

THE CASH QUARTET
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Berea College Appalachian Music Fellowship Program 2007

The Cash Quartet formed around 1956 in southern Rockcastle County, Kentucky, near the small rural community of Ottawa. They began performing over Renfro Valley's WRVK shortly after it went on the air in 1957 as part a show called the *Sinclair Sunday Serenade* sponsored by the local Sinclair Oil distributor. They continued to appear regularly during the radio station's first decade and performed occasionally on the *Gatherin'* during those years as well. The Cash Quartet also frequently sang at local and regional monthly sings and singing conventions in Kentucky, especially those in Pulaski and Laurel Counties, and they continued such work after they stopped performing over WRVK in the late-1960s.

They are one of the many amateur gospel groups that were an integral part of Kentucky's local music culture and thriving gospel scene during the twentieth century who were not interested in commercial recording. Fortunately, a few recorded performances survive on some of the *Gatherin'* shows that have been preserved in the Berea College Sound Archives. In addition, three of the four members still live in Rockcastle County along with the wife of the only deceased member, and they were all able to provide a wonderful account of the Cash Quartet's genesis and life.



The Cash Quartet (ca. 1958)

Walter Cash (1929-) initially organized the group with his wife Reba (1937-) and sister Joanne (1936-); R.H. Hamm (1919-1986), of no relation, was the fourth member to join the quartet. The personnel were all members at the local Ottawa Baptist church—what is currently the Ottawa Missionary Baptist Church. Today, Walter, Reba, and Joanne (now Joanne Brown) all still live near Ottawa and still attend the church, and R.H.'s wife, Audrey (1922-), is also still active in the church.

Walter and Joanne grew up attending Ottawa Baptist as part of a family of nine, and while they sang at home, church was where they really honed their singing skills as youngsters. They did attend singing schools, some of which were taught by Ottawa Baptist church member and Renfro Valley's Reual Thomas, but neither of them became especially fluent in reading shape-notes. They learned much more from their participation in the church's congregational singing. Walter remembers how as a young adolescent he would "gather up where the old bass singers were" and sing along, while Joanne similarly always sat in the alto section beside an accomplished alto and shape-note singer named

Dellie Hayes.¹ This hands-on experience was their primary source of singing instruction. Reba Cash grew up honing her singing at Ottawa Baptist in much the same way. While she had eight siblings, she claims that “there wasn’t any of them singing,” so the church represented her primary outlet for music as a youth. Although Walter, Joanne, and Reba all grew up together in the same church community, they did not sing together as a group until their quartet days.

Walter and Reba were married on July 16, 1954. Reba was just seventeen and Walter was twenty-four, and six weeks later he left for military service in Okinawa, Japan, for two years. While in Okinawa, Walter purchased a Japanese-made guitar for “probably about ten or twelve dollars” and learned to play on his own during his free time, especially on Sundays when he was often left alone in the barracks. He learned how to chord out of an instructional book and would often listen to religious programs being aired over the armed services radio that featured gospel quartets.

When Walter returned from Okinawa in 1956, he had become quite proficient on the guitar and, according to Reba, informed her of his desire to form a quartet. The young couple borrowed a guitar that “didn’t even have a strap on it” and recruited Joanne to sing alto with them. Their first tenor singer was another friend named Helen Albright, but she had young children and family life soon became too demanding for her to continue singing. Next they tried the current song leader at Ottawa Baptist, Dewey Roberts, but the tenor parts did not fit his vocal range. Roberts suggested R.H. Hamm, so the trio came over to the Hamm house and R.H. tried out with them, and “that was how it began with the Cash Quartet.” By late-1956, the core members of the Cash Quartet were together and singing.

Born in 1919, R.H. Hamm had grown up singing in the Ottawa Baptist community as well and, unlike the younger members, he was a trained shape-note singer. He was already well-acquainted with Walter, Reba, and Joanne long before they started singing together. Being several years their senior, he had been their Sunday school teacher when the three were teenagers. Reba and Joanne fondly remember R.H. and Audrey sponsoring many outings for the congregation’s youth, including picnics and church trips to such places as the capitol or a local prison. In many ways, the couple had long been mentors to the young trio of singers, and R.H. continued in this capacity after the formation of the Cash Quartet. According to Joanne, “he was kind of the leader of the group.” Indeed, R.H. lined up most of the group’s engagements, ran rehearsals, bought songbooks, chose material, provided transportation, paid for many of their expenses, and was essentially the one who got them the spot singing over WRVK.

When the Cash Quartet formed, R.H. had a good job working for Sinclair Oil as a product salesman and distributing fuel to a number of regional filling stations. When WVRK went on the air in May of 1957, he took it upon himself to sponsor a Sunday afternoon radio program that closely resembled a local gospel sing or singing convention in its format, featuring lineups of various non-professional groups from the area, including soloists, duets, trios, and quartets. Called the *Sinclair Sunday Serenade* and held in the big barn, the show went on the air at 3:00pm and was promoted by Lair as

being open to “anybody who loves to sing, regardless of their merits as vocalists.”² His vision was to develop the program “into an old-fashioned community sing, neighborhood type,” and assured people that there would be no “professional groups to come in to ‘show you up.’”³

R.H. Hamm hosted the *Serenade*, and although it is not entirely clear how, it appears that a portion of the broadcasts regularly featured the Cash Quartet as a “house band” of sorts. The show seems to have been a success. Two months later, the *Bugle* reported that it was “a very popular program on WRVK” and now lasted a full hour and thirty minutes. In addition, instead of being cancelled it was going to be directly incorporated into the schedule of the All-Day Sing that year.⁴

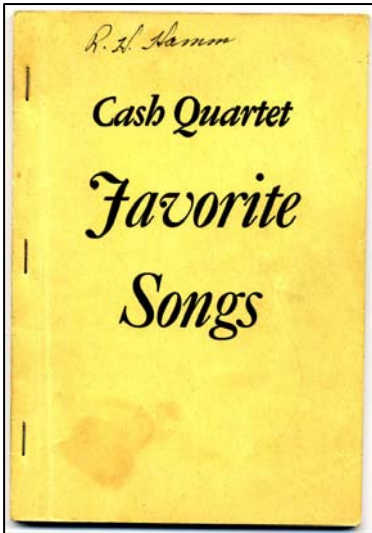
According to the surviving members of the Cash Quartet, the group had performed as a guest on the *Gatherin’* before singing over WRVK. On the first day that WRVK began broadcasting—a Sunday—R.H. convinced the group to go there to sing over the air (perhaps during the first broadcast of the *Sinclair Sunday Serenade*). As Reba recalled, they had only been singing together for a relatively short time and did not know that many songs. They decided to sing “Come Unto Me,” a gospel classic written by Charles P. Jones and one of the first songs they learned as a quartet. Shortly thereafter, they had a thirty-minute segment every Sunday afternoon over WRVK, opening with Cleavant Derricks’s “Just A Little Talk with Jesus” as their theme song and interspersing short advertisements for Sinclair with their gospel hymns. On January 26, 1958, Lair introduced them as guests on the *Gatherin’* by mentioning that they “sing each Sunday on our local radio station here in the Valley.”

All of this radio exposure required extensive rehearsing. At one point the Cash Quartet was practicing three nights a week on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays (not to mention heavy amount of singing on Sundays). Their rehearsing method was equally demanding as well. As only R.H. was comfortable sight reading shape-notes, the group had to find another way to learn material. Since Audrey was an accomplished pianist, they decided to have her play the parts on the piano while the singers memorized them one by one.

Once they all felt comfortable with their part, they would put them together and go through the song with Walter locating the key on the guitar and using a capo if necessary. In addition, R.H. was adamant that they memorize the words as well. As Reba recalled, “He thought it was unprofessional to be up there [on stage] with something stuck up in your face. You better get up there and know that song!” Once the quartet reached a point where they could make it through the entire song they might go through it twenty-five or thirty times to tighten it up. As if that was not exhausting enough, each member also had a day job. R.H. worked for Sinclair, Reba and Joanne both worked sewing fabric at a manufacturing company near Lancaster and Stanford, and Walter owned a welding shop.

The intense rehearsing apparently paid off. By February of 1958, listeners were requesting that the Cash Quartet be made regular performers on the Sunday morning *Gatherin’*. Although this never happened, audience response to the group was

overwhelmingly positive, with many letters and phone calls—sometimes during the broadcast itself—expressing listeners’ enjoyment and requesting certain songs or dedications. The quartet also began receiving requests to perform at more distant singings and singing conventions, sometimes traveling as far as Miami, Ohio, and Indianapolis. Unfortunately, they never made a commercial recording, but they did put together and sell a songbook—largely through the efforts of R.H.—called *Cash Quartet Favorite Songs* that contained some of their best-loved and most frequently-performed songs. They also once briefly shared the stage with the Chuck Wagon Gang when the group was giving a concert in Berea.



The Cash Quartet Songbook

It is unclear exactly when the Cash Quartet stopped performing over Renfro Valley. In 1962 the group was still singing regularly there, and the surviving members remembered being involved during the turbulent years of the late-1960s when Lair relinquished ownership of Renfro Valley to Hal Smith. Their departure from WRVK likely occurred somewhere around this time, but despite this the quartet continued to actively perform at area singings and conventions. They finally called it quits sometime during the seventies when the demands of the younger members’ respective families were too much to maintain active performing. For a while Audrey was able to do childcare while the group went out and performed, but it was only a matter of time before their lives became

too busy to support such a hobby. Unfortunately, Reba is the only one of the group still singing at present. Joanne lost her voice about ten years while battling a lengthy respiratory illness and Walter is currently struggling with cancer.

Three recordings from the *Gatherin’* survive which contain performances by the Cash Quartet. Their style of quartet singing is markedly and unashamedly reminiscent of the famous Chuck Wagon Gang. Not only do they have the same mixed vocal arrangement, but even the *timbre* of each voice seems to strive for semblance. The surviving members of the Cash Quartet had no reservations about citing the group as a major influence. In fact, when asked about groups other than the Chuck Wagon Gang that impacted their style, they struggled to name even one. “They’re the best,” said Audrey, and that was it.

Their choice of material was likewise largely influenced by the Chuck Wagon Gang. According to Reba and Joanne, they gleaned most of their material from Stamps-Baxter books, Chuck Wagon Gang books, and Mull’s Singing Convention books (which were also heavily weighted with Chuck Wagon songs). Of the three surviving *Gatherin’* radio recordings, two—“[I’m Finding New Joy](#)” and “[In the Sweet Forever](#)”—were recorded by the Chuck Wagon Gang. The third, “[I Want a Mansion](#),” is likely from a Stamps-Baxter songbook, but according to Joanne the group did not perform it as often as the others. Other favorite songs of the group included their theme song “[Just a Little Talk with](#)

[Jesus](#)” and [“When I Walk on the Streets of Gold,”](#) both of which the Chuck Wagon Gang also recorded.

In light of these observations, it may be tempting to simply dismiss the Cash Quartet as sound-alike of the Chuck Wagon Gang. However, their sound boasts an edge and rawness that is lacking in their professional counterpart. In particular, occasional doubling in the harmonies creates a textural shift that can be quite striking. For instance, “In the Sweet Forever,” (recorded on February 9, 1958) contains certain phrases featuring Walter (bass), R.H. (tenor), and Reba (soprano) all singing in unison in their response to Joanne’s alto lead. The first and third lines of the chorus (“In that beautiful city, some happy day” and “Look upon the beauty, fades not away”) are good examples. This sort of part-doubling does not appear in the printed versions of the song. The chorus of “I Want a Mansion” wonderfully captures Joanne’s alto voice that—through its lack of vibrato or other common effect—possesses a stark, pure quality not often found in the professional realm. The featured voice in “I’m Finding New Joy” is Reba’s soprano, which similarly displays an innocence and richness by way of its unrefined nature.

Author’s Note: Late in the course of my research Audrey Hamm presented me with several reel tapes filled with, among other things, recordings of the *Sinclair Sunday Serenade* and several demo recordings of the Cash Quartet. Subsequently, she and the surviving quartet members donated these recordings to the Berea College Sound Archives where they are available for research. Also selected portions for online listening have been added to those from the *Renfro Valley Gatherin’* noted above.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from an interview conducted by Kevin Kehrberg with Walter and Reba Cash, Joanne Brown, and Audrey Hamm on July 8, 2007.

² John Lair, “Editorial,” *Renfro Valley Bugle* (May 1957): 2.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “All-Day Sing,” *Renfro Valley Bugle* (July 1957): 1.