

TRADE REVIEW

THE **SINGING NEWS**
MAGAZINE
The Premier Voice of Gospel Music

Rain Tree- Showers Of Blessing For Southern Gospel's Own Piano Course

By
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Big dreams can begin in small places like the Florida Panhandle town of Bonifay located in the heart of lush farm lands where people live close to nature and the word of God. For years the best known groups in Southern Gospel Music, as well as fans from across the nation have traveled to Bonifay to

enjoy "The Biggest All Night Sing in the World," a major event held annually in the tiny town.

On one such night years ago a local teenager stood in awe as he watched Howard Goodman of The Happy Goodman Family playing the piano. As Howard's fingers danced across the keyboard, Larry Polston watched and felt a stirring inside his soul. "I've got to do that," he thought to himself. "I've got to do that."

Out of this moment of revelation, this one encompassing thought 25 years ago, a phenomenon in the Southern Gospel industry was born, which in the last few years has swept across the nation in the form of Rain Tree Publications, "Southern Gospel's Own Piano Course." Larry Polston and his family developed, produce and market the piano course, which has risen to the number one sales slot in the nation.

Polston is always mindful not to take credit for the success of Rain Tree. He gives all the glory to the Lord. "Larry Polston didn't do this...I'm just the instrument

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Pictured: Larry Polston

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Showers Of Blessings

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The Lord gave us Rain Tree," he says to those who congratulate him on the success of his business.

As roots of Rain Tree began to sprout as a much younger Polston watched Howard Goodman play, they were nourished by a Graceville, FL piano teacher, Forest Goodson. Goodson had taught at Florida State University for a number of years. Polston began taking lesson from her shortly after the sing.

"Mrs Goodson had an art for teaching the classics and Southern Gospel style together, which is hard to find in a piano teacher. She is the best," he says. For the next 12 years Polston studied piano playing and then teaching as he moved into a career with the Florida Department of Transportation.

While teaching, Polston began incorporating Goodson's methods into his own as he started to formulate the piano course. "I think that is one of the things people like most about it today. The course teaches not only Southern Gospel, but a lot of theory with a classic touch." In August of 1989, Polston began to write the book that has become known in Southern Gospel Music as "Southern Gospel's Own Piano Course."

The first edition, released in June of 1990, involved a green back book, script and an 80 minute tape with Polston's wife, Dianne, giving oral instruction. The first advertisement for the piano course appeared in THE SINGING NEWS MAGAZINE in April of 1990 with an average of 10 orders coming in a week. Still not satisfied with the course, in January of 1991 Polston revamped the whole package, but first he sought advice from some of the top Gospel pianists in the nation. Next came three major endorsements, with the first coming from friend and former student, Gary "Taco" Jones of Gold City.

Polston then sought the endorsement of Anthony Burger, who is known in the industry as "the master of the keys." This seemed like an insurmountable mountain to the Rain Tree staff, but much to their great joy Burger, "saw the material and encouraged me to further the course with a touch up here and there, to make it more professional." Polston recalls. Today Burger is a right hand man to Rain Tree. He and Jones proofread all changes made in the piano course package.

The third endorsement came from Eddie Crook, owner and producer of MorningStar Recordings. Crook took the completed package and came back with a "great" review and an agreement to endorse the

Rain Tree course. "One of the reasons the course is called 'Southern Gospel's own...' is because there are 25 of the top pianists in the nation who have included 'helpful hints' in the script. This involves almost everybody in the industry, and it gives the fans a chance to know what has helped their favorite pianists play the piano," he explains.

On July 3, 1991, the new course debuted at the Biggest All Night Sing in Bonifay. The first groups to take the course were The Hoppers and The Dixie Echoes. The support of Claude Hopper, who is known for helping newcomers and supporting new growth in the Gospel industry, helped boost sales of the piano course.

"From that night until this day, word of Southern Gospel's Own Piano Course has spread like wildfire. Never has there been a piano course that teaches people to play Southern Gospel style piano by ear, as well as advancing the classical student who wants to know more about theory, chord study, and Southern Gospel in general," Polston says as he looks back over the last year and a half. "That night Anthony (Burger) allowed me to set up our tent beside The Kingsmen table, and we sold 33 courses in one night," Polston recalls. "That really boosted our confidence in the product."

Later in the same year at the Annual Labor Day sing in Thomasville, GA, Rain Tree took on two more groups, The Nelons and The Cathedrals.

"Rex Nelon gave me every excuse there is not to take the course, but he finally relented and said he would try it. He is now my second largest client," Polston says.

The Cathedrals average ordering about 200 piano courses per month with their pianist Roger Bennett recording sales of as many as 44 units in one concert. Martin Gureasko, pianist for The Nelons, recently told Polston, "We were at a sing with The Talleys and The Cathedrals. We sold every piano course we had (29) and tried to borrow from the other groups, but they too had sold out the same night, so we took 16 orders to send out by mail. In October of '91 the Rain Tree staff headed to Nashville to the National Quartet Convention with 400 piano courses to market.

"We could have sold 1000. That was a salesman's dream come true" says Larry who spent his time with managers from the various groups in an all out effort to market the Rain Tree piano course. His efforts were successful. Groups who carry the piano course on tour include: The Cathedrals, The Bishops, Cedar Ridge, The Dixie Echoes, The Dixie Melody Boys, The Freemans, The Florida Boys, Greater

Vision, The Greenes, The Hoppers, The Isaacs, Karen Peck & New River, The Kingdom Heirs, The Lesters, The McGruders, The McKeithens, Mid South, The Mullins, Naomi & The Segos, The Nelons, New Journey, The Perrys, The Perry Sisters, The Singing Cookes, The Talleys, The Telestials and The Wilburns.

Polston gives credit to the success of Rain Tree "to God first and then the efforts of the groups who sell the package at their tables."

Today he feels these groups have become a part of his church family, "because there is a bond of love and unity there, and I pray and care for them as I do the members of my local church."

Future Rain Tree plans call for the addition of a video with a script featuring top pianists demonstrating their favorite ad libs and piano styles. A primer piano course for beginners is in the works, as well as a series of cassette tapes of hymn songs played in Southern Gospel style with a matching script.

"All of these will give the groups more of a selection for their tables and will meet the demand for all different levels of teaching," Polston adds.

Polston's dream was made possible by many factors, he says, including the love, support and hard work of his family. Today, daughter Charity heads the family business, which has gone from a part-time effort of shipping out a few courses, to a full-time job of sending out as many as 500 courses each week.

As Polston looks back, he says he can see the hand of God in all His work. "We have come so far in a little over two and a half years. God has truly blessed our family and our business, with a lot of our blessing coming from prayer," Polston says. "Charity has sent up a lot of those prayers. We only want to stay humble and in the place where God can use us for his glory."

The young man who stood in awe as he watched Howard Goodman playing the piano some 35 years ago has watched his dreams come true. Larry Polston knows from where his success has emanated, from praying and trusting in God.

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