

Richard and Robert Anderson of The Gospel Singaleers

Where: Welcome Baptist Church

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Robert Anderson

Robert Anderson, a Beckley native, age 58 at the time of the interview, has been a tenor in the Gospel Singaleers gospel quartet since he was a teenager. He is a supervisor at the Big Sandy Furniture Company.

Richard Anderson

Richard Anderson, a native of Towns, WV, and 74 at the time of the interview, is a member of the Gospel Singaleers gospel quartet.

RO: Robert Anderson

RI: Richard Anderson (*Interviewer's note: Richard has a deeper voice*)

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: Here tonight. Alright, so I'm recording. Well, could you both of you introduce yourselves and tell me when and where you were born?

RO: Okay, yeah my name is Robert Anderson, I'm the president of the group and born and raised in Beckley.

EH: You want to tell us how old you are?

RO: I'm fifty... eight.

EH: Okay (laughs)

RO: Born in October, October 5.

EH: How about you?

RI: I'm Richard Anderson. I was born in Towns, West Virginia, and I am uh, 74.

EH: So tell me about the Gospel Singaleers.

RO: Well, we've been singing together for practically 40, 40 or 45 years and we've been going ever since then. My mom and a couple of her friends uh, got this little group together with my little brother and a couple... it was maybe about 2 or 3 other young fellas and we've just been going ever since.

EH: So you've been in it since you were 13?

RO: Yeah.

EH: So did the... the group has sort of aged with you?

RO: Aged quite a bit!

EH: (laughs)

RO: Which is good, we've been blessed all these years and like we're still going on! And we're gonna keep going on until the Lord calls us home!

EH: And did you grow up going to this church? And is this where it started?

RO: Well it started in a little church called um, Church of Living God on Broadway Street which is here in Beckley. Rev. Tressenrider (sp?) was the pastor and then he passed away and then Virginia Powell became pastor, so that's really where we started singing in church mostly, a little Pentecostal church on Broadway Street.

EH: And what about you—where did you start singing?

RO: I started singing right in this church. When I was about uh, 16. And I've been here ever since, I came right back to the same church after 50 some years, 55 years and started singing again right here.

EH: (laughs) And what did you start singing at first and did your repertoire change?

RO: Uh, it's practically the same—of course we got new songs but it's sort of up tempo gospel. Right now, since through the years, it's been changed quite a bit, like contemporary gospel and but we still try to keep our roots in the Pentecostal gospel. I guess cause you know, that's what I was raised in and it feels like it's a lot more spiritual—know what I mean?

EH: Mmhm.

RO: You can get into it a lot. But it's up-tempo gospel.

EH: Do you ever write your own songs?

RO: We have, we have a couple—two or three songs that we've written. Well we've got 5 or 6 really, but we've only put uh, I mean... how many we put on?

RI: 2 on.

RO: 2 on CD?

RI: Yeah.

RO: Yeah, we've put 2 on CD. Name of it's "It Won't be Long" uh, the other one is "What Must I Do To Be Saved?"

RI: Yeah.

RO: And we've got another one on the latest, latest, well 2 more on the latest CD.

RI: Yeah.

RO: Yeah, which one is it—the one that uh, Brother Ellis (sp?) would sing—he's in the nursing home now, but he's still trying to sing a little bit. Um... I'm trying to think of the songs, the name of the songs that are on that CD. One of them is "Where He Leads Me I'll Follow." Um, "What Must I Do To Be Saved." "Bless You Lord."

RI: Yeah.

EH: (laughs)

RO: And I think there's a couple other ones—I can't think of 'em right now.

3:59

EH: Uh-huh.

RI: 4... 4 or 5, yeah.

EH: Nice.

RO: Like I said, we have some more songs, but we haven't put 'em on CD or anything yet. But we plan to.

EH: Has it always been a quartet?

RO: Always.

EH: And when you first started where were you singing?

RO: Well, we were singing on Broadway Street, and a few churches around here in Beckley, but they really started in the little house on Scott Avenue, which was my mom's house and she'd get the little... get my brothers and things together, in a little room, just sing!

EH: Uh-huh.

RO: And it's grown from there!

EH: Does she have any tapes from those days?

RO: Uh, no... we've got one CD... no... one 45 record we made in Charleston—Lord it's been—I bet it's been 30, 35 years ago. We did a 45 in Charleston. Uh, the name of it is... can you help me out?

EH: (laughs)

RI: I can't remember that one! I can't remember that. You wanna know where I started?

EH: Sure, yeah!

RI: Oh, I started singing gospel after we had a bad accident. A preacher got us together and told us we need to be singing for the Lord, you know? After looking at cars, you know, so he offered his house up. His name was Rev. Terry. We started practicing up there twice a week and 'fore you know it, we got pretty good at it and... but we were singing a cappella, we didn't have any, you know... and we sung like that for about 4 or 5 years until all of us graduated and went on our separate ways. I sung with his (Robert's) brother's dad years ago.

EH: Okay.

5:55

RI: And uh, and I've been doing it ever since. Well, not ever since, I've been sticking with it, you know, but not doing it all the time.

EH: Cause then you went up to Cleveland?

RI: Yes. Yes. Yes. But I never found any group up there I wanted to sing with in Cleveland.

EH: Uh-huh.

RI: Yeah.

EH: But would you sing around the house?

RI: Walking around the house singing and stuff like that, you know?

EH: Yeah.

RI: And I sung in a choir up there for a little while too.

EH: Okay.

RI: Mmhm.

EH: Do you still have that 45?

RO: We've got... I've got some at the house. Just thinking about it—the name of it is “It Won't Be Long” and “I Know I've Been Changed”.

EH: You got to get that digitized.

RO: Yeah, we gonna try to.

EH: It's a collectible.

RO: Yeah, it is.

EH: Probably pretty rare.

RO: Very rare.

EH: (laughs)

RO: Like I said, after we made it, one of the fellas... young guys that ran the group, uh, Mrs. Edith Harbers (sp?) she had a little restaurant up the street and she had a little machine in it like a juke box and they put it in there, and you wouldn't believe the people that played that.

EH: Oh wow! That was right up the street?

RO: Right up the street up there on Saunders Avenue.

EH: But not around anymore?

RO: No, it's been gone.

EH: It's hard to find a 45 jukebox these days.

RO: Yeah, for real!

EH: (laughs)

RO: Yeah, but you wouldn't believe how many would play that. She had a store like a restaurant, people come in, sat and eat, just you know, sit around have a good time and play music, and like I said, she put it on her jukebox and every time you go up there you'd hear it.

EH: Wow.

RO: Yeah.

EH: So then at a certain point you started touring around a lot?

RO: Yeah, we started touring and as we got older, there were a lot of people started hearing us and we started traveling around a little bit, older fella, deacon named Mason Powell, he was a deacon at this church on Broadway Street—Church of God. Church of the Living God. And he started to become our manager, so he got transportation and got us equipment and we started rolling!

EH: When was that?

RO: Oh Lord, that was in the...

RI: Sixties?

RO: Seventies.

RI: Seventies. I was in Cleveland.

EH: Okay, okay.

RO: Yeah that was in the seventies.

EH: Okay. So where were you traveling mostly?

RO: Mostly at that time we were traveling like Danville, Kentucky, Louisville, Kentucky, we did a lot of things in Kentucky because our church was affiliated with Kentucky.

EH: Okay.

RO: They'd have the general assembly down there and we'd go down there just about every year for the general assembly, and that's... people started hearing us from the assembly, and started inviting us to a lot of different places. Mostly our base was Kentucky, Kentucky and of course Charleston and Beckley.

EH: Mmhm. And the audience was mostly churches?

RO: Yeah, mmhm.

EH: Oh, I had a question in my mind that just went away. Oh—you were always named the Gospel Signalers?

RO: Mmm, yeah, that was the first name in the... once we got older we had some new members come in so we just put the "New" Gospel Singaleers.

EH: Mmhm.

RO: But it's always been the Singaleers.

EH: Okay. And who does the arranging—do you do it together?

RO: We do it together.

EH: Okay.

RO: We got a bass player, Henry Carson, he does most of our music, you know, our music and vocals together most of the time, and he does a good job with that.

EH: So it's all acapella, right?

RO: No, we have music! We have bass guitar, we have drums...

EH: Oh, okay.

RO: We have lead guitar, sometimes keyboard.

EH: Oh, so you have a full band.

RO: Yeah.

EH: Okay.

RO: Mmhm.

EH: Oh, I keep losing my questions. And then at a certain point the group has changed a little bit, so who else has been in the band?

10:08

RO: Well... we've had so many of 'em. So many of 'em has passed away.

RI: (speaks off mic) Oh okay, them or Virgil Trussenrodter,

RO: Steve Smith

RI: Steve Smith,

RO: Dennis Penn

RI: Yeah, Dennis Penn,

RO: Uh, Danny Dyer.

RI: Oh...

RO: James Slim Bandy, he was with us. Slim, he did most of our sound CDs and things like that. But it's been, it's been quite a bit of 'em. I can't think of all of 'em...

EH: That's okay.

RO: Yeah.

EH: Um, and then in the 90s you sort of had another bout of traveling around, or was that in the early 2000s?

RO: It was... in the 80s and 90s we really travelled. We've been... Lord have mercy, we've been to New York, we've been to Atlanta, Georgia, we've been to South Carolina, North Carolina...

RI: Louisiana

RO: Louisiana, New Orleans, um...

RI: Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland. Uh... Columbus, uh, so many places. Maryland, um, Delaware.

RO: Yeah.

RI: Uh, uh... a few places in Georgia, you called Georgia, though. We've been a lot of places.

EH: And that's, you guys are in the bus. So you must have some stories from the bus on the road, right?

RI: (laughs)

RO: (laughs)

RI: Yes, yes.

EH: Give me the good stuff! (laughs)

RO: (laughs) Well the best stuff we didn't have to drive, we laid back take it easy 'til we got where we was going.

EH: Oh, that's nice.

RO: But we met a lot of people.

EH: Yeah.

RO: Met a lot of people on the road.

RI: Sung with all kinds of groups like Cans, the Keynotes, the Nightingales, all kinds of groups. Been on the same programs with 'em too. During that time.

EH: Okay. What about—I used to live in D.C. and knew some groups in Baltimore. Did you ever perform with some Baltimore groups?

RI: Probably, Yeah!

EH: Well they're more...

RI: One Baltimore group used to come here, down in Scott... but I can't think of the name of 'em!

EH: Okay.

RO: The Melodyaires, something with the Melodyaries.

EH: That sounds familiar.

RI: Yeah, yeah.

RO: We didn't mention, we didn't mention a guy who had just passed not too long ago, Pete Easley.

RI: Yeah.

RO: One of his relatives were in Baltimore and they sung with the Melodyaires.

EH: Okay.

RO: And that's where we met that group from.

EH: Ah, okay. Well I guess there were a lot of R&B groups out of Baltimore too. But I think there was some cross over like the Orioles, and maybe there was a Cardinals group there too. But uh, why do you think you've kept doing it for so long?

RO: Well we were blessed for years and we loved what we were doing. It was just, it was a gift from God. We had other opportunities, we just stuck with that.

RI: Tell her about the opportunity when you was playing, trying to play R&B and gospel at the same time! (laughs)

RO: No I don't think I want to tell that!

EH: Come on!

RO: No, no, no...

EH: (laughs)

RO: Noooooo, I don't think I'll... well, that's when we were young, of course when we first started we were playing and a couple of guys, me and a couple guys we went and got the equipment out of the church and we caught ourselves doing some R&B. So we went to this little school and we set up and everything, we got up there and got to playing, and this happened a couple times. The first time we got to playing and then all the power shut off, so we, we kinda figured what was going on, we know we shouldn't have been there.

EH: Did you think that was a sign from God?

RO: Of course! And then there's another time we went, another place, and we set up and we were playing, I mean we were playing, playing, playing, and then all of a sudden, somebody had asked us to look back at the door, look back at the door, and the pastor was just standing at the door, arms folded!

And you know how we feel then, we felt... and she wanted to know why we did it and we, being young, we could make a little money! And she said, y'all needed any more, all's you had to do was tell us! We'd have give you all some money. So you know how that made us feel. I mean it made us feel awful low, but it never happened again. (laughs) Never happened again!

EH: Do you remember what R&B songs you were playing?

RO: No! (laughs) No!

RI: (laughs) You're getting deeper and deeper!

RO: Yeah, we tried a whole bunch of 'em! But...

RI: Getting deeper and deeper!

EH: That was in the 60s?

RO: That was in the late 70s.

EH: Okay.

RO: Late 70s, maybe early 80s.

EH: You don't remember any of the...

RO: No, no, no! (laughs)

EH: (laughs) And it's always been 3-part harmony with a lead?

RO: 3-part harmony with a lead, yeah.

EH: Okay and what do you sing?

RO: I sing tenor and some lead.

EH: Are there other churches in Beckley or in West Virginia or other groups who are doing similar things?

RO: Uh, not now. You got a few down in Charleston that's doing it, but I can't really think of the name of 'em now.

16:20

But, I think there's one down in Bluefield, down in that area, which, we are scheduled to go down that way. Bluefield—for Mother's Day—do a Mother's Day program with some other guys, but I don't know the name of the groups that's gonna be there right now. So that's... looking forward to that.

EH: Okay. So now you're at a Baptist church, but you still bring in a lot of Pentecostal? So do you do Pentecostal and Baptist churches—you sing at both of them?

RO: Yeah, we sing at any church that asks us to sing at!

EH: (laughs)

RO: Yeah.

EH: And do you feel you're part of, I don't know, a broader either church or music community?

RO: Uh, we're probably, I'd say, yeah. Because uh, like everybody... most of the guys here are from the community and uh, community Baptists are pretty good. They back us up a lot.

EH: Nice.

RO: Yeah.

EH: Do you think, churches... have you seen any decline or change in population?

RO: In churches?

EH: Yeah. Are there still a lot of like small town churches?

RO: Oh yeah. It's all around. All around. Practically all around West Virginia. I mean especially around Beckley and Charleston area, there's a small church on every corner just about.

EH: Nice.

RO: But the majority of 'em works together, which is good. It's good. Yeah, they work together.

EH: And why did you decide to group after being away and not singing for so many years?

RI: Uh... it was something inside of me, pushing me to sing. Uh, cause they didn't make it easy! (laughs) You know, you have to go through a little, you know, teasing and stuff like that to get past that, but I was pushed to sing because I just felt it in my heart. To sing, and I had, I had a good music teacher in school that was... kind of compelled me to keep singing you know? And no matter what, you know? And so I stuck with it. And now, I wouldn't... they tease me now how fast I want to get to singing now, or...

EH: (laughs)

RO: You see, Richard, Richard—we were doing a thing that... we used to have a swimming pool right here in Beckley, right here in East Park, on Broadway Street, and we were down there doing a thing for the community, we were singing, having a good time out there. And a lady, a cousin of mine come in and spoke with me, was telling me she knew a fella that liked to sing and he just moved back in to town, so I tell her, tell her to come on down, we'll let him sing! And Richard, Dickie, Dickie come on down and joined us and we had a good time! He just stepped right in and he fit right in, so he's been with us ever since!

19:30

EH: You didn't make him audition or anything?

RO: Naw, because once he started singing with us, we knew that he had some singing in him! So we just...

EH: (laughs)

RI: They pushed me on in there!

RO: So we just brought him on in. And he's been with us ever since.

EH: Did your parents sing?

RO: My mom used to sing. And my grandma, granddad used to sing. They used to get together and sing all the time at the house.

RI: They had a group, they had a quartet.

RO: My granddad and grandma did, yeah.

EH: Wow.

RO: I can't think of the name of them but they had one.

RI: Right.

EH: Was it with two... like another couple, or...?

RO: Uh, they'd get together and sing—my granddad and uh, my grandmother, and two other people I think it was. But they'd sing like acapella.

EH: Wow.

RO: Yeah.

EH: And did they grow up in Beckley? Where are they from?

RO: Lord... um, I think my grandma was from down in Fayette County.

EH: Mmhm.

RO: And my granddad, he was from here in Beckley. He worked in the coal mine for years. And... they used to get together and sing. Make us sit down and listen to 'em. We couldn't go anywhere, we had to sit down and listen to 'em.

RI: Over here in the 50s? Grandma...

RO: Well I wasn't, I wasn't...

RI: No, no—you wasn't born!

RO: (laughs)

RI: But I was around here in the 50s—your grandmother and granddad was around here.

RO: Yeah.

RI: Yeah, they used to sing, they had a quartet, but I can't remember the name of it either.

RO: They tell me they had a quartet, but I can't remember the name of the quartet they had but, that's... I guess where we started from really, listening to them, and it moved on to us.

RI: Right.

EH: Even though they made you listen?

RO: They made us listen! Go sit down and listen.

EH: And what did you do for work?

RO: For work? What do you mean?

EH: Like what did you do, or you're maybe not retired?

RO: Oh no, I'm workin', I work for, I work for, I started 30... 36, 37 years ago with the furniture company called John W. I. company.

EH: Uh-huh.

RO: And they sold out to John I. Big Sandy, now they sold out to Gran. So I been with them, like I say, for 30, 36, 35, 36 years. And I'm a supervisor in the warehouse set-up and service department.

EH: Was it ever hard to do the... you know, going on the road?

RO: Nope, they really work with me.

EH: That's great!

RO: They did like, always had the weekends off and it was never a problem.

EH: Mmhm.

RO: But they work with me.

EH: That's nice.

RO: Yeah.

RI: And during that time, the group was very famous around town and it wasn't no problem for none of the guys to get off to go do what they... what they was doing at the time.

EH: That's great!

RI: Yeah, it was never no problem. And uh, they had a lot of little benefit, little concerts around town you know like that, at his furniture store, you know McDonalds we did a concert behind McDonalds, you know. Doing stuff like that, you know, so.

RO: Yeah.

EH: Do you feel like you're not as famous now?

22:53

RI: No, I believe we just as famous as we were before.

RO: Yeah, we are.

RI: It's just that we don't have the same group we had, you know?

EH: Ah, yeah.

RI: It's not easy to find a person to move into a group like that. You know? It's complicated. It takes time too.

EH: Right.

RI: And uh...

EH: And what about you—did your parents sing?

RI: My dad did. He sung bass, but he sung in a gospel group too a long time ago when I was a little bitty kid. They went to New York and recorded and stuff like that, but I never took to singing until I got in high school. And um, just like I said, my music teacher kind of compelled me to keep at it you know? And voice training and stuff like that. Cause I was kinda.... bashful about doing that, you know. But it came around.

EH: Thanks goodness for teachers like that.

RI: Yeah, yeah, yeah, she was a great teacher. Yeah, she was a great teacher, her name was Ms. Henry.

EH: Oh.

RI: Miss Eunice Henry. She went... took me to all-state.

EH: Here in Beckley.

RI: Yeah, and then Charleston, we used to have to go to Charleston for all-state.

EH: Oh yeah.

RI: Different kids from different schools, ended up being about 350 kids down there, you know?

EH: Wow.

RI: Yeah, it was great.

EH: That's cool.

RI: Yeah, it was.

EH: Still have your medal?

RI: Still have my who?

EH: Did you get a medal or a ribbon?

RI: No, I got... they, I got an album of the whole concert.

EH: Oh wow!

RI: With everybody's picture on it and name on the album.

EH: You still have that?

RI: I still have it, yeah.

EH: Do you still have a record player so you can listen to it?

RI: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

EH: Cool. Um, and I know you've recorded a lot, could you tell me about some of those recordings?

RO: Yeah, our first CD recording was a cassette, was in Oak Hill, a little studio in Oak Hill, we did, I think we had about 18, 15 songs on that CD or cassette and it took us 2 days to do it. And it turned out very well. Turned out very well. The little studio was on Main St. there in Oak Hill, like it was um... little fella there that lived there and he had a basement and he did all his work in the basement. He's passed away now. I really can't think of his name, but he did a great job on it.

EH: Cool.

RI: There were some original songs on that too, wasn't there?

RO: Yeah. It turned out to be one of our best ones, the first one.

EH: Mm.

RO: Yeah.

EH: When was that from?

RO: That was, I think that was late 80s I'd say. Probably about '89 or somewhere in there.

RI: ... Trussenmeyer (?) was singing baritone. Strong baritone and he had some songs on there that was really good too. Yeah. We called him Peewee, though.

EH: Ah. So if I were to get one Gospel Singaleers album, should I get that one or should I get a more recent one?

RO: I think you should get all of 'em.

EH: (laughs) How many are there 20? 10?

RO: (laughs) No... it's only 3 different one. 3 copies.

EH: Three?

RO: Yeah, we got that one and we got a volume 1 and um, a volume three.

EH: Okay. I can manage that.

RI: What's the last one? The last one we did...

RO: "What Must I Do To Be Saved"

RI: Yeah.

RO: And it's only like, I think it's only like 5 songs on that one.

RI: Yeah.

RO: Matter of fact, we did that one here at the church.

RI: Recorded that (muffled)

RO: Yeah.

EH: So do you have a younger generation that is learning from you? Playing with you?

RO: Well, they are but they're scattered. They go to different churches and play. But they've followed us quite a bit and picked up from us quite a bit.

EH: Nice.

RI: Yeah, they peel off. A lot of different guys in a lot of different groups peel off this group.

EH: Okay.

RO: And preachers.

RI: And preaches, yeah. Peel off the group and went other ways, which is good.

EH: Yeah.

RI: Yeah, yeah.

EH: So you think they'll be other you know, as you get older, there'll be younger people doing it as well?

RI: You can't tell. You can't tell that by looking for mine's eye. You only can tell from after the fact, you know? You don't know who's watching you. You know? Just like my other music teacher from Ms. Henry... Ms. Fleming.

EH: Oh Eunice?

RI: Yeah.

EH: Oh, she was also Ethel Caffie-Austin's teacher.

RI: Yeah, I used to be in her community choir.

EH: Okay!

RI: When she used to go... had a scholarship for kids that was going into music, she would collect money to give to that scholarship fund for them, if they was going into music. But she used to always tell me—you know, you don't know who know you. You don't know how they think about you when you out in the public eye like that, you don't know who's seeing you, or what, you don't know whether they like you or not, cause after the fact, you know?

EH: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

RO: Everybody's watching ya, everybody know ya.

EH: Yeah.

RO: When you least expect it, people walk up to you and speak to ya and... sometimes you really don't know who they are, but they know you.

EH: Right, yeah. As a performer. Totally.

RO: Yeah.

EH: Yeah, she's still alive.

RI: Yeah!

EH: I'm hoping to talk to her.

RI: I just saw her last week.

EH: Oh really?

RI: Yeah, her daughter lived right there. I just saw her last week over there.

EH: Okay. Is she in her 90s?

RI: At least!

EH: Wow.

RI: Ninety-something.

RO: Ms. Fleming?

RI: Yeah.

EH: Okay. And she lives in Beckley?

RI: No.

EH: Her daughter does.

RI: Her daughter does. She lives over in Mt. Hope I think.

RO: Her daughter used to be a member here.

EH: Oh wow. Small world. Um, well I don't want to take up too much of your practice time, but is there anything else you want to add?

RO: No not really, I just appreciate you coming over.

EH: Well thanks for having me.

RO: Taking your time out to come out.

RI: Yeah, thank you.

EH: Well, I hope to come to a concert sometime.

RO: Okay! Well, we'll...

EH: Especially if... that Charleston one.

RI: Okay, I gotta give Robbie that number.

EH: Yeah, that'd be great.

RI: See if he...

EH: If it works out.

RI: I got a number for you guys.

EH: Cool.

RI: I gotta call him. He wants to know how much we charge to come to Charleston.

RO: Okay, we'll talk to him.

RI: And, uh, you got a card or something?

EH: Yeah. Um, and if you guys are gonna...

29:59

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