

Our History



Mount Airy Museum of Regional History

The brothers have garnered an array of music awards beginning in 1986 and 1987 when the Society for the Preservation of Bluegrass Music of America named them Gospel Bluegrass Band. In 2001 they were nominated for a Gospel Music Association Dove award. They went on to win three Dove Awards; 2002, Bluegrass Song of the Year for "Thank you, Lord, For Your Blessings On My"; and 2009, Bluegrass Song of the Year for "They're Holding Up The Ladder" and Bluegrass Album of the Year for "We Are Family." That last CD/DVD set was recorded at Mayberry Days with James' son and daughter-in-law Jeff and Sheri and her family, Georgia Music Hall of Fame members the Lewis Family gospel singers.

Honest with their music

Easter Brothers
part of local history

By Kate Rauhauser-Smith

Our History is a regular column submitted by Kate Rauhauser-Smith, visitor services manager at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History, examining the region's history and some related displays at the museum.

The world lost a sweet voice last month when Edd Easter passed away on Jan. 30. Born in Mount Airy in 1934, he was the baby of the Dove Award-winning Easter Brothers gospel music band.

The Easter Brothers' story is one of redemption, not only in terms of the spiritual salvation

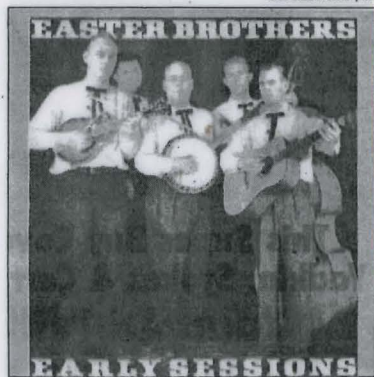
region. Surry County, and in Virginia Patrick and Carroll counties, like others in these parts, are steeped in traditions of tight-knit family, illicit liquor, and Biblical belief.

According to interviews they've given and their own words on album liner notes and publications, the brothers learned to sing and play together from their mother, Lillie Mae Talbert Easter. The family was poor but managed to pull \$3 together for a second-hand guitar. They began playing gigs in bars when they were kids to earn some money. They had hard liquor habits before they were old enough to drive and were running with a bad crowd. James ended up in prison before he

but just about this time, as often happens, they started to fall in love and

marry. Russell's young wife, Myrtle Blummett,

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Released in 1983 by Rebel Records in Floyd, Virginia, the music on this album was recorded in 1960-61 when this picture was taken. They played with friends at first as seen here where Edd, Russell, and James are joined by Ronald Thomas and Allen Mills to the rear. Mills went on to found the group Lost and Found. Later many of their children and grandchildren performed with them. Perhaps the most notable are Jeff

raised in a church-going family, convinced him to move to Danville, Virginia, for work but also to get him away from his drinking buddies. The rest of the family, including their mother, followed. Several returned to Mount Airy after their feet were on a less troubled path and they always seem to have counted Mount Airy as their base.

Their booklet, "God Had A Plan For The Easter Brothers," details how each man came to answer alter calls. Edd, on a bender, asked Russell why he never invited him to go to church. He might not have anticipated the outcome to that but Myrtle overheard and, that Sunday, got Edd up and out to church, much to Mother Easter's amazement.

As the folks in this

region have risen to overcome each economic challenge they've faced, so the Easter Brothers overcame their rough beginnings. They began playing and singing at dances with some friends as the Green Valley Quartet. They caught the attention of legendary Bluegrass duo Don Reno and Red Smiley who helped them land a recording deal.

They steadily grew their audience and opened as the Easter Brothers and the Green Valley Quartet for artists such as the Carter Family, Ray Price, and Bill Anderson, appeared on radio programs and produced their own for WPAQ. The mix of Bluegrass and gospel they played included more and more of their own songs. In the early 1960s, Elvis Presley

gave their career a major boost when he mentioned the brothers in an interview. He said one of their songs, 'The Darkest Hour,' was one of his current favorites and their career was set.

Together they have more than 150 recordings and have performed on stages at the Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Sydney Opera House. Their songs have been covered by other performers and appear in hymnals around the world.

Regular readers of this column will know I often encourage people to sit with their elder family members, listen to their stories, ask them to

identify pictures, share their history. Don't let it go because we never know when we won't have another Sunday to visit. When we will have waited too long.

Members of the Easter Family have entrusted the museum with some items to tell the story of these Mount Airy Hometown Heroes. We're building an exhibit that will sit near the Donna Fargo and Tommy Jarrell exhibits. We planned to visit with the brothers and record some of their recollections but we've waited too long to get Edd's stories.

The museum staff extend our deepest condolences to Edd's family and friends. I can't help

but think of the obvious joy on his face, though, watching him sing, fist raised in victory, at the Absolutely Gospel Award show where they were honored in 2014. "They're holding up the ladder that I'm climbing on, I'm climbing up the ladder and I'm going home, At the top of the ladder O what a joy

there shall be and the angels are holding up this ladder for me."

Kate Rauhauser-Smith is the visitor services manager for the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History with 22 years in journalism before joining the museum staff. She and her family moved to Mount Airy in 2005 from Pennsylvania where she was also involved with museums and history tours. She can be reached at KRSmith@NorthCarolinaMuseum.org or by calling 336-786-4478 x228



While their music has made them well-known, it has been their openness which has made Surry County's Easter Brothers accessible. Their interviews over the years have been painfully honest about their lives, the good and the bad. The lyrics to the more than 400 songs they've written speak intimately of their sorrows, and joys, from standing with their father at his deathbed, to the gratitude felt for even hard times after James was released from prison. They laid their souls bare to stand in brotherhood with their audience. Edd, James and Russell are seen in this photo from about 2000.



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Critics describe their music as pure, simple, and no frills with "a maximum of country soul, and a minimum of pretension." Russell frequently insisted they "just held the pen and wrote what God sent through" them. They learned to play and sing from their mother, Lillie Mae Talbert Easter, seen here with Edd, James, and Russell on their 1982 album jacket "Songs About Mama."