

Derrell Stewart

A few years ago I had the opportunity to talk with several of the Southern Gospel Music legends at the Grand Ole Gospel Reunion. This week's feature is one of the true legends. He is Derrell Stewart, one of the main stays of The Florida Boys before they retired and Charlie Waller began to carry on the group.

Darrell was born in Brunswick Georgia. Derrell began to play piano at five years of age and continued to take lessons all through school. He stated that his introduction to Southern Gospel Music was through the all-day singings and other church related musical events. One of his piano teachers was James Walbert and according to Derrell he was one of the best quartet style piano teachers in the business. If you have ever been to a concert of The Florida Boys you know that Derrell learned his piano lessons well and, although Derrell is very modest in talking about himself as a pianist, he would have to be numbered among the best in the business. Some of his heroes were Hovie Lister and Wally Varner. They too are know for not only their ability to play but also for their stage presence.

When Derrell finished high school his plan was to enroll in college but music was in his blood. He was offered the piano playing position in January 1953 with the Dixie Rhythm Quartet, so at the age of eighteen and without his mother's blessing he joined the group. The quartet moved to Macon, Georgia, for a time and then on to Dothan, Alabama, where they had a radio program on WOOF-AM a 5000-watt station. This program was heard in Northern Florida, South Georgia and parts of Alabama. This group traveled and sang for about three years and broke up late in 1955. It was during Derrell's year with the Dixie Rhythm Quartet that the idea, which has become a trademark, of always wearing "red socks" began. Derrell stated that while with this group he wore red socks, red suspenders and a red tie. When he joined The Florida Boys he continued to wear red socks but drops the other red items.

The next chapter in Derrell's life was and still is his tenure with The Florida Boys. J. G. Whitfield called Derrell in January of 1956 and invited him to join his group as piano player. Of course Derrell had been off the road for a few months and was anxious to be with a quartet so he accepted the offer. By this time he was married and had a small child. Derrell packed his family and himself and moved to Florida where some 50 plus years he played piano with the same group. If you have followed Southern Gospel Music over the years you know that The Florida Boys are one of the most awarded groups in gospel music. In the 60's and 70's the Gospel Singing Jubilee TV program was seen coast to coast.

I asked Derrell to share some of his most memorable moments and here are a couple of the stories. He shared a story about a young man who came to him at the quartet convention a few years ago. This young man told Derrell what an influence he had been on his life. It started with this young man watching the Gospel Singing Jubilee on Sunday mornings. This young man admired Derrell so much that he asked his grandmother to give him piano lessons and through Derrell planting a seed in this young man's life he has gone on to not only be a pianist but also a pastor of a church in West Virginia.

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The other story is about a young lady in a wheelchair who Derrell prayed for because she was having surgery the following week. A year later he was back in the same town and the lady walked up to him and reminded him of who she was and what God had done in her life. Derrell related these stories not for self-recognition but to show how God will use some one to minister to other people. People can be and are reached for Christ through Southern Gospel Music.

Derrell will once again be a part of this year's Grand Ole Gospel Reunion August 8th through 10th. Don't miss out on this great week of Southern Gospel Music.

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