

An Interview with Tanner Stahl

Recently, I had the chance to interview Tanner Stahl. He played piano for Young Harmony for a year before joining Soul'd Out Quartet in May 2007.

DJM: *What got you interested in Southern Gospel?*

Tanner: I grew up in a contemporary church and sang contemporary music. I didn't even know Southern Gospel existed—if Bill Gaither walked by, I wouldn't have known who he was. My first Gospel experience was hearing David Phelps solo when I was 18. That got me interested in the Gaither Vocal Band. Then I went to a Gaither Homecoming concert, and heard a group called the Hoppers. I was captivated by them and started following them around. I used to go to their concerts, sit on the front row, and sing my lungs out.

Then I got a copy of *Singing News* and discovered there was a lot more out there than one family group!

DJM: *What brought about the transition to wanting to do it yourself?*

Tanner: I guess it was when attending Bible College; they had ministry groups. (I attended the Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville, Tennessee, in the heart of downtown.) We had a quartet, we had a mixed group, we had an ensemble. We would travel and sing during the summer. That got me wanting to sing for a career. I never thought it would happen—I thought it was one of those unreachable dreams. But God opened the door and I ran through it.

DJM: *What did you do in the college groups?*

Tanner: I sang and ran sound from stage. The college had dates lined up where we were singing five nights per week through the summer. It was a lot of travel, and a lot of singing—kind of hectic.

DJM: *What part did you sing? Did you play piano?*

Tanner: I sang lead in the college quartet; in the mixed group, I sang a Karen Peck & New River lead / tenor vocal part. Well, it was a tenor part but not high.

I didn't play piano in the college groups.

In fact, I didn't start until I was 17 years old. I went to college and failed beginners' piano—



though I already knew how to play—so I never in my life thought I would start off in Southern Gospel as a piano player. I'm not very good first of all, and I always thought of myself as a singer rather than as a piano player.

DJM: *Your first professional music position was with Young Harmony. How did you get it?*

Tanner: It was very interesting. I had gone to a concert. The lineup was the Perrys, the Hoppers, and Jeff & Sheri Easter. Young Harmony was also there that night, with a bunch of groups I didn't even know would be there. Honestly, the concert was not all that good. I left disappointed; the big groups didn't get to sing that much. The sets were too short.

As I left, I went to the gas station to get gas. Young Harmony pulled in behind me. They were going to go to Wendy's. I stopped there and talked to Johnathan. He said they needed a piano player. I said, "I play piano—what would it take to get an audition?"

He gave me all their CDs and told me which songs to learn. He gave me a call, and he came to Nashville to hear me play, and I got the job.

So our first official meeting was in a Wendy's parking lot. It was the most random thing imaginable—totally a God thing.

DJM: *How long were you with Young Harmony?*

Tanner: I was with them one year. At that point, we were doing the normal weekend stuff, a different church every night. Now they're doing revivals, staying at the same church for a few days or a week. That's pretty cool, to not have to travel as much. But I will say this: I wouldn't trade my time with YH for anything! I absolutely loved being a part of their ministry. I learned so much during my



time there and I left there a better musician and a better person than when I started. And for that, I'm truly grateful!

DJM: *What led you to Soul'd Out Quartet? Was it that you were a male quartet fan and wanted to move to a quartet?*

Tanner: No, actually I am a big mixed trio fan. I love the Hoppers and Karen Peck & New River—they are my two favorite groups. I more or less wanted to get away from the piano and sing. I have mutual friends with Matt Fouch, our bass singer. (We went to the same Bible College.) A friend told me that Soul'd Out's baritone had just quit. So I called Matt to set up an audition.

I probably shouldn't be saying this, but I got Soul'd Out's first recording through a mutual friend of ours. They were a start-up group doing all original

songs, which was cool, but the quality of the CD just wasn't there. A friend and I made fun of it for a year, and I never in my life thought I would sing for them. Looking back now, we just laugh about it. It's just funny how the Lord works!

DJM: *Well, that's a new spin on the familiar line "I never in my life thought I would sing with them!" When did you join the group?*

Tanner: May 2007, a little over a year ago.

DJM: *Did you join Soul'd Out as their baritone only, or as their baritone / pianist?*

Tanner: I just joined as their baritone. I'd play a piano solo every now and then. Then we started a hymns set where we each soloed our favorite hymn. Prior to me joining, we never had a piano player of any sort for a long period of time. We always wanted one, but we could never find the right guy.

DJM: *I hear Soul'd Out hired a full-time pianist recently?*

Tanner: Yes—his name is Michael Howard. He's 19, and he's annoying as all gets out! But I love him, and he's a great piano player and I am thrilled that he is with us! I love playing, just not in front of people. I like playing when I'm the only one there, but I just don't have the confidence to perform on piano. I'm just teasing about Michael, by the way!

DJM: *Could you tell me a little about Soul'd Out's history?*

Tanner: It is based in Georgetown OH, about 30 miles east of Cincinnati. Matt Rankin, our lead singer, started the group with Jimmy Dooley about seven years ago. They were a mixed trio with a female singing the high part. After about two and a half years of that, the girl quit, and Jimmy moved on, so Rankin formed a quartet in 2004.

DJM: *What makes Soul'd Out Quartet unique?*

Tanner: The fact that we are one of the youngest full-time quartets in the industry. Our average age is 24, but most of our audiences have more years behind than ahead of them. We like to bring energy, have fun, yet we still know when it's time to be serious. We like to have church!

We love theaters, but we love churches more than theaters.

Last week we were special music for a teen youth camp all week. I don't know how many Southern Gospel groups could do that now and still be well liked.

Also, our lead singer writes most of our music. We don't do his songs because he's our lead singer, but because he writes great songs and they don't all sound like each other, they don't sound the same. I imagine if I wrote songs, they would all sound the same, but his don't.

DJM: *Where would you say that Soul'd Out falls on the traditional to progressive spectrum?*

Tanner: We're right in the middle. We do have progressive stuff, but we also *love* traditional stuff. Especially since we just hired a piano player, we've started doing a couple old Cathedrals songs, just with piano and I play the bass. We've started infiltrating that into our repertoire. Our appearance on stage is usually very traditional. Rarely do we do a concert where we're not in suit and tie.

DJM: *What can we expect from an average Soul'd Out concert?*

Tanner: It will be about an hour and half. Ninety-five percent of our music is original. If it's recognizable it's usually a hymn—Sweet By and By, I Love to Tell the Story, I Need Thee Every Hour. Of late, we've added Boundless Love and some old Cathedrals songs.

We like to high energy songs, and also slow it down and give a good invitation. After all, that's the most important part of the concert!!

DJM: *Who are your greatest influences as a baritone? Who do you most want to sing like?*

Tanner: Well, I've not followed Southern Gospel very long, only three or four years, so my answers might be a little different. I love Devin McGlamery from Karen Peck and New River. I love Joseph Habedank of the Perrys. I think those guys are great models for younger male singers.

DJM: *But he's singing lead now.*

Tanner: Yes, even though he's lead now. I never thought he'd be singing lead like he does. What a lead voice he has! I would never have guessed. Also, Scott Inman from Triumphant. Those would be my three biggest influences.

I've obviously been influenced by Dean Hopper and the Gaither Vocal Band, since that's where I first heard it all, but once I started really getting into it, it'd be more of those three.

DJM: *You mentioned youth appeal a while back. What would be the percent of young people in your audiences on an average night?*

Tanner: It's usually just the typical church crowd, whatever that percentage is, not really sure. We do get invited to youth camps, rallies, and functions, just because we are young and have a young look, but but I'm not really certain.

DJM: *So how often do you do youth events?*

Tanner: We usually do something youth oriented once or twice every couple of months. We've done high school graduation parties; once we did a birthday party for a young man with Down's Syndrome. Honestly, when I look back at all the concerts I've done with Soul'd Out, it was the most fun and encouraging to me. The young man loved our music—I'm not really sure why—and that his family would think enough of us to bring us out, sent up a tent in their backyard, and have us do a concert for everyone.

We did a youth camp this week; there were 600 campers, and 56 got saved in a four-day period. It was really awesome. From that camp, one girl heard us and really liked it, and her parents invited us to sing at her sweet 16 party. We feel that God puts us in some of these places for a reason, so we're just following where He leads us!

DJM: *If you could do one thing to improve Southern Gospel, what would it be?*

Tanner: I'd try to get the younger audience involved. We've got to get the younger people like you and me involved to have an audience for future years.

DJM: *How?*

Tanner: Just keep singing, try to win over a youth group at every church, and market yourself to appeal to youth group and please the older crowd at the same time.

That's hard to do and keep Southern Gospel Southern Gospel, not being Southern Gospel and going contemporary without even meaning to.

DJM: *At what point does a group cross the line between being Southern Gospel and contemporary? You can skip this one if you want.*

Tanner: I'm not afraid to answer, I'm just trying to think what the point would be. I think the attire and how you present yourself will keep you in your style. If you show up in jeans that have holes, guys with long hair, and a ballcap backwards, you'll just be appealing as more contemporary than Southern Gospel.

DJM: *Interesting. I would never have thought of drawing the line at attire. On another topic, what was the biggest surprise for you moving from part-time to full-time?*

Tanner: I guess the constant travel. With the part-time group we did all summer and we'd sing once a month. We didn't do many dates. With full-time we're out every week, sometimes a week and half or two weeks at a time. Circumstances cause you to be gone – last night I slept in my own bed for first time in three weeks. But it's my choice. I choose to do this, and that's how it happens.

DJM: *What is one thing you want people to take away from your music?*

Tanner: We want to get the Gospel message out first. We want to present that in a quality way. I think there's a lot of groups that do a great group presenting the message and get the point across, but sometimes quality and class is lacking.

DJM: *Any other questions you'd like to be asked, or any other comments?*

Tanner: Well, you might mention my sports interest. I'm a diehard Hog fan (Arkansas Razorbacks) and I want everyone to know that. I'm a HUGE sports fan. When I was younger, any time I would have the choice to play basketball or another sport or practice music, I would always do ball first. But now that I'm full-time, I can't make that happen any more.

Also, I recently got engaged—we're getting married December 20 of 2008.

DJM: *You're sure I can print the date?*

Tanner: Sure. It will probably embarrass my fiancé, but I think it's hilarious.

DJM: *Sure you want me to print that, too?*

Tanner: Oh yeah! I found me a girl who loves God, loves the razorbacks, and her parents are Southern Gospel fans.



DJM: *Is she?*

Tanner: She likes it. She doesn't follow it closely, but she likes the music.

DJM: *Any closing thoughts or comments?*

Tanner: We're excited about what the Lord's done for us. We're at Dollywood and on mainstage this year so that is awesome!

DJM: *At NQC?!?*

Tanner: Yes, I was totally surprised when the contract or whatever came in. Matt Rankin, our lead singer called me up and said, "Tanner, we're going to be on mainstage."

I said, "Quit lyin'!" I was totally surprised. We've only been in existence for four years as a quartet.

Our new CD, titled *Ain't Nobody*, comes out within the next week. We'll be getting it in our office this week or next week. We're also excited about our annual SOQT Homecoming Concerts that are quickly approaching! We're bringing in The Collingsworth Family, The Crist Family, and The Dills!! We're just really excited about the future!