



Choir competitions were for bragging rights Photo courtesy www.sethskim.com

By Sugaray Rayford

I grew up in the Church of God in Christ with some of the greatest singers and musicians on the planet. Everything I learned in the church, I use every day as a blues singer.

Gospel prepared me for the rigors of the stage. It also gave me insight to performing on a big stage in front of large crowds, as well as the pressure of getting it right and with true feeling. A church was judged in those days on how well a preacher could preach and how good its choir and musicians sounded. In those days we played for free, for the glory of God, but competition was fierce. Choirs practiced two or three times a week to get ready for Sunday.

But the real work and singing happened during revivals. Choirs came from everywhere to sing and compete with other choirs. Monday night was always musical night or choir night. Choirs didn't sing from a book – you knew the songs and followed your choir director's every move. That was my job.

I went from drummer to choir director for Bethel Temple Church of God in Christ in Tyler, TX. Our choir was made up of more than 50 members. I also directed an interdenominational choir that had more than 300 members. On one trip, our large choir would not fit inside the small church, so we opened the windows and the choir sang from the outside into the church while I directed from the inside. You learn to go with the flow, and to do your best with what you've got.

If you had a great choir director, your choir had a chance to win the competitions. No prizes were ever handed out, this was for bragging rights only. I've been in revivals that started at 8 p.m. and went until 8 a.m. All the years of choir directing prepared me for my current schedule of rigorous travel where I perform on stages around the world. When not on stage, it's all laughs and fellowship, but once you take the stage, it's time to cut heads.

Someone asked me if I get nervous. Yes, but not because of how many people are in the audience – I'm used to large audiences. It's the anticipation of destroying my set and

Raised on Revival: Competition With True Feeling

leaving nothing back, leaving it all on stage. You never know what the next band is going to bring, maybe they will be great and kick your butt.

You only get one chance to make an impression. As I was taught in all those days of choir competitions: give it all you've got, leave nothing for the next group. So when I went to the International Blues Challenge, I had already performed in front of large groups with time limits, and being judged was nothing new. Church folk criticize you on the drop of a hat. They say things like, "Honey, not everyone can sing. The Lord needs ushers, too." 🎵

Sugaray Rayford first sang before audiences when he was four years old in the Pentecostal Church of Holiness in west Texas. He is a 2015 Blues Music Awards nominee for B.B. King Entertainer of the Year and Traditional Blues Male Artist. He also is the lead singer for the Mannish Boys, nominated for Best Album and Traditional Blues Album. He fronted Aunt Kizzy's Boys when it placed second at the 2006 International Blues Challenge.



Sugaray Rayford applies everything he learned in the church to his work onstage as a bluesman Photo courtesy Sugaray Rayford