

THE KING SISTERS :

A CHAPTER FROM THE HISTORY OF HARMONY

By David W. McCain

The recent death of Yvonne King of the King Sisters prompted me once again to observe that when you trace “the history of harmony” back to its roots, those roots more often than not end with the names of Martha, Connie and Vet Boswell. Like the Andrews Sisters, the King Sisters admired and were inspired by the Boswells and went on to develop their own particular blend and style which carried them to well-deserved fame and fortune.

The rich harmonies of the King Sisters are a delight to experience, and to me they are the most musically interesting female harmony group after the Boswells. A quartette, the King Sisters had a full-bodied blend reminiscent of the Boswells. (The Boswells always sound like more than three voices to me because of the heaviness and depth of both Martha and Connie’s contralto lines). It’s interesting to note that in 1944 Connie (by then she was “Connee”) told John Lucas for a *Downbeat* cover story that originally the Boswells had wanted to form a quartette, and how they had searched for someone to take the fourth part! Lucas rather understatedly surmised, “Fortunately, I think, they found no one who satisfied their requirements.” Maybe their search for a fourth voice was because they had been raised on the barbershop quartette singing of Mama and Papa Boswell with their Uncle Charlie and Aunt Mattie (two brothers who had married two sisters), so the thought of creating a vocal trio was at first rather foreign to them.



The King Sisters achieved national fame with the voices of Luise, Alyce, Donna and Yvonne, but the group began as a trio comprised of the three eldest sisters (Maxine, Luise and Alyce). Both Alyce and Yvonne were to make occasional solo records, but not with the

frequency that Connee Boswell recorded during her tenure with sisters Martha and Vet. Alyce King's solo work puts me in mind of Connee: her Bluebird recordings of *How Green Was My Valley* and *I'm Glad There Is You* display a purity of tone mixed with the warmth and sensuous delivery that were such hallmarks of Connee's ballad singing. Writer Joseph F. Laredo described Alyce as "blessed with a lovely, cello-like voice, uniquely deep and resonant for a female vocalist, and might have gone on to great success as a solo artist had she not deferred to family loyalty." Laredo also related how the Horace Heidt Orchestra and the King Sisters were signed for a prestigious radio sponsor in New York—the Stewart Warner Company—chiefly on the strength of Alyce's solos. Alyce King's looks and voice were definitely star quality, and in 1936 she appeared in a bit part as a nightclub singer in the Universal film *Nobody's Fool* (the stars were Edward Everett Horton, Glenda Farrell and Cesar Romero). For the same studio and around the same time, the Four King Sisters made their very first film appearance—which was unbilled—in a feature called *Crash Donovan*.

There were a total of eight King siblings, beginning with eldest brother Karleton, followed by Maxine, Louise, Alice, ("Luise" and "Alyce" came later), Donna, Yvonne, Billy and baby sister Marilyn. Marilyn replaced Donna in their later career, and she is the only King sister still living.

The King Sisters (as a trio) began their radio career on station KLX in Oakland, California in 1931. Their real surname was Driggs, and they grabbed the name "King" from the full name of their father, William King Driggs. Any singing team, amateur or professional, male, female or mixed, in 1931 would certainly have been aware that a new era had dawned in the realm of vocal harmony after hearing the Boswell Sisters. I initially decided to explore the Boswell/King connection in 1996, when "the history of harmony" was egregiously skewed by the Associated Press obituary of Alyce King Clarke. AP stories are picked up by countless news services and publications across the world, and the following is a segment of what went out over the wire in 1996:

Alyce King Clarke, A Singing Sister, 80

LOS ANGELES, Aug. 23 (AP) – Alyce King Clarke, who sang her way through the Depression and most of the next five decades as part of the King Sisters, died on Wednesday. She was 80.

The cause was bronchial asthma.

Ms. Clarke was born in Payson, Utah, the fourth of Pearl and William King Driggs's eight children. Her father was a voice teacher and classical musician who trained his children to play instruments. He also booked them for shows around the West as "The Driggs Family of Entertainers."

To increase the family income during the Depression, Ms. Clarke and two sisters, Maxine and Louise, spun off into the Boswell Sisters. When Maxine retired, Donna and Yvonne joined. Then with another sister, Marilyn, and a friend, the group billed itself as the Six King Sisters, appearing with Horace Heidt's band in Chicago. The group had a final incarnation as the King Sisters, a quartet with Alyce, Donna, Luise and Yoonne.

Huh? Was I seeing things? "Spun off into the Boswell Sisters?" That gives the impression that the King Sisters had billed themselves as such! When I called AP, I was told that I wasn't the only fan of either group that called to point out the error. Where in the world did they get that from? What must the King Sisters themselves have thought about it?

AP also didn't get the sequence right in the subsequent configurations of the group after eldest sister Maxine left, so with some harmonious (and posthumous) assistance from Donna, Yvonne and Maxine King, I will give the information as told to me verbally or in writing by the sisters themselves.

I discovered that Donna King Conkling was a member of the Society of Singers, so I wrote to her care of that organization in September 1996. (Donna's husband, James "Jim" Conkling, was a music and broadcasting executive who helped create the Grammy Awards and had been head of artists and repertory at Capitol Records, president of Columbia Records and the first president of Warner Brothers



Records). Not long afterwards, my phone rang one evening in my New York apartment. It was Donna King, a bright and talkative lady, who was delighted to receive my letter and was only too happy to give me a little family history as well as tell me what had happened with AP. She had given the *Los Angeles Times* a statement (in writing, no less, that had even been proofread by eldest sister Maxine!) that they began their career by wanting to sound like the Boswell Sisters. Donna related how she made it a point to say at Alyce's funeral service that at no time were the King Sisters ever billed as the Boswell Sisters, which is what the AP story had conveyed.

Donna put me in touch with her sister Yvonne King Burch and also sent me a copy of a very well-researched feature story on the King Sisters published the July 21, 1995 issue of the record collecting publication *Goldmine* authored by Dana Countryman, who I subsequently contacted. I told Donna I had recently seen her, Luise, Alyce and Yvonne in a brief segment of the Sonja Henie film, *Second Fiddle* (1938) in which they sang a very swingy chorus of a number begun by (New Orleans native) Mary Healy called *I'm Sorry For Myself*. (The King Sisters were unbilled in this film, but even with just a minute or so of screen time, they give out with such a spirited arrangement that it's hard to forget them). Donna said she had never seen the film, so I copied it onto a VHS tape for her. Since Donna lived in Roseland, California and Yvonne in nearby Sacramento, she said she'd be sure to share it with her sister.

How wonderful that the King Sisters were so cooperative to their admirers! I wrote to Yvonne and followed up with a call. When I mentioned the Boswells, Yvonne, who was very spirited and vivacious over the phone, said, "Oh, the Boswells—they were REAL jazz, like Bix Beiderbecke! We all loved them!" Then she spontaneously sang several bars of *Sing A Little Jingle*, just as the Boswells had arranged it! (And "Vonnie" didn't miss one Boswellian lick!) She also told me another Boswell-inspired song they did was *Sentimental Gentleman From Georgia*, and she sang a few of the Boswell riffs from that arrangement as well. I was amazed that after so many years her memories of this particular arrangement were so accurate!

Another Boswell connection was established when I asked Yvonne (at Donna's suggestion) about Billy Burton, an old friend of the Boswells who became a very successful agent in the '40s (he was Jimmy Dorsey's manager for a few years and also had Helen Forrest, Dick Haymes and the Mary Kaye Trio as clients). Yvonne recalled that they never signed a

contract with Burton, but that he was instrumental in getting them their contract with Bluebird Records. Burton, born in New York City, was initially a violinist who later led an orchestra. He first met the Boswells in their native New Orleans, probably in 1928 when Burton was hired as orchestra leader for the New Orleans Owls, a 10-piece ensemble which included three of the Boswells' friends—clarinetist and saxophonist Pinky Vidacovich, "Deacon" Dan LeBlanc on bass, and on banjo and guitar, Joseph Hilton "Nappy" Lamare. Nappy Lamare had previously worked for Burton's orchestra in Atlantic City. He later became part of Bob Crosby's Bobcats and was guitarist on Connie Boswell's most famous recording with the Bobcats, *Martha*.

For several years Burton was close friends with the Boswells, as they were in Los Angeles and New York at the same time. Burton was struggling to further his career, and the Boswells helped him a great deal, and he regularly house-sat their apartment when they were on tour. He was a frequent dinner guest at the Boswell apartment, where more often than not he was the butt of the trio's constant practical jokes. A typical Boswell prank was described in a 1933 feature story called "Meet Radio's Nut Sisters":

Only recently, they planted a flock of vegetables in the dinner coat of Billy Burton, their orchestra leader, and when Billy, playing at a swell affair, noticed the bulge in his pockets and pulled out four carrots, his blushes outreddened the vegetables.

Billy was a witness at the (then secret) late 1935 wedding of Connie Boswell to her (and the trio's) manager, Harry Leedy, and when Leedy was hired at the prestigious Rockwell-O'Keefe agency, he was able to get Burton a job there, initially to assist him with Connie's publicity. Billy Burton's brother, Nat Burton, was the composer of *The White Cliffs Of Dover*, and he also wrote other songs, among them *Don't Let Your Love Go Wrong*—a tune recorded by the Boswell Sisters. Burton was a stage name, as the original family name was Schwartz. *Don't Let Your Love Go Wrong* was published in 1934 with credit for the lyrics listed on the sheet music as George Whiting and Nat Schwartz and music by J.C. Johnson. Both of the Burton brothers died young from heart attacks—Nat at age 43 in 1945 and Billy at 54 in 1958. Donna King recalled Billy Burton had a highly volatile temper.

Luise King Rey was still living at the time I contacted Donna and Yvonne, but her health was rapidly declining, so I didn't press her for information, although I did write to her. I was

glad to find this quote from a book by Fred Hall, the longtime host of a syndicated radio show called *Swing Thing*:

Fred Hall: *Luise, did the sisters, when they began, take inspiration from any of the other singing groups like the Boswell Sisters or the Andrews Sisters?*

Luise King: *Well, the Boswell Sisters are really our idols. That's how we got started. We used to hock every penny we had and buy their records. We kind of took over their job, they were singing at San Francisco NBC and they left and got a commercial, Chesterfield or something, really big time and went to New York City. NBC was looking for a girls' trio and we went up there and auditioned for their spot. We copied everything they did. They probably were our major influence. And then later on, I would say, when we got into the four-part harmony, I think it was the Merry Macs.*



Just to put Luise's memory in the proper historical perspective, the Boswells left KGO—the flagship station of the NBC Pacific Coast network—in January 1931 to travel to New York where they had landed a 52-week network contract with NBC . They were to appear on several special broadcasts of the *Pleasure Hour* sponsored by not Chesterfield (that happened for the Boswells the next year and was their longest running commercial program, lasting 10 months) but by Camel cigarettes.

I next called eldest sister Maxine King Thomas, who asked me to write her a letter with my questions. I did so and even enclosed the obituaries I had of Alyce and Luise plus some other articles. Since the Driggs family were Mormons, they were on top of their family history, and Maxine graciously replied with very detailed answers to each and every one of my

questions, even correcting some erroneous information that had been published in the obituaries. Maxine said she had never seen an article about them which didn't contain at least one error! (Of course, there were a lot of King Sisters to keep track of!)

Maxine first recalled hearing the Boswell Sisters when the Driggs family was living in Twin Falls, Idaho, which is where Maxine graduated high school in the Spring of 1930. The whole Driggs family was musical (their father was a classical musician and a voice teacher), and the three eldest Driggs Sisters displayed their talents as follows: Maxine, violin; Luise, piano; and Alyce, violin and cello. This family musical background undoubtedly aided them—as a similar trained background had done for the Boswells—in developing a musicianly approach to their subsequent vocal harmonies. (This musicianship is illustrated most beautifully in the King Sisters' splendid acapella recording of *San Fernando Valley*). The Driggs Sisters loved to tune in the Boswells from KFWB in Los Angeles, and Maxine said they also liked to listen to the radio broadcasts of the Rhythm Boys (Bing Crosby, Harry Barris and Al Rinker). In the summer of 1930, the family moved to Glendale, California.

The Boswell Sisters left KFWB in November of 1930 to accept the above-mentioned job at KGO in San Francisco. Yvonne King, in a 1991 self-published and handwritten memoir, recalled an earlier “replace the Boswells” audition by her older sisters:

The year was 1930. The town was Glendale, Calif. Alice and Louise Driggs had been smitten by the great sound of the Boswell Sisters and wanted to have a trio just like them. They asked their school chum Evelyn Reid to join them. The Boswells had just left KFWB in Hollywood to do a network broadcast in New York City. The Driggs Sisters and Evelyn worked up a couple of "hot" arrangements and trekked over the hill to audition. One of the songs was Tie a Little String 'round Your Finger (Wah deedle Dah) So You'll Remember Me. (Wah beet in Dah Rah). They didn't get the job.

When school was out in 1931 the family went on a tour of the great northwest. Mother had given birth to her "change of life" baby, Marilyn, in May - the only child she ever had in a hospital, so she, the baby and Donna stayed behind.

We spent the summer 'midst the tall redwoods ending up in San Francisco. Maxine had now joined Alice and Louise and were improving all the time. They auditioned at KPO in San Francisco, but again, did not get the job...So they took the ferry across the bay to Oakland where they were hired at KLX, Karleton accompanying them. They sang 2 days a week on their own show and then the

big show "Hi Jinks" all for \$25.00 for the 4 of them. It was enough to pay the rent on a large Victorian house, sparsely furnished and with a friendly front porch. We sent for Mama, Donna, and the baby and that became our home for the next couple of years.



HERE WE HAVE Louise, Maxine and Alyce King, a trio who help in the fame earned by Horace Heidt and his Californians during "The Show," heard weekly on KFRC.

By the winter of 1931-32, Maxine, Luise and Alyce had become a popular feature on KLX in Oakland, and this is where they first billed themselves as "The King Sisters." Their brother Karleton was their pianist, and Maxine remembered they got \$100 a week. They were on 5 times a week and as was customary, their programs were 15 minutes in length. This was great money during the Depression, needless to say, especially for a family as large as the Driggs household.

In the summer of 1932 Maxine, Luise and Alyce were hired by KSL in

Salt Lake City for what they thought would be just for the summer, but turned into a year's stay. It was during their tenure in Salt Lake City that bandleader Horace Heidt first heard the King Sisters on a KSL broadcast. He eventually signed them in 1933 to appear with his

orchestra between movies at the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco, and they were to be a vital part of his ensemble for the next few years.

Maxine explained to me in detail how her younger sisters Donna and Yvonne initially joined the group. For a brief time they were billed as “The Six King Sisters”—only at this early stage of their career, one of them wasn’t really a blood sister!

The “Six Sister” bit was a brief interlude in San Francisco as follows: Luise, Alyce and I were with Horace Heidt at the Golden Gate Theater in San Francisco. Young Donna and Yvonne were going to school in Oakland and started singing as a trio with a school friend named Anita at the lake Merritt Hotel in Oakland. Horace heard us talk about them said, ‘Let’s use them for a few weeks – making six King Sisters.’ This we did, until Horace and the band were asked to come to Chicago to perform at the Drake Hotel and on a national radio show. This was the last time the Six King Sisters sang with Horace Heidt, except for one concert in Salt Lake City enroute to Chicago. Yvonne and Anita then went home to Oakland. We asked Horace to let us take Donna along with us to Chicago so we could sing as a quartette. We did this so I could sing a few months and then retire to go home to my husband. I had just married. So Horace would still have a trio.

We didn’t tell Horace this was the reason we wanted to take Donna. After three months I was so lonesome for my sweetheart that I asked Horace if I could go home. There were no written contracts in those days. But Horace still wanted a quartette, not a trio. So we wired young Yvonne to come and take my place. Marilyn, our youngest sister, was still a little girl. So the “Six King Sisters” never sang with Horace Heidt in Chicago.

Of course in later years when the King Family TV show started, we had six (real) sisters, with Marilyn. She had been available to fill in when Donna wanted to retire or one of the girls needed to take time off to have a baby.

Donna King told Dana Countryman about the brief career of the Six King Sisters and how they were presented onstage:

We used to go over to see our big sisters in San Francisco. They’d let us borrow some of their stage clothes, so we’d have all these glamorous dresses to wear when we performed at our own shows. At that time there were no more than three singers in any popular vocal group, so we actually were the first to have more than just the three. My sisters, Maxine, Alyce and Luise, would stand at one microphone, and Yvonne, our friend Anita and myself would stand at another. One trio would sing a line of a song and the other trio would echo back to them. We’d go back and forth that way. We sang either in unison or in simple three-part harmony. It wasn’t really ‘close’ harmony yet.

Yvonne’s memoir goes into a little more detail and gives us “sister” Anita’s surname:

Donna and I, along with Anita Johnston, found a singing job at the beautiful Lake Merritt Hotel in Oakland on weekends. Our big sisters in the big city across the bay would send us their used gowns and we dressed up and made up just like them - and when Horace Heidt heard about it he thought that it would be sensational to have six King Sisters. He offered the three of us \$100 a week. Anita asked if he couldn't make it \$35.00 a piece instead of that \$33.33. He refused.

Maxine stayed with the group until the autumn of 1935, when she retired for good. Yvonne took her place, and the Four King Sisters were on their way to the Big Time, beginning with a national hookup on the Alemite Oil radio show, and in 1937 they made their first recordings on the Brunswick label (their very first being a vocal chorus of *Hot Lips* with Horace Heidt's Orchestra on Brunswick 7916).

As I wanted to focus on the early days of the King Sisters, I'll conclude my "history of harmony" here. Those of you who want to know more about later King Sisters history can refer to Dana Countryman's excellent *Goldmine* article and web page postings, plus there's a lot more information on the King Sisters official website, the link to which is provided in the bibliography.



As a special SPECIAL added attraction, listen to the King Sisters themselves narrate their own "History of Harmony"—with a special acknowledgement of the Boswell Sisters -- on

this delightful *Fitch Bandwagon* radio show of December 12, 1943. Thank you, Dana Countryman, for providing this great reference!

The King Sisters paid similar homage to the Boswells on TV's *Hollywood Palace* program of May 2, 1964 (in which they sang a bit of the Boswells' arrangement of *Sing A Little Jingle*). A biographical medley of songs (which they called "Memoirs of a King") became a standard part of their personal appearances, and a bit of *Sentimental Gentleman From Georgia* was performed in the first part of 1965 during the first season of the *King Family* TV show, as well as in several live performances in the 60s and 70s.

VITAL RECORDS

(Maxine Elliott Driggs) King Thomas – b. Sanford, Colorado, October 5, 1911; d. Corona, California, May 13, 2009.

(Louise Driggs) Luise King Rey – b. Payson, Utah, December 21, 1913; d. Sandy, Utah, August 4, 1997.

(Alice Golda Driggs) Alyce King Clarke – b. Payson, Utah, August 14, 1915; d. North Hollywood, California, August 21, 1996.

(Donna Olivia Driggs) King Conkling – b. Sanford, Colorado, September 3, 1918; d. Plano, Texas, June 20, 2007.

(Cornelia Yvonne Driggs) King Burch – b. Ephraim, Utah, January 15, 1920; d. Santa Barbara, California, December 13, 2009.

(Marilyn Adine Driggs) King – b. Los Angeles, California, May 11, 1931.

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Thurber, Jon. Obituary. "Donna King Conkling, 88; sang on radio, TV, records as part of the King Sisters." *Los Angeles Times*, June 22, 2007.

Variety, October 8, 1958. Obituary. Bill E. Burton.

Wald, Jerry. "Meet Radio's Nut Sisters: Connie, Vet and Martha Boswell Holler Over Air and Run A Home That Tickles Hungry Reporter." *Philadelphia Sunday News*, Fall 1933 (exact date unknown).

For more information about the King Sisters:

www.officialkingfamily.com

Marilyn King has her own site: www.marilynking.com.

Luise King Rey wrote two memoirs: The Singing Kings (with Ora Pate Stewart, Desert Book Company, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1969) and Those Swinging Years (1983).

The following people are not only great admirers of the King Sisters' artistry, but they all were very helpful in the research for this article:

Dana Countryman is the webmaster for The King Sisters' Fan Page. He discovered their music at age 23, and has been collecting it ever since. He's also a musician himself, having released two CDs of "happy" Moog synthesizer music with France's legendary electronic music pioneer, Jean-Jacques Perrey. In the '80s, he was the former musical mastermind behind Seattle's beloved comedy cabaret act "The Amazing Pink Things," whose music has been featured on *The Dr. Demento Show* and on television's *Arsenio Hall Show*. Countryman was also the publisher and editor of the eclectic music magazine *Cool and Strange Music*. Spring 2010 will see the release of his first solo CD for Oglio Records, plus the release of his first book, Passport to the Future: The Amazing Life and Music of Electronic Music Pioneer Jean-Jacques Perrey. Dana lives near Seattle, and when he's not tinkering in his home recording studio, he can be found relaxing with his wife Tricia (a singer) and their son, Matthew (a drummer).

Margie Schultz, a longtime King fan and collector of King Family memorabilia, grew up watching the King Family on television and belonged to their fan club in the 1980s. She's the author of four books on female movie stars (Ann Sothern, Ann Sheridan, Irene Dunne and Eleanor Powell) and has written several articles on movies, theater and her other passion, dolls. A resident of Cincinnati, she has been researching another group of sisters for a book: the movies' Lane Sisters (Leota, Lola, Rosemary and Priscilla).

Bill Anderson is an educator and author of 20 books. Bill was first exposed to the King Family television show when it debuted in 1965 and first met the King Sisters and King family at age 13 through their personal appearances. He has remained in touch with the family ever since. Bill says, "I consider the King Sisters to be one of the all time greatest vocal groups of the 20th century. In addition to that, they are among the finest and most enjoyable people I have ever known." Bill resides in Lapeer, Michigan.

Patti Garver first saw the King Family television in 1964, "and for some reason, I just loved them...the wonderful, rich, unique harmonies of the King Sisters appealed greatly to me." Patti was Vice President of the King Family Fan Club in the 70s, and she was able not only to meet all of the King Sisters, but to get to know them (especially Donna and "Vonnie."). A resident of Brookhaven, Pennsylvania (near Philadelphia), Patti is a singer and occasionally sings

barbershop quartette type harmony (and she says *Sentimental Gentleman From Georgia* is always a popular number in the “Sweet Adelines” choral competitions).

And last but certainly not least.... Thank you Donna, Yvonne and Maxine for being so friendly and gracious to your admirers. The harmony lingers on!