

An Interview with Penny Greene

Recently, I had the chance to interview Penny Greene, alto singer for the Chuck Wagon Gang.

DJM: *Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you became interested in Southern Gospel?*

Penny: I was singing all my life. My first time singing in front of an audience was at my pre-K graduation ceremony; I sang “Every Day With Jesus” out of the Redback hymnal. I always loved singing and always had a passion for Southern Gospel.

I grew up in a musical family. Dad sang and played guitar, so I would just sing with him. Then as I got a little older, I started learning to sing harmonies; I started singing harmonies at 8 years old. I guess I always had an ear for picking up harmony.

I started singing with my dad and one of my best friends. Then later on, I sang with several local groups and sang in a female trio, Sacred Calling. Then I decided I would try to venture out and do this professionally.

I was actually trying out with Crabb Revival, with Adam Crabb. They decided to use one of their utility players (Zach) for their third harmony part. The same week I found that out, someone told me they knew of a group needing an alto—the Chuck Wagon Gang.

I was surprised at first, since I didn't know the Chuck Wagon Gang was still traveling. But I gave Dave [Dave Emery, CWG manager and bass singer] a call. We talked a few times on the phone; then I met up with him, sang a little bit, and it all worked out.

A funny sidenote: When I was auditioning for Dave, I was kinda holding back. Stan [Stan Hill, tenor] was saying, “Just let it out—sing something like 'Mustang Sally.'” When I sang that, I let it rip as a joke. But they said that once they heard me do that, they knew I could sing any style. They offered it to me right then.



DJM: *What was your first exposure to Southern Gospel, and to the Chuck Wagon Gang?*

Penny: Growing up in Morristown, Tennessee, where J. Bazzel Mull helped the Chuck Wagon Gang get its start, 96.3 played the Chuck Wagon Gang a whole lot. So I'd always heard "Keep on the Sunny Side," "This World is Not My Home," and a lot of those songs. And, a lot of those songs I grew up singing in church—"Jesus, Hold My Hand," "I'll Meet You in the Morning."

So I was familiar with the Chuck Wagon Gang early on, but I wasn't aware they were still singing.

DJM: *Could you tell us about the current generation of the Chuck Wagon Gang, the third generation?*

Penny: Shaye Smith is Anna's granddaughter. She is still part owner of the group, but came off the road in 2007. She and Dave are co-owners of the group and they have every intention to keep the group going as long as God intends it to.

We normally do about 3-4 dates per week, in all types of venues. We actually had the opportunity last year to sing at Gaither Family Fest in Gatlinburg, Tennessee—that was really neat for the Chuck Wagon Gang to do that. We're praying the Lord keeps opening doors.

One thing I've heard people say is that people can hear that the third generation of the Chuck Wagon Gang is very ministry minded. Not to say anything bad on other generations, but we're all of one mind and one accord to see the lost saved and people come closer to the Lord.

It was hard for me at first. It's a different type of ministry, a ministry where people have the memories of growing up with those songs. So it takes them back to a time when things were so much simpler for them—tears often of memories, tears of joy.

We don't experience a lot of shoutin'-down services, *per se*—the Spirit is still there, just received differently. We're still seeing lost people saved, and Christians rededicating lives—because they hear familiar songs they grew up with.

So often we hear how people love to hear clear, uncluttered music – words they can understand and relate to, instead of overbearing music so loud you can't hear the message.

DJM: *In his book Close Harmony, Southern Gospel historian James Goff interviewed Roy Carter. In the interview, he quoted Carter as saying: "People enjoy and like what they understand. Dad told me one time, 'Son, there's ten thousand farmers out there plowing on the plow and listening to a radio or cassette tape that believe sincerely they can sing bass just as good as you can. It's because they understand it. It's simple.'" What do you think of that quote—does it hold true for today's Chuck Wagon Gang?*

Penny: Yes, it does. The Chuck Wagon Gang can go into a country church—two men and two women stand up, like a church quartet. It is the simplicity people are familiar and comfortable with.

Dave sings many different styles of music, I sing many different styles of music, Stan's true love is bluegrass. But God works it out the way He wants it. It wouldn't be the Chuck Wagon Gang if I got there and sang like it was someone else.

Another phrase Dad Carter used to always say: "Sing the old songs, and sing them like I always taught you." That's what they always did—they didn't complicate it, try to jazz it up.

Then I hear Anna, who had a powerful alto voice, she kinda had a bluesy feel sometimes. Libbi Stuffle said when she was growing up, she loved the Chuck Wagon Gang, and she wanted to sing like Anna. We were singing with the Perrys in Florida, and we brought her on stage to sing Looking For a City. It was so neat, because she said one of her dreams had been to sing with the Chuck Wagon Gang—and one of my dreams had been to sing with her! She's my favorite alto, and the Chuck Wagon Gang was one of her favorite groups.

At quartet convention, someone had given a picture from that night and gave it to her, and she had me sign it. It was just neat to see the joy on her face and of the fans—and I was excited, too!

It was fun. You never know what song or what word of testimony might bless somebody's heart. That night was a blessing to me as well as Libbi.



Since I was young, I knew this was what I was called to do, but I didn't know who it would be with. At first, I told Dave no, because in my own mind, I was like, that's not my style—Lord, this isn't right. But the next week, I was praying, and my husband called me. He had been praying, and the Lord had told him this was the job I was supposed to do. What was funny was I'd got that same clarity when I was praying. The Lord was saying, “You prayed for me to open a door, I opened the door, now you're supposed to go through it.”

But now, I have no doubt—for some reason, this is what the Lord has called me to do. For what time I don't know, but I definitely think He's using me in this ministry for a reason and a purpose.

DJM: *Could you introduce us to the current group?*

Penny: Julie Hudson sings the soprano. She's a Bedford, Indiana native transplanted to High Point, North Carolina. She's been with the group a little over 2 years.

Dave Emery is the emcee / guitarist / manager / bass singer. He's been with the group almost 5 years. He's from Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

Stan Hill, who sings tenor, lives in Knoxville, Tennessee and has been with the group about 2 ½ years.

Joe Rotten is from Spartanburg, South Carolina. He plays the bass and drives the bus some.

Monty Shonkwiler drives the bus with us 6 to 8 months of the year.

That leaves me—I started June 1, 2007.



DJM: *Where does the Chuck Wagon Gang primarily tour these days?*

Penny: Mostly in the south—Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, etc. We have been to Texas, Missouri, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio a few times.

We're getting ready to do a cruise in January with the Dixie Echoes. The Diplomats and Josh Garner. The Dixie Echoes are another of my favorite groups. They're another group that stays true to the Southern Gospel legacy—you can understand the words and message, and I don't think they'll ever change that.

DJM: *What can we expect from an average concert? Do you do the old-fashioned radio program at every show?*

Penny: We don't do the radio program at every show. It depends on the setting, and in a church, if the pastor asks for it. Most commonly they do, because people like hearing that portion of it. We've started using 2 mikes, and Dave does the announcing. Julie puts on her Rose glasses. We start off with the Bewley Mills Song. (My little boy loves that song—he just thinks that's the neatest thing. One day in class, he wanted me to sing that song to his class!) We'll start off with the very first Gospel song the Chuck Wagon Gang ever recorded, “The Son Has Made Me Free”—lots of people are familiar with that one. A lot of times we'll sing the Jericho Road and Albert E. Brumley's “I'll Fly Away.” (The Chuck Wagon Gang is the first group known to record “I'll Fly Away.) We'll do a lot of those old, familiar ones during that portion. Everybody just smiles, they're familiar with those songs.

You wouldn't believe the stories we hear. One guy was a human antenna for battery powered radio because that was the only way he would get connection—if he took his hand off, he would lose it. Families knew that when the Chuck Wagon Gang came on, none of the kids could talk.

DJM: *How set is your song list at a concert?*

Penny: We've learned we have to listen to what Dave says. We have a list of songs that we try to include, but we veer off it quite a bit. Sometimes we even open it up to the audience for requests. A lot of times we break out songbook and sing one we don't know at all.

DJM: *So everyone in the group can sight read music?*

Penny: We do pretty well if Stan can see the words out of the book!

Sometimes there's one it's just not feasible for us to do. The Chuck Wagon Gang has recorded over 750—no, now it would be over 1000 songs, so there's no way we could possibly know all those songs. So it makes it kinda hard when you open it up for requests—you can't know them all.

Most groups usually have an intro of some sort. We just have a strum of a guitar. So if Dave wanders off list, he'll usually holler the song name out.

DJM: *Any recommendations for aspiring alto singers?*

Penny: I myself recommend that you listen to all styles and all tones. I say tones, but there's many different types of altos. I wouldn't have ever imagined I'd be singing the Anna tone, because I do have a little broader of a range. But I think that when you pray for the Lord to give you the desires of your heart, He's done that—He knew that my passion and my love was to sing, He's made that happen for me.

DJM: *We touched on this earlier, but who are your favorite altos?*

Penny: Libbi Stuffle, Kim Lord, and Debra Talley are my three. My favorite all-time singer is Karen Carpenter—I love Karen Carpenter, though she's not a Southern Gospel. As a little girl, I loved listening to her sing. But those three for Southern Gospel. I love the Perrys and the Talleys, and I've always loved the Ruppes, loved Kim's voice.

DJM: *Would you agree with the statement that the Chuck Wagon Gang's style is so unique that it is defined by its sound more than by any individual member?*

Penny: I definitely would agree. First of all, the strum of the guitar kinda sets it off. I don't know of any other groups that start all of their songs the same way.

Another thing that's kinda distinctive is the two ladies' parts, the Anna and Rose voices, alto and soprano. Rose had a high soprano tone, and Anna had a low bluesy tone. People are familiar with the Chuck Wagon Gang sound because of those three things.

DJM: *Would you point to any other groups that are similarly defined primarily by a group sound?*

Penny: Definitely the Inspirations. Another one is the Primitive Quartet. I grew up at Hominy Valley—they have that mountain harmony, bluegrass sound.

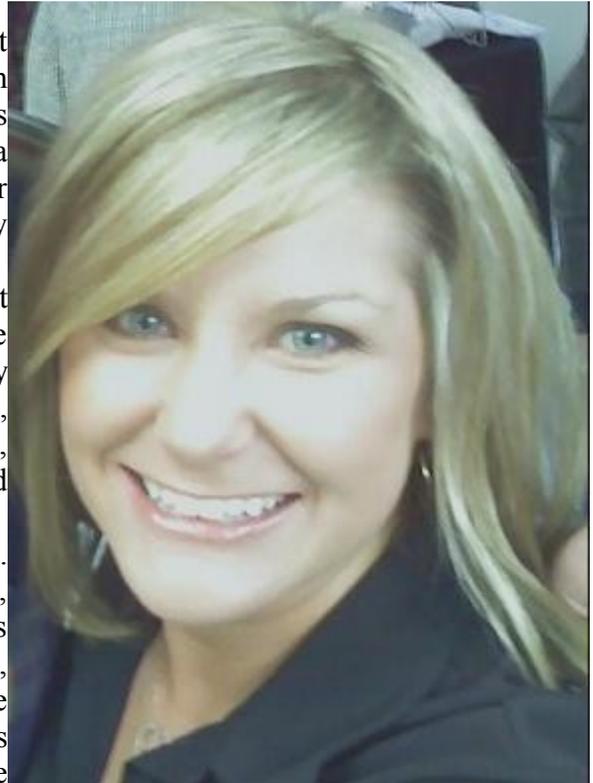
I can't think of anyone else right off. Well, the Dixie Echoes have a distinctively traditional sound, but nobody else comes to mind

DJM: *Any other thoughts or comments?*

Penny: Being new in the industry, one thing that I've been overwhelmed with is the support and love from all of the Chuck Wagon Gang fans. Southern Gospel fans in general have been so great to welcome me in as a newcomer into Gospel music. We sing with many other Southern Gospel groups, and the people in the industry have been just so good.

It's not easy being on the road. I've learned that firsthand. We do rely on one another a lot, build one another up, pray for each other. It's not easy being away from families and friends a lot. We've become friends, and the people I travel with are my family, too—Julie, Stan, Dave, Joe, and Monte. So I'd like to thank fans and industry peers for their support and encouragement.

I couldn't do this without my family's support. I've already said that it's not easy being away from home, when Blake is eight and Lauren is five. So many times they pray for Mommy to sing for Jesus. My husband, Dustin, is wonderful, and my parents, who have supported from the beginning, and always knew that this was my passion and my love – they've always been there to support me and help me.



DJM: *Thanks for doing this interview!*