

# DIXIE HUMMINGBIRDS



The Dixie Hummingbirds are an institution. While they have always remained deeply rooted in the gospel tradition, their influence has made itself known far and wide in American popular music. Perhaps Isaac Hayes has put it most eloquently: "In the beginning, after the word, and before there was rap, hip-hop, disco, punk, funk, metal, soul, Motown, rock-a-billy, before bebop, doo-wop, and the big band swing there was the Dixie Hummingbirds."

The group began their remarkable journey in 1920s Greenville, South Carolina, organized by gospel great James B. Davis, then 12 years old. After singing together in church through their high school years, Davis and his friends embarked on a ten-year stint of "wildcatting" - taking their act on the road to build up a reputation. In 1939, they began recording on the prestigious Decca label, and in the early 1940s they moved to Philadelphia, where easy access to a range of venues allowed them to make a name for themselves on an even larger scale.

By 1942, the Dixie Hummingbirds were wowing audiences at Cafe Society, New York's first integrated nightclub, backed by legendary jazz saxophonist Lester Young. In the 1950s, they routinely brought down the house at the Apollo Theater. The group broke into the popular consciousness in 1966, when they prompted a standing ovation at the Newport Folk Festival, and still greater fame was in store in 1973, when they backed Paul Simon on his smash hit "Loves Me Like a Rock." The Birds' own rendition of the tune won them a Grammy in 1974.

But the truth is that long before mainstream America knew their name, they knew their music. Retired patriarch Davis is fond of noting that the Dixie Hummingbirds have typically been about a decade ahead of the curve. In the 1940s, for example, they were singing the kind of a cappella harmonies that

caught on as doo-wop in the 1950s, and in the 1950s, they added electric guitar to their sound with the addition of Howard Carroll who is herald as the most progressive guitarist of his time and possibly this century, prefiguring the soul music of the 1960s.

Lead singer Ira Tucker, Sr., who has been with the group since 1938, when he was 13, was especially inspired and inspiring. Musicologist Horace Boyer writes that "not only did he put his voice and vocal technique to use, he also became the model for the 'activity' singer. He ran up and down aisles, jumped from the stage, and spun around without sacrificing one iota of the pure musical sound that he first brought to the quartet. Indeed, he served as the model for many of the rhythm and blues and soul singers from Jackie Wilson and Clyde McPhatter to Bobby Blue Bland, Stevie Wonder and the Temptations."

At the turn of the Century time took its toll on the Dixie Hummingbirds. After their 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary many of the members retired, all but one, Ira Tucker. And now on the eve on celebrating the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Dixie Hummingbirds in 2008, indeed he is "The Last Man Standing" and by all means "Still Keeping It Real". After singing 69 years with the Birds' Tucker chose an elite group of young men to help carry the legacy of the Dixie Hummingbirds in to uncharted waters, 8 decades of faith-based song. This legacy is now one step closer to being fulfilled with the album "Still Keeping It Real.....The Last Man Standing" garnering nomination at the 49<sup>th</sup> Annual Grammy Awards in 2007

Currently the Dixie Hummingbirds consist 6 members and over sixty years separating the members, with Ira Tucker the senior and lead singer at 82, William Bright, baritone and former lead singer of the apprentice group "Sons of the Birds", Lyndon Baines Jones lead guitarist, Willie Coleman bass guitarist, Torrey Nettles with the double duty of tenor singer and drummer, and last but not least bass singer Cornell McKnight

As The Dixie Hummingbirds embark on their 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2008 and Ira Tucker celebrates 70 years of non-stop performances they are renown as National Treasures. The legacy of the Bird's will live on forever through the Mural and street dedication on 15<sup>th</sup> and Dixie Hummingbirds Way in Philadelphia.

The Dixie Hummingbirds continue to entertain audiences world-wide. According to Fort Miles "...and those harmonies are so close that at times they barely seem to come from human beings. (McKnight's voice from the bottom of the ocean sure helped in that regard.) It's easy to drift away on a cloud when people sound this good together. Rarely did anyone fly up into falsetto; the Hummingbirds' harmonies are more of the cool blue flame variety, although they are not without their intensities. Tucker did drop to his knees to testify, surrounded by (and helped up by) his fellow singers. And on the road to 80 years of dedication and song they are..... "Still Keeping It Real".