

## *An Interview with Ed Hill*

Last week, I had the honor of interviewing the legendary Ed Hill. He founded the Prophets Quartet in 1959 and stayed with them until disbanding the group in 1973. He then joined J.D. Sumner and the Stamps and stayed for five years. After a short stint with the Statesmen, he joined the Singing Americans in the 1980s. In 1987, he joined the Masters V shortly before they were re-named J.D. Sumner and the Stamps, and stayed with the Stamps until several years ago (including a few years after J.D. Sumner's death when they were known as Golden Covenant). Last year, he announced that he was bringing the Prophets Quartet back. It was an honor to talk with him and learn more both about his background and about what he's doing with the Prophets.

**DJM:** *A few years ago, you had heart surgery and a stroke, and left the Stamps Quartet. Probably one of the first things Southern Gospel fans would want to know is a health update.*

**Hill:** Well, I'm really doing well. I had triple bypass heart surgery, and then a mini-stroke. I go to my doctor every three months. He's been my doctor for 15 yrs, and he told me that I am in the best shape he's seen me in that time. The Lord has blessed me!

**DJM:** *Your wife Sharon has been described to me as the world's perfect quartet wife, which is no small compliment! Could you tell me a bit about your family?*

**Hill:** My wife and I have been married 53 years this coming August. I have a son named David and a daughter named Lisa, and three grandsons, David, Drew, and David! My son David married a Lisa, so in my immediate family, I have two Lisas and three Davids! My wife has been a wonderful Christian lady, and has kept me in her prayers constantly.

**DJM:** *It's been quite a while since the Prophets retired; most people remember you from later groups. Could you tell us a bit about the original Prophets?*

**Hill:** I started the original Prophets in January of 1959. I had "Big Lew" Garrison as the tenor, Jay Barry as our lead singer, I did the baritone, Rancel Taylor did the bass, and Gary Trusler was the original piano player. We rehearsed every day for three months and did our first program in March of 1959. We recorded our first album back then in about November.



**DJM:** *How long was it before you were nationally known?*

**Hill:** We were blessed. There hadn't been a new group in Southern Gospel for a lot of years. The Statesmen Quartet, Stamps Quartet, and the Blackwood Brothers helped us. We went on TV in Knoxville with Rev. J. Bazzell Mull in about May. He was really a help for us to get started, and got us right into the middle of things

In about 1961 we went on the Gospel Singing Caravan with the Blue Ridge Quartet, the LeFevres, the Johnson Sisters, and the Prophets. It was syndicated in over 50 markets in the U.S., almost from coast to coast. It was just a step below the Gospel Singing Jubilee in those days.

I disbanded the Prophets in 1973.

**DJM:** *Why did you decide to bring the name back?*

**Hill:** Well, you know, all the years after I had disbanded the Prophets, I had a lot of people wanting me to start the group again. But the Lord just didn't lead me in that direction. Somehow when Johnny Minick asked me about this, I prayed about it, and the Lord told me it was time to start back. I know the Lord is wanting us to get back together, and we're getting it back together.

**DJM:** *Why did you originally pick the name "Prophets"? What does it signify to you?*

**Hill:** It was actually my wife's idea. The name Prophet is a wonderful thing, because we were delivering the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people all around the country. To tell folks he died for them—that's what the Prophets is all about, to tell this world all about Jesus Christ.

I decided to use it again when I prayed about it this time.

**DJM:** *Did you devote any thought to getting permission to bring back the "Singing Americans" name instead?*

**Hill:** No, I never did. I guess you could call the Prophets my baby. There was never another name I considered.

**DJM:** *Many times, when someone brings back a group name, their programs and recordings focus on songs the earlier version of the group made popular. Should we expect this from a Prophets concert or recording, or should we expect a lot of new material?*

**Hill:** Well, I think people in Southern Gospel music expect both. We're recording one of the original songs from the first Prophets in 1959. We also did several other songs of the Prophets, but we're also doing some new material, because I think people want both. Some of them want the old ones, some want the new ones, so I think we're going to try to do both.

**DJM:** *You've been a part of quite a few quartets. But to my knowledge, the last time you managed a quartet was in the 1980s, with the Singing Americans. What led to your joining that group?*

**Hill:** Charlie Burke called me to hear the Singing Americans rehearse. He wanted me to manage them. But at that point, I wanted to get off the road. But I went and heard them.

But when I heard the Singing Americans, to be honest with you, that was the nearest sound to the Prophets I'd heard since I disbanded them.

The first thing I did was call my wife and let her hear them. When she heard them, she knew I'd be getting back on the road. She just said, "Well, I'll pack my bag for North Carolina."

**DJM:** *Do you see any parallels between what you did with the Singing Americans and what*

*you're hoping to do with the Prophets?*

**Hill:** I believe there are parallels with the type of music we sang, and what the songs say. Most of us sang for the right reasons, what the Lord wanted in our lives, what we could do for people. I think it parallels these (things) pretty closely.

**DJM:** *Suppose the Singing Americans had never disbanded. What similarities and differences do you see between what you are doing with today's Prophets and what you would be doing with the Singing Americans if they were still on the road today?*

**Hill:** I don't see a whole lot of difference in the two groups. I feel the new Prophets will have a similar sound, style, spirit... a similar goal – that God wants us to touch people's lives.

**DJM:** *Do you see today's Prophets as more similar to the Singing Americans or the original Prophets?*

**Hill:** I'd see them as closer to the original Prophets than the Singing Americans. A lot of Southern Gospel has gone farther than what I did with the Prophets back then, but I believe the new Prophets will be able to do some of the stuff like we did before.

I'm 72. Back when I was 16 and 17, I'd go hear Southern Gospel. As I sat in the crowd, I really wanted to sing with all the legends like Hovie Lister, J.D. Sumner, James Blackwood, and Jake Hess. I ended up singing with the Statesmen and Stamps. I did fill in one time for the Blackwood Brothers with James Blackwood, and I filled in with the Masters V.

When I went back to the Stamps Quartet, they were just ending the Masters V and changing over to the Stamps. I was at the Convention one year with both the Singing Americans and the Masters V. J.D. stood us on the stage. They introduced us as the Masters V.

J.D. said, "All you boys turn your backs to the audience. Ladies, and Gentlemen, you have welcomed the Masters V, now welcome the Stamps Quartet!"

That's the way J.D. was.

**DJM:** *Over the years, you have sung with numerous Southern Gospel legends. If you could pick from all the singers you've sung with and assemble an all-star quartet, who would you select for the different parts? (Let's leave Bill Baize, Paul Jackson, and Mike Allen out of this question, as the current Prophets.)*

**Hill:** Danny Funderburk, Mike English, myself, and J.D. Sumner. On piano, I love old Milton Smith—as a good Christian boy and as a musician.

**DJM:** *You've been a member of many of Southern Gospel's most famous groups at one point or another. Is there any group that you never sang with that you wish you had sung with at least once?*

**Hill:** I filled in with many groups; you know how it's done. I've sung with almost all the legends out there. It was a dream come true for me to not only be able to sing with just one group but to sing with all the legends. I can't think of anyone else that I would rather sing with than those guys. I've sung with every group that I cared about singing with.

**DJM:** *J.D. Sumner made no secret of the fact that the Stamps Quartet was an entertainment quartet. I've been hearing that the Prophets are going to be a somewhat more ministry-oriented group. Is this true, and if it is, why?*

**Hill:** Yes, because first of all we have all prayed and thought about many things in our lifetime. We thought we were finished, but all of us have prayed about this thing, about whether we start the

Prophets again. We all felt like the Lord wasn't finished with us, and we're going to finish the plans God has made for us for the future, until we go. I think that it's the Lord's will for us to do this.

It is going to be more ministry-oriented, because we're hoping to bless people. We've all done entertainment all of our lives, but this is a new start for all of us. The Lord's leading us that way, to take His word to the people, telling others about Him all the time we're singing.

**DJM:** *What can the fans expect from the Prophets' upcoming project, especially in the way of song selection and styles?*

**Hill:** Well, we've taken old-fashioned Southern Gospel songs like I did back in '59, '60, and '61 and put new arrangements to them, trying to bring them up to our day now. Then we're bringing new material also. Like a song that Paul Jackson and Johnny Minick wrote called "I'll Follow". It's not exactly like a lot of Southern Gospel songs, but it has a great message. Ever since Sharon and I heard it, we can't get the tune out of our minds. I think some of the style is going to be a little different, but it's going to be a combination. We're going to bring back some of the old material that the older people will remember and some that the younger people will attach to...like (what we did) when we started.

**DJM:** *Suppose the original Prophets had never disbanded, and that you were still managing them today. Are you doing anything with this fresh start that you probably would not have tried if you were managing a group that had been continuously on the road for forty or fifty years?*

**Hill:** Well, I don't think I would change much. I was a little discouraged at the end of the old Prophets because I had lost the (Prophets) original sound. It was good, but not original. I believe this Prophets has it—not the original sound, but maybe a great sound

**DJM:** *You referred to a "Prophets sound." What is makes a sound a Prophets sound?*

**Hill:** Back in those old Prophets days, we sang higher than anyone else. It was high! We always hired a tenor singer to sing lead. Our tenor, Big Lew, sang a falsetto style. His normal voice was as low as mine. Leroy Abernathy had taught him this style and he could sing it all night long...and it was strong. So we had to have a high lead singer. I sang a lot higher than I do now. We also did that a lot with the Americans. That is why I enjoyed the sound.

With Paul Jackson and Bill Baize, we will sing high, too. We're not quite as high now, but I'll still get up there to get that sound I like.

**DJM:** *How do you think the Prophets will compare to the expectations of what people think you will sound like?*

**Hill:** I think there are people who want the old Prophets, back to what it was in '59 and '60, but I don't think we want to go back that far. We want to sing some of that material and put a new style to it. I don't know whether everyone will like it or not. I hope they do!

I'm bringing back memories of the past, with material for the future. We're not trying to go back to the same spot—we're trying to go where the Lord wants us now, what the Lord wants us to do with the rest of our lives now.

I sang a lot of years without being a Christian. I knew how to talk like one, and how to act like one...but I became a Christian while with the Stamps in 1979, right before I went with the Singing Americans. I wasn't that bad, but I had never asked the Lord to come into my life.

I gotta admit, we started the original Prophets just to entertain. But we have a new Prophets. We're going to do the old stuff. But we're in it for a new reason, to spread the Word for the Lord.

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April 2007 Feature Article

**DJM:** *What do you hope to accomplish by starting this quartet again? At the end of the day, when today's Prophets retire and sing their final concert, what do you hope you can say about the Prophets?*

**Hill:** The Lord has challenged us to live the "good life", to tell the people about Jesus Christ and what He's done for us. If we leave here with just one song, and somebody got saved because he heard the Prophets sing it, at the end that's what it's all about. I hope at the end of this we've touched people's lives, that we've helped people to realize the need of salvation and what the Lord has done for us.

He's certainly blessed me for a lot of years.

**DJM:** *Are there any other stories or thoughts you'd like to share with this article's readers?*

**Hill:** I want to say this: I know the Lord has blessed me, He's allowed me and others to pick up and start anew. When I thought I was finished, I'm not, the Lord has impressed me to keep on. His plan is perfect, to keep us singing and sing his message. He's blessed me, even though I wasn't a Christian. I am now. I'm so thankful this very day for all He's done for me.

*Thank you to Ed Hill, and to Prophets lead singer Paul Jackson for setting up the interview.*