



MUSIC CITY BEHIND THE WALLS

Written by Jason Hale, Save the Prison

For nearly one hundred years, the Tennessee State Prison contained some of the most dangerous men in the State of Tennessee. With twenty-foot tall limestone walls topped with five feet of barbed wire and powered with 2,300 volts of deadly electricity, few men were successful with their escape attempts. Many tried, but only a few lived to tell their story. This prison was built like a fortress, and was intended to keep the inmates completely shut off from the public, and everything else outside the walls. TSP served its purpose for the most part, but there is one thing those thick limestone walls couldn't keep out, and that's the power of music.

With a clear view of the Nashville skyline from TSP, it is no shock that music played such a huge role in the life of the prison. For years musicians stepped inside "The Walls", and brought "Music City" to the inmates that called the prison home. The Grand Ole Opry was not shy about sending its entertainers over on a regular basis. Big names like Johnny Cash, Hank Williams, Sonny James, and many others were regulars at the penitentiary. Sonny James recorded a live album at the prison, with an all inmate band. He spent much time behind the walls, practicing and perfecting his show with the band. The prison still has a strong connection with music, even as it sets empty today. Many country singers have filmed videos behind the walls. Blake Shelton, Brantley Gilbert, Eric Church and a handful of others have



made TSP the visual backdrop to the lyrics they write. The list of entertainers that spend time at the prison is endless, but there is one music act that tops them all. The story of these entertainers is one for the ages. Making your way into the music industry is hard for everyone, but for The Prisonaires, all the cards were against them.



It all started with a man by the name of Johnny Bragg. Bragg had been a resident of TSP since 1943. Born blind, Bragg found a love for music at an early age. As he got older his vision miraculously came to him, but his love for music never faded. During Bragg's early days of incarceration, he spent time writing songs, and trying to sell them to music acts who performed at the prison. There is even some who say that he is the true writer of Hank Williams' *Your Cheatin Heart*, but there is no way to prove this other than taking Johnny Bragg's word for it.

Johnny Bragg attempted to join a few gospel groups at the prison, but none of them seem to fit right with him. He made friends with two of the gospel singers, Ed Thurman and William Stewart. They began practicing together, and then they added two new inmates, John Drue Jr, and Marcell Sanders. The men spent every minute they could practicing, writing, and performing in

the prison yard for their fellow inmates.

It wasn't long before the warden noticed the musical talent that was behind his walls. The warden had the inmates perform for the Governor, and "The Prisonaires" were born. Governor Frank Clement became a huge fan. On many occasions the inmates were taken to the governor's home to entertain his guests. Radio producer Joe Calloway gave the group a chance to perform on a live radio broadcast. They made the most of this opportunity, and it paid off in a big way.

Not long after their radio performance, someone told Sam Phillips of Sun Records about the group. When he heard the taped version of the group's performance, he knew they were something special. Phillips somehow convinced the corrections officials to allow the group to travel to Memphis, Tennessee, with armed guards of course, to record an album. The recording process was not easy for Johnny Bragg. The producers didn't like the way he pronounced certain words, and the album was almost a bust. They were about to throw in the towel, when a young man in the lobby, by the name of Elvis Presley stepped in, and offered to help Bragg. After spending hours in the room with Elvis, Bragg returned to the studio, and perfected the song. The inmates returned back to their cells at TSP, and a few weeks later Bragg's song *Just Walkin In the Rain* was released. The song was manifested from Bragg as he walked across the prison yard with a friend. The two



were heading to their prison jobs, and the rain was coming down hard. Johnny jokingly started singing the lyrics, "Just walkin in the rain, getting soaked to the bone." Later that night in his cell, he started writing lyrics to complete the song. After the songs release, it quickly sold 50,000 copies, which was a big success at that time.

After their song hit the radio, the group was regularly allowed out of prison to perform at political meetings, hotels, and even churches. The men were even allowed to drive themselves to the events, with only one guard. There were times that the warden himself accompanied the group to their performances. Of course this did not sit well with the other inmates. Numerous times the group had to defend themselves against other inmates who didn't like the special treatment the group received. The group was always looking out for one another, and none of them were ever hurt by any of the other inmates.

In 1953 when they were at their biggest, *LIFE magazine* sent a photographer out to the prison to follow the inmates around. They gained much exposure from this news spread. Some people enjoyed hearing about them, and some didn't like the fact that men sentenced to a penitentiary were allowed out just because they could sing. As quickly as fame came to the group, it was soon over. They made a good run from 1953 to 1955.

This story intrigues me. How could five African-American inmates, in 1953 accomplish what these men did? You have to remember, 1953 was a tough time for African Americans, and racism was still very alive in this country. Yet these men were able to defy the odds, and beat all the cards against them. They were so talented that people didn't care if they were black or white. They didn't care that they were inmates. They didn't care what crimes they had committed. That shows the power of music. Writing this article, I couldn't help but think of the movie *Shawshank Redemption*. When the main character, Andy Dufresne, says "That's the beauty of music. They can't get that from you."



The story of The Prisonaires is one of the many intriguing stories from the Tennessee State Prison. Yes, it was a prison, and yes many bad things happened behind those walls, but for every bad story, there is a good story to follow. History should be told, whether it is good or bad. If we continue to destroy and forget our history, we are destined to repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Two years ago when I started Save The Prison, and dug deeper into the history, I had no idea the incredible stories that would be uncovered. The prison has set untouched for years, and it was slowly but surely being forgotten. Yes, there have been movies filmed there, and people talk about those, but there is so much more to it. I'm sure you have heard the phrase, "if these walls could talk," well the prison walls can talk, because now they have a voice, and we are that voice.

The Tennessee State Prison was listed on our 2011 Nashville Nine list of the city's most endangered places. Jason Hale is the pioneer behind the Save the Prison campaign to save this local landmark. Follow his campaign on [Facebook](#) or his [blog](#) and find out how you can get involved!