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Doyle Lawson and the Paschall Brothers at the Blue Ridge Music Center: A Summit Meeting of Mountain and Black Gospel

GALAX -- A towering figure at the center of bluegrass for forty years, Doyle Lawson will bring together the roots of the black and white gospel traditions in a concert at 7 p.m. June 6 at the Blue Ridge Music Center, located at milepost 213 on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Lawson leads an ensemble celebrated for its impeccable musicianship and harmony singing. He has taken the white and black gospel quartet singing traditions of the South and integrated them into bluegrass music, creating a new standard of excellence, one that has pushed this venerable art form to a new and different level.

He will be paired with the Paschall Brothers, a black gospel quartet that, like him, has built its music in large part on the foundation of the legendary Golden Gate Quartet. This is the first meeting between Lawson and his Quicksilver group and the Paschall Brothers; it is rare for black and white gospel singers to share a stage.

It is also rare for a working musician to receive an award as a master teacher, but two years ago Lawson received a National Heritage Award from the president of the United States for his teaching of mountain gospel singing. The odd thing is that Lawson, leader of the Quicksilver bluegrass band, like many other fine traditional singers, is totally self-educated. Equally odd, he has never called himself a gospel singer, and still sings a broad repertoire of songs.

Lawson was wonderfully trained through a lengthy apprenticeship immersed in the music. It began at home, with his mom, dad and his sister singing in gospel quartets. A neighbor, brilliant bluegrass singer Jimmie Martin, gave Lawson his first job as a teenager, playing the banjo and singing harmony

in one of the nation's top bluegrass bands.
But it was the fiery Kentuckian Bill Monroe, inventor of practically everything bluegrass, who most inspired Lawson. This was especially true in quartet singing. Monroe's Bluegrass Boys Quartet sang in classic quartet style with "turnaround" breaks from Monroe's mandolin and boundless energy.
But the apprenticeship went further. Lawson joined J. D. Crowe's New South when that band was shaking the country music barn by introducing new harmonies, new concepts, and astounding instrumental skills into bluegrass.
His last apprenticeship was with the Country Gentlemen, the Washington-based band that defined urban bluegrass with its vocal skills and arrangements. Its D.C. gig became a must-see for touring rock bands and join-in divas such as Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris. A high point in every performance was when Lawson turned his band mates into a top-flight gospel quartet. Lawson then formed his own band, Quicksilver, and for more than twenty years has been a commanding figure in bluegrass, winning an endless array of awards culminating with the presidential award. Many brilliant singers and instrumentalists have been a part of Quicksilver over the past 25 years, but the group's sound has always been the result of Lawson's meticulous attention to detail and gentle leadership.
All this is well known to Lawson's myriad fans, yet there is a secret to his success that remains obscure even to his fans. That secret is his devotion to black quartet singing and his study of the greatest set of masters in black quartet singing, the Golden Gate Quartet.
Norfolk is the home of a tradition of black a cappella quartet singing, and the Golden Gates got their start there in the 1930s with an array of vocal skills and stunts considered almost outrageous at the time: train imitations, vocal imitations of instruments, and "dipsy-doodle" arrangements. An epochal concert at New York's Carnegie Hall brought them to national attention in 1939.
After World War II, the government took the Gates to Europe on a cultural tour where they received a rousing welcome. Virginia was then rigidly segregated, so in the mid-fifties the Gates moved to Paris. They always spoke well of their native nation, but they never came back, and continued to perform from Paris for another 50 years.
Among contemporaries of the Gates was the Rev. Frank Paschall, who lived near them in Chesapeake. He trained his sons in a style remarkably like that of the Golden Gates. He has passed on, but his sons have carried on the tradition.
Unlike the older Deep South gospel tradition with its trademark reliance on formal song structure and straight-ahead harmonies, Virginia's gospel music was looser and more rhythmic. Influenced by such varying sources as the popular Mills Brothers, the swinging jazz of the Three Keys, and the emotional wailing of area pulpit preachers, the Virginia gospel style of singing was something daring and exciting — spiritual music geared for the

body as well as the soul.
It takes only the opening notes for the skills of the Paschalls to grab the house. Much of the lead is done by Tarrence Paschall, but as in many quartets, the vocal parts are traded among the members for different songs. Billy Paschall primarily sings bass, often in the pumping style employed by numerous Tidewater quartets. Frank Paschall Jr. and Johnny Lewis trade off on tenor and baritone. Renard Freeman brings to the Paschalls a smooth tenor voice reminiscent of the great Sam Cooke.
The Paschalls perform frequently at churches and festivals in the Tidewater and have performed at several national festivals, including the Roots of American Music Festival at Lincoln Center and the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife. In 2007 they released On the Right Road, now on Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. It was part of the African American Legacy series co-produced by the Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture.A free discussion workshop with musicians of both bands led by Dr. Jon Lohman of the Virginia Humanities Center will be held in the music center's indoor auditorium at 5 p.m. Seating is limited to 90 and must be reserved in advance. Call (276) 236-5309 to reserve.

Evening concerts begin at 7 p.m. and end at 9 p.m. Concert seating starts at 5:30. Admission to the Doyle Lawson and Paschall Brothers concert is $15. Children under 12 are admitted free. Advance tickets are available online and by calling the center. Call (276) 236-5309 or visit www.blueridgemusiccenter.org for more information.

Patrons may want to bring lawn chairs and blankets. Picnics are permitted but alcohol is not. Concessions are available.

In case of inclement weather, concerts will be held indoors at the nearby Fairview Ruritan Club.

Pets are not permitted in the amphitheater area.

The Blue Ridge Music Center is operated jointly by the National Council for the Traditional Arts and the National Park Service. The center is located at milepost 213 on the Blue Ridge Parkway. It is open for public visitation 9-5 daily through October. Admission to the center is free.
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