

The Gospel Music Circuit – Blessed Nostalgia

2024 marks one-hundred-fourteen-years since the first professional quartet was formed. A quartet was formed in 1910, for the soul purpose of selling song books, by James D. Vaughan Music Publishing Company. I have five of these little books found in a Tennessee antique store. Why in Tennessee? The James D. Vaughan Music Publishing Company was in Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. The song books are copyright dated 1947, 1951, 1956, 1960, and 1961, with one once belonging to Kermit Maples Chevrolet in Harriman, Tennessee (bet that was a joyful place to work).

Mull's Singing Convention with Rev. J. Bazzel Mull and Lady Mull was the pre-church every single Sunday morning in a whole lot of Christian family homes. The humble home in which I grew up was not excluded. The one difference between my home and the more well-off Christian homes was the size of the television. As small as it was, J. Bazzel and Lady Mull filled the screen. While painful hair curlers were being slung out from the night's torture, ironing boards pulled from the pantry, amidst the smell of bacon and eggs, hairspray, and a variety of inexpensive perfumes; Gospel music was rolling across the television. An ad break would result in the The Oak Ridge Boys' commercial for Sweet Sue Chicken & Dumplings. As I recall, the timing was perfect; J. Bazzel Mull would be signing off just as the family closed the door behind them, loaded up in the car, and headed out for church. What comes around, truly does go around. In moving back to the mountains and fairly close to Knoxville, Tennessee, I had not heard too much about the Mulls since the TV show had not aired for some years now. I had almost forgotten about the Mulls, except for the irony that my daughter's last name was Mull (absolutely no connection). But folks in the area absolutely knew all about the history of Mull's Singing Convention. When my daughter became a deputy for the county, almost immediately she was given the nickname, Lady Mull. She came home one day from work to ask if I knew what they were referring to. Oh, I so knew. She loathed the name, not because of its rich history, but, oh well, a divorce would take care of the name change.

The arenas for me, back in the day, were The Charlotte Coliseum, Reynolds Auditorium in Winston-Salem, Spartanburg Auditorium in South Carolina, Lake Norman Music Hall, and The Hallelujah Supper Club (remind me to tell you about this one later on). Talking about Southern Gospel greats of days gone by. Not talking about those walking amongst us now in their glory days. Someday, someone will pen those as they become memories. I want to talk about those, mostly whom have changed from glory days to simply glory. Let me tell you about what I remember of:

The Thrasher Brothers had matching suits of a deep burgundy and on stage gave the illusion of expensive, velvet swaying curtains in a grand estate. It would appear the curtains were opened as Jerry Golf stepped front and center blasting a trumpet as one can only envision the likeness on the day of our Lord's return. Randy McDaniel sat slightly stooped on the piano bench, unaware of anything around, including the trumpet blast. His focus was only on the eighty-eight keys in front of him, giving it everything that he had. The brothers (Jim, Buddy, and Joe along with John Gresham) were belting out *Through It All*.

The Carolinians were well-known in their native North Carolina. Kyle Taylor and Terrie Sapp stand out as two members of the group. While I may not recall so much of their music, I do recall Kyle Taylor's tenor voice ringing the rafters. Closer to home, I worked side by side for many years with Kyle's sister. When my own twenty-three-year-old sister was dying from cancer, and in the Winston-Salem Baptist Hospital, Terri Sapp unexpectedly came to visit her and to pray with her. His 2009 obituary reads: Loved to sing, minister to others. Loved the Lord. This writer agrees. This writer remembers.

The Sammy Hall Singers once resided in North Carolina for a time. I was young when they rose overnight to some sort of fame in Gospel music. Being so overprotected by the staunch church environment, I did not fully understand the horrific struggles that Sammy Hall had encountered from a former life of Rock and Roll and drugs, before standing behind a microphone singing, *Plenty of Time* and *Wish We'd All Been Ready*.

When one has “been there” and that one has been rescued; it is an unmistakable grace that is recognized even by the eyes of the fledgling in faith. Not having the same testimony of Sammy Hall, I would shortly come to hold to his music of *I Lost It All To Find Everything* and *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*. Some twenty something years later, I finally had something in common with a pastor out of the one-hundred-forty something that I worked with. One particular pastor, once played and sang with Sammy Hall. He was as cool as Sammy Hall and that day was a beautiful bit of nostalgia conversation.

Johnny Cook, although quite possibly one of the best tenor singers ever, I am pretty sure that I never saw or heard him in person. However, *Looking For A City* burned up the Gospel radio stations, especially by Miss Tilly at WGNC Gastonia, Gene Purkey at WGAS Gastonia, and WAGI in Gaffney, South Carolina. Johnny Cook was blaring from the radio that fateful day when a lady, fresh out of the hospital and medicated, ran a red light, totaling my car with one payment left, and spiraling me into anxiety/panic attacks that would last for years forward. Praying daily and looking for a city where this personal hell would never be allowed. Still, God had so many other plans for my life. Those hellish days are almost forgotten, until Johnny Cook comes back to memory.

The Prophets takes me to a Knoxville, Tennessee memory. James “Big Lew” Garrison, the tenor singer ranked right up there with Johnny Cook. Lew was a big man with the voice to match. He reminded me so much as the male version of my “big sister”. With a move to the mountains so far in the future, trips were often made to Gatlinburg, Pigeon Forge, Sevierville, and ultimately ending up at the Knoxville mall. We did not have one in North Carolina, and I could not wait to go to the department store, Proffitt’s. I somehow associated the two, Prophets and Proffitt’s. Living in Maryville, Tennessee, I learned that Proffitt’s Department Store was founded in Maryville by D. W. Proffitt in 1919. Guess Big Lew was not responsible for the Big and Tall section of Proffitt’s. Stands to reason as God packed so much singing talent into him, how could he possibly have had time for another career? Some renowned names rolled through The Prophets quartet, but Lew stuck in my head with, *I’ll Meet You In The Morning*.

The Blue Ridge Quartet, another quartet where more renowned names rolled through, and one very unknown. Being from Spartanburg, they hosted many a Gospel sings. When my dad became very ill, this teenager had to go to work. I was underage to work but a few hours, but life required otherwise. I worked in a sweatshop, if you will, clocking out at the appropriate time, going back to work to be paid another way. One day a young man, a bit older than me, came to work there. He was placed right beside of me. Even then, I could tell that his life was battered and this was not what he would have chosen for himself. You have to understand that having someone to talk to whittles away a bit of the taxing day in these dreadful working conditions. Our talks turned to Gospel music for whatever reason. He began to tell me stories that could not have been made up even if one tried; funny stories, sad stories, good and bad stories. Immediately, I knew why this place in life had found him so miserable. Sometime in the 70s, he had the opportunity to fill in with The Blue Ridge Quartet. Robby’s heart and his mind were still there. I so hope he found his way back to what he loved, and for whatever horrible reason, had lost. The Blue Ridge Quartet songs I do not know, but Robby I did know. Have you ever looked at someone and wondered, “How did they get here?” What you see is but a moment in time; you never know where they have been or where they are going. As a matter of fact, this applies to every human being walking amongst us; yes you, yes me. Only God’s life calendar knows and it changes seasons in, seasons out.

Teddy Huffam and The Gems, what an amazing never filmed live video still plays in my head. Eldridge Fox wrote the song, *Gone*. But in my personal opinion, no one sang it (or sings it) better and with the passion of Teddy Huffam. It was about the passion. When a song makes one’s hair stand on end, it is more than just a song being sung by a great singer. Teddy’s calm and genuine smile, backed by the soft, swaying voices of The Gems is the very reason I am so drawn to Black Southern Gospel. Try as one might, Teddy Huffam and The Gems “owned” *Gone*. Heaven must have loved it too, as Teddy Huffam left behind the music way too soon.

London Parris and The Apostles' memory comes from a shifting and sorting in my life. The horrors of anxiety attacks were receding, a broken marriage was ending, more flaming bridges in my future would result in being very mad at God. Little did I know that rising from those flaming bridges was my way back to God. It was going to take a little bit, but here I am. I was sitting in the Charlotte Coliseum, hearing for the first time the new group, London Parris and The Apostles. Everett Reece, I recognized on the piano from The Blackwood Boys. London Parris, I had seen and heard before. Now, two brothers had joined this new group, Ronnie Bowlus and Aubrey Bowlus. *Love Lifted Me* and *No Never Alone* solo-sung by Aubrey was by far the feature of the concert. It stuck. It stuck so much that evening, that years down the road, I would have my guy, Richard Putnam do the music exactly the same. When recording, I desperately endeavored to be the female version of Aubrey Bowlus. I hope that somewhere in Kentucky, if he should hear my version, he recognizes the honor due him. London Parris was to produce an album for me, but he passed away before it was scheduled to happen. Knowing now that the time was not right, the thoughts of what might have been are still very much there.

Thanks for reminding me, the Hallelujah Supper Club in Newton, North Carolina. I have been in singings at grand auditoriums, massive churches, less than grand music halls, yet, given the option, I would go back to the Hallelujah Supper Club above all. Arriving at the building for a night of Gospel music and a real, honest to goodness meal, all around looked vacant. Then one sees a staircase going downward as if going under the old downtown buildings. There is a sign over the opening, Hallelujah Supper Club. Paying as you walk in; the whole world is left outside for a few hours. Once inside, it is rather small. There is a circular stage with a piano and microphones set up. Gazing around there are cloth-covered tables and chairs like as being in a restaurant. From the stage looking right, and from the tables looking left, there is a kitchen. Peering from that kitchen are some of the most pleasant smiling faces; those folks with aprons looked so clean and so happy to be there. All with a full belly, the music starts. The music soars. It fills the air like the thick smoke in a crowded cigar lounge. It is amazing. If an actual fire had started, there is an awfully good chance that no one would have gotten out alive. To all sitting there in the presence of not wanting the night to end, a fire seemed to be the least of concerns. Oh, for a place like this today, especially in this cruel world, to escape from the devil roaming about seeking whom he may devour. I, somehow, feel that the devil wanted no part of being trapped underground in tight quarters with singing, shouting, crying, and praying saints at a place called the Hallelujah Supper Club. Not exactly his comfort zone. I can still recall those many Saturday nights of so much peace, comfy and cozy.

These are not just some random remembrance chronicles. Each of these persons and/or places were bits of God's amazing grace, dripping down from Heaven, down through my life when I needed it the most. Like a familiar candle, burned down to the wick, one will remember every glimmer of light, the sweet aroma filling the air in the middle of each dark night.

The songs mentioned are not by coincidence: *Through It All, I Lost It All To Find Everything*, *Bridge Over Troubled Waters*, *Looking For A City*, *I'll Meet You In The Morning*, *Gone*, *Love Lifted Me*, and *No Never Alone*. These are the songs that lifted me above the burning bridges and carried me 'round and 'round many a Jericho wall, until all fell down around my feet. It was there, from the rubble, that God poured his words and music into my own personal pen, flowing out like I would have never imagined. That blessed nostalgia brought me safely to that *Blessed Assurance*, "Jesus is mine. Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine."