

The American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress presents

**HOMEGROWN**  
2013  
*The Music of America*

Traditional Ethnic and Regional Music and Dance that's "Homegrown" in Communities across the U.S.

AN ACQUISITIONS & PRESENTATION PROJECT

# THE NORTHERN KENTUCKY BROTHERHOOD



Quartet-style A Capella Gospel Music from Kentucky

Wednesday  
August 7, 2013  
12 NOON – 1 PM

**Coolidge Auditorium**

Ground Floor, Thomas Jefferson Building  
Library of Congress  
10 First Street, SE,  
Washington, DC

**FREE AND OPEN  
TO THE PUBLIC**

Metro Stop:  
Capitol South,  
one block south  
of the Jefferson  
Building

Cosponsored with the Kennedy Center Millennium Stage

Request ADA accommodations five days in advance at (202) 707-6362 or ADA@loc.gov  
For more information contact Thea Austen 202-707-1743

# THE NORTHERN KENTUCKY BROTHERHOOD

## Quartet-style *A Capella* Gospel Music from Kentucky

The Northern Kentucky Brotherhood is a jubilee-style, *a cappella*, sacred gospel quartet from Covington, Kentucky. Nearly 25 years ago, Ric Jennings formed a five-voice quartet (one lead and four harmony vocalists) out of the renowned Ninth Street Baptist Church Men's Choir. Since the beginning, this community-based quartet has sung in churches, at special gospel programs, anniversaries, song services, and other sacred music events, which in the words of folklorist Ray Allen "foster a communal atmosphere conducive to bringing on the experience of the Holy Spirit or as they say, 'shouting the church.'"

### Influences

Many people who hear the Northern Kentucky Brotherhood are amazed at the blending of their harmonies and the driving force of their rhythm, especially when words are replaced with sounds and voices become instruments. The group has many influences, but probably the most important were their early experiences in the family, in church, in school, and on street corners. The late 1950s and early 1960s was a vital time for gospel music of all forms. Adult and youth choirs, as well as men's and women's choruses and quartets, were popular in Northern Kentucky and Cincinnati African American communities. At home, Ric Jennings heard recordings of popular quartets, including The Harptones, a local group he particularly admired. He remembers watching his father practice with the Ninth Street Baptist Church Men's Choir in the early 1950s:

*Bringing that harmony together and seeing how they were supporting the lead singer just dug down inside of me and gave me an opportunity to open up spiritually to the sounds and to understand the message in their singing, and at the same time watch those guys really enjoy themselves.*

Ric and his friends found the church and the segregated Lincoln Grant Elementary School safe and supportive environments to learn music. Teachers taught them not just how to sing a note but how to enhance the sound. When desegregation came, Ric's stressful move to the formerly white Holmes High School was easier because his favorite music teacher from Lincoln Grant transferred with him. Many agreed that the Holmes band and chorus got much better with the influx of African American students and teachers.

As you listen to the Northern Kentucky Brotherhood, you will hear elements of jazz, rock, and doo-wop singing. Ric says:

*When times were difficult you could resort to something that was fun, that made you happy, that brought happiness in midst of the storm. We doo-wopped any opportunity we'd get to stand on the corner or walk down the street knocking out some songs. The favorite corner was Robin and Greenup Streets in Covington or down to what we called the "bottom of the Projects." Somebody would start off a song, and you try to find your way in it. How do I do that harmony? How do I hold on to that note I remember they taught me in school? Okay, let's add a little something to this, man, to bring it up, let's up-beat it a little bit, so we don't fall asleep while we're singing it.*

### Getting "the Right Flavor"

A Northern Kentucky Brotherhood practice session resembles the streetcorner scene described above. A member brings in a recording, the group listens, and each member finds his part. After two listens, they have the basic song harmony. Then they work to memorize the words and "enhance the song," using elements from different genres of music.

Singing in the Brotherhood is analogous to fine cooking because each member brings his own personal flavor to a song, like the perfect blend of seasoning in an exquisite dish. Enhancing the song is like adding spices. You can see it in their faces and hear it in your ears when they get it right.

Watching their faces, body movements, and signals will also give you a glimpse of their creativity on stage and how they communicate. They have an innate ability to adapt their songs to any audience, but what happens at a performance depends on the reaction and response of the audience.

In addition to continuing this traditional role of the gospel quartet, the Brotherhood increasingly reaches out to a global audience with both spiritual and secular songs. They have become an annual hit in Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Switzerland. They have also recently been discovered by many secular venues in the Cincinnati area, and by the National Folk Festival. In 2012, they toured Russia in a special cultural initiative under the auspices of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, The American Folklife Center, and CEC ArtsLink. The program, called American Seasons, was part of the U.S.-Russia Presidential Bilateral Commission, and included a concert series featuring traditional musicians from the U.S., in a marked departure from the usual offerings of classical, pop and jazz. About these performances for non-English-speakers, Ric says: "The music itself carries our message and that is what touches people so deeply. We are blessed with being able to reach out from the youngest to the oldest audience members and touch people deeply with our message, with our music." As for the Russian experience, he states: "Many stereotypes were broken, Rumors squashed, barriers torn down, God Glorified, lives changed for the good, cultures embraced, love, joy, hope was shared as the Russian people received us just as much as the crowds do in the USA (if not more)."

Bob Gates, Folklorist Emeritus,  
Kentucky Folklife Program  
Brent Björkman, Director,  
Kentucky Folklife Program

*The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival preservation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Center includes the American Folklife Center Archive of folk culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Please visit our web site: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/>*

