



John Thompson, Kevin Short and Ed Shockley never planned to form a musical group, but their voices blended so harmoniously that they had to give The Reminders a chance.

# Musical Mission

The Reminders explore harmony of the heart and spirit

BY PATRICIA V. RIVERA

**A**t the height of their individual musical careers, when they could each draw from decades of experience, the men who compose a group called The Reminders struggled with something akin to uncertainty.

Not because they doubted their talent or the possible divine intervention that one day combined three wide-ranging voices in harmonic perfection. But because their lyrics came imbued with the spirit of God — and with that privilege came an examination of conscience.

“I really struggled with the idea of being worthy of doing this,” recalls musician Ed Shockley of Lewes.

Likewise, Kevin Short remembers feeling uneasy at first, singing in so many worship halls near pulpits where the teachings of God transcend.

Their souls, however, reassured their minds. So did the third group member, John Thompson, an internationally accomplished gospel songwriter who had built a career on imparting inspirational messages.

With heartfelt vocals and arrangements that include the guitar, mandolin, bass and percussion, they now take to churches and gatherings across the state and the nation. In their repertoire — and in their first album called “Tender • Loud • Gravel” — is a song called “Broken Alleluia.”

Thompson wrote it for a group of convicts who met for Christmas breakfast one year. Today, he

sees it as the story of the musical journey experienced by The Reminders. This is how the song begins:

*Well I don't feel much like singing  
And if the truth be told  
I'd rather go off somewhere  
And just lick my wounds alone*

*So here I am — here I am*

For the last two years, The Reminders have shared their faith through genres that embrace Americana, gospel, roots, praise — and bygone days, as their name reflects. In the words of one of their friends and fellow musician Bill Rawlins, they share stories through voices that say “we’re all creatures of history, wrestlers with demons, searchers for something sacred and moments of grace.”

The Reminders aspire to be authentic and take a simple approach to songwriting and performing. Perhaps that sense of genuineness stems from their unplanned formation.

Professional musicians enjoy sharing in convivial spirit, particularly in smaller communities. Shockley is a well-known singer and drummer recognized for his soulful music influenced by rhythm-and-blues. His rock song “Dodge City,” written years ago when he was in the band Jack of Diamonds, is still an anthem to many music fans in the mid-Atlantic region.

Over the years he has worked with Short, a singer, bass player and producer. Short, owner of Mid-South Audio recording studio has produced for RCA/BMG, Smithsonian Folkways, Sierra, and Rebel Records among many others.

The two men have known each others for decades and even compiled a CD of almost-forgotten hymns in 2000 called “Little Is Much.”

Shockley’s relationship with Thompson was newer. The connection was intense.

Thompson is a career songwriter who produced more than 30 major albums in the country, pop, and gospel fields for artists such as Earl Scruggs, the Bill Gaither Trio, Doug Oldham, the Oak Ridge Boys, Roseanne Cash and Don Francisco. His 1983 Grammy-winning song “El Shaddai” was named one of the Songs of the Century by the Recording Industry Association of America and the Gospel Song of the Decade (for the 1980s) by *Billboard Magazine*.

But it was “Sanctuary” that touched

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## Music Maker

Shockley one Sunday morning during church service.

“I remember telling my wife, [Jill,] ‘I want to write songs like that,’” he recalls.

Years later, Thompson relocated to southern Delaware, and one day approached Shockley at a songwriters event in Lewes.

Thompson thought he would take a break from writing, but true callings don’t go away that easily. When Shockley realized Thompson was the writer of “Sanctuary,” he was amazed.

The two men started writing songs together. One day they showed Short one of their songs and asked him to sing it with them. To their own surprise, their voices came together in perfect harmony, from Short’s boisterous baritone voice to John’s higher pitches. Shockley infused the music with earthy and raspy middle vocals — the “gravel” in the name of the group’s CD.

They felt the spirit of the music.

“This was an instance in which the sum was greater than its parts,” Shockley says. “We couldn’t have planned it so perfectly.”

*But there was something pulling me  
Gently to this place  
At first I tried resisting  
But folded to the grace.*

Broken alleluias reflect real life. They resonate with the everyday man and woman. Religion aside, who doesn’t struggle with inner conflicts — with the concept of worthiness?

After forming The Reminders, Shockley wondered about his new role of galvanizing audiences in churches.

All his life, he’d evoked emotion among those who accompanied his musical creations with clapping, stomping, singing and swaying. Using gospel, however, still felt unfamiliar. He felt lost at times. He remembers thinking, “Wouldn’t it be nice to feel like God was with you?”

Then one Sunday morning during worship, Shockley felt his worries lifted.

He and gospel singer Deah Harriott performed a song appropriately called “Sanctify Me,” written by Thompson and Shockley.

*“Lord, I confess, I am anxious in my spirit  
 Could you help me, please, show me what to do  
 ‘Cause I want my life, for you, to be, well, pleasing.”*

The lyrics and voices moved more than half of the worshipers who, during an altar call, rose to their feet and moved to the front of the church as a symbolic spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ.

Shockley witnessed how his voice was an instrument for something greater than entertainment. He realized that God was with him.

*Could you use another broken alleluia  
 From a sinner with his back up against the wall  
 I heard once from a man who said he knew ya  
 That a broken alleluia, is the sweetest alleluia of all*

Thompson related a telling interpretation of God during worship in a Georgetown church.

Songwriters, he noted, love to share their songs: “We get excited when we go into a writer’s session with nothing and come out with something.”

Likewise, he sees God share similar enthusiasm about each and every one of his creations.

“God has such a heart for creativity that if he was to show you his songs, he would show you people. He would say, ‘Look what I made, look what I did with this one,’” Thompson says.

The Reminders live their faith quietly. They don’t pretend to convert souls (Thompson says that’s God’s work).

They don’t cast stones as they’re all too aware of their own shortfalls as humans.

They do share stories of human strength and frailty in a world they believe was created by a loving God, a God whose most important creation felt at one moment in his life “broken, alone and

afraid,” as The Reminders wrote in their song “Outrageous Grace.”

Though they struggled with the idea of worthiness, they feel privileged to be used by God to share those stories.

Not all their music is spiritual. Some of it depicts the everyday life of ordinary people, such as “The Waterman” who “fed my babies, saved my soul, on the back of the skipjack Chesapeake Rose.”

More often than not, they strike a chord with their audiences.

Says Thompson: “We would just want to connect with people, move them, with songs that speak to their hearts and to their experiences.”

*I don't know much about heaven  
 But they say it's filled with praise  
 So would you mind this straggler  
 Trying to show a little faith ■*

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