

Appalachian Music Fellowship Activity Final Report
Kevin Kehrberg
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**An Examination of Gospel Quartet and Sacred Music
Performances Recorded at Renfro Valley: 1940-1960**

Initial Project Objectives:

I first became fascinated with twentieth-century gospel quartet music while working as a sideman in a professional bluegrass band. One day while traveling to another performance, a friend who was also with the group introduced me to some of the lesser-known gospel quartets recorded by bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe during the 1950s. I was floored, and chill bumps began running up and down my spine. Shortly thereafter I studied Monroe's gospel quartets in depth for my Masters thesis in musicology and was exposed to a world of sacred music that I had scarcely known existed—that of southern gospel and black gospel quartets. From that point forward I knew that a main focus of my work as a music researcher had to be American gospel music and specifically that of the twentieth century. Now a Ph.D. candidate, the subject of my dissertation in progress is the music of decorated gospel music composer Albert E. Brumley.

Thus, when I began investigating the breadth of music contained within the Appalachian Sound Archives at Berea College, the sacred groups captured on the archive's recordings of radio programs produced by John Lair from Renfro Valley, Kentucky became of special interest to me.

In Appalachia and certain areas of the American South where singing schools produced a critical mass of talented singers, gospel groups and quartets became perhaps the most popular form of amateur musical engagement (see William Lynwood Montell's *Singing the Glory Down*, 1991). Local regions could often boast of several well-polished gospel groups that were essentially part-time endeavors which rarely ventured beyond their geographical base, and my guess was that a large percentage of the gospel performers that had been preserved on Berea's Renfro Valley broadcast recordings fit such a description.

I had various initial goals in studying these groups and their recorded performances within the context of Renfro Valley. I hoped that an analysis of the various performing styles would not only be revealing from a broader point of view of quartet style and repertory, but also that with certain groups it would inform an understanding of stylistic similarities and differences within a fairly concentrated region and perhaps even along racial lines.

By researching the historical background of these performers, my goal was to fashion a more complete story of John Lair's Renfro Valley as well as the local gospel music community that surrounded it. Furthermore, I wanted to study the importance of gospel music and specifically gospel quartet music as part of the entertainment featured at Renfro Valley, especially on programs such as the *Gatherin'*, but also through other events such as the annual All-Day Singing which at times was coupled with a national gospel quartet contest. Such investigation would hopefully provide more context concerning these recordings in particular and the role of sacred music at Renfro Valley in general.

On another level, I have long been unhappy with the lack of attention paid to the gospel music represented by these recordings. With the exception of Sacred Harp music and Old Regular Baptist singing, much Appalachian sacred musical expression is often overlooked and under-recognized in favor of the more “secular” manifestations of traditional music (fiddle tunes, ballads, etc.). This imbalance calls to mind the familiar anecdote of the academic ballad collector asking his performers to skip over the gospel numbers and get to the ballads. In reality, sacred songs and practices form an important part of the complete cultural legacy that we equate with the Appalachian region. The overwhelming ratio of gospel songs in the repertoires of those that pioneered the commercialization of traditional music (the Carter Family, Monroe Brothers, Mainer’s Mountaineers, etc.) helps testify to this as well.

Finally, I knew that the subject of my dissertation research, Albert E. Brumley had worked with John Lair on publishing the first edition of the *Renfro Valley Hymn Book*. I wanted to explore this connection in more detail and find out if Brumley was involved in other ways at Renfro Valley. I was also curious about the ways in which Renfro Valley had become involved with other aspects of the southern gospel music industry.

Research

Once I began, I quickly realized that it would be necessary to divide my work into two phases. I made the performers that had been preserved on recordings in the sound archive my primary focus. My secondary focus was researching the history and development of various gospel music events at Renfro Valley, specifically the annual all-night and all-day gospel sings and the quartet contests of the 1940s and 1950s.

Regarding the recordings, I decided to limit my research to those groups whose recordings dated from 1960 or before. The reasons for this were manifold. First, I wanted to focus on the formative years of Renfro Valley before John Lair temporarily relinquished his ownership in the late-1960s. Second, Berea possesses several quartet recordings from 1940 through 1960, but between 1961 and 1976 there exists only one quartet recording, and it is from 1965. Rather than include this one isolated example, I chose to use 1960 as a stopping point, thereby retaining some semblance of chronological continuity. As for the 1970s recordings, not only are they after Renfro Valley’s “mid-life crisis,” but they also mostly consist of staff quartets whose members at any one time may have been entirely different.

Gospel Quartet Singing at Renfro Valley

A select group of artists quickly emerged that dominated the collection of recordings I had chosen to examine. One of the most prominent figures was [Reual Thomas](#) (1906/7-1959), an accomplished quartet singer and active rural singing school teacher who was involved in a surprising myriad of capacities at Renfro Valley for almost twenty years until shortly before his death. A sampling of his various duties included leading quartets, helping conduct radio rehearsals, booking agent, bringing area singing classes to Renfro Valley for performances, organizing the quartet contests, leading the All-Night and All-Day Sing, and emceeing shows in Lair’s absence. Thomas was so involved that one historian has gone so far as to call him Lair’s “right hand man.”¹ Other prominent gospel quartets from Renfro Valley’s first decades whose performances have been preserved were staff quartets, or quartets formed from individual Renfro Valley cast members that actually experienced a life of their own. I investigated the two most popular and enduring of these groups, the [Rusty Gate Quartet](#) and the [Gloryland Quartet](#).

There was one other quartet from the late-1950s with a few recorded performances in my designated collection. The [Cash Quartet](#) was a local quartet from Ottawa, Kentucky, in southern Rockcastle County. Their primary involvement at Renfro Valley was through a weekly radio program on station WRVK. Beginning in 1957, purportedly the day WRVK first went on the air, the Cash Quartet sang gospel hymns and did advertisements for their sponsor, Sinclair Oil, for thirty minutes every Sunday afternoon. Their show apparently lasted for at least a decade, and they also occasionally appeared on the Renfro Valley *Gatherin'*. Their performance recordings in the Berea Sound Archives are from the latter program.

There were four additional quartet recordings that technically fit within my limitations, but that I declined to investigate in depth. Two are of a group called the Bluegrass Quartet, an African-American male group from Richmond, Kentucky, that performed at Renfro Valley's first Red Bud and Music Festival in April of 1946. Lair organized this festival with the help of Bascom Lamar Lunsford as a showcase for amateur and "folk" talent, and one of the groups featured was an African-American choir from Richmond High School led by Andrew Miller. The choir sang gospel music, and it is highly likely that the quartet was simply an aggregation drawn from the better singers in the choir. Although the recordings of the group are fascinating, they did not entirely fit within the focus of my research. The other two additional recordings are by two different groups from Knoxville, Tennessee, known as the Melody Aires Quartet and the Soul Savers Quartet. Both had sung at the 1959 All-Day Singing and were in Renfro Valley a couple weeks later to perform on the *Gatherin'*. Because the two recordings are isolated guest performances, I elected not to research the artists.

Gospel Music Events at Renfro Valley

It is not exactly clear when Renfro Valley held its first "All-Day Singing and Dinner on the Grounds," but by 1943 it was an annual event occurring during the first Sunday in August. Led by Reual Thomas in its first years, the All-Day Singing was, according to Lair, a continuation of the annual Rockcastle County Singing Convention that had started years ago. At these events, individuals would gather at Renfro Valley for an all-day affair featuring performances by various local singing groups (quartets, trios, etc.) and area church choirs as well as general group singing. The only break in the music was to partake in a community meal that, according to some accounts, involved a 1,000-foot table spread with food brought by those in attendance. In 1946, Lair began incorporating an "all-night" component to the All-Day Singing, basically extending the festivities into the previous evening. The gospel music would often start around midnight and last until the four or five in the morning, at which time a sunrise service was held followed by a short break before the *Gatherin'* broadcast and the All-Day Singing.

In addition, Lair incorporated a national amateur quartet contest as part of the weekend during a handful of various years in the 40s, 50s, and 60s. First occurring in 1944, these contests often involved regional preliminaries that culminated in a final round held at Renfro Valley where groups would compete for cash prizes and recording contracts. In the 1940s, these regional contests were held in cities where Lair's radio sponsor, Ballard and Ballard baking products, had regional offices. In the 1950s it was certain CBS affiliate stations that hosted them. Reual Thomas, who was often in charge of organizing these huge events along with the Singing, spent months traveling and judging the preliminaries during the contest's first years. Soon they simply assigned judging duties to the various radio stations holding these regional contests. Over the years, judges of the championship rounds at Renfro Valley included prominent figures in music, radio, and/or gospel circles such as Bascom Lamar Lunsford, Harold Safford (WLS), George Keiffer Vaughan, Vep Ellis, and Dwight Brock. Unfortunately, these

contests appear to have been critically subject to Renfro Valley's sponsorship status, and although Lair tried to resurrect the event in 1962, after the mid-50s the contests were effectively finished.

While the contest may have depended on sponsorship, the All-Night and All-Day Singings did not. These singings became consistently the biggest annual events at Renfro Valley, in the early years often breaking attendance records and achieving crowds of around 10,000. It appears that the all-time record was set during the 1949 All-Night and All-Day Singing, at which Lair claimed the total attendance topped 15,000 people. This event has continued in some form or another to this day, and it still draws the biggest annual crowds to Renfro Valley. However, audience participation is basically nonexistent, with the event being essentially a marathon five-hour evening concert featuring professional gospel music entertainment.

Resources and Methodology

My research for this project involved various methodologies. Not only did I study the audio recordings and the context of the artists' performances, but I also scoured the voluminous amount of written transcripts of John Lair's radio and television productions. These included programs that stretched over decades such as the *Renfro Valley Barn Dance* and the *Gatherin'* as well as shows with shorter runs such as *Monday Night in Renfro Valley* and the *Renfro Valley Folks* television programs. All of these scripts have been meticulously catalogued by the wonderful staff at Berea College's Special Collections.

Other invaluable resources contained within Berea's John Lair Papers included repertoire lists for a couple of the quartets and boxes of correspondence concerning Renfro Valley's quartet contests and the publication of the *Renfro Valley Hymn Book*. I also looked through years and years of Lair's monthly newspaper, the *Renfro Valley Bugle*, most issues of which are available via microfilm at the University of Kentucky's William T. Young Library. The *Bugle* turned out to be an incredible source of information about both performers as well as the All-Day Singings, quartet contests, and other gospel music events held at or sponsored by Renfro Valley.

Undoubtedly, the most fruitful (and exciting) aspect of my research was speaking in person or via telephone with various individuals associated with Renfro Valley and/or the artists in question. I was able to interview multiple individuals that were part of the "first generation" of talent at Renfro Valley, including Linda Martin, Jean Clark (widow of the late Manuel "Old Joe" Clark), and Virginia Sutton. John Lair's daughter Ann Lair Henderson was also a wonderful resource. Jim Gaskin, current host of the *Gatherin'* and close associate of Lair, was of immense help.

I was also thrilled to learn that three of the four members of the Cash Quartet were still living near Ottawa, Kentucky, in the same area as the spouse of the fourth member. All four were gracious enough to offer me an interview with all of them over lunch one Sunday afternoon. It was an experience I shall not soon forget. Additionally, they had in their possession photographs, set lists, and makeshift songbooks harkening back to their singing days. Perhaps the most remarkable items in the possession of the widow, Audrey Hamm, were ten reel-to-reel tapes that her late husband R.H.—tenor singer for the quartet and host of the WRVK radio show—had stored away years ago. The tapes contained everything from numerous Cash Quartet demo performances and tapings of their radio program to recordings of other amateur gospel groups on WRVK to taped local church services and WRVK farm reports. In a word, it was a windfall of material. Audrey and the surviving quartet members subsequently donated these

recordings to the Berea College Sound Archives where they are now available for research. Also selected portions for online listening have been added to the *Renfro Valley Gatherin'* performances referenced in my separate [Cash Quartet](#) profile.

Conclusions, Observations, and Areas for Further Research

One significant preliminary conclusion reached as a result of my fellowship work is that Renfro Valley's incorporation of and involvement with gospel music was quite different from its counterparts such as the *Grand Ole Opry*, the *WLS National Barn Dance*, or the *WWVA Jamboree*. Although religious singing and quartets were certainly an important ingredient of much country music radio, involvement with such music did not stretch beyond strictly entertainment. At Renfro Valley, however, it emerges that Lair was genuinely interested in having Renfro Valley become a part of the local gospel music community. So much of the organization's involvement with gospel music represents an effort to include and support local, amateur gospel singing. The All-Day Singing and Dinner on the Grounds, the amateur gospel quartet contests, the Renfro Valley singing school in 1948, Reual Thomas's summer singings in the 1950s, R.H. Hamm's *Sinclair Serenade*—all of these events cater toward grassroots gospel music.

Even on his national radio programs, Lair would make a point to occasionally feature Reual Thomas's rural singing school classes or local talent like the Cash Quartet right next to his professional entertainers. Renfro Valley's only flirtation with professional gospel music entertainment might have been Reual Thomas's Four Tones quartet, but the group only lasted a matter of months. Lair wanted to create a feeling of family, familiarity, and a community, not over the airwaves but in the Valley itself. One way for him to do so was to engage Renfro Valley in the local gospel music scene both through his employees and by hosting events.

I am very pleased with the level at which I met my initial objectives. Not only did my work illuminate a different angle of John Lair's Renfro Valley, but it provided a fresh look into the local gospel music community that surrounded it as well. By studying the repertoire of various quartets and the papers concerning the publication of the *Renfro Valley Hymn Book*, I gained valuable insight into the influence and work of my dissertation subject, Albert E. Brumley. My project produced several unseen benefits as well, such as discovering an early recording of a shape-note choir in the archive that happened to be one of Reual Thomas's singing school classes. I also established contact with Clay Colson, one of Thomas's quartet members from the 1940s who is now ninety years old. Perhaps of most importance, I was able to discover and connect with the Cash Quartet, a group that might have fallen into obscurity despite its important involvement with both Renfro Valley and the local gospel music community.

My only regret is that I was not able to keep working for a third month. Perhaps unsurprisingly, I ended up with too much material to synthesize it all in a succinct way, and additional time would have helped in fleshing out more of my research. This is most apparent with my research on Renfro Valley's All-Day Singings and quartet contests. I have enough information to compose an extensive and interesting history, but due to time constraints this task must remain unfinished at present. However, I am planning to present a conference paper in the spring of 2008 that will enable me to finish the job. Other future objectives connected to this project involve interviewing Clay Colson in the near future and working with Audrey Hamm in surveying the contents of her audio materials.

There are various avenues for future research involving this subject matter. While it is fairly apparent that Lair wanted to connect Renfro Valley with the local gospel music community, the motives behind this desire are not altogether clear. Another potentially fruitful subject to examine would be African American gospel music at Renfro Valley. Although the quartet contest rules contained a provision implying that it was open to black as well as white groups, I was not able to uncover any record of an African-American gospel group performing at Renfro Valley other than the Bluegrass Quartet mentioned above. Several of the people I interviewed were surprised when I mentioned this, but yet they could not recall ever seeing such a performer at Renfro Valley. An examination to see if this pattern remained unchanged after the 1960s would be very telling. The reel tapes from the Hamm family featuring the Cash Quartet present still another option. They contain some of the only recordings of WRVK broadcasts from the first decade of the station's life, and they also offer a variety of remarkable performances by amateur gospel groups from Rockcastle and Laurel counties. In this way, they could contribute to a study of amateur gospel music in south-eastern Kentucky, covering territory left untouched by Lynwodd Montell's well-known monograph.

Renfro Valley represents an interesting cultural intersection by way of being a hub for professional country music entertainment within a rural area. John Lair wanted to present his listeners with a community that harkened back to an older way of life, but I would argue he also genuinely desired for the physical community of Renfro Valley to do the same. He did not want it to be a front, and he invited his listeners to come with him and be a part of that old-time rural community...via a national network facilitated by one of the twentieth century's crowning technological achievements—radio. Renfro Valley provides a unique case study in cultural collision between national community and local community, and the gospel music of Renfro Valley is one lens—an important lens no less—from which one can view this collision.

¹ Pete Stamper, *It All Happened in Renfro Valley* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 56.