

THE IDLE AMERICAN

The Blackwood Name Lives On....

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

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The name “ Blackwood” has been as closely linked to Southern Gospel Music as ham and eggs to diners, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz to TV, and Tarzan and Jane to jungle movies. The family has endeared itself to a grateful nation for their renditions of gospel music for some 125 years.

It began when the family started singing in churches in 1934, when the Great Depression had the country in a death grip. In the original group were Roy, his oldest son R.W. and his two brothers, James and Doyle. (Actually, Blackwood music first came from the fiddle of Emmett Blackwood--Roy's dad--in the 1890s.)

There have been many names, including Blackwood Brothers, Blackwood Family and Blackwood Singers. They've all had songs in their hearts, commitment in their souls and remarkable energy as pioneers in Southern Gospel Music. “Southern” is worthy of note; the USA is devoid of Eastern, Northern and Western Gospel Music....

In Branson recently, I chatted with R.W. Blackwood, Jr., who has sung at Pigeon Forge and Branson venues since 1990. He was a lad when his dad and uncles started gaining national renown in the 1940s.

He took leave of his Branson “gig” in November and has been battling COVID and lung trouble.

“I've been singing full-time, mostly on the road, for 60 years,” he said. “Isn't it time for a sabbatical?”...

Thankfully, his lung x-rays show improvement. He credits medical science and heavy-duty prayers at his church and beyond.

Alongside is Donna, his wife of 58 years. (Donna, R.W. Jr. and his brother Ron and wife Sandra, were members of the Blackwood Singers.)

During leave time, R.W. and Donna are greatly enjoying their two children, 11 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren, with two more expected soon....

A book about the Blackwoods would require multiple volumes. They've sung throughout the nation and beyond, appearing before both handful-sized groups and others that would fill largest cathedrals. R.W. cites many reasons for his family's preeminence.

First-generation Blackwoods traveled on horse-drawn conveyances, long before the family criss-crossed the nation in Cadillacs. Then, they had the first-ever customized "tour bus," followed by a twin-engine plane whose pilot was R.W, Sr. Tragically, he and Bill Lyles, another group member and also a pilot, were killed in an Alabama plane crash in 1954.

The funeral for R.W. Blackwood, Sr. was attended by thousands of friends and fans, among whom was a close family friend, Elvis Presley. (An even larger Memphis funeral was held 23 years later when Elvis died.)....

Presley and the Blackwoods visited often. Elvis always chose to sing gospel songs only, leaving his rock-and-roll performances for other places. Enamored by the Blackwoods' tour bus, he had a similar one customized for himself.

R.W. Jr. fondly remembers his childhood, playing games with the Everly Brothers when they were children.

He cherishes memorabilia of the family, many of whom branched out to join other groups after getting started....

Discovering the Blackwoods were Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scout Show and Ted Mack's Amateur Hour. Then, singing in Shenandoah, Iowa, on KMA Radio--a 50,000 -watt station covering much of the nation--helped greatly. Later, they sang at many Billy Graham Crusades.

The Blackwoods have won every award for gospel music, including eight Grammys and seven Dove Awards. His favorite is the Memphis Music Award. They've recorded numerous albums and sold millions of records. They also collaborated with Dallas' Stamps-Baxter Music Company to produce thousands of song books.

Back home in Ackerman, MS, is the Blackwood Brothers Parkway....

Just 11 years of age when his dad died, R.W. had to grow up quickly.

He's grateful for God's many blessings. In recent weeks, he has enjoyed attending Branson theaters instead of singing in them. His son Robbie is a drummer for the popular Clay Cooper Show. Grandson Joey is a singer/dancer in the Cooper Show and a singer in the theater's Elvis Show.

May the Blackwoods continue to brighten our lives.....

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