

# How They Got Over: A Brief Overview of Black Gospel Quartet Music

**Jerry Zolten**

*October 29, 2015*

Jerry Zolten is Associate Professor of Communication Arts & Sciences, American Studies, and Integrative Arts at the Penn State-Altoona.

**T**his piece takes you on a tour through black gospel music history — especially the gospel quartets — and along the way I'll point you to some of the most amazing performances in African American religious music ever captured on film.

To quote the late James Hill, my friend and longtime member of the Fairfield Four gospel quartet, “I don't want to make you feel glad twice—glad to see me come and glad to see me go.” With that in mind I'm going to get right down to the evolution from the spirituals of slavery days to the mid-twentieth century “golden age” of gospel. Along the way, we'll learn about the a cappella vocal tradition that groups such as the Fairfield Four so brilliantly represent today.

The black gospel tradition is seeded in a century and a half of slavery and that is the time to begin: when the spirituals came into being. The spirituals evolved out of an oral tradition, sung solo or in groups and improvised. Sometimes the music is staid, sometimes histrionic. Folklorist Zora Neale Hurston famously described how spirituals were never sung the same way twice, “their truth dying under training like flowers under hot water.”<sup>1</sup> We don't know the names of the people who wrote these songs. They were not written down at the time. Slaves created the songs while being deliberately kept illiterate in their forced servitude.

Slaves were, however, taught by slave owners to sing English hymns for a number of reasons, all with the basic aim of countering rebellion by cultivating cooperation. For instance, there was the thought early on that the teaching of hymns in English would encourage speaking in English, thereby getting everyone on the same language page. Another goal was to encourage an interpretation of the Bible that played up notions such as “the meek shall inherit the earth.” In the long term though, slaves took these hymns and morphed them for their own purposes into what are now called spirituals. They created new lyrics, words of hope that served as a balm against the pain of slavery, offered comforting themes of a better world on high, all expressed musically in traditions rooted in Mother Africa.

You probably know some spirituals without realizing that you do, such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Obviously we have no performances on sound recordings of how spirituals were sung during

those formative decades of slavery, but I can tell you that the Gullah people who live on the Sea Islands of the Carolina and Georgia coasts come close to giving us a feel for what that tradition was like and how it came to be. The Sea Islands were excellent for growing a variety of high value long staple cotton, and for that reason many slaves were retained there. Because of the isolation on the islands, the surviving Gullah culture still has elements that give some idea of what it must have been like when black religious music was taking shape.

No one knows with certainty where the term “Gullah” comes from. Some suggest it might relate to the country of Angola, but not many of the Sea Island Gullah people came from there. “Geechee” is another name for the Sea Island black culture more often used in Georgia. This short film, “[Gullah Traditions of the South Carolina Coast](#)” provides helpful background. The Ring Shout is demonstrated in the “[The Ring Shout and the Birth of African American Religion](#).”

In this last clip we see the roots of our own rock ‘n’ roll culture. The way people dance and move to rock ‘n’ roll today has its connections to African ring shout dancing. Interestingly, one of the classic hits of early rock ‘n’ roll is the tune “Shout” by the Isley Brothers, with the words “You know you make me wanna shout, kick my heels up, shout, throw my hands up, shout, throw my head back and shout...Everybody shout now!” The song “Shout” is still often heard as a rallying cry over stadium loudspeakers at college football games. As a teenager, I always thought the song meant literally shouting, making a lot of noise, but the reference many generations later was to the religious circle dance as seen in the video clip. The dance was called “the shout,” and so to shout meant to dance and move around.

It should also be noted that slave owners banned musical accompaniment, in particular drums, because they understood that drumming was a method of long distance communication, not to mention their view that it riled up the slaves. Slave owners wanted complacency and resignation. However, while you can take things away from people, tradition and culture will win out. People will find a way, as did the slaves. They improvised drumming with their hands and feet and makeshift rhythms with anything they could find, from spoons to bottles to pieces of wood. That certainly happened within slave culture. From all of this, the spirituals developed.

Of course the slaves didn’t call them “spirituals.” That was a term applied decades later by musicologists. Slaves thought of them as religious songs, self-sung for comfort and as part of worship ritual. Often there were hidden messages in the songs. Some years ago I had the opportunity to meet a family from nearby Mount Union, Pennsylvania. Mount Union is unusual in rural central Pennsylvania in that it has a large and vibrant African American community drawn there during the World War years to work in the brick factories that thrived then. After I got to know one family, two sisters at the time in their late eighties and their granddaughter/niece, they told me stories that had been passed down through generations about spiritual songs such as “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” On the surface it seemed to be a

song about carrying drinking water out into the work fields, but it really was about finding and following the North Star, escaping slavery by heading north. The drinking gourd actually referred to the constellation the Little Dipper with the North Star at the end of its handle.

They had many songs that spoke about crossing rivers, often the river Jordan, again an allusion with biblical roots, but this time to the many rivers that had to be crossed on the journey north. My friends in Mount Union told me about the spiritual “Steal Away.” They described how as children they were told about slaves at sunset sitting outdoors on porches in side-by-side rows of ramshackle shotgun houses staidly singing the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus,” with the intent to distract and lull slave owners, covering up that somebody was making a nighttime escape to the North. Spirituals sometimes had that function.

When the Civil War ended slavery, the spirituals might have died out. They were thought of as slave songs, reminders of an ugly past, and most newly freed slaves wanted to forget them. As it developed, though, a group of young former slaves, then students at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, played a large part in preserving the spiritual tradition. The story is part of the early history of Fisk University, which began a mere six months after the end of the Civil War with the goal of educating former slaves. The school needed to raise money to survive so the choir director, a man named George White, had the idea to train a choir of student singers to perform the old spirituals, to offer public concerts to raise money for the school. There was an audience for spirituals among whites who perceived them as beautiful, sentimental, and with no negative connotations at all. In fact, some whites mistakenly viewed spirituals as evidence that the “peculiar institution” had somehow been a time of comfort and stability for slaves. The Fisk Jubilee Singers, as they called themselves, began performing for the public, first in and around their home base but later far and wide and by the late nineteenth century worldwide. On many occasions they performed for the crowned heads of Europe and Asia. After the turn of the twentieth century, the Fisk Jubilee Singers were one of the first African American groups to make sound recordings, on phonograph records. The market for their recordings was not necessarily African American but more to Anglos who thought of this music as folk song. First, here is a 1909 performance by the Fisks of “[Swing Low Sweet Chariot](#),” made available by the Library of Congress. You learn considerably more about the original singers and their remarkable accomplishments in this [short film](#).

The Fisk Jubilee Singers pioneered as recording artists and as they continued to release recordings, the cross-cultural interest in spirituals and the music of black America in general began to take hold and develop a broad market. By the 1920s, the American music business went through profound changes that opened doors for many African American artists who wanted to be entertainers. Keep in mind that in those days of institutionalized segregation there were few occupational options if you were black. Mostly only mundane laboring jobs and barely subsistence wages were on offer. Music

and performance presented opportunities to escape a life of drudgework and do something meaningful, powerful, and dignified.

I had the great fortune and honor to speak with a number of the pioneering gospel singers who made their names in the mid-twentieth century, most of them now gone. Interestingly, many of them didn't actually call themselves "gospel singers" nor was the goal necessarily to convert people to their particular religion. They often called themselves "spiritual entertainers." They wanted to convey a sense of epiphany, of spiritual awakening. They were entertainers whose songs focused on living the "good" life. They made a "joyful noise" in praise of the Lord. They wanted to uplift through jubilant performance and heartening messages in song.

Before 1920 there were few recordings by African American artists. All of that changed in the year 1920, when the New York City-based Okeh Records gambled on recording a blues artist named Mamie Smith. Her record sold very well, which caught the attention of other major mainstream labels. Apparently there was a market for African-American music. Labels began releasing blues and jazz records under the broad umbrella of what the industry called "race records." The term "race" actually appeared on the label as a cue that the artist was black. Of course, anybody could buy the record, and everybody and anybody did, which helped broaden the popularity of black music. And under the umbrella of "race records" were recordings by a variety of gospel artists, many of them in the quartet a cappella vocal group tradition. Commercial possibilities were in the air.

Stepping back to the era before World War II, some of the more enterprising artists in the genre, instead of reinterpreting old spirituals, began writing new songs that had the feel of spirituals with lyrics often drawn from Biblical tales. For the most part, though, these were original songs with attributed authorship. African-American religious music was moving into a more commercial realm.

One of the most important of these new religious singer/songwriters was Thomas Dorsey from Georgia. He had been a hot blues piano player who made records and worked with the best and even sang a few songs with suggestive "double entendre" lyrics such as "Tight Like That." Georgia Tom, his stage name, was on the road touring when word came that his wife was ill in childbirth. He didn't make it home in time and both his wife and child passed away. The tragedy cut him to the core and from that point on he abandoned the blues and wrote only religious songs. But religious songs with a difference because he brought the rhythms of the barrelhouse blues he had been playing into his spiritual compositions. Thomas Dorsey called his new style of religious music "gospel" so as to distinguish it from the older, more staid spiritual tradition. Today, Thomas Dorsey is considered the father of gospel music.

Dorsey wrote many songs over the course of a long career. He was still active when he passed at the age of 94 in 1993. Dorsey established his own musical publishing house. He sent people out from his

company in Chicago to teach African-American congregations nationwide how to sing this new kind of blues-based gospel. It was quite an enterprise.

Dorsey's most famous song is "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," which he wrote upon learning of his wife's passing. This [interview](#) features Dorsey talking about the circumstances under which he wrote that song. Also take note of a brief performance by one of gospel's greatest divas, Mahalia Jackson. Her frequent television appearances in the 1950s and 1960s played a major part in introducing mainstream audiences to the black gospel tradition. Note how she doesn't just hit the note. She works it, plays it, and wrings every drop of emotion out of it. This is exactly the approach so many young singers, especially women, bring to pop vocalizing today. The style is rooted in black gospel music.

The Fairfield Four are part of the early gospel quartet tradition, at least as we've come to know it through phonograph recordings that preserved the music starting in the 1920s. Quartets in the earliest days performed as a cappella vocal groups with four or, interestingly, sometimes more members. The "quartet" designation was more about the presence of the four basic vocal harmony parts rather than necessarily the number of total singers. By the 1950s, African American gospel had evolved into a variety of styles and configurations. There were choirs, male soloists, gospel divas such as Mahalia Jackson, and guitar evangelists such as Blind Willie Johnson and Reverend Gary Davis, who played hot licks acoustic guitar on the streets for whatever money passersby would toss into an open guitar case. They all made records but the gospel quartets were an especial favorite with gospel fans.

Vocal quartets began springing up in different locations around the country, mostly in the South. One particular hotbed for quartet singing was northern Alabama in and around the city of Birmingham. Why there is hard to say, but several groups from that city, such as the Famous Blue Jays and the Birmingham Jubilee Singers, were among the first to make records and exert influence outside the region. The Fairfield Four style is rooted in that Birmingham tradition. Their home base, Nashville, was only about an hour's drive away.

In the 1920s and 1930s, quartets typically took old spirituals such as "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" or "Roll Jordan Roll" and arranged them for a cappella voices in harmony. Without the accompaniment of musical instruments, singers developed ways to create rhythm and harmony through vocal devices that served as backdrops over which lead vocalists sang. The bass singer anchored the bottom and was essential: the best ones had ultra-low voices and the ability to rhythmically pop out the notes like a bass fiddle. The group would then have two, three, or four singers in harmony vocalizing on some sort of nonsense syllables or phrases that gave them something to sing while at the same time provided a drive or pulse to the performance. Birmingham quartets, for example, often used the repeated phrase "boom-a-clank-a-lank-a." The syllables with their hard consonants articulated a rhythm that propelled the song.

Most of us are aware of rock ‘n’ roll’s first wave back in the 1950s and especially the vocal groups that sang what is now called “doo-wop.” Back then, though, it wasn’t called doo-wop. To teenagers who bought the records, it was just plain rock ‘n’ roll. The singers though, most of them African American, used vocal back-up phrases such as “doo-wop-a-doo-wop-a-doo,” and it was the same idea, propelling the song rhythmically through syllables. Doo-wop grew out of this very style of a cappella gospel quartet singing.

Another hotspot for the emerging gospel quartet tradition was the city of Norfolk and the surrounding Tidewater region of Virginia. The Golden Gate Quartet, one of the most influential groups in black gospel history, got started there. They began performing locally in churches and at community events, but then they began making records, appearing on radio, and their fame spread, making them in demand countrywide. What really put them over the top, besides an exquisite harmony sound, was that the Golden Gates wrote their own original songs. They were no longer solely interpreters, but originators and innovators. They did not merely arrange old spirituals but created originals, new songs with different melodies, rhythms that jumped, and words that took on broader subject matter. The Golden Gate style came to define what was called “jubilee.” It was up-tempo, designed to lift the spirits as commanded by the biblical edict in Psalm 100 to make a “joyful noise unto the lord.”

By the late 1940s other groups, the Fairfield Four among them, followed suit by creating their own original gospel compositions and sound. Uplifting jubilees would become part of the soundtrack of the Civil Rights Movement. These were songs that fostered hope in the face of fear and adversity. They sometimes offered direct messages about how to live life, what was right, what was wrong, what to think and what to do. In this black gospel music we begin to hear songs that are social commentary, the root of so-called protest and later hip-hop. The Golden Gates, for example, had songs such as “No Restricted Signs in Heaven” and “Atom and Evil” that warned of danger in the wake of the atom bomb.

In this performance clip, you will see the Golden Gate Quartet from the 1944 wartime film *Hollywood Canteen*. The Gates are dressed in stylized army outfits and were then well known to mainstream audiences from their appearances on radio and records—there was no TV—with some of the biggest names in American entertainment, Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong among them. They were among the first “crossover” artists, black performers who were popular across cultural lines, white, black, or otherwise. They performed at Carnegie Hall and at Franklin D. Roosevelt’s inauguration. Everyone loved the sound of the incredible Golden Gate Quartet.

Note the message in the song they sing here, “[The General Jumped at Dawn](#).” It might not be evident from the title but the message of brotherhood comes through in the lyric. Also note that the vocal leads are not so much sung as talked out over a rhythmic backdrop. These are techniques that decades later found their way into rap and hip-hop.

The world of black gospel music entered a golden age after World War II due, in part, to relative prosperity within the African American community as well as technological innovations. Prior to World War II, phonograph records were heavy ten-inch discs that could hold no more than three minutes of sound and were as brittle as glass. The war years, however, saw the development of microgroove recording on lightweight vinyl instead of shellac. The vinyl records could hold far more music.

There were also other technological applications that came into play, most notably the amplification of “electrified” musical instruments. The guitar, so much a part of pop music today, was primarily used as ensemble background before World War II for the very obvious reason that it could not be heard over the other instruments. When the guitar was fitted with electric pick-ups and amplified, everything changed.

One of the pioneers of electric guitar was a gospel singer, a woman named Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Sister Rosetta was an absolute revolutionary. She had a tremendous influence that resonated throughout gospel and even secular music. The electric guitar became *de rigueur*, the quartets especially taking note. There were, of course, many conservative people who looked askance at and condemned Sister Rosetta Tharpe and her electric guitar, but she pressed on. Sometimes she seemed to walk a fine line between singing for the lord and singing what was thought of as the devil’s music, which is how some people regarded the playing of any musical instrument in a religious context. While the elders may have objected, many of the young folks got on board. They showed up at church services and gospel concerts and bought the records because they loved the sound. Sister Rosetta delivered that.

In this clip from an early 1960s television show called *TV Gospel Time* note the background choir typical in a period church service. Sister Rosetta Tharpe is center stage leading them in call and response. The song, which I suspect everybody knows, is an old spiritual “[Down By The Riverside](#).” It’s an anti-war song that Sister Rosetta Tharpe delivers as only she can. She rocks when she sings “I ain’t going to study war no more.” She was a total original, doing what nobody else was doing at that time.

Sister Rosetta and the Golden Gates helped usher in a wonderful period that began in the early 1950s and lasted through the mid-1960s that is looked back upon as a golden age of black gospel music. Electric guitars, pianos, drums, you name it—all of these instruments became integral to gospel. A cappella was now past and gone.

The following few examples provide a sampling of four of my favorite gospel quartets in performance during this period and that illustrate the role of musical instruments. The first clip is by the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, a group that is still performing today. While referencing a disability in the group’s name might seem politically incorrect by today’s standards, back then it was their choice and not that uncommon in the world of black music, including blues, jazz, and gospel. The Blind Boys adopted that name because they wanted people who only experienced them through recordings to know of their

disability and how through training they had overcome and were able to make a dignified living in a world that was hostile and inaccessible to them simply because of the color of their skin.

Here they sing “[Leaning on the Everlasting Arms](#).”

Next, we see one of the few female quartets, the Davis Sisters from Philadelphia. The song is titled “[Bye and Bye](#)” with piano accompaniment. Notice how one lead takes it so far before another kicks in and puts the song in overdrive.

One of my favorite performances features one of gospel’s best-loved lead voices, Reverend Julius Cheeks here performing with his wife Margie Cheeks and backed by his group the Knights. Margie’s showmanship on the piano in “[Morning Train](#)” really steals the show and for the astute observer points the way to rock ‘n’ roller Little Richard.

Finally, there is the group called the Mighty Clouds of Joy singing “[Steal Away to Jesus](#).” Their lead singer, Joe Ligon, currently lives in Texas. Their matching suits, the choreography, the sound of electric guitar and bass really laid the foundation for R&B and soul music long before Motown. This is where it came from. American popular music of the 1960s and beyond owes a lot to the performers of gospel’s golden age as you can see.

I have had the good fortune of close associations with two of the great pioneering gospel quartets, the Dixie Hummingbirds and the Fairfield Four.<sup>2</sup> The Dixie Hummingbirds, based in Philadelphia, are best known to the mainstream for their 1973 collaboration with pop singer Paul Simon on the song “Loves Me Like A Rock.” Simon was a gospel fan and wrote the song in the gospel vein with the idea of inviting one of the great groups to record with him. The single by Paul Simon and the Hummingbirds topped the American pop charts. The fascinating part of the story is that the Dixie Hummingbirds asked Mr. Simon if he minded them recording their own version of the song without him, which with Simon’s permission, they did. Ironically it was their version without Simon that won the Grammy that year.

The Dixie Hummingbirds have been going continuously since 1928. Only one of the original members is still alive, the brilliant Harold Carroll. Inspired by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, in 1952 he brought his electric guitar sound to the Dixie Hummingbirds. The success of the Dixie Hummingbirds rested on a number of factors. For one, they had an incredible bass singer in William Bobo; another was their tight harmony and choreography; and above all they had two exceptional lead vocalists, Ira Tucker and James Walker. The group first made their name in the 1940s singing at a very famous New York City club called Café Society. During that period, there were many venues in New York City that featured the best of African American music—places such as the Cotton Club—but segregation ruled the day. If you were black you were not allowed in to see the show. Café Society, though, deliberately thumbed their noses at those restrictive policies. They kept prices affordable, showcased the best African American talent, and anybody regardless of color or creed was welcome.

The Dixie Hummingbirds really became masters of stagecraft when they played at Café Society. They understood that they had to put on a show. The Hummingbirds wore white tuxedos with tails. When they were announced, they didn't just come out flatfooted and sing. They came running out from side stage and slid into position. They understood the value of choreography and coordinated their moves throughout their show.

Years later one of the great Motown groups, the Temptations, actually sought out and studied with the Dixie Hummingbirds to learn the choreography that would contribute to their own success. As to the Dixie Hummingbirds, they always made a point of dressing well and minding their public appearance because they understood that they were regarded as icons within the African American community. In fact, they came to be known as the "Gentleman of Song." The late Ira Tucker told me that back when the group was still touring in a big old car and had only one suit each, they would pull over at the outskirts of town and press those suits on the hot hood of the car so that they looked their best when they arrived. They realized it was about more than music and entertainment. They were expected to look the part and live the life they sang about.

This 1963 performance is of "[Our Prayer for Peace](#)," a staple of their repertoire for many years. It was a song with a message written by the lead singer in the clip, James Walker. "Teach us how to love each other, every creed and every color." That year, though, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and Walker and the Birds added a new verse to address that tragedy. Look for Harold Carroll in the backdrop playing the guitar. The other singers are Ira Tucker, James Davis, William Bobo, and Beachy Thompson.

I will conclude with a look at the Fairfield Four. The Fairfield Four are Grammy-winners and in their previous iteration appeared in the Coen Brothers' 2000 film "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" In that film, besides contributing to the soundtrack, three members of the group—Isaac Freeman, Wilson Waters, and Robert Hamlett—appear in a scene towards the end where they step up out of a grave they are digging and sing a song of foreboding to actor George Clooney just before floodwaters wash everything away. The song "[The Lonesome Valley](#)." The song, by the way, is an excellent example of the oldest style of black gospel singing, a "lined out" hymn with the leader singing a line responded to by the congregation.

The Fairfield Four started in Nashville in 1921. I came to know of them through the old shellac 78-rpm phonograph records they cut back in the 1940s and '50s. Here in Pennsylvania it was not unusual to find records by many pioneering gospel groups including the Fairfield Four, the Dixie Hummingbirds, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and many others. Each record I found was, for me, a revelation of sorts.

In the early 1980s I was at the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival in Washington, D.C., and the focus that year fell on the state of Tennessee. On the Mall on a small side stage I chanced upon an a cappella

singing group performing traditional gospel. I was utterly blown away. The group was billed generically, as in “Traditional African American Gospel Group.” A few hours later I ran into the group members walking along on the Mall. We joked years later that it must have been destiny. I told them how incredible I thought they were and that they needed to be heard. I asked who they were. James Hill, the group’s baritone and leader said, “Well, we’re the Fairfield Four.” My jaw dropped and I said, “I’ve got a lot of your old records!” And then their jaws dropped, surprised not only that I had heard of them, but also that a person of my generation and background would even have their old records. I later learned that as early as the 1930s they had been broadcasting nationwide out of Nashville and that in the 1940s into the early 1950s they had been making records and traveling around the country performing.

By 1952, tired of touring, they retired as a group and went into professions outside of music. Thirty years went by and here they were still kicking, not as high, they liked to joke, but now ready to get back out there and sing again as the Fairfield Four. I was game and so we formed an informal partnership. One of the first things we did was to come to central Pennsylvania to Mount Union to record a new album in live performance at an African American church. That church was the Mount Hope Baptist Church. That album on CD, we titled *Wreckin’ the House* and released in 1989, is still out there today and played a major part in helping them resurrect their career.<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately the Fairfield Four signed with the Warner Brothers label. They were also invited by a number of country, pop, and rock artists to sing backups on recordings and in some cases go out with them on tour, among them Lyle Lovett, Elvis Costello, Johnny Cash, and John Fogerty of Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Think of the Fairfield Four not so much as a specific lineup of people, but rather as a living tradition that has been going since the 1920s. Over the decades there have been many members of the Fairfield Four carrying on that tradition to the present. Each of the group’s current members has ties with the Nashville gospel tradition and the Fairfield Four. In fact, surviving member Robert Hamlett organized and coached the current lineup of the group: Joseph Thompson, Levert Allison, Larrice Byrd, and Bobby Sherrell.

They still sing songs from that heritage, including their signature “Don’t You Let Nobody Turn You ‘Round.” The song rooted in an old spiritual was one of those that had an oblique message that had a special resonance during the Civil Rights era. That message was exactly what the group intended. Stay on the firing line. The lead singer at that time was Reverend Sam McCrary.

Below is a performance clip from the early 1980s when Rev. McCrary was in his seventies. Sam McCrary had one of the most admired tenor voices in all of gospel music. In fact, blues singer B.B. King told me that Rev. McCrary was one of his idols and vocal role models. B.B. King described how when he was a child, his family of sharecroppers worked a farm just outside of Indianola, Mississippi, and would

get up at dawn and listen to the radio as they ate breakfast before going out to work in the fields. His mother had the radio tuned to a live broadcast that came on every morning at sunup out of Nashville, station WLAC. That's how B.B. heard the Fairfield Four and Sam McCrary singing. Live on the radio. The two never met but Rev. Sam became B.B. King's vocal role model. One other point about the Fairfield Four. They realized like many of their professional contemporaries that they were entertainers. That is evident from the bit of clowning they do in this song with an otherwise serious message, "[Don't You Let Nobody Turn You 'Round](#)."<sup>4</sup>

Thank you for coming along with me on this ride through black gospel quartet history. Obviously the tradition lives on today, not only through groups such as the Fairfield Four, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and the Five Blind Boys of Alabama, but in elements of performance that give character to so much of contemporary popular music. Their pieces are songs with a message, social commentary, and rapped out rhymes in rhythm. They offer group harmony singing that wring out every drop of emotion in each note. They provide a visual style in coordinated costumes and stage choreography. Lastly, you see performers as cultural icons. All of these and more have found their way from traditional African American gospel into contemporary American popular music.

## NOTES

1. Zora Neal Hurston, *The Folklore Writings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Berkeley, CA: Turtle Island Foundation, 1981), pp. 79-80.
2. Jerry Zolten, *Great God A 'Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also, Jerry Zolten, Co-Producer and Notes, *The Dixie Hummingbirds, Jesus Has Traveled This Road Before* (Gospel Friend, 2003).
3. Jerry Zolten, Producer/notes, *The Fairfield Four, Wreckin' the House* (Dead Reckoning Records/Compendia, 2001).
4. The Fairfield Four re-recorded this song in their Grammy-winning album, Jerry Zolten, Track Consultant/Notes, *The Fairfield Four, Still Rockin' My Soul* (Fairfield Four Records, 2015).