

# East Texas Historical Journal

---

Volume 34 | Issue 2

Article 11

---

10-1996

## Gospel Music Pioneer: Frank Stamps

Robert G. Weiner

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj>

 Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Tell us how this article helped you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Weiner, Robert G. (1996) "Gospel Music Pioneer: Frank Stamps," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 34: Iss. 2, Article 11.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol34/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in East Texas Historical Journal by an authorized administrator of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

## GOSPEL MUSIC PIONEER: FRANK STAMPS

by Robert G. Weiner

In 1924, V.O. Stamps took the first step toward realizing his dream of spreading gospel singing throughout America. That year, he and his brother Frank formed the V.O. Stamps Music Company in Jacksonville, Texas, and published their first song book, *Harbor Bells*. They also organized the Frank Stamps and His All Star Quartet, which was the first in a long line of gospel quartets to feature the name Stamps. His theme song and motto, "Give the World A Smile," became as well known as The Lord's Prayer. "Give the World A Smile," which was used for over forty years, was synonymous with the name Stamps.<sup>1</sup> In 1926, J.R. Baxter joined the firm; it became the Stamps-Baxter Company and was moved to Dallas in 1929.

In addition to publishing several songbooks each year and sponsoring dozens of gospel singing quartets in Texas and surrounding states, the company held annual three-week singing schools where students learned to read music and employ various voice techniques. They also were taught the rudiments of gospel singing and instrumentation. In 1935, Stamps-Baxter began publishing a newsletter, "The Gospel Music News." The newsletter included reports on the activities of the various quartets, statements of belief, and contained a section on how to improve one's grammar and writing skills.

After the death of V.O. Stamps in 1940, Baxter became president and general manager of the company. He also formed his own quartet and produced radio programs. In April 1945, for reasons which remain obscure but possibly were due to his loss of influence, Frank Stamps broke ties with Baxter and formed The Stamps Quartet Music Company. This break did not spell the end of Stamps-Baxter, because Baxter continued with the company and remained "president and general manager ... for 23 years."<sup>2</sup> Frank Stamps first published his newsletter, the "Stamps Quartet News," in August 1945. This newsletter covered the same topics as the "The Gospel Music News" but was smaller and concentrated on activities in Texas.

Using issues of "The Gospel Music News" and the "Stamps Quartet News," published between 1943 and 1965, as primary sources, this paper attempts to answer the following questions: What did the Stamps Quartet Music Company believe about God, and how one's life should be lived? How did its schools fit into the picture? And what trends can be found from reading through the newsletters? Because "The Gospel Music News" retained the "stamp" of Frank Stamps, the two publications are treated as one; their content is characterized and quoted interchangeably.

The Stamps Quartet Music Company remained denominationally neutral throughout its existence. Its quartets, such as the Stamps Friendly Quartet, Industrial Stamps Quartet, and the Stamps Ozark Quartet, performed in all types of Christian churches, including lesser known denominations, such as the Foresquare and Holiness churches, as well as those of the more popular denominations such as the Baptist and Methodist churches. In the newsletter Stamps wrote, "we need more Christianity ... and unity, [and] less

---

*Robert G. Weiner is a graduate student at The University of North Texas.*

denominationalism.”<sup>3</sup> The name “Stamps” was associated with quality and excellence, and it was said that “anyone can have a big crowd, [if a Stamps Quartet is singing]”.<sup>4</sup>

Stamps’ company promoted belief in the Bible and Jesus Christ as the ultimate answer for those who lived their lives in fear.<sup>5</sup> Readers of the newsletter were told that those who “put God first will live well,”<sup>6</sup> while world philosophies were “thoroughly bad” and could never produce a “great man.” Tools of Satan, such as liquor and roadhouses, were condemned, and readers were admonished to take a stand against such temptations and ideas. Jesus was portrayed as the cure for all worldly evils, able to free anyone from the “poison of the world.”<sup>7</sup> Few denominations would have disagreed with such doctrinal stands. So, Stamps’ Company could serve a large population of consumers, which translated into business from many Christians from all denominations.

The Stamps Quartet Music Company fit in well with the American conservative mindset of the 1940s and 1950s. It viewed itself as a company in the mainstream of the American Christian tradition. The company argued that if it were not for its churches, America would not be the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” The newsletter advised readers to “keep America as Christian as possible,” and to go back to the “old paths of decency and honor.”<sup>8</sup> The company was elitist in its orientation; it believed that the “best people on earth are church people” and that to associate with such people would bring financial rewards. Stamps claimed that those who could sing and play gospel songs (the Stamps way), and had successful business dealings, owed their success, in part, to their gospel music.<sup>9</sup>

Another interesting aspect of the Stamps newsletter was how well it fit into the context of the “red scare” of the late 1940s and 1950s. In 1949, one commentator wrote, “we are living in a day when everything is needed to combat evil forces ... [i.e.,] communism.” The world was “a-jitter,” fearful of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Ten years later, the Soviet Union was still referred to as a “Godless Nation.”<sup>11</sup> The writer expressed fear and skepticism of a forthcoming visit to the United States from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, and wondered if such a visit would place our country in jeopardy.

The newsletter also criticized the Beatnik movement and characterized it as having “twisted thought and inscrutable vocabulary.”<sup>12</sup> Communists, beatniks, and other “evil people” were portrayed as enemies of the “gospel of Christ” who “required opposition” in the form of prayers and God’s word through Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

As might be expected, the Stamps Quartet Music Company believed that its promotion of gospel songs and singing was in the American tradition. It claimed that the American colonists in Massachusetts Bay were missing something in their lives, and that something was music and singing. Because the colonists’ communities could not thrive without song, the first book published in America (1639) was a gospel song book entitled *Bay Psalm Book*.<sup>14</sup> Viewing gospel songs as a pivotal force that could bring people to Christ and church, the newsletter pointed out that “Gospel Song is soul food.” It expressed the belief that “music is divine in scope”;<sup>15</sup> therefore, the better one could sing gospel songs (Stamps songs), the more singing could affect the singer’s life and

minister to others. Forms of music other than gospel, such as "hillbilly and rock-and-roll," were criticized because they did nothing to "magnify the Lord" and were considered a bad witness for Christians. The newsletter contended that it was not "square" to listen to the "Sweet Music of Heaven."<sup>16</sup>

The Stamps Quartet Music Company believed that it was in the middle of American thought and custom. Stamps' wife even argued that gospel singing was as "American as hot dogs and apple pie."<sup>17</sup> Although he oversaw and controlled all aspects of the business, Stamps paid lipservice to the idea that his company was a "Democratic organization for the people by the people."<sup>18</sup>

Stamps took more pride in his Stamps Quartet School of Music than in any other aspect of his organization. The school was held during three weeks each year, usually beginning the first week of June. Every year the school ended with an all-night radio broadcast which Stamps called the "longest uninterrupted musical broadcast in history."<sup>19</sup> As many as 7,000 people attended the annual event. The school's motto was "Not the original but the BIGGEST and BEST" in the land.<sup>20</sup> Stamps believed there were many reasons for this. He continually argued that his school had the "best bunch" of students and the finest faculty in the world.<sup>21</sup> He stated that parents could send their children to the school "with confidence" that they would be looked after as if "they were our own."<sup>22</sup> The school had an appeal for students ranging in age from six to eighty, and prospective students were encouraged to come "if they know little or much" about music.<sup>23</sup>

Stamps felt that learning the rudiments of gospel songs, by attending his school, helped "people follow the right course in life" and introduced them to the "right kind of people."<sup>24</sup> In an attempt to increase enrollment, Stamps admonished his readers, "We need you and you need Gospel singing."<sup>25</sup> He genuinely believed that gospel singing was the answer to many of society's problems.<sup>26</sup> The school was successful for a time, due primarily to the personal attention Stamps gave his students; they "all loved him."<sup>27</sup> Stamps' school did influence many people; one writer states that the singing schools had a "tremendous impact on the voices and minds of youngsters... ."<sup>28</sup>

Students could attend Stamps' for \$12.50, which covered tuition and books. Private lessons could be arranged for an extra fee, and room-and-board for the three weeks cost less than \$100.00. One marketing technique that Stamps tried was a contest in which "everyone could come out a winner." A prospective student could attend the school free of charge for tuition and books if he/she could sell 100 subscriptions to the "Stamps Quartet News." If the goal of 100 subscriptions was not reached, the student was given credit for the number sold toward tuition and books. This contest was begun in 1947 and continued into the 1950s.

In 1946, the Stamps Quartet School of Music had its best attendance, 1,171 students. By 1950 only about 500 students were attending the school. In the mid 1950s, Stamps knew enrollments were declining, so for 1956 his slogan was "lets make it a thousand."<sup>29</sup> However, 1956 brought not 1000 students but the usual 500. In 1958, Stamps begged each student to come back the following year and to bring "half a dozen [with you]."<sup>30</sup> In 1959, Stamps stopped quoting exact attendance figures and the number of students in attendance was referred to as a "litle less than last year," or just "under 500."<sup>31</sup>

Stamps still referred to every school and student body as the finest there ever was, but a degree of melancholy crept into his columns. He expressed fear that unless "we teach children to sing ... it will die with this generation."<sup>32</sup> In light of declining enrollments, it seems as though this fear was justified. Singing schools were on the way out. Even the all-night broadcast seemed to go downhill. By 1963, what had begun as a localized event that could command a large attendance had become a parody. Stamps had to bring in famous groups such as the Blackwood Brothers and the Speer Family to get people to attend the all-night broadcasts.

Stamps was always boastful of his music company. Columns and ads in the newsletter pointed out that the Stamps name was known to "thousands" throughout America and that vast numbers of people bought Stamps' products.<sup>33</sup> His idealism was especially revealed in the publication of the Stamps song books, usually three or four annually. Year after year song books *Gospel Bells*, *Gospel Echoes*, and *Heavens Echoes*, among others, were described as the "best books ever made by anybody." The "Stamps Quartet News" pushed its readers to buy the song books, pointing out that "every time you buy a Stamps Quartet Music book you are helping with a great work."<sup>34</sup> Stamps told his readers they should only buy books published and printed by the Stamps Quartet Music Company. Doubtless, the greatest effect of people buying the songbooks was to enlarge the banks accounts of the Stamps Quartet Music Company. In this sense, the Stamps Quartet Music Company fit into the traditional mold of a business in a capitalistic environment. The impression given by Stamps' writings and advertisements is that he equated bigger with



Frank Stamps

better, whether the topic was a convention, church service, school attendance, record sales, or book sales. This, too, is in line with the traditional American mindset that quantity equals quality.

Stamps' writings seem to reflect a feeling that he was not well liked. This was partially true, but most of it seems to have been a product of his personal phobias. In 1943 he was accused of singing and promoting songs which would send "souls to hell." This music was called the "Devil's Music" disguised as church music. To this Stamps responded thoughtfully and objectively. He pointed out that the Devil should not have all the "GOOD tunes," and that it is the "words which make the song and not the tune."<sup>35</sup> While this criticism was well documented, other instances of so-called criticism claimed by Stamps were not. When he began his newsletter, he told his readers that a certain music magazine did "NOT LIKE ME." The reason he gave was that his company was "growing by leaps and bounds" and was the "fastest growing organization of its kind the world had ever known ..."<sup>36</sup> Subsequent claims of persecution were a little less specific. Stamps pointed out that "our kind of gospel singing has taken quite a beating in the past ten years ... [and] the name STAMPS is poison to some people."<sup>37</sup> He claimed that people were jealous of the Stamps style and that, because they could not sing it, they condemned him.<sup>38</sup> While Stamps gave no specifics as to who was persecuting him, perhaps he saw his previous associate, J.R. Baxter, as the enemy. This, however, is pure speculation.

The Stamps' form of gospel music was on the decline, and Stamps knew that gospel music as he knew it was dying. His newsletter reflects an awareness that something was happening, but the writers never came out and said what it was. One writer referred to a "present trend" that was affecting gospel music in a negative way, without discussing what that trend was.<sup>39</sup> By the early 1960s something was obviously wrong with the Stamps organization. The "Stamps Quartet News" was shorter, having gone from approximately twenty pages to between ten and fifteen pages. It had fewer pictures, and later issues were not as "slick" as the earlier ones. Despite its emphasis on doing everything for the cause of Christ, the Stamps Quartet Music Company was a business, and it had to function as a business. In May 1965, due to the death of Frank Stamps and declining subscriptions, "Stamps Quartet News" joined with two other gospel newsletters, "The Vaughn Family Visitor" and "Skylite Hi Lites," to form the "Gospel Music Hi Lites." This paper carried a tribute to Frank Stamps in its first issue.

Frank Stamps has been referred to as one of the "fathers of gospel music."<sup>41</sup> Whether this is true or not is debatable. What is evident, however, is that Frank Stamps and the Stamps Quartet Music Company certainly did do a great deal to promote singing, teaching, and listening to gospel music. In this sense Frank Stamps and his "Stamps Quartet News" made an important contribution to American musical history.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Mrs. Frank Stamps, *Biography of Frank Stamps* (unpublished manuscript, Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University c. 1965) p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Lois S. Blackwell *The Wings of a Dove: The Story of Gospel Music in America* (Norfolk), 1978, p. 53.

- <sup>13</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 9 #9 (April 1954), p. 3.
- <sup>14</sup>"Gospel Music News," 9 #12 (August 1943), p. 3.
- <sup>15</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 11 #9 (April 1956), p. 6.
- <sup>16</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 1 #9 (April 1946), p. 8.
- <sup>17</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 2 #9 (April 1947), p. 4; "Gospel Music News," 9 #12 (August 1943), p. 3; "Stamps Quartet News," 2 #6 (April 1947), p. 4.
- <sup>18</sup>"Gospel Music News," 9 #10 (June 1943), p. 2; "Gospel Music News," 10 #4 (December 1943), p. 2.
- <sup>19</sup>"Gospel Music News," 9 #10 (June 1943), p. 2; "Stamps Quartet News," 9 #1 (April 1954), p. 3.
- <sup>16</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 4 #12 (July 1949), p. 2.
- <sup>11</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 15 #2 (November 1959), p. 2.
- <sup>12</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 15 #9 (September 1960), p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 14 #9 (April 1959), p. 11; "Stamps Quartet News," 15 #9 (September 1960), p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 13 #1 (August 1957), p. 5.
- <sup>14</sup>"Gospel Music News," 9 #12 (August 1943), p. 2; "Stamps Quartet News," 14 #10 (May 1959), p. 5.
- <sup>16</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 4 #12 (July 1949), p. 2; "Stamps Quartet News," 14 #9 (April 1959), p. 6.
- <sup>17</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 1 #1 (August 1945), p. 2.
- <sup>18</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 9 #9 (April 1954), p. 3.
- <sup>16</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 5 #11 (June 1950), p. 2.
- <sup>20</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 5 #8 (March 1950), p. 4.
- <sup>21</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 5 #10 (May 1950), p. 2.; "Stamps Quartet News," 5 #12 (July 1959), p. 2.
- <sup>22</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 5 #8 (March 1950), p. 2.
- <sup>24</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 6 #5 (December 1950), p. 2.
- <sup>25</sup>"Gospel Music News," 9 #10 (June 1943), p. 3.
- <sup>25</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 5 #11 (June 1950), p. 2; "Stamps Quartet News," 8 #5 (December 1953), p. 4.
- <sup>26</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 13 #11 (June 1958), p. 2.
- <sup>27</sup>Mrs. Frank Stamps, *Biography of Frank Stamps*, p. 10.
- <sup>28</sup>Douglas Green. *Country Roots*, (New York) 1967, p. 146.
- <sup>29</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 10 #12 (July 1955), p. 2.
- <sup>30</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 13 #12 (July 1958), p. 22.
- <sup>31</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 14 #12 (July 1959), p. 2.
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 10 #2 (November 1943), p. 23; "Stamps Quartet News," 9 #9 (April 1954), p. 3.
- <sup>34</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 2 #7 (February 1947), p. 2; "Stamps Quartet News," 17 #1 (November 1962), p. 2.
- <sup>35</sup>"Gospel Music News," 9 #11 (July 1943), p. 3.
- <sup>36</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 1 #7 (February 1946), p. 2.
- <sup>37</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 14 #8 (March 1959), p. 2.; "Stamps Quartet News," 16 #2 (February 1962), p. 2.
- <sup>38</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 16 #2 (February 1961), p. 2.
- <sup>39</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 14 #6 (January 1959), p. 4.
- <sup>40</sup>"Stamps Quartet News," 14 #12 (July 1959), p. 2.
- <sup>41</sup>Mrs. Frank Stamps, *Biography of Frank Stamps*, p. 3.