

# The Chuck Wagon Gang

Celebrating 74 years: 1936 – 2010

## The Chuck Wagon Gang Story – Past to Present

Seventy-four years in any business is a long time, particularly in a musical group of any genre. Today, the Chuck Wagon Gang holds the distinction of being the oldest recording mixed gospel group still recording and performing with ties to the original founding. By trade, the Carters were farmers, who migrated from place to place to pick cotton. The singing group came from humble beginnings in 1935, as the Carters found themselves in Lubbock, Texas, without enough money to buy medicine for a sick child, Effie. Dave Carter and two of his children, Lola and Ernest of his Carter Quartet (no relation to the Carter Family of Bristol, VA) arrived at radio station KFYO in Lubbock seeking live singing employment on radio in order to buy medicine for Effie. They landed the job, Effie soon re-joined them, and the Carter Quartet remained at the station for about a year.

The radio response had been so over-whelming that Mr. Carter decided to move his family to Fort Worth, Texas. They auditioned for several stations, and finally hit the big one, 50,000-watt station, WBAP. Already on the station was a western band known as the Chuck Wagon Gang, sponsored by Bewley Mills. The flour company sent this group out on location advertising the flour, and hot biscuits were served on the spot. The Carter Quartet was hired by the station, and instantly became Bewley's Chuck Wagon Gang. In addition to the group name change, came individual name changes as well for simplicity: D. P. "Dad" Carter (Dave), Anna (Effie), Rose (Lola), and Jim (Ernest). Their repertoire consisted of ballads, folk, western, and popular songs of the day, and one hymn or gospel song each day.

The group became very popular at WBAP, and at one time Bewley Mills offered a picture for coupons from flour sacks. Over 100,000 requests came in to the station. Two British record producers, Don Law and Art Satherly, heard them early on and quickly signed them to an exclusive recording contract with American Record Corporation. Their first recording sessions occurred at a makeshift recording studio at the Gunter Hotel, in San Antonio, Texas on November 25 and 26th, 1936, where they recorded twenty-two titles of both gospel and western songs. "The Son Hath Made Me Free" was their first recording. In short time, their gospel recordings became so popular that after three western sessions, the decision was made to only record gospel music. In short time, the Chuck Wagon Gang's contract and master recordings were purchased by Columbia Records, now Sony Music. Their association with Columbia Records lasted thirty-nine years, during which time they recorded 408 known masters. At one time, the Chuck Wagon Gang was the second highest selling artist on the label, second to Xavier Cugat, and they were followed in sales by the newly rising star, Johnny Cash.

The group was quite content with their popular radio program, and on occasion did a few personal appearances in Texas and neighboring states. Their records were being heard nationwide as well as in several



foreign countries. Promoter, the late Wally Fowler heard them on radio, and decided they were a must for his "All-Nite Singings" which were becoming very popular in the South. Traveling to Texas, his mission was to convince the Chuck Wagon Gang that folks outside Texas were ready for live concerts at his programs. The group was very reluctant for these far travels, but finally booked two dates with him, Augusta and Atlanta, GA. Even as they traveled for these dates, they called Wally, ready to turn around and go home, but after much persuasion, the group agreed to come to the concerts.

Much to the Gang's surprise, thousands of very enthusiastic folks were on hand to greet them at both cities. The Gang did not know the "norm" for Wally's programs. As a radio group, they sang from songbooks, and sung western and gospel songs. They did not even know they were to sing all gospel music at Wally's programs, and have the lyrics memorized like other gospel groups. Much to the surprise to other groups on the program, they did sing from their songbooks at these two engagements. In short, the Gang did not like all the traveling associated with concert appearances, as most of Wally's programs were in the Eastern United States, but they granted him many 10-day sporadic tours during the early years. Except for brief interruptions during World War II, their radio shows lasted 15 years, but their career was mounting for full concert work, where their travels would eventually take them to the famed Carnegie Hall in New York City, Hollywood Bowl, Gator Bowl, Daytona International Speedway, numerous appearances on The Grand Ole Opry, and international travels to Canada, and Nassau and Spanish Wells in The Bahamas.

The Gang's popularity was greatly enhanced by radio play. One could hardly move the radio dial without hearing them. Many locally sponsored 15-30 minute daily radio programs, playing only Chuck Wagon Gang music, sprouted across the nation. In the 1950's, promoters Rev. and Mrs. J. Bazzel Mull of Knoxville, TN began playing their music exclusively weekly on large 50,000-watt stations in Nashville, Chicago, New Orleans, and other large cities. Millions of records and songbooks were sold across the nation as well as many foreign countries from the Mulls' radio shows. Around 1956, the group briefly moved headquarters from Texas to Knoxville, and Rev. Mull became their booking agent. Turning to television in the early 60's, they made a number of black and white video clips for *The Wally Fowler Show* and *The Mull's Singing Convention*. The Chuck Wagon Gang also co-hosted a TV Show with The Rangers Trio, *The Gospel Roundup*, a fifteen-minute Monday-Friday show, featuring two songs by each group. This program was aired and rerun for approximately five years. They made numerous guest appearances on several country music shows, including The Wilburn Brothers and Porter Wagoner.

As with any organization, and particularly with a music group, personnel changes are inevitable and the expected for various reasons. The Chuck Wagon Gang remained essentially a family group through the years. As family members retired or left the group, other family members as well as non-family members came in to the group. To date, forty-eight known individuals have played their respective roles in the Chuck Wagon Gang. This is not a lot of people, considering the longevity of the group. Each edition has remained a close-harmony quartet, and contributed to the onward success of the Chuck Wagon Gang.

Through the years many awards and accolades have been bestowed upon the group. The first commercially licensed recording of the now Albert E. Brumley classic "I'll Fly Away" was the Chuck Wagon Gang's recording of the title on December 16, 1948. In 1950, *Billboard* reported that disc jockeys of America voted the Chuck Wagon Gang eighteenth most popular of all small singing groups in the nation, considering all genres of music, and third most popular of all Columbia Recording artists. Anna Gordon was awarded "Miss Gospel Singer" in 1954. In 1955 Columbia Records awarded them their first gold record for "I'll Shout and Shine," commemorating 20 years on Columbia Records. Also in 1955, the National Disc Jockey Association voted them "Number One Gospel Act in America." They were named "Kentucky Colonels" in the mid-sixties. In 1966, The Chuck Wagon Gang was chosen with several other artists to appear in a movie, *Sing a Song for Heaven's Sake*. Columbia Records also presented a 30-year plaque in 1967. Dad Carter was posthumously inducted into the

Gospel Music Association's Hall Of Fame in Nashville on April 3, 1985. On November 28, 1986, performance rights organization SESAC presented the Gang's second gold record "to commemorate 50 years of recorded music, an unparalleled milestone in Gospel Music." "The Lifetime Achievement Award" was awarded in 1986 by SESAC. The 50th anniversary also included a letter from President Ronald Reagan. The States of Texas and Tennessee also bestowed special honors. In 1989 Rose Karnes was presented "The Living Legend Award" by The Grand Ole Gospel Reunion, followed by her sister, Anna, receiving the same award in 1990. In 1989, at the National Quartet Convention in Nashville, Roy Carter was presented the coveted "Marvin Norcross Award," the highest honor given in the gospel music field. The Chuck Wagon Gang garnered "Gospel Group of The Year" by TNN/Music City News Awards for the years 1988, 1989, 1991, 1992, and 1993. The group was nominated for a Grammy Award in 1992 for their album, "Still Rollin," placing in the top five of their category. In 1998 all past and former members of the 'Gang' were inducted into the Gospel Music Association's Hall of Fame in Nashville, TN. In 2006, Shaye Smith was made a "Kentucky Colonel." On June 14, 2006, President Bush sent White House greetings in honor of the Chuck Wagon Gang's 70th Anniversary. In October 2005, Anna Carter Gordon Davis was inducted into the Southern Gospel Music Association's Hall of Fame in Pigeon Forge, TN. Anna was followed by her sister, Rose Carter Karnes for the same induction in October 2006. Their recordings are among the historic recordings at both the White House and The Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC.

The Chuck Wagon Gang's '70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary' CD was a very special recording. Many artists of the country music community have roots to Chuck Wagon Gang music, and twelve artists were invited to appear as guests on this recording. The guests included George Jones, The Oak Ridge Boys, The Gatlin Brothers, Ricky Skaggs, the late Billy Walker, John Conlee, The Jordanares, and others.

With the rich history and music now spanning into eight decades, and having sold over 40 million records, the current Chuck Wagon Gang is rolling right along today. Singing bass, and serving as manager and emcee for the group, is Dave Emery, who resides in Pigeon Forge, TN. Dave is a minister, and was a pastor for nine years, taught Bible College for 5 years, and has been active in the performing areas at Branson, MO and Pigeon Forge, TN, prior to joining the Chuck Wagon Gang. Shaye Smith is the alto singer for the group. Shaye is the grand-daughter of the late Anna Carter Gordon Davis, the original alto singer for The Chuck Wagon Gang, and the late Howard Gordon, who played guitar for the group for many years. The quality, tone, and style of Shaye's voice are very reminiscent of Anna, adding to the groups 'original' sound. Shaye holds two Bachelor's Degrees in Music (Bachelor of Arts in Vocal Performance and a Bachelor of Music in Choral Conducting) and she arranges many of the Gang's new songs in preparation for recordings. The tenor position of the group is now held by Stan Hill, of Knoxville TN. Stan has been singing many years with his wife, local groups, and at various theaters in Pigeon Forge. Audiences everywhere love his featured new rendition of the Squire Parsons' classic, "Sweet Beulah Land." Singing soprano for the Chuck Wagon Gang is Julie Hudson, from Kingsport, TN. Julie's voice has already been termed a "young Rose," as she does possess those high, clear, piercing tones as Rose had. She is a registered nurse, having served for 17 years as a surgical nurse prior to joining the Chuck Wagon Gang.

The great Chuck Wagon Gang standards, classics, and most requested songs are still featured at today's Chuck Wagon Gang concert, and their simple approach remains intact. There just can't be a Chuck Wagon Gang concert without "The Church In The Wildwood", "Higher", Echoes From The Burning Bush", "Heaven's Really Gonna Shine", "We Are Climbing," "I'll Meet You In The Morning", "Looking For A City", and others in this vein. But as with any singing group, new songs, new recordings, and freshness must prevail.

The Chuck Wagon Gang is currently nominated in "Mixed Group Of The Year" in the Singing News Fan Awards, which will be given out at the National Quartet Convention in Louisville, KY in September of this year.

The Chuck Wagon Gang records for Song Garden Music Group, and their latest recording, "Keep Travelin' On" remains true to their famed tradition of old favorites, yet freshness comes out in several new songs. The Chuck Wagon Gang is committed to preserving the integrity of the it's great legacy by continuing the simple style that Dad Carter established nearly 72 years ago. They will continue to do as Dad Carter instructed, "Sing the old songs, and sing them the way I taught you."

Currently the Chuck Wagon Gang consists of: Dave Emery (Bass, Emcee, and Manager), Shaye Smith (Alto), Stan Hill (Tenor), and Julie Hudson (Soprano).

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