

Southern Gospel museum seeks new home

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PIGEON FORGE, Tenn. (BP)—The Blackwood Brothers Quartet promoted its 37-passenger, refurbished 1939 Aerocoach bus, air-conditioned with bunk beds and recliners, as providing the “utmost riding comfort.”

Typically at that time in the 1950s, Southern gospel music groups traveled the sometimes hundreds of miles by car to perform in rural towns, with singers in the seats and musical instruments in the trunks, said Arthur Rice, lead singer for the Kingdom Heirs and president of the Southern Gospel Music Association’s Southern Gospel Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

“And so J.D. Sumner decided that, you know, it would be a whole lot more comfortable to travel in something that was a little bit bigger,” Rice said. “J.D. Sumner was the very first one to actually come across” using tour buses for singing groups.

A replica of the bus is among the thousands of Southern gospel music artifacts displayed by the Southern Gospel Hall of Fame and Museum.

The Southern Gospel Music Association is looking for a new home for its collections after more than 20 years at Dollywood, Dolly Parton’s amusement park and entertainment complex in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. The association’s lease for its 15,000-square-foot facility at Dollywood was not renewed in 2021 because of constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic and a Dollywood expansion plan, Rice said.

Between performances of the Kingdom Heirs Oct. 8 at Dollywood, where the group is in its 36th year as resident gospel artists, Rice talked about the

search for a new museum home. He said the Southern Gospel Music Association plans to remain in the Pigeon Forge area and is currently blessed to store its hall of fame and museum artifacts in space donated by an area businessman. Several possibilities are being considered for new sites.



Arthur Rice (2nd row 3rd from left) is lead singer of the Kingdom Heirs and president of the Southern Gospel Music Association's Southern Gospel Music Hall of Fame and Museum. (Kingdom Heirs photo)

"When we opened at Dollywood that was just a godsend, to have a public platform to present our music and the message," Rice said. "That was right for the time. When we closed, I was sad because it was an end of an era, but I believe that God has ... got his hand on what's next. He's given us this time, while the museum is closed, to prepare for that time. I don't know exactly what it is.

"My vision really is to have a place where we could not only have the plaques and the artifacts, but also have a theater-type venue to where we could have groups come in (and) do a performance." Attendees could then view the history.

“I think we can educate more people in a year’s time than we could in a lifetime,” Rice said.

The plaques Rice references depict inductees into the SGMA Hall of Fame spanning 25 years. 2021 inductees, announced Sept. 28 at the National Quartet Convention in Pigeon Forge, are prolific musician and songwriter Jack Clark of Cleveland, Tenn.; award-winning singer and songwriter Karen Peck Gooch of Karen Peck and New River; gospel music broadcaster Marlin Raymond Taylor; and the late Aaron Wilburn, a noted gospel songwriter, musician and comedian who died in 2020.

They join such noted honorees as Fanny Crosby, inducted posthumously in 2014; Thomas A. Dorsey, inducted posthumously in 2013; Carl Stuart Hamblen, inducted posthumously in 2012; Bill and Gloria Gaither (inducted in 1997 and 2005, respectively); and several members of The Happy Goodman family group.

In addition to the plaques, among the many museum artifacts awaiting display are historical songbooks, clothing worn by singers, and priceless musical instruments on loan from owners. Many of the priceless pieces are in safe-keeping with the owners until a new site is found.

Rice sees preserving the history of Southern gospel as important.

“It’s a very interesting story, and we want to share that with people,” Rice said. “For me, it is a map of how God has used our music through the years to encourage, to draw people to Christ, to lift them up.

“There’s nothing more encouraging than a gospel song when you’re in a low place. I want people to see how God’s hand has been on this music and on our people. We’re all flawed and we all are going through things, but God still chooses to use us as vessels. Yes, there’s been some characters through the years, but you know what, God still uses them.”