

“Don’t Let Nobody Turn You ‘Round”—The Fairfield Four (1947)

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Essay by Opal Louis Nations (guest post)*



The Fairfield Four, c. 1947

The Fairfield Four are perhaps Nashville’s best known, most influential and certainly longest public performing Afro-American a-cappella gospel quartet. The celebrated Fairfield Four Quartet’s history dates all the way back to late 1921 at Rev. Cobyn’s Fairfield Baptist Church in Nashville where a trio of young hopefuls were picked to sing during service. The trio grew to a quartet in 1925, and Mother Annie Clay named the group the Fairfield Four. In 1941, Fisk University educator John W. Work III came to Nashville on behalf of the Library of Congress to document Assistant Rev. J.R. Statton’s choir. In March 1942, Work recorded multiple versions of the traditional “Dry Bones in the Valley” by the choir plus the Fairfield Four’s equally historical “Don’t Let Nobody Turn You ‘Round.” The song gained so much popularity over the years it became synonymous with the group.

“Don’t Let Nobody Turn You ‘Round” was first recorded by the Dixie Jubilee Quartet of New York in 1924. Interestingly, the song was also covered by bluesman Blind Willie McTell and his wife for Decca back in 1935.

The five-member group at that time was composed of Sam McCrary and John Battle, lead vocals; George Gracie, tenor; Harold Carrethers, baritone, and Rufus Carrethers, bass. McCrary was considered the principal leader in the a-cappella group who by the late 1930s had secured radio exposure on WSIX, a Springfield, TN, country music station. Through the outstanding lead work of silver-toned tenor McCrary, the Fairfields (sponsored by Colonial Coffee) moved over to the 50,000 watt WLAC in Nashville in 1942. The show reached an even broader audience with a national hook-up over the CBS network. The program ran for almost a decade. It was this wide exposure that brought them to the attention of Jim Bulleit at Bullet Recording & Transcription Corporation on Nashville’s Broad Street. Bullet was one of the first small, post-war independent record companies to promote black popular music in the Southlands.

The Fairfield Four were one of the first to sign with the Bullet label during the spring of 1946. The recording of “Don’t Let Nobody Turn You ‘Round” (Bullet 284) was waxed on the second session. It’s “stop tempo,” which allowed the score to stand out, drew attention as McCrary’s long, drawn-out, sweeping passages set listeners on a vocal roller coaster ride. McCrary’s later live and in-person staging of the song finds him drawing circles in the air with his arms and bending forward in a dip. It was quite

a sight to see. They waxed the song again in 1947 for Dot and for the group's Old Town album in 1960. Rev. Sam McCrary leads, with "wind-up" vocal effects on all three versions.

In 1947, John Battle was stricken with T.B. He sang his final program in Birmingham, so weak that other soldiers had to prop him up on their shoulders. Battle was the glue that held the group together. He died on April 24th, 1947. Now that he was gone, the group lost its crucial and unifying element. The Fairfield Four split into two groups. Both were active on the church circuit. It was McCrary's faction that retained the radio spot over WLAC, and it was this group that prevailed.

By 1949, McCrary had put together an "all star" outfit recruited from major quartets in other cities. First of these was baritone James Samuel Hill from Bessemer, Alabama, who replaced Battle. Then came "house-wrecking" tenor Edward "Preacher" Thomas from New Orleans. He had had considerable experience singing lead with the Famous Blue Jay Singers. Thomas took over the musical directorship that Battle had managed for many years. Talented tenor lead Preston York from Atlanta was also added. He had sung in the Reliable Jubilees and was also a skilled musical arranger. Finally, super-basso Isaac "Dickie" Freeman from Johns, Alabama, was commandeered. He was plucked out of the Kings of Harmony of Cleveland. Freeman was the heaviest, longest-serving rhythm bass known to man. With utility singer Lewis and lead tenor McCrary from the original line up, this fresh set of soldiers could match any quartet at any singing battle, any time. In fact, the Fairfield Four were invincible in "Battles of Song." They toured from coast to coast, appearing in huge auditoriums and vast outdoor stadiums.

By 1960-61, a-cappella quartets no longer dominated the gospel music landscape. The public demanded a more sophisticated approach. 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 20 years.

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 W.L. 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 passed 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 Centennial concert in April 1991. The following year saw the release of their first CD collection on Warner Brothers. Topping this, the group was awarded three Grammys, one in 1997 for Best Traditional Gospel Album, then again in 2002 for Album of The Year honoring their contribution to the "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" soundtrack, and in 2015 for Best Roots Gospel Album. They were inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 1999.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.