

# The Chuck Wagon Gang

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## HISTORY

Eighty years of hope, harmony, faith and family.

Eighty years of what American roots music-titan Marty Stuart calls, “Unbreakable, steady, unmovable, truth.”

Eighty years that have brought accolades and honors for a group that began singing on local radio in 1935, and that went on to play Carnegie Hall, the Hollywood Bowl, and the Grand Ole Opry.

Eighty unparalleled years with the same patented, instantly identifiable sound for the Chuck Wagon Gang, and momentum continues to build. Some say that’s really no surprise.

“This group was designed for the ages,” Stuart asserts. “For the eternal ages.”

Stuart penned each song on the Chuck Wagon Gang’s latest album, Meeting in Heaven, and he is among the choir of celebrated figures who praise the history, legacy, and contemporary relevance of the Gang in America’s Gospel Singers, The Legacy Lives On, the documentary film that aired on PBS, beginning in the fall of 2015.

When farmer D.P. ‘Dad’ Carter formed the group in 1935, with son, Ernest, and daughters Lola and Effie, he could not have conceived of PBS documentaries, or of fan letters from presidents. Dad was simply looking for a way to spread the good word, and a way to buy medicine for Effie, who was sick with pneumonia.

The group found work on a small, Lubbock, Texas radio station. Word soon spread about the group’s harmonies, well-spaced and emphatic, and on November 25 and 26th of 1936, the Chuck Wagon Gang was recording for the American Record Corporation, run by now-famed producers Don Law and Art Satherly. In short time, the Gang’s contract and master recordings

were purchased by Columbia Records, a company with which they ultimately recorded 408 masters.

On Columbia, the Chuck Wagon Gang became what WSM air personality, music historian, and Grand Ole Opry announcer Eddie Stubbs calls, “America’s foremost country-gospel singers.” They sold millions of records and songbooks, enduring numerous personnel changes while retaining ties to the original quartet. Current owner, manager, and alto singer Shaye Smith is the granddaughter of original alto Anna (“Effie”) Carter and of Howard Gordon, who played deft and discreet electric and acoustic guitar for the Chuck Wagon Gang in the 1950s and ‘60s. The quartet still performs with accompaniment from only one guitar, now played by Karl Smakula. “Singing Chuck Wagon Gang music, there’s nothing to hide behind, and nothing to lean on,” Smith says. “It’s bare-bones, just voices and guitar, and that’s what creates that unique sound. It’s like the hard beginnings they all came from: Raw and tough, and you have to put it all out there.”

In today’s Chuck Wagon Gang, Smith and Smakula are joined by sonorous soprano Melissa Kemper, and longtime tenor Stan Hill, who remembers lying in bed as a child, listening to Chuck Wagon Gang records while he was supposed to be sleeping. Hill was far from the only musically inclined child to draw inspiration from the Gang.

“(Hearing them) set all of the wheels in motion for me,” said Duane Allen of Country Music Hall of Fame quartet the Oak Ridge Boys. “I wanted to sing in a four-part harmony group like that.” Each Chuck Wagon Gang member is a student of music history, fully aware of the legacy they uphold together, in harmony.

“The history is part of what makes us unique, and it’s a story that needs to be told,” Smith says. “This never would have started at all if my grandma hadn’t gotten sick. This story started out of crisis. It’s one of those good old American survival stories: Work hard, come out of the pit... it’s an encouraging story.”

That story, and this music, has moved Johnny Cash, Merle Haggard, Charlie Daniels, and generations of gospel singers and open-eared listeners. For eighty years, the Chuck Wagon Gang has offered hope and harmony, faith and family.

“Life moves on hope,” says Dan Rather, the legendary broadcaster who has been a Chuck Wagon Gang fan since childhood. For him, and for many more, the group is “an echo of an America that was, and a reminder of how important the values of that America remain.”

## TESTIMONIALS

### Ricky Skaggs, WSM Grand Ole Opry Star

“When I was fifteen years old, I left home and started working for Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys. Later there were stints with J.D. Crowe and The New South, and Boone Creek. Many times it would be Friday, Saturday, and Sunday shows, so I missed a lot of Church services as a result. One thing that would take me back home in my heart and soul was when we could pick up ‘The Mull Singing Convention’ radio show, and hear the great gospel sounds of The Chuck Wagon Gang. It made me think of Mom and Dad, because they loved them, too, but more importantly it made me think of Jesus. Many of their songs had a three-minute gospel message in them, and believe me, I needed to hear it.

They were the very best at what they did. Their harmonies were perfect. Even today with all the tuning devices that are used to make records, nothing comes close to the perfection of The Chuck Wagon Gang. With just a guitar for rhythm and those beautiful voices, they brought down the sounds of Heaven to the earth.

I’m sure thankful for their music. It was a source of inspiration for me at a time when I really needed it, and it still means the world to me today.”

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### Duane Allen, The Oak Ridge Boys

“I grew up on a farm in Northeast Texas, near Taylortown. My mom and dad taught us about God, how important it is to work for a living, the benefits of going to school, and how to sing. The only music we listened to was Gospel music, or music that was done at school or community events. We listened to the Grand Ole Opry on Saturday Nights, and on Sundays we listened to the Stamps Quartet on KRLD out of Dallas, and the Chuck Wagon Gang on WBAP in Fort Worth.

We did not have electricity in my boyhood years, so we had to save our battery life for radio shows that were approved by our family. News, weather, the Opry, the Stamps, and the Chuck Wagon Gang. I learned all of their songs from those radio shows. My family taught them to us.

In the mid-50s, the Chuck Wagon Gang appeared at my school, Cunningham Public School, and filled up the gym. They were the biggest stars I had ever seen in person. I loved their simple, four part harmonies, their message, and their guitar player, Howard Gordon. Later in life, I was asked to perform Farther Along at Howard’s funeral in 1967. I also bought the house owned by Howard and Anna Gordon. After I married Norah Lee Stuart, who sang with the Chuck Wagon

Gang briefly in the 1960s and '70s, all of our children and grandchildren were raised in that house.

The Chuck Wagon Gang and their music helped frame my dreams of being in a harmony singing group. To me, they will always be superstars. I am blessed that I got to know them, and that they became some of my dearest friends.

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### Larry Gatlin, The Gatlin Brothers

There are certain things that one never forgets--the smell of bacon frying; the taste of a GOO-GOO; the sound of a bull elk trumpeting to a full moon. These are some of the things that I will never forget. But in the "sound department," there is another one that is right there at the top, the sound of Dad, Anna, Rose, and Jim - the Chuck Wagon Gang. Their hauntingly beautiful, perfectly in tune, pristine sound, was not JUST unique. It was anointed by the Holy Spirit of ALMIGHTY GOD, and as I just listened to On the Jericho Road, I was taken back to my childhood - to the first time I heard that sound - and at the same time, I was uplifted by that sweet Holy Spirit. HALLELUJAH!!

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### Charlie Daniels, WSM Grand Ole Opry Star

When I was a kid, the radio stations always played a gospel song along with the country music. The Chuck Wagon Gang was featured quite often, and were played a lot on the Sunday gospel music shows that were so prominent in that period. So I became familiar with them early in my life. We didn't have a record player at home in the early days, but my daddy's brother Marvin bought the old 78rpm records, and I remember hearing them at his house.

I was raised in pretty rural parts of North Carolina and we didn't get many concerts, but I know the Chuck Wagon Gang did play some shows in different parts of the state, and some of my family who lived in the area went to see them.

They are one of the first gospel groups I ever remember hearing, and there was no mistaking them. From the very first note, you knew you were listening to the Chuck Wagon Gang.

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