring of 1950, they left for Montgomery, Alabama, seeking greener pastures.

THE FAIRFIELD FOUR IN THE 1950s

Again, Sam McCrary had to rebuild his group. He still had Willie Frank Lewis and the superb Alabama lead singer Willie Love, who came to the quartet from the Flying Clouds of Detroit. Sam McCrary's first cousin, baritone Clarence "Baby" Brooks was brought into the Fairfield Four from the group he had been singing with, the Fireside Singers. A promising young bass singer from California, George McCurn was also engaged. McCurn later expanded his reputation through work with Lou Rawls and the Pilgrim Travelers. Before much longer Willie Frank Lewis moved off to the Skylarks. Veteran tenor star Wilmer "Little Axe" Broadnax came to the Fairfield Four after a brilliant tenure with the Spirit Of Memphis Quartet.

BY LAWS OF THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

- * 1. BUSINESS MEETING AND REHEARSAL TWICE WEEKLY TUES. & FRI. 10: O'CLOCK UNTIL ALL NOT PRESENT ON TIME BE FINED \$5.00 ABSENT \$1.00.
- * 2. ALL DISCUSSIONS BE MADE IN MEETING AND NOT IN PUBLIC ANY ONE CAUGHT ARGUING WITH ANYONE IN PUBLIC \$2.00
- * 3. MEMBERS OF QUARTETT MUST BE IN CHURCH AT ALL PROGRAMS 8:15 OR BE FINED \$1.00 WITHOUT A LAWFUL EXCUSE.
- * 4. FIN. MEMBER CAUGHT DRINKING WITHIN 8 HOURS OF PROGRAM BE FINED \$5.00
- * 5. WHEN IN CHURCH ANY TIME DURING PROGRAM NO MEMBER SHOULD LOOK AT OTHER, ARGUE ON STAGE OR APPEAR TO LOOK ANGRY. STAGE ETIQUETTE. NO UNNECESSARY TALK, SITTING OUT OF ORDER IF ANY CLAUSE BE DISOBEYED FINED \$1.50
- * 6. ANY MEMBER CAUGHT WITH ALCOHOL ON BREATH WHILE ON DUTY BE FINED \$2.50
- * 7. WHEN PROGRAM IS OUT OF TOWN MAKE SPECIAL PLACE TO MEET AT A CERTAIN TIME IF NOT PRESENT WITHOUT LAWFUL EXCUSE FINED \$1.00
- * 8. WHEN MONEY IS IN TREASURE AFTER WEEKLY DIVISION, NO MONEY WILL BE GIVEN TO ANY MEMBER UNLESS NECESSARY.
- * 9. ANY MEMBER ACCEPTING DRINKS FROM ANY STRANGERS BE FINED \$5.00
- * 10. ANY MEMBER THAT DONT RESPECT MEMBERS OF GROUPE OR ANY OUTSIDE PERSONS SAINTS OR SINNERS BE FINED \$5.00
- * 11. ANY MEMBER THAT TRYS TO ARRANGE OR FIX A SONG FOR THE GROUPE AND THE OTHERS DONT ASSIST. WILL BE FINED \$1.00
- * 12. ANY MEMBER CAUGHT WITH CHEWING GUM WHILE IN SERVICE BE FINED \$1.00 UPON ENTERING CHURCH
- * 13. ALL FINES MUST BE PAID AT THE END OF WEEK AND DIVIDED AMONG THE OTHER MEMBERS.
- * 14. ALL MEMBERS BE IN STUDIO 30 MIN. BEFORE GOING ON AIR OR BE FINED \$1.00 ABSENT \$2.50
- * 15. EACH MEMBER BE FINED \$2.50 FOR THE WORD G.D. AND \$1.00 ADDITIONAL FOR EACH OFFENSE
- * 16. ANY MEMBER THAT ARGUE WHEN FINE IS PRESENTED BE FINED DOUBLE

The touring, radio work and recording continued apace until 1954, when Sam McCrary received a call to the ministry. By 1955 he was pastoring St. Mark Missionary Baptist Church and his involvement with the quartet was restricted. For the next few years the Fairfield Four made less frequent tours and the personnel became more fluid. Willie Love was the mainstay of Fairfield Four units which featured Nashville quartet all-stars such as outstanding baritone Thomas Huggins and bass singer Ben Vaughn.

In late 1958, there was another attempt to reorganize a full time Fairfield Four. Rev. McCrary brought an excellent young group, the Silver Quintet, to Nashville from Gary, Indiana. When they arrived here they became the Fairfield Four, in company with Willie Love and veteran Nashville quartet leader Clarence Mills. The group from Gary included Roscoe Robinson and Joe Henderson, who later had successful careers in pop music. Other members were David Aron, Willis Williams and Huey Brown. With Rev. McCrary, this Fairfield Four recorded an album for Bill "Hoss" Allen at RCA Victor Studios, in May

1960. By that time musical styles had begun to change, a cappella quartets no longer dominated the gospel music landscape, and the Fairfield Four's reputation had dimmed somewhat. After a very difficult tour through Pennsylvania, in 1960, the Fairfield Four disbanded.

During the 1960s, there were a few trips to Detroit for the annual "Tennessee Day" program there, with Fairfield Four pickup groups organized around Willie Love and including local singers such as Robert Hamlett, Ronnie Threlkill, Red Ransom, Joe Thompson, John Phillips, Thomas Huggins and others. But for the most part the Fairfield Four was not heard from for twenty years.

TO THE PRESENT DAY

A special "Quartet Reunion" program in Birmingham, Alabama, in October, 1980, provided an opportunity to reunite the Fairfield Four. Rev. Sam McCrary, James Hill, Isaac Freeman, Willie Love and guitarist Joe Whittaker took part in that reunion. This group was invited to Washington,



Fairfield Four (1949). Top row (left to right): Sam McCrary, James Hill, Willie Frank Lewis. Front row: Edward Thomas, Isaac Freeman, Preston York.



Fairfield Four (1953). (left to right): George McCurn, Willie Love, Clarence "Baby" Brooks, Rev. Samuel McCrary, Wilmer "Little Axe" Broadnax.

D.C. in November, 1981, to participate in the Smithsonian Institution's "Black American Quartet Traditions" presentation.

Willie Love and Joe Whittaker eventually had to drop out of the Fairfield Four to continue their service with the Voices Of Nashville. Elder W.L. Richardson and Wilson Waters came to the Fairfield Four in 1982, both have made important contributions. Waters is a powerful and accurate tenor singer and Elder Richardson's inspiring lead singing has excited audiences wherever the group has performed. The quartet's harmony was shored up further with the addition of utility singer Robert Hamlett in 1984. For the past three years the Fairfield Four have performed without any instrumental accompaniment.

A pastor's duties and recent ill health have made it difficult for Rev. McCrary to travel with the quartet to out-of-town programs, but he remains the heart and soul, the grand old man of the Fairfield Four. Today James Hill assumes most of the Fairfield Four's business responsibilities, while Isaac Freeman serves as musical director. These capable, energetic gentlemen have successfully reestablished the Fairfield Four as Nashville's foremost ambassadors of the proud heritage of black gospel harmony singing.



Fairfield Four at "Birmingham Quartet Reunion," October 12, 1980. (left to right): Isaac Freeman, Rev. Sam McCrary, Willie Love, Joe Whittaker, James Hill.



Fairfield Four at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife (1986). (left to right): Rev. Sam McCrary, Rev. W.L. Richardson, Robert Hamlett, Wilson Waters, James Hill, Isaac Freeman.

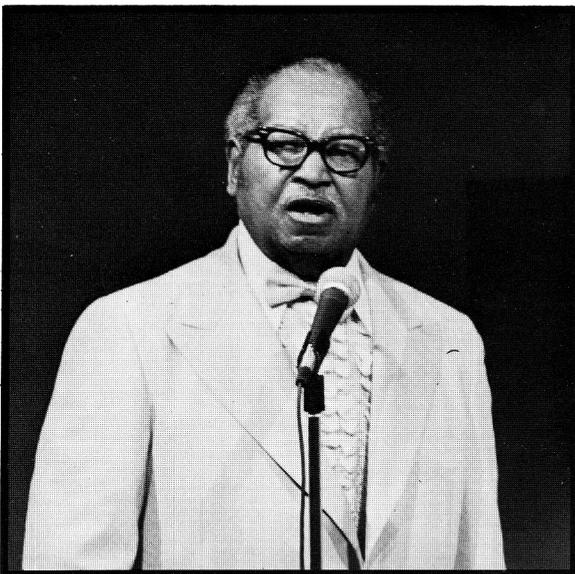
1988 GOSPEL ARTS DAY HONOREES

THE FAIRFIELD FOUR

The Fairfield Four's illustrious past, their prominent role in the history of gospel music, is only part of the reason why this group is so uniquely deserving of recognition. Since reuniting in 1980, the Fairfield Four have established themselves among the highest ranks of American traditional musicians. Along with appearances in churches and auditoriums throughout the mid-South, the Fairfield Four have taken their music to New York's Carnegie Hall, to Michigan's Wheatland Festival, the New Orleans Jazz &

Heritage Festival and on two occasions to the Smithsonian Institution's Festival of American Folklife. Here in Nashville they have become fixtures at the annual Summer Lights and Grassroots Days celebrations. Whenever they have sung, the Fairfield Four have amply demonstrated the spiritual and artistic vitality of the a cappella quartet style.

In their repertoire and in their vocal arrangements the Fairfield Four maintain an unmistakable historical integrity. No modern day gospel group preserves the a cappella traditions more capably or faithfully. By perpetuating the old methods and reaffirming long-established standards they help guide the way for a new generation of gospel singers. For these reasons we have chosen the Fairfield Four to be the special honorees for Nashville's 1988 Gospel Arts Day program.



Rev. Samuel McCrary (1988).



Fairfield Four (1988). (left to right): Rev. W.L. Richardson, Robert Hamlett, Wilson Waters, James Hill, Isaac Freeman.

A TRIBUTE TO JOHN BATTLE

John Battle was a man who loved gospel quartet singing. He was an original member of the Fairfield Four, a singer, song arranger and manager for the group, and the spiritual glue that held them together.

On Nashville's Gospel Arts Day 1988, we wish to pay special homage to the late John Battle for his outstanding contributions to this city's music heritage.

John Henry Battle is buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Nashville.



REMEMBRANCE

(A poem written by John Battle, dedicated to the Fairfield Four.)

Although I may be far away
My heart is there with you.
I often sit and wonder,
About things we use to do.

Just remember how our parents,
Use to take us by the hand,
And would lead us to the church
We thought that a mean plan,

But now we need no parents,
To lead us to that place
We strive now to help others
To find redeeming grace.

As time moves on dear comrades,
Someday I hope to be,
By your dear sides once more,
To sing God's praise with thee.

Remember where we got our name,
From dear old Mother Clay,
And remember dear old Fairfield,
Who put us on our way.

We have also been discouraged
But we went on just the same
We didn't let that stop us
And success it finally came.

Tho' the world may talk about you,
And may try to turn you round
Just keep your hands in Jesus,
And make a joyful sound.

Don't give up hope because I'm gone,
But sing just as before,
For every good-bye is not gone
You'll hear from me some more.