

William Edmondson: Spokane Boy to Network Radio Star

by
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The Southernaires were one of the most popular black quartets during radio's Golden Age, during which there was abundant competition including Wings Over Jordan, the Golden Gate Jubilee Quartet, and the Utica Jubilee Singers. They hit the airwaves in February, 1930, and were still on the air at least into 1952. Their lineup changed over the decades and by the time the quartet quietly faded from the scene, only one original member still remained. That member was William Edmondson and, unlike all his band mates who were from the South, he grew up in the Pacific Northwest, specifically Spokane, Washington. His decades-long radio career has for too long been overlooked and it is time Edmondson receive due recognition.

William Edmondson was born October 15, 1902 in Spokane, a bustling city of 36,000 whose population had nearly doubled in the prior decade. Details of his life are unknown until he reached college, presumably in the early '20s and whereupon he studied at Spokane College, a Northwest Norwegian Lutheran institution that closed its doors in 1929.

After leaving Spokane College Edmondson joined touring troupes in 1923 and spent much of the decade honing his singing and acting skills before settling in Harlem at the end of the decade at the same time as the Harlem Renaissance was winding down. There he got involved with the Lafayette Players, a notable black theater troupe which was based out of the Lafayette Theater. Around the same time he appeared in two films by Oscar Micheaux, regarded as the first African-American producer of feature-length films. Edmondson's film credits under Micheaux included *The Millionaire* (1927) and *Thirty Years Later* (1928). He also appeared in *The Midnight Ace* (1928), the only production by Oscar Micheaux's brother, Swain Micheaux.

The seeds of the Southernaires quartet, the band with which Edmondson would perform for over two decades, were sewn years before their formation when the members' paths crossed while singing on the college circuit and working in Harlem's black theater industry. Edmondson's connection came when working a production with future Southernaire Lowell Peters. Peters, incidentally, had earlier met future quartet-mate Homer Smith while on a college vocal tour. In late 1929 Edmondson ran into Smith in front of the Lafayette Theater, a prominent Harlem theater which staged all-black productions for black audiences to mixed success. The two shared their ideas of forming a musical quartet. The aforementioned Lowell Peters was invited to join as was Jay Stone Toney, Smith's roommate.

In December, 1929, Smith (tenor), Peters (tenor), Toney (baritone), and Edmondson (bass) locked themselves away for three months, forsaking all other responsibilities to rehearse and hone their vocal teamwork. Emerging from their practices in the basement of the Williams Institutional C.M.E. Church in Harlem, the quartet almost immediately landed a slot on radio. After a couple concerts they hit the airwaves on WMCA's *Goodwin's Goodtimers* in February, 1930. Over the next few months they also appeared on WRNY, WGBS, WOR, and most importantly WAAF, NBC Red's New York affiliate. Their relationship with NBC (and later ABC after the Blue network was sold off) would last into the early 1950s.

During their first three years on the air they appeared at different times on *RKO Theatre of the Air*, *Major Bowe's Capitol Family*, *Visits with Uncle Ben in His Cabin*, *Slow River*, *Harlem Fantasy*, *The New Mollie Show*, and *Rocking Chair Memories*, along with various slots under their own name. The Southernaires also provided the music for three programs written by Carlton Moss, radio's first black drama writer. These Moss productions were *Careless Love*, *Folks From Dixie*, and *Meetin' House* and aired between 1930 and 1936.

The Southernaires' Sunday morning gospel show, originally entitled *Southland Sketches* and later just taking the quartet's name, was their core broadcast, the showcase for their gospel harmonies for which they were so fondly remembered. After their fame had subsided somewhat and the group was no longer in multiple programs every week, they held on to their Sabbath slot against all comers.

Despite the Southernaires', Edmondson did not give up all acting aspirations. In 1933, when the Southernaires won a spot providing music for *The New Mollie Show*, which aired Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays over WEA, Edmondson earned an additional role as the show's master of ceremonies. He was also chosen to present a feature on the show entitled "The Comic Side of the News." A year later the Southernaires provided music for a short Ethel Waters film called *Bubbling Over*. Edmondson also won a small acting part in the picture.

In addition to song and comedy Edmondson tried his hand at dramatic roles. The first such documented role was on an episode of NBC's *Magic Key*, a series relayed to over 100 stations. The particular episode was "David the Giant Killer," aired in late June, 1938, and was based on the biblical story of David and Goliath. The broadcast featured William Edmondson as Jonathan as well as fellow Southernaire Homer Smith as David. A few days later on June 23, Edmondson once again received a prime time role on a broadcast called "In Abraham's Bosom" broadcast over the Blue network. The program was directed by James Church and featured music by the Southernaires and the Juanita Hall choir. The script was based on a Pulitzer prize-winning play from the mid-1920s.

"In Abraham's Bosom" is the story of Abe McCranie, an African-American man bent on providing educations to black boys in the oppressive environment of the Reconstruction-era South. The radio play was cast entirely by members of the Negro Actors' Guild of America, three of whom were also members of the Southernaires. William Edmondson was cast as Bud Gaskins, Homer Smith as Puny Avery, and J. Stone Toney as Douglass McCranie. Their parts were minor and critics called their performances "creditable." Such an underwhelming response perhaps explains why they were not featured in more future dramatic productions.

Despite these forays, singing remained the focus of Edmondson's career through the '30s, '40s, and into the early '50s. As membership turned over, Edmondson slowly became the center of the Southernaires. In 1940 the group's accompanist and arranger, Clarence Jones, fell ill and was replaced by Spencer Odom. In 1942 Homer Smith was drafted into the Coast Guard and would forge a separate musical career after leaving the armed forces. His replacement was Ray Yeates, an old friend of Edmondson's from their days on the stage's "Blackbirds of 1928." In 1948 Jay Toney died of a heart attack while the band was touring in Iowa. He was soon replaced with William Franklin, a graduate the Chicago Conservatory of Music.

The Southernaires sang on, finishing out the decade on radio and on tour before being ignominiously dropped by the networks in 1950. In 1951 the Southernaires returned briefly to the airwaves, by now featuring only William Edmondson of the four founding members. The new program dropped their tried-and-true spirituals and reworked their repertoire with popular ballads and more modern tunes. The final references this author could find on the quartet was a 1952 radio appearance and a record released in 1953 on Rudder Records featuring the songs “Baby What You're Doing To Me” and “For You, For You, For You.”

There is no evidence at this time that Edmondson continued to pursue music after the final incarnation of the Southernaires faded from the musical scene. He pursued at least one dramatic radio project entitled *Opportunity Unlimited*. Broadcast around New York state in 1953, the show was a series of scripts dramatizing episodes of African-American employment discrimination. Beyond this radio effort, Edmondson resumed his acting career, this time on the small screen, making the first of a string of television appearances on an episode of a New York police show called *The Naked City*. He went on to make scattered appearances on such television classics as *Richard Diamond, Private Detective*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Bonanza*. He seems to have closed out a ten-year television run at the age of 66 with an appearance on a 1968 episode of *The Flying Nun*.

William Edmondson passed away on May 28, 1979, in Los Angeles. His legacy as an early black film and stage actor and popular singer for the long-running Southernaires quartet has been largely forgotten, those entertainment fields having a small number of followers today. Hopefully this short retrospective of Edmondson's career will assure him his due respect among fans of the Golden Age of radio.

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The Southernaires from l to r: Homer Smith, Lowell Peters, Jay Toney, and William Edmondson.
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