

## **Tribute To James Blackwood**

Written by Scott Evans

Saturday, 20 September 2008 16:15 - Last Updated Thursday, 25 September 2008 20:09

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### **Mr. Gospel Music**

## **James Blackwood**

**BORN: AUGUST 4, 1919; DECEASED: FEBRUARY 3, 2002**



The year was 1934 and a fifteen year old James Blackwood joined with his brothers, Doyle and Roy and his nephew, R. W. to form a group named The Blackwood Brothers. Certainly, that day in 1934, no one could have know the

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impact that the Blackwood Brothers and James Blackwood would have on a fledgling style of music called southern Gospel music.

James Blackwood's story is a story of courage, dedication, steadfastness and following the will of God for his life. The Blackwood Brothers certainly enjoyed a lot of success in southern Gospel music but what many people are not aware of, is that the group actually disbanded in 1935. Those were difficult days to make a living in America and Roy and R. W. had to move away from James' hometown of Ackerman, MS. However, two years later, Roy and R. W. moved back home and the Blackwood Brothers were back singing again and determined to make it work. Times were not always easy in the early days, but they stuck with it and the Lord blessed them greatly!

On May 4, 1939 James married the love of his life, Miriam (Mim) Grantham. They had a double wedding ceremony that day as Doyle was also married. James and Mim would spend the rest of their life together and Mim became the role model for many "quartet wives" and she stood by James and realized the calling that God had put on his life.

In 1940, the Blackwood Brothers made an important and difficult decision. They moved to Iowa. As James once said, "We may as well have moved to China." They were a big hit in the area and were performing nearly every night while doing three radio programs a day. The radio station estimated their listening audience at million people! This situation was brought to an end by World War II. James

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spent his time during the war in California working in defense plants.

The war eventually ended and the Blackwood Brothers were back singing in 1946. It was 1947 that the Blackwood Brothers began to put together the group that would become famous in southern Gospel music. James Blackwood, R. W. Blackwood, Doyle Blackwood and Bill Lyles were joined by Hilton Griswold and later Jackie Marshall on the piano. The Blackwood Brothers made their first television appearance in 1948.

1952 marked the year that the Blackwood Brothers finally had that great quartet! Many people consider it the greatest quartet ever. James was still singing lead, R. W. was still singing baritone, Bill Lyles was still singing bass and they were joined by tenor singer, Bill Shaw and pianist, Jackie Marshall. The quartet moved back to the Memphis, TN area and they found instant success. It was in 1954 that the Blackwood Brothers won the *Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts* television program.

Without a doubt, the single most tragic event in the history of southern Gospel music, was the plane crash that took the lives of Bill Lyles, R. W. Blackwood and Johnny Ogburn (son of the concert promoter). It happened just a few days after the Blackwood Brothers appearance on the *Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts Show*. It happened in Clanton, AL where a concert was scheduled that evening with the Blackwood Brothers and The Statesmen. The hours that followed that tragic event were difficult. James was given a ride back home to Memphis, TN by The Statesmen. By his own admission, James said that he was through singing and

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would never sing again. The weeks that followed the crash and the funerals were a blur for James

Blackwood. He continued to fill the dates that the Blackwood Brothers had booked but he remembered very little of what happened during that time. The Blackwood Brothers had a break scheduled and that allowed James to figure out his next plan of action.

To replace R. W., James had to look no further than the family. Cecil Blackwood, another one of the brothers, was asked and accepted the position of baritone. The person that James chose to be the next bass singer was a legend in the making himself. JD Sumner joined the Blackwood Brothers as their new bass singer and James and JD became very good friends. Together, James and JD built the first touring bus and began the National Quartet Convention.

The new quartet picked up where the old one left off. James had some tough days when the new group first began singing but the Lord was faithful and saw him through. The personnel changed over the years and at one time included James' son, Jimmy.

James was involved a little later in life with the Master Five. This group consisted of James Blackwood, Hovie Lister, Jake Hess, JD Sumner and Rosie Rozell.

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They were very popular and James traveled with them for eight years. Of course, James became a regular and a favorite on the Gaither Homecoming Videos right up until his recent death.

I don't know who first called James Blackwood "Mr. Gospel Music" but the name stuck with him. I never met James Blackwood but every time I saw him perform on a Gaither Video, he was always smiling and happy. He seemed to have a real joy for singing Gospel Music and it was very apparent that he knew the one that he sang about. James was inducted into the Gospel Music Association Hall Of Fame and the Southern Gospel Music Association Hall Of Fame and he won countless awards and honors for his contributions to the southern Gospel industry.

When I think of James, I think of two songs that he sang. The first song is "How About Your Heart." I honestly don't remember the first time I heard that song but I always took to that song as a child. The second song I remember James singing is "Sheltered In The Arms Of God." My first recollection of that song was a Blackwood Brothers Record by that same title. It was recorded in 1971 when I was only six years. For some reason, that song was a favorite of mine and has remained a favorite of mine to this day.

What a wonderful legacy the life of James Blackwood was. James was faithful to God, showed great courage through God to go on after the plane crash and was steadfast in his beliefs. If there was ever a gospel singer for the singers of today to model their life after, it was "Mr. Gospel Music," James Blackwood. We will

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miss James but we can find so much happiness and comfort in knowing that James is now "Sheltered In The Arms" of that great God he sang about for over 60 years.

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