

An Interview with Ernie Haase

As most Southern Gospel fans know, Ernie Haase sang tenor with the Cathedral Quartet from 1990 through 1999. After the Cathedrals retired, he performed solo concerts, as well as appearing with the Old Friends Quartet at their selected dates. He formed Signature Sound in 2002. I recently had the opportunity to interview him, asking both general questions and questions about their upcoming January CD and DVD, *Get Away Jordan*.



DJM: *Surveys of the National Quartet Convention audience show that over half of attendees are Baptist, with members of the Assemblies of God making up the next largest group present. Do you know anything about the denominational makeup of an average Ernie Haase & Signature Sound audience?*

Haase: We have been doing an informal survey and we have found that it is a pretty diverse crowd who attends our concerts. I do not have the “exact” percentages but I would say that Non Denominational, Baptist (of all flavors) and Catholics round out the top three with neither pulling ahead of the pack.

The statistic I am loving is that there are many who come each night who have never been in church or who have not attended “regularly” in years.

The environment of our concerts is very fun, friendly & inspirational.

TV exposure has been the key to these numbers. Matter of fact, the first week our self-titled DVD and CD released on TV (Oct 2005) and debut #3 on Billboard's video chart 40% of the buyers that week had “never” bought a Gaither video.

I am thrilled that there are some new people coming to our shows. I love singing to my brothers and sisters but the good news of the Gospel is so glorious and life changing that we (EH&SS) want to sing to everyone we can.

DJM: *Most Southern Gospel quartets do a concert that is approximately an hour and a half to two hours long. Why does Signature Sound do three-hour concerts?*

Haase: Well, we never set out to do three hours—it just happens that way. There have been those rare nights that we have been by ourselves and with time constraints that we never connected with the crowd and I could feel that it was time to go around the 1 hour or an hour and a half into it.

Here are the top three reasons we do three hour show:

1. We want to give the people their money's worth! We want the good people who support us enough to spend their time and resources to walk away saying, “Man, they gave us all they had!”

2.. We have so many song that people want to hear it takes us that long to get it done
3. We love what we do! Once we get started no matter how tired we may be it is hard to stop doing something you love. Think about it there are not many things that you really like that you can do for two or three hours at a time..... this is the main reason we sing so much.

DJM: *When most groups practice for a concert or arrange a song, they concentrate on highlighting their group's sound. To what extent do Signature Sound's planning and practice sessions focus on choreography, lighting, and other visual aspects of a concert presentation?*

Haase: At first not much. We started with songs that “move” us then we move on from there. After we have all the parts learned we start thinking staging. We still operate that way when picking material.

However, with this new video, *Get Away Jordan*, we did think with the “End in mind” so to speak.

I had in mind two things before we ever recorded the first note. On “Happy Birthday and Anniversary Too,” I told Benjy Gaither (who wrote the music to the lyric I wrote) to put a few extra bars of music at the end because I knew I wanted to do the confetti canon. And then, on “Until We Fly Away” I knew it was going to be a great live song before we ever sang a note of it in the studio. I asked our record company to have a camera behind us so we could turn our back to the stage and then have the camera “Fly” over us as we song the first line of the chorus.

As we grow I keep thinking staging. It is who we are. Our music is listened to and that is why we work so hard to get it right. But we now live in the MTV generation and some people cannot hear it unless they *see* it. So, We do spend equal amounts of time and energy to get the song to come to life in a live setting.

It takes about a year and a half to record and then get the staging done before we are ready to record two hour show/DVD. It is probably about the same amount of time it takes a comedian like Jerry Seinfeld to come up with enough new material to go out and do a hour show in a live setting.

DJM: *This year marks your twentieth in full-time Southern Gospel music. How has being on the road for 20 years changed you?*

Haase: Well, for one thing when I am home I really do not want to go anywhere. Lisa and I used to plan where we would go on vacation and all the things we would do. Now, I just want to stay in a three mile loop of my house.

Twenty years?! Really? WOW! Where have the years gone.

DJM: *That prompts another question. Very few tenors last more than fifteen or twenty years on the road in full-time Gospel groups. What do you do that has helped you last twenty years on the road, and what do you plan to do to beat the trend and stay on the road for another twenty years?*

Haase: Well, I keep thinking I am going to help myself by lowering the songs a bit. But Lari Goss (our producer) seems to always change keys and end the songs with me on a high C or higher. I am taking control on that a bit and trying to stay no higher than a B-flat. I feel that has

always been my best note when it comes to "power."

Other things going against me is that I do not get a rest in our concerts since I am the MC. George use to always worry about that and tell me to pace myself every time I'd leave the house for the road.

In my Cathedral days I could bust a note and then catch my breath and recuperate vocally while George talked. Now, I must pace myself so that the last night of singing in a given week is getting the same quality as the first night.

What has really helped me the most is turning my cell off on the days home and only doing business via email. I do not like it because it is not very personal but it does help me stay fresh and go out on the road the next week ready to sing.

One other thing I had to do to protect my voice is monitor how much time I spend at the product table. I hate this too because I really do feed off the energy and spirit of the people at our product table. However, if I do not protect the voice then there will be no one coming to the concerts.

DJM: *Have you ever considered assigning the emcee duties to another member of the group, to give you more time to rest your voice?*

Haase: Yes, I have asked the guys if they ever want to say a word to feel free to jump in but they have all said they would rather not. I think they all feel comfortable with me doing the MC work.

When it comes to emceeing a group you have to have "one person" that the crowd feels comfortable with. It does not matter if they are funny or not; it just matters that the crowd feels comfortable and believes what the MC is saying. The crowd needs to be at ease and it is hard for a group of listeners (sometime thousands of listeners) to direct their ear to more than one person when it comes to setting up songs. Testimony time is different that person is sharing his or her heart. Emceeing is more than sharing your heart it is setting up a song, setting up a singer, telling a joke or story, reading the flow of the crowd, thinking 2 or 3 songs ahead and still being in the moment, making sure the corner is turned at some point to where the buyer feels they get their moneys' worth, yet in the end they feel closer to God through the sum of all the ebb and flow of all the happenings of that particular evening and spending time in your "off stage" moments "researching" for new material. Then the next night, you have to be sensitive and be able to read it all over again for no two nights or crowds are alike. It is a challenge I enjoy!

DJM: *You referred to "thinking two or three songs ahead" to properly tailor a concert to a specific audience. When you walk out on stage, is the list of songs you plan to sing effectively set in stone (like some groups do) or is it not even started (like Jim Hamill would do with the Kingsmen)? Or is it somewhere between?*

Haase: I walk out with what I call a "Game Plan" I tell the guys that sometime tonight we will do this new song or that new joke or this new move but I never know where.

It is kind of like in basketball when you work on running a back door screen and you know it will happen but the game dictates to you when and where on the court it will take place.

That is how I run a program. I have a skeleton program but pray each night something happens that we have not planned.

DJM: *How low can you sing? Can you sing down into a baritone's range? I guess I was wondering since you said "hello" in a relatively low voice.*

Haase: Good question.

Here is how it works for me...this is really weird!

If I get up in the morning and my voice is "low" (having body and depth to it) then I know I will have my highs and the power behind it.

If I do not have the lower register then my highs are not going to be that easy.

Now to really answer the question, I do not know. I could sing baritone notes but it would not be as rich as a real baritone like Doug Anderson or Mark Trammell.

DJM: *Will your group's appearance change with the times and with the fashions, or do you intend to find a certain "look" and keep it? 20 years from now, do you still expect to be keeping up with the most recent fashions?*

Haase: We are not fashion savvy; the look we have now is just our own. You do not see us looking like a pop group. The ties and all are our thing.

Looking down the road I just see us doing what we do the way we feel it. I like cool clothes (and I make no apologies) but that is up to interpretation. Some think it cool some not so cool.

When it comes to stage clothes I want to wear something that makes "me" feel good as I step off the bus. I also don't want to walk into the venue seeing what I am wearing on another person.

I think what we wear would be considered "Stage clothes" and not church clothes. I think the people who come to a concert need to feel that we care enough to "step up" our presentation in all areas including our clothes.

Someone who thinks that we should not bring attention to ourselves just isn't being honest. We are always bringing attention to ourselves. That is what we want so that we can tell them about the Good News in Christ. If one truly believes that they should not bring attention to themselves, then they should not be on stage in front of lights and cameras.

DJM: *Would you say that Signature Sound is more like the Statesmen or the Cathedrals? Why?*

Haase: I would say 50/50. I always wanted to have The Cathedrals sound and class and the Statesmen showmanship and work ethic.

George use to tell me how when he was with the Blue Ridge Qt back in the 50's that when they (The Blue Ridge) would get in town they would all go golfing but the Statesmen would go to the ball room of the hotel and work on parts and staging.

The EH&SS concert experience feels so much (at times) like the Cats. A wonderful joyful heartfelt concert!

And then at times (I have never seen a live Statesmen show) but from what I have been told by those who have (Gaither, Russ Taff and George) we have some of their qualities when it comes to "energy" and "polish."

We do sing Cathedrals, Statesmen and Gaither songs a lot. This is not by accident! They have stood the test of time and we love putting our spin on these classics.

DJM: *Sixty years ago, the Statesmen revolutionized Southern Gospel music with their innovative arrangements, choreography, and energetic stage presentations. Their songs and arrangements have become classics, due partly to the fact that many groups that came after them--including the Cathedrals--staged and recorded these songs and arrangements. Do you foresee Signature Sound having that sort of long-term impact on Southern Gospel? Or do you think that decades down the road, when Signature Sound has retired, nobody in the genre will be doing choreography, and things will be like they were before your quartet went on the road?*

Haase: Good question!

Here is what hope happens if I could "foresee" the future based upon EH&SS's influence. I hope someone who has been to one of our shows leaves and says "I can do that!" Not so much the "moves" and the "arrangements" but "That" meaning take the talent and "desire" and turn it into something uniquely their own building on the things they have seen in us.

We all build on the past Gaither has said many times. "We are all like turtles on a fence post. It did not get there by itself." Point is we all build on those who paved new roads.

On a side note let me say something else

I not only wish to influence others who have musical talent but those who are carpenter, doctors, mothers, teachers, construction workers, landscapers and all walks of life. I want people to see what we are doing and see how God can take five ordinary guys and do extraordinary things with them.

If a person walks in to buy a cabinets for their new kitchen I would wish that the best cabinet made would be made by a Christian. The best kept yard A Christian! The best paintings A Christian! On and on I could go I want people to be "free" to explore and dream big. We have! God is letting our dreams come true.

Your only going to go as far as your able to dream.

George used to tell me "Ernie, God will let you go to the top of the mountain but your gonna have to do the climbing" and he would also say "God feeds the sparrow but He does not put the worm in its mouth."

Now, back to Southern Gospel There are kids sitting in the crowd who have tons of talent as they grow older they use that talent in the areas they have been "inspired" if we do our job there will be a fresh crop of talent come along that will want to do Gospel Quartet Music and think it cool to do so.

So, the long answer is this I hope someone comes along and blows what we do away! I mean that when I am old and cannot do it anymore I want there to be a group who makes me laugh and live vicariously through them. I love this art form!

DJM: *How I would have loved to ask Hovie that question in 1955!*

Haase: Me, too.

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DJM: *I noticed that the song “Oh, What a Savior” is on your new CD. Not even counting live versions (such as several on Cathedrals, Gaither Homecoming, and Signature Sound videos), you've recorded this song several times. Why did you do it again?*

Haase: I have never recorded it with full production ... this I hope will be the end all of arrangements for me. However, I will sing this song every night until I die or can't. This song comes from deep inside me!!!



For more information on Get Away Jordan, Signature Sound's upcoming CD/DVD, visit <http://www.erniesigsound.com/>.