

# “Crossing Chilly Jordan”—The Blackwood Brothers (1960)

Added to the National Registry: 2012

Essay by Tom Graves (guest post)\*



*The Blackwood Brothers*

## **The Third Rail of Rock-and-Roll: Paying Respect to the Greatest of Gospel Groups, the Blackwood Brothers Quartet**

Almost exactly one week before Elvis Presley struck a chord heard 'round the world at Sun Studio in July of 1954, he heard news on the radio so devastating that he spent half an hour in Gaston Park in Memphis crying bitter tears over the tragedy. Two members of the most famous gospel group in history, the Blackwood Brothers Quartet, had died in front of hundreds of gasping spectators at a county fair in Clanton, Alabama. The 10-seater Beechcraft airplane the Blackwoods used to fly to their appearances crashed and exploded during a practice take-off and landing. Two group members were on the ground watching in horror with the rest of the crowd as the plane stalled and fell nose down, piloted by R.W. Blackwood and bass singer Bill Lyles.

There is some debate over which gospel group Elvis most favored, the Blackwoods or the Statesmen Quartet. What there should be no debate about is that Southern gospel music was the music Elvis most loved and was most influenced by. There were many days in Elvis' life when he did not listen to one note of rock-and-roll, blues, country, or soul. But there were very few in which he did not hear music by one of the many gospel groups he adored. James Blackwood once told a reporter that the last album Elvis listened to was by the Stamps Quartet. Insiders at Graceland have confirmed the album still sits on the turntable.

Of all the biographers and critics and musicologists who have explored ad nauseam every facet of Elvis' musical life, scandalously few pages have been devoted to his greatest passion, gospel music. Why? There are several reasons. The most apparent is that few of these writers hail from the Deep South and thus were not exposed to the Blackwoods, the Statesmen, the Happy Goodman Family, the Florida Boys, and the Dixie Echoes, as many Memphians were on every

Sunday morning for over two decades. The born-again movement that began in earnest in the 1970s also, in effect, balkanized music tastes. Country gospel music became wholly identified with low-church fundamentalism and polyester suits. Before this social change, however, many gospel fans who would not ordinarily darken the door of a church on a Sunday morning, such as Elvis Presley, who, contrary to myth, was not much of a churchgoer, would have a sweaty, stompin' good time at the All Nite Sings at Ellis Auditorium in Memphis.

The Blackwood Brothers were the first gospel group to sell over a million records, the first to sign to a major record label (RCA), and the first to get nationwide television exposure (on "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts," which, incidentally, they won). Their hit gospel song "Crossing Chilly Jordan" in 2012 was added to the prestigious Library of Congress National Recording Registry which cements their rightful place in American music history. And they made Memphis, a Mecca for many genres of American music, their headquarters for over 50 years. Today, you would be hard-pressed to find a Memphian under the age of 50 who has ever heard of the Blackwoods, much less could name any of their songs. Yet virtually every one of the musical giants who came out of Sun Records, particularly the white ones, owed musical debts to the Blackwoods, including Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash, who wrote a song for the group.

People who still believe that white gospel music did not cross over to black audiences should note that so many requests were phoned in to Ellis Auditorium at the funeral for the two Blackwoods who died in the 1954 plane crash that the balcony was reserved for black mourners. And it was full. The funeral procession that day is believed to be the biggest in Memphis history until the King himself died in 1977.

After the crash and funeral, the Blackwoods regrouped and brought in one of the greatest bass singers to ever overshadow a stage, J.D. Sumner, who later toured with Elvis. Sumner was like no one before or since, a revelation as a singer who brought a rhythmic, boogie beat to the staid gospel field. He was a superb songwriter (you've got to hear his vision of heaven as a Hawaiian Eden in "Paradise Island") and a great entertainer and comedic presence who could bring down the house with his deadpan ad-libs. At the other end of the quartet was Bill Shaw, a high tenor as remarkable as any competitor of the day on the Atlantic Records R&B roster. Bear Family Records in Germany some years ago put out a terrific, if expensive, CD boxed set of the group's pre-1960 recordings. But the Blackwoods recorded many more treasures after that, up until the departure of Sumner for the Stamps Quartet (which was owned by the Blackwoods' company). One example of the group's vocal acrobatics is their cover of the Dixie Hummingbirds' "The Devil Can't Harm a Praying Man," where they morph their style from black gospel to white and back again, all in homage to the black gospel groups the Blackwoods revered and championed. During the days of segregation in the South, the Blackwoods frequently booked the legendary black gospel group the Golden Gate Quartet on their tours. And white audiences loved them.

If there's one group America needs to rediscover before the historical rust obliterates this music form, it's the Blackwoods and their singular gospel quartet style. Shortly before his death from a series of strokes in 2002, James Blackwood, the sole surviving original member of the quartet, quietly admitted his hurt when, in tribute after tribute to Memphis music, the Blackwoods more often than not were not mentioned.

There is one person in Memphis' music past who would never have allowed such a thing to happen. This same person won his only Grammys with million-selling gospel albums that in large measure paid tribute to a group few now bother to remember.

*Tom Graves, a lifelong Memphian, is the author of the award-winning "Crossroads: The Life and Afterlife of Blues Legend Robert Johnson" and the memoir "White Boy." He also was a producer and writer for the Emmy-winning documentary film "Best of Enemies," about the acrimonious 1968 debates between Gore Vidal and William F. Buckley Jr.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.