



# Great God A'Mighty! The Dixie Hummingbirds: Celebrating the Rise of Soul Gospel Music

*Jerry Zolten*

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From the Jim Crow world of 1920s Greenville, South Carolina, to Greenwich Village's Café Society in the '40s, to their 1974 Grammy-winning collaboration on "Loves Me Like a Rock," the Dixie Hummingbirds have been one of gospel's most durable and inspiring groups.

Now, Jerry Zolten tells the Hummingbirds' fascinating story and with it the story of a changing music industry and a changing nation. When James Davis and his high-school friends starting singing together in a rural South Carolina church they could not have foreseen the road that was about to unfold before them. They began a ten-year jaunt of "wildcatting," traveling from town to town, working local radio stations, schools, and churches, struggling to make a name for themselves. By 1939 the *a cappella* singers were recording their four-part harmony spirituals on the prestigious Decca label. By 1942 they had moved north to Philadelphia and then New York where, backed by Lester Young's band, they regularly brought the house down at the city's first integrated nightclub, Café Society. From there the group rode a wave of popularity that would propel them to nation-wide tours, major record contracts, collaborations with Stevie Wonder and Paul Simon, and a career still vibrant today as they approach their seventy-fifth anniversary.

Drawing generously on interviews with Hank Ballard, Otis Williams, and other artists who worked with the Hummingbirds, as well as with members James Davis, Ira Tucker, Howard Carroll, and many others, *The Dixie Hummingbirds* brings vividly to life the growth of a gospel group and of gospel music itself.

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