



Liner Notes to
The Charioteers / Dixie Songsters – Associated Transcriptions
by Opal Louis Nations

ACR 221 – scheduled for August 2005 Release on Acrobat Records

The Halcyon Daily Review just about summed it up when they said that the Charioteers (founded during the early days of The Depression) were one of the unheralded gems of the time. Anyone who has watched the Bing Crosby-hosted Kraft Music Hall programs on NBC between October 1942 and April 1946 would have seen and heard tightly knit precision harmonies, sweeping falsetto acrobatics and the magic that was synonymous with one of the greatest black folk, pop and spiritual-singing outfits of all time.

The Charioteers appeared on the Kraft program on at least fifty-four occasions (the Kraft program was usually, but not always, hosted by Crosby.) They were one of the most “visible” African-American entertainment entities of the 1940s. Why is it then that today the Charioteers are just brushed off as being mere fluffy pop artists not worthy of mention in Dixon, Goldrich & Rye’s *Blues and Gospel Records 1890–1943*, or even anthologized in digital CD form as frequently as, say, the Mills Brothers or Ink Spots? And why did ground-breaking lead tenor Billy Williams die a forgotten man?

We know that the great falsetto master Claude Jeter of the Swan Silvertones got his chops from the brilliant Wilfred “Billy” Williams, helmsman for the Charioteers. In October 1946 the Charioteers switched over to the new Philco Network (ABC) and appeared sporadically on *Philco Radio Time*. But they had to wait nineteen years before breaking the “race” record charts with the Ink Spots’ nugget “A kiss and a rose”

on Columbia issued in 1949. Even then they had to contend with strong competition from the Orioles. Five months later Billy Williams quit to form his own group, the Billy Williams Quartet where he waxed some solid rhythm & blues sides like “The Honeydripper” during the Golden Age of vocal quartet.

It all began when Dr. Howard Daniel, having graduated from Northwestern University in 1929 went to Wilberforce College to teach music. Wilberforce College, situated east of Dayton, Ohio, off Route 35, brags about being the first African-American college in the U.S. Daniel organized a quartet to sing folk songs and spirituals at Glee Club meetings. He called the quartet the Harmony Four (believed to have no connection with the unit who sang on radio in Frederick.) The Harmony Four would sit around on campus walls singing harmonies for fun. The group consisted of Daniel, trainer/bass, Pete Leubers, second tenor, John W. Harewood (born December 8, 1909 in Cambridge, Ohio), baritone, and Wilfred “Billy” Williams (born in Waco, Texas on December 28, 1910), lead tenor.

Wilberforce College had gained much renown with their resident singing group, the Wilberforce College Octet made up of four men and four women. The Octet toured and enjoyed radio work. The Mills Brothers from Piqua north of Dayton were also enjoying radio work over WLW in Cincinnati, and the Harmony Four got a chance to tune in. The Harmony Four / Charioteers would become both fans and friends of the Mills Brothers who quite naturally became role models for the group. The principal difference between the two groups was that the Mills Brothers adopted a cheerful, almost comic side to their repertoire, while earlier on the Charioteers adhered to a spirited jubilee-gospel approach.

The Harmony Four beat out all the local competition, both black and white, in no time at all. Some time during 1934 an All-Ohio State Quartet Singing contest was set up, sponsored by the Knights of Columbus. The event was open to both black and white units. The College Octet was away touring at this time. College President Wilbert Jones asked Daniel to enter the Harmony Four in place of the Octet. The group at this point had only fully mastered two songs, “Steal away to Jesus” — described as an old American Negro melody — and the traditional “Let the church roll on” first recorded by the Norfolk Jubilees in 1926.

Twenty-eight quartets entered the competition, and the Harmony Four came out tops. “Steal away to Jesus,” in its original “competition” arrangement, was later recorded by the Harmony Four for The Library of Congress and dedicated to the governor of the state. The Charioteers recorded the song commercially for Brunswick five years down the line. Winning first prize put the group on the radio—WLW out of Cincinnati, the station where they had picked up the Mills Brothers’ broadcasts. The other half of the winning prize was a twelve-month contract with Decca Records where they conducted one session as the Charioteers, the name WLW music director Grace Raines had gleaned from the old spiritual “Swing low, sweet chariot.”

Two 78s were issued, label-copied as by “Male quartet with piano accompaniment.” The pianist was probably a young German musician hired in New York. The WLW gig was a daily one which meant that Daniel, now the groups “roadie,” guardian and manager, had to drive the outfit down to Cincinnati in the wee hours of the morning every day to arrive at 7 a.m. The Charioteers (a name they now used with regularity) shared their program with Western show host Paul McCarmody. The boys (who were still all in school) had to be back in class by 10 a.m. The show lasted almost

2 1/2 years. During this period they also appeared sporadically on a midnight program called "Moon River" which often meant two trips a day.

At WLW the Charioteers got to meet the three Riff Brothers who appeared on the Rhythm Club show. The Riff Brothers later evolved into the Ink Spots. By 1936 the Charioteers had graduated and were in New York doing a fifteen-minute show over W.O.R., the Mutual Network, each Sunday. Daniel had quit his job at Wilberforce to sing bass with the group. The outfit's managerial duties were taken on by Jean Goldkette, a promoter they had met at W.O.R.

In New York radio and concert appearances filled up most of the group's time, leaving nothing for studio recording. In 1937 they got a chance to cut a number of V-Disc sides, some with Bing Crosby and Pearl Bailey. One of these, "My Lord, what a morning" "I've got a home in that rock," was particularly beautiful. It was cut as a medley for a disc entitled "The Fleet's In." In September 1947 the Charioteers recorded "I've got a home in that rock" again with very little rearrangement except for the fact that Frank Sinatra was singing lead. To my mind, this is Frank Sinatra's best and most soulful record. Sinatra was more than familiar with the Charioteers at that point, having recorded with them on the song "Lily Belle" in 1945.

By January 1938 the Charioteers were recording for Vocalion. In April 1938 they recorded beautifully behind Maxine Sullivan on "Dark eyes" and with Fletcher Henderson on the swinging "Sing you sinners." At just about this point the Charioteers recorded their first of three transcription sessions for Associated on 16" discs—four of these are included on this collection—only one disc from this session has been left out.

In October 1938 the group appeared briefly on the label's "parent" imprint, Brunswick. Back on Vocalion, the Charioteers recorded behind Mildred Bailey singing "Don't dally with he devil" in August 1939. Weeks later the Charioteers appeared behind Mildred Bailey again, this time on Okeh "serenading" behind the beautiful "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." The Brunswick/Vocalion conglomerate was by now in the process of being taken over by the Columbia/Okeh conglomerate. This did not phase Brunswick who issued two excellent jubilee gospel releases on the Charioteers, now ascribed as the Southern Male Quartet, during the fall of 1939. This was followed by the reissue of the Mildred Bailey / Charioteers sides.

A second Wilberforce group, the Oleanders, had come up after the Charioteers' departure from the college. By the late 1930s they also had moved to New York. During the switch to Columbia, two of the Charioteers, now weary of the road and yearning for a normal life of day-to-day domesticity, returned to Ohio. Peter Laubers became a bank teller in Cincinnati and John Harewood a high school principal in Dayton. Daniel took two singers from the Oleanders to replace them. Second tenor Edward Jackson replaced Laubers and baritone Ira Williams replaced Harewood. While recording for Vocalion, pianist Teddy Wilson often accompanied the Charioteers. When the group switched to Columbia, pianist Jimmy Sherman occupied the piano bench.

Now begins the long ten-year Columbia tenure of the Charioteers during which time they recorded behind Maxine Sullivan and Fletcher Henderson again on the Okeh subsidiary in 1941. In March of that year the group conducted their second transcription session with Associated. Transcriptions were made as promos to send out to radio stations for air play. Air play lead, hopefully, to a string of engagements.

Of the March 1941 sessions, three discs have sadly been excluded from this collection. The third and last transcription session at Associated was held on April 27th,

1944 and was mainly a gospel singing one. Much of the material is believed to have shown up on 78 RPM extended play format on the Riverside label. In February 1948 the group smoozed behind Buddy Clark on the melodic "Now is the hour."

In October 1949 the outfit were back with Pearl Bailey on the Columbia Harmony subsidiary. A rehash of "Who" was waxed. By now the glue that had held the group together for so long was coming unstuck. The success of "A kiss and a rose" had drawn Billy Williams into a solo career. Moving over to Frank Walker's MGM label on Seventh Avenue, "Billy" Williams set up a quartet with himself on lead tenor, John Bell, second tenor, Claude Riddick, baritone, and Eugene Dixon, bass. The outfit became a regular feature on "Your Show of Shows" with Sid Caesar, a variety program on which Woody Allen did much of the writing.

Meanwhile, the Charioteers stumbled on with Billy's replacement, Herbert Dickerson from Philadelphia. He was eventually replaced by Henry King. The group then was composed of Henry King, lead tenor, Bob Bowers, second tenor, Ira Williams, baritone, and Howard Daniel, bass. The new Charioteers label-hopped from Keystone to Josie, RCA, Tuxedo and finally to MGM in 1957. The outfit stopped touring, tired of the road and being away from family. Howard Daniel's wife had pleaded with him to quit, but it did not take too much persuasion.

Back in Ohio, Daniel resumed singing as a soloist at Carter's AME Church. He has now sadly passed. John W. Harewood died on August 1st, 2000 in Dayton. The Charioteers had stayed together for twenty-six years, twenty-two of them spent cutting seventy-six singles releases. The Billy Williams quartet continued to record the kinds of records Billy's fans had come to expect. In 1952 he switched to Mercury where he continued to mix pop and old standards and even country into his repertoire. In 1954 he switched to Coral and with Alan Freed's support began to cut R&B records. Some were extremely fine, like "I wanna hug you, kiss you" and "The glory of love."

Ollie Jones of the Ravens spent some time in the Coral group. In early 1956 Billy Williams started making solo recordings. Sometimes his group was used to background. But it was 1957 that turned out to be Billy's bumper year. Slim Green had waxed the original sepia version of "I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter" in 1935 for Decca. Now, twenty-two years later, Billy Williams cut loose with a cover that broke into the Billboard Jockey & R&B charts, climbing to the number nine spot at the close of July. Like "A kiss and a rose," the tune was pop-oriented and white-chart friendly, which probably explains its runaway sales.

Although Billy Williams was a jubilee gospel singer by training, he was smart enough to know where the real money was coming from. In July 1957 Billy Williams appeared on Alan Freed's ABC telecast of The Big Beat. The Billy Williams segment of him singing "I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter" (supported by his quartet) could not help but stoke the healthy sales figures. He never repeated this instant success ever again. He cut his last record for Coral at the close of the decade. Strangely, it was Felix Arndt's old 1916 chestnut "Nola" which sold very well for Billy despite the fact that he was up against the pale-faced version by the Morgan Brothers on MGM. Billy Williams would have gone on to ever greater realms of success had it not been for diabetes, the consequences of which led to him losing his voice. Retiring to Chicago, he took up social work. He died in The Windy City on October 12th, 1972. Relegated to obscurity, he was living in a donated room in the basement of a church. It was some while before he was found. Then the city authorities had problems finding

someone to claim the body or to provide a decent burial. Billy Williams had gone from riches to rags to erasure.

This CD takes you back to a time when airtight harmony was a thriving art form. Sit back and enjoy.

— Opal Louis Nations & Peter Grendysa
March 2005

**Playlist for:
The Charioters / Dixie Songsters – Associated Transcriptions
ACR 221 – Scheduled for release August 2005**

Dixie Songsters *AA-1836 - *60.067B May 10th, 1938**

1. Sing a song of sixpence
2. Running wild
3. Down south
4. Dinah

Dixie Songsters AA-1833 – 60.064B May 10th 1938

5. Sweet Georgia Brown
6. Stormy weather
7. I'm getting sentimental over you
8. Way down yonder in New Orleans

Charioteers 22-2774 – 60-272B March 17th, 1941**

9. Tumbling tumbleweeds
10. The glory road
11. Mighty like a rose

Dixie Songsters AA-1835 – 60.066B May 10th 19938

12. Watermelon smilin' on the vine
13. Carry me back to old Virginny
14. Old folks at home
15. Water boy

Dixie Songsters – AA-1834 – 60.062B May 10th 1938

16. On the sentimental side
17. Honey that I love so well
18. My gal Sal
19. Darktown strutters ball
20. Ride, red, ride

Charioteers – 22-2773 – 60.272A March 17th 1941

21. Swing for sale
22. Careless love
23. Nobody's sweetheart
24. We won't let it happen here

*** wax number**

**** acetate number**

***** 16" Transcriptions**

The May 10th, 1938 session also includes Master AA-1837 – 60.070B

The March 17th, 1941 session also includes Masters 22-2772 – 60.271B, 22-2775 – 60.274B, and 2-2776 – 627B on 12" masters

A later, third session, dated April 27th, 1944 includes two masters—60.580AB and 60.597B (master number data unknown)