

James D. Vaughn

It seems only fitting that since this year marks the 100th anniversary of Southern Gospel Music that I feature the founder of Southern Gospel Music who was James D. Vaughn. America had been torn asunder by the Civil War. Atlanta lay in smoldering ruins and General Sherman and 60,000 Union troops were approaching Savannah, cutting a fifty-mile-wide swath through the Georgia countryside from Atlanta to the sea. The entire South was devastated by the war. On the evening of December 14, 1864, with Sherman only a week out of Savannah, a baby boy was born to George Washington and Eliza Vaughn in Giles County, Tennessee. The boy's parents named him James David Vaughn. His life spanned 77 years, ending February 9, 1941, ten months before Pearl Harbor. What happened to James D. Vaughn between the burning of Atlanta and the bombing of Pearl Harbor was significant in the annals of American music. He helped develop and popularize a new folk form of American music known today as Southern Gospel Music.

While James D. Vaughn was yet a baby, something happened that would have a tremendous effect on his life. Ephraim Ruebush rescued a bright young Southern musician, Aldine S. Kieffer, from a Union prisoner-of-war camp. Later these two became brothers-in-law and business partners. They founded the Ruebush/Kieffer Publishing Company and began printing sacred and Gospel songs. Until that time, Southern sacred songbooks had been written in a four-note system known today as "Sacred Harp." Ruebush and Kieffer created a seven-note scale (known today as shape notes) that provided a completely different style of harmony and certainly a different sound. Then, they began publishing songbooks written on this scale. In 1874, Ruebush/Kieffer created the Ruebush Kieffer Normal /school to teach the new shape-note style of music. In 1883, James D. Vaughn became a pupil. After school, Vaughn formed a quartet with his brothers, Charles, John, and Will. Charles sang the alto part, James sang soprano, Will sang tenor, and John sang bass.

Although Vaughn supported his family teaching school, he could not get Southern Gospel Music out of his mind, so in 1902 he took the biggest step of his life. He packed up the family, moved to Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, and opened the James D. Vaughn Publishing Company. The company grew slowly. In 1909, the Vaughn Music Company sold about 30,000 songbooks.

Then, Vaughn came up with an idea that he felt would really put the company on the map. Why not form a traveling quartet to promote the book? So, in May 1910, the first professional all-male Southern Gospel Quartet in America hit the road. In their first year out, the Quartet doubled the sales of songbooks to 60,000. The next year they sold 75,000 and in 1912 they sold 85,000. Along the way the Quartet was growing more popular.

Next, Vaughn started the famed Vaughn School of Music in 1911. That was the birthplace of most groups, styles and harmonies that still exist today. In 1921, Vaughn opened a new branch of the James D. Vaughn Music Company- Vaughn Phonograph Records. Early Vaughn recording were made under the Vaughn custom label and advertised as the first and only Southern records in the American marketplace. Therefore, a year before the first country music recording was cut; a Vaughn Quartet recorded the first Southern Gospel Quartet record ever. The business grew to the point that branch offices were opened in Mansfield, Arkansas; Laurel, Mississippi; Greenville, South Carolina; and Jacksonville, Texas. He sent a man named V. O. Stamps to run the Texas

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office. From this event would come the famous Stamps/Baxter Music Company.
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By the middle twenties, Vaughn had sixteen full-time Southern Gospel Quartets on the road. Today there are an estimated 8,000 amateur and professional Southern Gospel groups singing in all 50 states and many are touring foreign countries. The upcountry's own Ken Ward worked for the Vaughn Music Company as a songwriter. Ken continues to write songs which are published in the "Shape Note" song books that are produced each year. Also Jack Pittman, another up country native, is a product of the Vaughn School.

I can be contacted at 864-979-9626 or 864-895-1287. I understand that the Trav'lers will be in concert in Duncan at the Old Skating Ring. The concert will begin at 5pm on Friday, November 26th. Hope you can attend this concert. This coming Saturday, Heritage Chapel will have their 4th Annual Car Show to raise money for a mission trip to Nicaragua. Come bring your restored auto or just come and enjoy some great food. The car show will begin at 1pm and go until 5pm. You can contact me for more information.