

A Conversation with Randy Byrd

Randy Byrd, bass singer for the Blackwood Brothers Quartet, was one of my first artist friends in Southern Gospel, perhaps the first. Ever since I started this website approximately three years ago, I've wanted to do a feature story interviewing him. The opportunity came recently to sit down and chat, and here is what we discussed.



DJM: *I understand you were raised as a preacher's kid in Oklahoma. Could you tell me a little bit about your upbringing?*

Randy: Sure, I'd be happy to, Daniel. I appreciate the opportunity to talk to you!

My dad was a truck driver and a union worker, and when I was about three years old, he became a Christian. About a year after

that, he surrendered to preach. We actually moved from Oklahoma to Louisiana so he could go to Bible College full-time. He attended Baptist Christian College, which is now Louisiana Baptist University, in Shreveport, for about three years.

DJM: *How old were you when he was going to college?*

Randy: I actually moved the summer of '69, so it was in between kindergarten and first grade. So I would've been approximately 6 years old.

Then he took his first church in Oklahoma while he was a senior in college. He commuted back and forth—he just had a class or two left—he commuted back and forth during the week. He finished up, and then we were in Oklahoma for ten months.

Then in the middle of my fourth-grade year, we moved to Arkansas. He took a church there and was there for fourteen years.

DJM: *What was the name of the church, and where was it?*

Randy: The name of the church was originally “West Side Baptist Church” (obviously, it was on the west side of town). Later, they bought five acres of land on the outskirts of town, and changed the name to Victory Baptist, which is what it still is today.

The city was Benton, Arkansas, about fifteen miles southwest of Little Rock.

DJM: *So was that basically for the rest of the years you were still at home?*

Randy: That is correct. He was actually there after I was grown. I finished there—we started a Christian school in my eighth grade year. I graduated from the high school, and met my wife, Lisa, a little while later. We married and moved to Missouri.

You'd asked me the other day a little bit about my testimony, and I don't know if you want to go into that now.

DJM: *Yeah. I can just make up a question to lead into it if I need to.*

Randy: Actually, when I was about fourteen or fifteen years old, as a lot of boys do, I started testing the waters a little bit, becoming rebellious. By the time I was sixteen, I figured out that I knew a lot more than my dad, because every sixteen-year-old boy does, you know!

So rather than run away from home and go that route, I figured I would just outsmart him. I went to the local authorities and had them place me in a foster home. I moved into a foster home for about a year.

All I really wanted—I didn't rebel against my dad because I thought he didn't love me, and I didn't rebel against him because I felt I was abused or mistreated—I just wanted a “normal” family life, what I considered normal. I wanted Dad to come home and play sports with me, and go camping and fishing. I got sick of being the preacher's kid. And that's what I rebelled against.

But it's amazing how God works through all of that, though. When they placed me in custody of the state of Arkansas, and took me to my foster parents, my foster mother met me at the door and said, “Son, you can live here as long as you want. There's just two rules you have to live by. The first rule is that I make all the rules, and I can make new ones any time I want. The second is that every time I go to church, you'll go with me. And just for the record, I'm the Sunday School superintendent, the church secretary, and I sing in the choir, so I'm there a lot.”

I literally stood on the porch and dropped my head. I'd just jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. But God really used that family to mend the relationship between me and my parents.

One of the things I'm really thankful for is that my parents did not compromise their beliefs during that. When they sent my belongings, when I opened the suitcase, my Bible was on top of it. My mother had written a note in there: “Son, we love you very much. But as long as you live in our house, you have to live by our rules. And until you're willing to do that, we'll just pray for you and love you.”

So when it would have been easy for them to cave in and give me whatever I wanted, they stood strong on Biblical principles, and I'm very thankful for that.

DJM: *So about a year after that, you decided to come home?*

Randy: I did, actually. Through court meetings and through my foster parents' guide, I had started rekindling the relationship with my parents, and had become on pretty good terms with them. The timing just worked out right, so I moved home, and was there for a few months. By then I had become independent enough that I moved out on my own, and was on my own for another year. Then I met my wife, and a few months after that, we got married, and moved to Missouri.

DJM: *So at what point in all that process did you first discover Southern Gospel music?*

Randy: Well, actually I had discovered Southern Gospel around age 12. My mother says that I had memories of it, but I just didn't know what it was. When my dad was in Bible College, the college had a quartet that traveled called the Crusaders Quartet. We had a couple of their albums. As a matter of fact, I made contact with the bass singer from the group a couple of years ago, and he mailed me the

two albums that we had when I was a kid. So I have those in my collection.

So I listened to that quite a bit as a child, but my true love for quartets started around age 12. My Sunday School teacher took me to a Gospel concert in Little Rock, Arkansas. There were several groups on the lineup that day. I remember the Kingsmen Quartet came out and just tore the place down with what we call “three chords and a cloud of dust.” I looked at my buddy and said, “This is awesome!” This is in the mid-70s.

Then after the Kingsmen were done, there were two old guys and three young men in plaid suits walked on the stage. I looked at my friend and said, “This is gonna be *awful*.” And the piano singer sat down and ran an arpeggio, and the bass singer sang, “There is a fountain filled with blood...”

And it was George Younce and the Cathedrals. I went home that night and told my mom that that's what I wanted to do. The problem was that at that time, I sang high tenor.

DJM: *Not unlike George himself at that age.*

Randy: That's true. George started out with a high voice, and then became a lead singer for many years. In my opinion, George is the greatest bass singer ever, and one of the greatest singers ever. That's when I developed my love for it. My Sunday School teacher played a huge part in that, letting me borrow his albums and his 8-tracks. I would just wear them out.

DJM: *I'm just curious. Did you stay in touch with Southern Gospel during your years of going the other direction, or did you come back to that later, then?*

Randy: You know, that's a good question, Daniel. I've always loved music from the time I was little bitty. I've always had some sort of stereo system in my vehicle.

Yes, I stayed in touch with Southern Gospel, because I still had some 8-tracks and cassettes that I still enjoyed. Like I said, I wasn't necessarily running from God as I was looking for more of a family relationship. That's more of what I rebelled against. But my love of the music was always there. Matter of fact, I introduced my foster parents to Southern Gospel. They were not familiar with it. They used to just sit and grin at me because I would play those albums and sing along. Especially in the shower—that was my favorite time to do it.

DJM: *What line of work did you go into before you started singing? Then, when did you start singing regionally, and who did you sing with?*

Randy: Sure. Well, my earliest memories of singing in church were when I was in kindergarten. The family that babysat me had a son that was a year older than me, and he and I sang a duet, which was 2-part unison. That's my earliest memories of singing.

Being in church, I've always been involved in some kind of music program. Then when I got married, though, and moved out on my own, like any young couple, you just take whatever job you can find. Probably my most stable job was when I worked in a factory in Missouri—we made aerial device trucks, which are the big trucks you see the linemen go up in to work on lines. I built those machines for almost 15 years in Saint Joe, Missouri.

During that time, my wife and I started a regional mixed quartet in Missouri called Eastern Sky Quartet. We traveled for four and a half years. As far as regional groups go, we were quite busy. The last couple of years, we were working over 40 weekends a year.

And it was going really good, but my desire had always been to sing in a male quartet. It's funny how God works: Eastern Sky had worked in a revival, and one night the evangelist preached on finding the will of God and getting in it. I prayed that night that God would give me the desire of my heart. My desire was to sing in a male quartet, as long as that was His will.

What I didn't know is that that same night, my wife had prayed, asking God to allow her to stay home. She was tired of traveling and wanted to be at home more. She even wrote it in the cover of her Bible—the date and wrote the prayer. I'm paraphrasing, but this is basically what she said: “Dear God, I would like to stay home more, but I know Randy loves to travel and sing. I'm not sure how You'll work this out, but I'm trusting that You will.”

So later that summer, we worked at an outdoor event in Iowa. We sang with a group from Des Moines called Majesty. And just in conversation with them one day, I was joking with the owner and said, “Hey, if you ever need a bass singer, keep me in mind.”

DJM: *They were a male quartet, then?*

Randy: Yes, they were a male quartet. Anyhow, two weeks later, he called me, and asked me if I was serious about that, and offered me the position. I said, “Well, let me pray about it.”

I'm a lot like Gideon when I pray for things—I want to make sure God's in it. So I fleeced Him this way—I said, “God, my wife's reaction will be a good indicator of whether or not you're in this.”

So when I presented it to her, I said, “Well, what do you think about me singing with Majesty?”

She started smiling from ear to ear, with tears rolling down her face. I said, “What in the world does that mean?” And she showed me her Bible, and showed how God had answered her prayer, and would allow her to stay home and me to travel.

DJM: *And did you realize that night it was the same night you'd prayed, or did you realize that later?*

Randy: She had written in the sermon notes in her Bible, so when we got to looking at it, we realized at that time that it was the same night. And so we just knew that God was in it.

That was in August of '97, and we commuted back and forth every weekend from then until January of '98, when we moved to Des Moines, Iowa, and joined Majesty. And for the next two and a half years, Majesty worked forty-eight-plus weekends a year, in about a seven state area. Then we had some personnel changes, and we continued on for a couple of years after that, even though we did slow down some.

And the group had kind of disbanded, but through that, I had developed relationships with local pastors. I emceed for Majesty, and through that, pastors would ask me to come in to fill in at their pulpit, or preach, or whatever. So for a brief time, I had a ministry called “New Direction Ministry,” for about a year and a half, and stayed quite busy doing that. But my love for singing in a quartet was still my focus and my desire. So I reconnected with the owner of Majesty, and we re-formed that in late 2003. We had actually just been back on the road for about six months when the opportunity to join the Blackwood family came along.

DJM: *Okay. Now with Eastern Sky and then with Majesty, what were the names of the recordings you made, just so I can keep my eyes out for them?*

Randy: Well, Eastern Sky made two recordings. We did it all ourselves. We hired a little studio in Kansas City, in a guy's house, and we produced it and everything. To my knowledge there's none in existence, but there may be. One was entitled, *His Blood Still Sets Men Free*, and the other one ... I have no idea! I don't know that we ever titled it, to be honest with you. They were just two cassette recordings—we never even put them on CD.

I was on two recordings with Majesty as well. The first was titled *Back by Popular Demand*, and then the second one was the 25th Anniversary of the group. I was proud of it—I helped produce that album and design the liner notes for it. It was entitled *Then and Still*, with the thought being that

Woody had developed his love for quartets at an early age. He pushed very hard for Majesty to do the things like they used to back then.

DJM: *Woody?*

Randy: James Woodyard—everybody called him “Woody.” He was the tenor and the owner of the group. He insisted that we do things the way they used to do back then, and still today. And we just did a play on words, and called it *Then and Still*.

Also on that recording was Milo Herrick. Milo was the staff vocalist for Jimmy Swaggart before John Starnes. He still sings—lives in Atoma, Iowa, and just a great guy.

DJM: *So how did the opportunity arise to sing with the Blackwood Brothers?*

Randy: Well actually, as I mentioned, we had just re-formed Majesty. The Blackwood Gospel Quartet was in concert in the Des Moines area. They announced that Ken Turner was retiring and that they were looking for a bass singer. Somebody at that concert that knew me from Majesty—to this day, I don't know who it was—but somebody gave them my information.

That next week I got an email from Marc Blackwood, asking me to come audition. And I thought it was a joke. His email address was just initials, and I didn't know who it was from at first, till I read the email. Like I said, I thought it was a joke. I didn't answer at first. I got another one the next day, so I responded to it. Long story short, they wanted me to audition that Saturday night.

Majesty was scheduled to be in Illinois that Saturday. So my wife and I drove to where they were on Friday night, which was about a 5-hour drive, and I emailed him, told him I was coming just to hear them. In the middle of that, they started taking requests. Marc came down, handed the mike to me, and said, “Sing some songs with us,” right there on the spot. He offered me the job that night. I couldn't take it that night. I told him I wanted to pray about it.

The next weekend he flew me to New Jersey. I did a New England tour with them, got the job, and two weeks later, I moved to Tennessee. That was in April of 2004.

DJM: *In April of 2004. Now was Jimmy already with the group at that point, or how much after that did he join?*

Randy: I don't remember the exact timing. It was later that summer. I could probably find out if I did some research.

Actually, Wayne Little was already singing with Marc when I joined. We were scheduled to sing with Ernie Haase & Signature Sound in Greeneville, Texas, at a Harold Marshall event. We had just lost our piano player and our baritone. Our piano player had broken his leg. And so Marc, unbeknownst to us, had called Brad White and Jimmy to come down and fill in. I didn't know they were coming till they walked on stage for sound check.

I was very nervous, because I'd grown up listening to Jimmy, and had seen him on TV, and I was just very nervous for him to be there. But he walked in that night, and just made me feel totally at ease, like I was part of them, and anyway, long story short, they were just filling in. Then a few months later, Marc asked them to join the group, which they did. Then a few months after they joined, Marc said he was going to start Blackwood Gospel Quartet back up.

DJM: *At that point, Jimmy decided to bring back the Blackwood Brothers name?*

Randy: Well actually, Marc was traveling as the Blackwood Gospel Quartet. Due to some legal proceedings over the trademark of the name, and lawyers' advice, we had changed the name back to the Blackwood Brothers, and were traveling as the Blackwood Brothers, as Marc being with us.

Shortly after that, he decided to go back and start up the Blackwood Gospel Quartet. So we just continued, the four of us, on as the Blackwood Brothers. That's been four and a half years ago.

DJM: *So was it late '04 that the Blackwood Brothers name came back?*

Randy: Somewhere in that time frame, late '04, early 2005, somewhere in that time frame, I don't remember exactly.

DJM: *What have some of the highlights been of the four and a half years you've spent with the Blackwood Brothers?*

Randy: Well, it's everything that I dreamed it would be and more. To think of just a highlight would be impossible. There are just so many.

Getting to sing with the people I've long admired, and getting to know them on a personal basis, is no doubt a highlight.

This year we'll be singing on the main stage at the Quartet Convention, which has been a dream since I was a kid.



From left to right: Wayne Little, Jimmy Blackwood, Brad White, Randy Byrd

DJM: *In fact, it's a month and a day away. (At the time of the interview!)*

Randy: I'm counting the days. (Laughs.)

DJM: *You're not the only one!*

Randy: A funny story: One of the highlights that turned out not to be a highlight was that ever since I was young, I wanted to sing in Merrimac Caverns. We got invited to sing there last year with Ed O'Neal and the Dixie Melody Boys. The day that we were to sing, I developed laryngitis. I could not make a sound. My chance to sing bass in that big cave was there, and I couldn't utter a sound. But they did re-book us this year, and we're back on the main stage at Merrimac, so I'm looking forward to that.

Probably the single biggest highlight, though, is that this is the Blackwood Brothers' 75th Anniversary year. And a couple of weeks ago, we were in Tennessee with the Inmans—Clayton Inman's family—hosted a sing for us there. Dr. Buck Morton was the emcee for the evening.

Halfway through it, they had us sit down on some stools on stage, and they presented a video presentation paying tribute to the family. It was such an honor for me to sit back and watch them paying tribute to Jimmy and the family. His mother, who is 88 years old, was there, and his wife, and grandkids. That was a highlight, because it was just special to really get a grasp on what you're able to be a part of. So I would say that ranks way up there on the highlight list.

DJM: *You also had the opportunity to have a solo on a song the group did on a Gaither Homecoming video.*

Randy: That is true ...

DJM: *And what was that like?*

Randy: That was a highlight. It almost turned out to be a nightmare for me. We did not know until the day before the taping what song we were going to sing. Bill Gaither picked the song off of our hymns album. And as luck would have it, he picked the song "More About Jesus," which featured me on a verse. The problem was, I had laryngitis the day before the taping. I know it seems like a pattern here—I don't get laryngitis that often—but I could not make a sound the day before! But to walk in that day and get to what goes on behind the scenes for a Gaither taping is just very mind-boggling. But when it came time for sing, God blessed, and we had a good stand there, and people were very receptive, and made us feel at home. It was just a very special day, without a doubt.

DJM: *The Blackwood Brothers recently signed with Daywind. Could you talk a little bit about that, and a certain special project in the works?*

Randy: Sure, there's actually very exciting news. We did sign with Daywind. The first thing on the plate for us is that they're wanting to put out a 75th Anniversary album. They're hoping to have it out around November or before. We'll do at least ten songs, Blackwood classics that we will sing. They're also hoping to release some old RCA recordings or some vintage recordings. We're not sure yet—they're still discussing that.

And at the same time, they're pitching us all new songs that we're in the process of selecting for an all original album. So it'll be the first original Blackwood Brothers release in many, many years. I'm not sure the last time a recording of all original songs was released.

DJM: *'84 or '85, I'd say, probably—over twenty years?*

Randy: Over twenty years, and I don't know if that one in '84 or '85 was ten brand new songs. It was probably some re-cuts. So this will be the first all original recording done by the Blackwood

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Brothers in many years. We're very excited about that.

DJM: *Any other thoughts or comments? And could you close that with how people can get in touch with the Blackwood Brothers, and you personally?*

Randy: I just want to say that I appreciate the opportunity to visit with you today...

DJM: *Thank you!*

Randy: ...and without a doubt, a highlight for me has been to get to meet you and your family. Not just for you personally, but for what you do for Gospel music. Who would think that a young kid with a computer from Ohio could make such an impact in such a short period of time, but you have, and I want to congratulate you on that, and encourage you to keep on keepin' on.

You can reach us by visiting our website, www.blackwoodbrothers.com. We also have a facebook page (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Blackwood-Brothers-Quartet/102626178884>).

You can contact me personally by email—randy@blackwoodbrothers.com—or my cell phone, 595-991-2510.

DJM: *You're actually going to let me put that in the interview?*

Randy: I'm happy to put that out there.

DJM: *Wow!*

Randy: Not so much that I enjoy talking on the phone, but I would rather talk than type. I talk better than I type!

DJM: *Thank you very much!*

