

## *An Interview with Stewart Varnado*

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I recently had the opportunity to interview Stewart Varnado. He has been the pianist for the Dixie Echoes since 1998. He also helps promote several concerts each year, most notably the J.G. Whitfield Memorial Sing every June and the Suwannee River Jubilee, one of the largest outdoor music festivals in Southern Gospel.

**DJM:** *You recently released *A Southern Gospel Decade*, a compilation piano solo CD commemorating your first ten years in Southern Gospel music. How many piano solo CDs have you recorded, and how many other recordings have you played piano for?*

**Varnado:** I guess you could re-word this question as “how many can people get a hold of”! I first went into a local studio in Louisiana when I was 13 years old to record a couple of cassettes to give away as Christmas presents to my family. I did the same thing the next year and recorded 3 more. They were very simple, and there’s NO chance of me ever putting any of those recordings on anything for ANYONE to hear. The playing was so pathetic that I literally laugh when I hear them now. So after those first 5 “never to be heard again CDs,” I recorded another piano CD at the age of 16 while I was with a group from Laurel, MS, called “Masterpeace,” who later changed their name to “Master’s Voice.” This group included me, Josh Garner (Florida Boys), and Tim Duncan (Signature Sound).

Before I joined the Dixie Echoes in 1998, Roger Bennett helped me by arranging and producing my first professional recording. I can still remember pulling in his driveway and working out the arrangements at his house. For a seventeen year old kid, I was in heaven! Also on that recording, titled “A Show Of Hands”, Anthony Burger joined me on a duet.

Since I have been with the Dixie Echoes, I have recorded 7 new recordings:

1999 – *Plain & Simple*

2001 – *Jubilee*

2002 – *Southern Gospel Piano*

2003 – *Musical Journey*

2004 – *The Southern Gospel Players*

2005 – *Old Style Gospel Piano*

2006 – *The Southern Gospel Players – Volume 2*

Then in 2007, I released *A Southern Gospel Decade*, which includes 30 songs from those 7 CDs along with selections from the CD that Roger produced.

In 2000, I recorded a Christmas instrumental CD “Christmas in Dixie” along with Randy Shelnut Sr. & Jr. (The Dixie Echoes Band)



On Dixie Echoes Recordings:

*River Of Love* 1999 – I accompanied the group on 2 songs on the recording

*Reunion* 2000 – I accompanied the group on 2 songs on the recording

*Press On* 2002 – I accompanied the group on 1 song, plus we did an instrumental song “Higher Ground” on this CD.

*The Old Fashioned Way* 2003 – was my first album to play all 12 songs

*A New Chapter* 2005 – I played on 6 of the songs

*Sounds Of Sunday* 2006 – I played on all of the songs

In 2002, along with Gene McDonald, Josh Garner, Billy Hodges, and Randy Shelnut Jr., we recorded a CD called *Five Broke Single Boys*.

In 2006, I played on Gene McDonalds first (and only right now) solo recording called *In Times Like These*.

On the Florida Boys' last recording, *Keep On Singing*, I played the piano on their signature song “When He Was On The Cross.”

I have played on various other sessions in Nashville, Atlanta, and at Echo Sound in Pensacola, but they have been too many to keep track of. But you won't find me in the studio much anymore, it's not really my cup of tea.

**DJM:** *At the 2007 Parade of Pianos, you played "Gloryland Way." Why did you select that particular song?*

**Varnado:** When I first heard the Cathedrals, Roger was playing this song as his instrumental, and he gave me his CD *Heavenly Highway Hymns* which it was on. I think I learned every song on that CD. I loved his playing, but I hadn't developed my playing enough to figure out some of his licks at the time. Roger and I quickly became friends (why he ever paid any attention to a 15 year old kid, I'll never know). But he took the time to teach me that song note for note. He even paid for my trip to Nashville one summer to play for the students at his Piano Workshop that he held one year. He had me perform it with his track, along with a few of his other songs. It is no secret that Roger was my hero and I have always tried to pattern my playing and career after him.

When thinking of what to play at NQC this year, I wanted to pay tribute to Roger by playing the first song of his that I had ever heard, and learned because of him teaching it to me. So, I called his wife Debbie and asked her if it would be alright for me to play it at the Parade of Pianos and use Rogers soundtrack. She graciously agreed. NQC was different for me this year, because I've never really acted my age. I tell people that I'm a 60 year old man trapped in this body. When other guys my age would stay up all hours of the night at NQC, going out to eat and bowling, etc., I would go to bed by midnight at NQC if at all possible. Then I'd be up first thing in the morning to go eat breakfast with Roger Bennett or Andrew Ishee. Last year at NQC 2006, Every meal I ate was with one of those two. This year, with neither one of them there, so I was a loaner.

I am always a happy player on stage, but prior to the Parade of Pianos, I was sitting backstage visiting with Jeff Stice (another of Rogers very close friends). We were reminiscing about ‘Rog’ and after Jeff played his awesome rendition of Jesus Saves, as a tribute to Roger, I became in a slump. Thinking to myself that this just wasn't the same without Roger. I went up to play “Gloryland Way” and it was all just a blur. I know I didn't smile a bit, I fought my way through the song, and hope that I did his arrangement justice.

**DJM:** *On a Pianorama several years ago, Roger Bennett told a story about how he first became exposed to your music. (Scott Howard gave him a CD you had recorded, using all his arrangements from a piano solo CD he had released.) Could you tell it from your perspective?*

**Varnado:** I was first exposed to quartet music when I was 15 years old, when I attended my first Gospel concert--the Cathedrals. That night, I met the pianist who would make a big impact in my desire to play Gospel music. After hearing Roger Bennett play, I was hooked.

When the concert was over, I went to the product table and introduced myself. Roger had never heard of me or ever heard me play, but he gave me his full attention. That made a great impression on a fifteen-year-old redheaded pianist. He gave me his *Heavenly Highway Hymns* solo CD, and the Cathedrals' *Radio Days* CD. I took them home and tried my best to pattern my playing after his. I wanted to be just like Roger Bennett. From that time on, Roger sort of took me under his wing, and was always a phone call away for any questions I ever had or just to lend an ear. I was a part of the Pianorama when Anthony Burger produced it each year at the NQC. And when Roger took over the event, he confided that as long as he had any say that I would be a part of the event. Words can't describe how much of an impact his friendship has been in my life. Roger was pure class and a great role model. It has always made me conscious that some young pianist might be watching me, and I've always tried to show them a little bit more attention and encourage them.

**DJM:** *I understand you have become a shareholder in the National Quartet Convention. What led you to do this?*

**Varnado:** A couple of years ago, I was visiting with Les Beasley at his home and Clarke was also there. That was the first time I was checked to see if I had any interest in being a part of the Convention. But my chance didn't come until June of 2006. One of the board members contacted me to see if I would be interested. I quickly accepted, and after their June meeting, I along with Mark Trammell became the newest shareholders of the National Quartet Convention.

**DJM:** *What do you think a NQC of the future--say 25 years down the road--might look like?*

**Varnado:** I can remember back in 1996 and 1997 wanting to go to the convention, but as a high school student, my parents wouldn't let me miss school (for anything! I never missed a single day in 13 years: Kindergarten-12th) And my first year to attend the NQC was in 1998, which was also the same year I performed on the mainstage for the first time. It is the Biggest event for Southern Gospel Music, and I love going there every year. Lots of people have different ideas on the direction that NQC needs to take. I do believe that it will be around and going strong 25 years from now. I plan to do everything I can to promote the event throughout the year wherever the Dixie Echoes perform. The guys that are in charge of the event really DO listen to the fans and suggestions, but what folks often don't realize is that it is simply a promoted concert. Just as any other, the promoters do their best to present the best program possible and keep the fans happy. You'll never be able to please everyone. As a promoter of several other events, I've quickly learned this. I am a fan of many different styles of Southern Gospel, but I'm really a male quartet traditionalist, and really want to do my best to keep quartet music in the forefront.

**DJM:** *The year is 1959, and you have your pick of playing piano for any Southern Gospel group. Which group do you choose, and why?*

**Varnado:** This is a tough question, and the reason why is because both groups that come to mind had pianists that were an integral part of the groups sound and success. I would either choose the Statesmen (from that time it would have been Rosie, Jake, Doy, Chief), or the Florida Boys (Coy, Les,

Glen, Billy). But either group without Hovie or Derrell, respectively, would have been missing a little something. Those were the days... When the musicians played an important role and their charisma and stage presence meant a lot to the groups presentation.

**DJM:** *The Dixie Echoes are known for using soundtracks rarely if at all. Do you wish more Southern Gospel groups would drop soundtracks, or do you like the distinctiveness this gives your group?*

**Varnado:** When I first joined the group, we used a few soundtracks during our program, and while I do prefer live music myself, I understand why some groups have to use tracks. It is definitely a costly thing to keep a group on the road, and even one less paycheck can save the group a lot. By not using tracks and singing around two mics, it does give us a little something different than most groups, but I also like the variety that Southern Gospel has to offer. My favorite part about attending Cathedrals concerts when I was growing up was that they performed many of their songs live with just piano and bass, and managed to keep the concert entertaining.

**DJM:** *What parts can you sing, if any, and have you ever filled in vocally during the illness or absence of a group member?*

**Varnado:** I'm not a good singer at all. I've never filled in for a member (we have other people that usually ride along and help out when necessary. I know the bass part, and can consistently hit a low C, and occasionally down to a Bb, but you wouldn't want to hear it. I've joked with the guys saying that I want to sing badly, but they tell me that I already do. To which I usually reply. What I mean is, I would like to sing in the worst way. Again they confide that I do!

**DJM:** *How many hours do you spend practicing piano each week? How many hours do the Dixie Echoes rehearse as a group each week?*

**Varnado:** Honestly, I hardly touch the piano when I am at home unless it's near the time that we are in the studio or I am recording a new CD. We are usually home 3 or 4 days per week and when I'm home I am busy filling product orders or reservations for the Suwannee River Jubilee or promoting some other concert. The Dixie Echoes never get together as a group during the week to practice. We usually arrive at our concerts 2-3 hours prior to start time and once the sound equipment is setup, we sometimes run over a possible new song or two. And we only typically do this after setting up for a church concert or a concert featuring just us (since when there are other groups on the program, they need to get on stage to do soundcheck also.

**DJM:** *Are there any questions you wish an interviewer would ask you, but nobody has to date?*

**Varnado:** Do I worry about not seeing many young people at Gospel concerts, and the industry dying?

Absolutely Not! Randy Shelnut has told me that as a teen, he can remember sitting on the Happy Goodmans bus talking with Rusty, and Rusty was worried about the age of their crowds and how we might not have an industry in a few years. This was back in the 60s. The elders of that time have gone on, and we have a new crowd of elderly people. I believe as people age, so do their tastes in music, and along with maturity, many people start looking toward the church as they grow older. Gospel music is the only music with a real message, and as long as we sing songs that can speak to the hearts of people, there will always be an audience.