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POLICE CHIEF ANSWERS HIGHER CALLING

By Linda Ann Chomin staff writer



Dressed in “blues,” gold badge shining on his chest, Plymouth Police Chief Robert Scoggins looks the part of the city’s top law enforcement officer. Then, as if suddenly transformed, this symbol of authority begins speaking about singing with his gospel group, The Chapels. His face softens and his words become a most lyrical.

“In a time when role models seem to have diminished, we’re an example of what role models can do,” said Scoggins, who studied music for three years at Kent University and trumpet with the first chair of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra in the 1960’s. “We’ve carried it through our lives. Music is something you have to love to do — not just a love for singing but a love for singing for Jesus.”

Scoggins, who is retiring as police chief after serving nine years in the position and 25 years on the force, plans to do nothing but sing with the trio — Ron Newsome of Allen Park and Jim Talbott Jr. of Redford, and “believes eventually we’ll do this for a living.” After all, look how far they’ve come since Scoggins formed the group in 1990. Four recordings later, the group’s gone from carting around their equipment in a truck and trailer to a bus. “My gospel ministry has had more effect on my police work than vice versa,” said Scoggins, who goes by the stage name of Bobby Crumpler. “I look at my police work as a ministry. I try not to judge other human beings but accept them for who they are. I truly like people and have a respect for human life and that has an affect on my police work. Even dealing with my employees I try to bring in the humanistic side.

“Most people have no idea how stressful a police officer’s life is, not only on the job but then they frequently take it home with them. I try to do what I can to help by sometimes just listening.”

Following in his footsteps

Live on stage at the Plymouth Fall Festival on Sept. 12, Scoggins led off the concert with the group’s signature song, “My Heart is a Chapel.” It was originally recorded in 1957 by the Statesman, his father’s gospel group. Other tracks from the Chapel’s latest album, “Listen,” followed. Singing over the top of the harmonies, the 51-year old tenor gave it everything he had. Before long the crowd was clapping to the toe taper as Scoggins moved around the stage to the uplifting music.

The reception is similar to ones Scoggins remembers his father Denver Crumpler, a legend in Southern gospel music, receiving. Bobby Crumpler (Scoggins) grew up listening to the gospel music Denver Crumpler sang before his early death at the age of 43 in 1957. Denver Crumpler sang with the Rangers Quartet in the 1930s and ‘40s and then with the Statesmen Quartet from Atlanta, Ga., in the 1950s. He was inducted into the gospel Music Hall of Fame in Nashville in 1973. “Everything we sing people still remember him,” said Scoggins, who was 9 when his father died. “I remember at age 3 standing on a piano bench singing at Masonic Temple. He made quite an impression on a little guy.”

Second generation gospel

Scoggins, Talbott and Newsome “all have a heritage in gospel music and carrying on the tradition.” Each of their fathers were involved in gospel music. Ron’s father sang with the Good News Quartet for 50 years and “grew up being a huge Statesmen fan.” Talbott’s father, an accomplished musician, played piano for the Toney Brothers for 15 years.

Talbott Jr. began his gospel music career playing keyboards and guitar in a rock band while a student at Olivet Nazarene University in Illinois. Afterwards, he played with the Christian rock band Crossfire, and then with Crimson.

"We have a tremendous friendship," said Newsome, a former Westland resident.

"I think the Lord puts together people who have the same interests.

Our childhoods were all around great gospel music.

We were all sitting on piano benches around great gospel singers."

According to Newsome, gospel music is not as cutthroat a business as the rest of the music world, so it was easy to form a friendship. Even when writing music for their recordings, each of the members takes turns. No one hogs the spotlight.

Talbott, who spent time with his father traveling on the buses and writing backstage at concerts, agrees the three musicians share much more than singing.

"The camaraderie is special," said Talbott, network administrator at J.P. Bender & Assoc. in Farmington Hills.

"We get along musically and relationship-wise."

Spreading the word

The Chapels sing every Sunday at different churches in Michigan, Ohio and Ontario.

Between concerts and church services, the group gave 80 performances last year.

Letters of recommendation from churches such as

Calvary Baptist in Westland attest to their popularity.

Radio station WEEC in Springfield, Ohio, receives daily requests for songs from "Listen,"

the recording produced in 1998 by Gerald Wolfe. The Chapels, who've appeared on

three Bill Gaither Homecoming videos, also have performed with such groups

as Gold City, Jeff and Sherri Easter and Greater Vision.

"We sing a wide variety of music to reach everybody from country to contemporary," said Newsome.

Added Scoggins, "we go through the doors the Lord opens for us and

lead people to salvation. We're missionaries in the field."