

Paul & Ann Downings

This week's feature is a flashback to one of the top groups of yesteryear, the Downings. The story of the Downings begins as a classic boy-meets-girl story. Virginia Ann Sanders of Pittsboro, MS, grew up on a cotton farm and had dreams of singing gospel music all over the world. Her family was supportive of those dreams, making sure Ann had the best music teachers and singing schools in the area to attend. Ann listened to a variety of music as a girl, and was a fan of Patti Page and Rosemary Clooney in particular, but since her aspirations were in gospel, it was her interest in Ginger Smith Laxson, soprano and pianist for the Speer Family, that would ultimately pay off for her.

Right out of high school, Ann was hired to join the Speer Family, impressing them with her knowledge of all their songs. For five years, Ann traveled and sang with the Speers, quickly becoming one of the more popular singers in gospel music, especially with her renditions of "I Must Tell Jesus" and "On The Sunny Banks." Ann's talents were honed and sharpened by her time with the Speers.

Paul Shirley Downing, Jr. from Manila, AR, grew up in Tupelo, MS (Elvis Presley's hometown). In 1948, Paul joined the Navy. Upon returning from the service, the charming and likable Paul became a successful salesperson. However, Paul was led to sing gospel music, and his deep bass voice attracted the ear of gospel music legend Lee Roy Abernathy. Abernathy, who had been instrumental in bringing a similarly pitched London Parris into gospel music, was taken with the quality of Paul's voice, and likened it to that of another gospel legend, Aycl (A.D.) Soward, one of the great bass singers of the 1940s and 50s. Lee Roy got Paul into the Abernathy's All-Stars Quartet in 1964, and from there, Paul eventually went to the Rangers Quartet and the Dixie Echoes.

Paul's role model as a bass singer was the late Bill Lyles, and Paul someday hoped he would emulate Lyles by joining the Blackwood Brothers. However, when his eye caught Ann Sanders, those dreams took a bit of a detour. Paul first saw Ann in a diner in Americus, Georgia. The two began seeing each other regularly. After six months, Paul proposed to her by writing "Will You Marry Me" on a Styrofoam Dairy Queen cup. Ann said "Yes," and soon, the couple became Mr. and Mrs. Paul Downing. Shortly after they were married, Paul (who as a salesperson was only home on weekends) noticed Ann was unhappy not singing at this time, and decided to do something about that! He asked his wife if she wanted to form a group. After another "Yes," they bought a bus, and the Downings were born. Paul did not just start any old group, instead, he put together one of the most talented and versatile ensembles imaginable. Along with Paul and Ann there was soprano Sue Chenault, today known as Sue Dodge, male lead Greg Gordon (son of Anna Gordon of the Chuck Wagon Gang), who had sung with the Chuck Wagon Gang and played drums for the Oak Ridge Boys, and veteran gospel pianist Dickie Matthews, whose resume included stints with the Crusaders Quartet and the Deep South Quartet in the 1950s. This original incarnation of the Downings wasted no time making an impact on gospel music, with hits such as "I'm Free," "I Believe What The Bible Says," and "Jesus Is Coming Soon," establishing the Downings as a force to be reckoned with from the start.

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In 1969, Ann was awarded the first Dove Award for best female singer. With success came the ability to add singers and more versatility to the group, so by 1970 the Downings had brought Wayne Hilliard, Joy Dyson (who replaced Sue Chenault), and singer/pianist Donny McGuire (from the Rebels Quartet) into the group, and the hits kept on coming... "Sheltered In The Arms Of God," "City Of Gold," "Happiness," "Getting' Ready Today," and "He Touched Me" added to the legend that the Downings were becoming.

By 1971, the group consisted of Dyson on soprano, Ann on alto, McGuire on lead and piano, and Paul's rumbling bass and on-stage warmth. They recorded their first live album that year, "This Is How It Is," in Muncie, IN. This album was the biggest seller of the Downings' career. Along with their obvious crossover appeal to both young and traditional audiences alike, one of the Downings most distinctive attributes was their dynamic concert style. They moved around at will on stage, often interacting with each other while doing so. The effect of all that movement and their dynamic arrangements was one of intense energy – it was very difficult to remain still at a Downings concert. Both of their live albums,

the above-mentioned recording and 1975's double album "Praise Him," were two of their best-known recordings.

Throughout the mid 70s, the Downings continued to rack up the hits songs like "I've Got Confidence," "I'll Soon Be Gone," "Bridge Over Troubled Water," "Greater Is He That Is In Me," "Oh, I Want To See Him," "I Feel So Good About It," and "Operator" all added to the Downings' legend. In addition, Paul was the winner of the Singing News' "Favorite Bass" award in 1973.

In 1978, the Downings disbanded for a time, and financial troubles and marital difficulties plagued Paul and Ann. The 80s were a trying decade for the two, as they tried to salvage their marriage and their individual lives. However, through counseling, and prayer Paul and Ann persevered and saved their marriage, and their fortunes began to turn.

It seemed they had come full circle, and were ready to set gospel music on fire as they had 20 years earlier. However, this time, they had become involved in extra musical ministries they began to counsel couples in trouble and also troubled youth. Paul and Ann began a women's retreat, which continues annually to this day under Ann's leadership. However, there was always music they re-formed a new Downings to do concerts, and Paul was helping Ann begin a solo music ministry of her own.

As the 90s dawned, it appeared Paul and Ann was poised to conquer gospel music as they had in the 70s. However, on Feb. 23, 1992, while preparing for a service in the Lexington, KY area, Paul Downing's heart stopped beating. At the age of 59, that resounding deep bass voice of Paul Downing was stilled.

As for the Downings, eighteen top 20 songs in a seven year period (1969-1976), many successful concerts and albums, and the acclaim of young and old alike has firmly established them as one of

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country music's most talented and noteworthy group. Ann continues her solo career today and appears on the Gaither Videos.
Hits: 12795

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