



*I*nnovative ideas come from determined people like Derwin Hinson of Wilmington, N.C., and generally because some barrier appeared in their paths. Keeping a professional bluegrass gospel band together always presented a problem down in the southeastern sliver of the state, far from the bluegrass rich Piedmont and mountains. Finally, Hinson combined his love of the Lord, bluegrass music, and technology into an exciting concept that has freed the entertainer from the necessity to carry a band with a totally new medium for bluegrass music.

By 1998 it had become hard to travel the two lane roads of southeastern North Carolina without passing a church somewhere announcing a forthcoming appearance by Derwin Hinson. Outside his concerts or services, it sounds like a full band is performing bluegrass and southern gospel music. Step inside, contribute to the love offering, and you'll discover a one man band for the 1990s. Since 1996 Derwin Hinson has thrived as a self-described "high tech redneck for the Lord."

Using pre-recorded tracks of his own rhythm playing and harmony singing, Hinson dashes about taking all the lead breaks on five instruments while singing all the lead vocals. "In a forum, gospel music, that accepts the use of tracks—where you hear a whole band, but don't see any musicians—I try to carry it to a new level," he explains. "God is allowing me to use three CD players with the tracks, on which I am the only musician, the only voice, combined with five live instruments. So, when a banjo break comes up I'm there, time for a guitar break, or mandolin... I get to move around a lot! So once the audience gets the idea, they have a blast realizing that every sound they hear is being done by the one they see...me.

# *Derwin Hinson*

## *And A New Medium For Bluegrass Gospel*



"I hope to continue doing church services," said Hinson of his plans. "Most of the time I am invited to have the whole service, complete through the invitation. I also do other singings, schoolhouses, gyms, grand openings, about anything so far that a band may be called on to do. I hope to book some festivals someday. I'd like to have the first thing Sunday morning, a time of songs and fun things of the Lord to share, testimony inserts... A great time and something different for the Sunday morning festival fan what I hope to accomplish with the music I love and am blessed to be able to do."

Wait a second. Pre-recorded tracks at a bluegrass festival? At first glance that seems pretty out there, but consider this. Derwin grew up in bluegrass and has played the music professionally most of his life.

His father Conrad Hinson, from Columbus County in the swamps south and west of Wilmington, became obsessed at a young age with the guitar and, as his son recalls, "practiced every chance he got, and soon had learned about all the local folks could show him. He never missed a local program at the high school, which would include Flatt and Scruggs, Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys, Carl Story, the Stanley Brothers, Reno and Smiley and several others."

While living in Wisconsin, Conrad fell in love, got married to Marlene Cox, then fell in love with the resonator guitar and bought one. Not long after Derwin's birth, the family moved to Charlotte, N.C. "Dad joined the Blue Ridge Partners. This group had some members I recall, Joe Ransome on mandolin, Slim Burgess on banjo, Reid Baucom on guitar, and Bob Long on fiddle. Daddy joined playing resonator guitar, but later switched to guitar and sang the lead vocal part. They were offered a deal on Starday Records in 1966 or '67, but it just didn't work out."

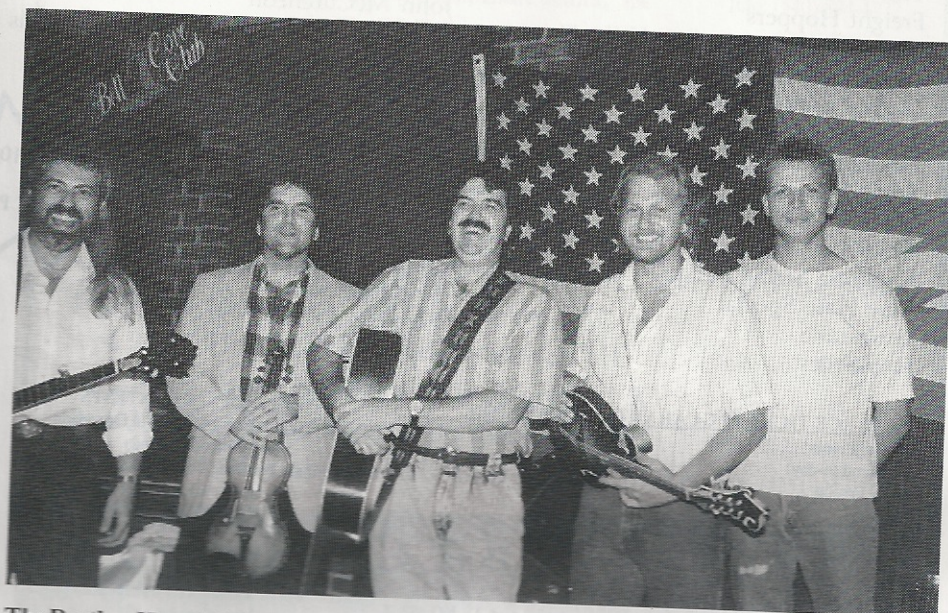
The family moved near Fayetteville, N.C. to be closer to Derwin's ailing grandfather. His father joined a local bluegrass group that played the Veterans' Hospital there. Derwin got his first chance on stage and realized he liked it. At the 1968 Berryville, [Va.,] festival at Watermelon Park he started to pick. "A young group called the Wilsons were playing, and they were merely kids. I thought if they can do it,



L-R: Danny Hinson, Mike Baker, Vern Gosdin, Dave Roe (hidden) and Derwin Hinson



The Wayne Lewis Band, L-R: Art Stamper, Danny Hinson, Billy Rose (hidden), Wayne Lewis and Derwin Hinson.



The Restless Heard, L-R: Derwin Hinson, Glen Duncan, Larry Cordle, Danny Hinson, and Kenny Lewis.

By Art Menius



so can I! I came home and was beatin' out rhythm for Dad in two short weeks."

After his father gave his mother a bass fiddle, the family trio commenced entertaining at the VA hospital. Younger kids Danny and Ramona eventually joined the fun on mandolin and tambourine and vocals, respectively. They adopted the name, the Conrad Hinson Family. "We played some of the major festivals, recorded three projects in all on LP album format and, my favorite, the 8-track tape. On our second project 'The Family Circle,' a great friend, Joe Stuart, played fiddle and became even a better friend."

After a number of guest appearances, the Conrad Hinson Family became regulars on *The Red White Show* on a Wilmington, N.C. television station. The Hinsons eventually earned their own show on the station, which continued to air locally produced hillbilly television shows through the 1970s. After eight years, however, the elder portion of the Conrad Hinson Family decided they had had enough of the musicians' life.

"After mom and dad hung it up, Danny and Ramona got involved in the home church youth program. As for me music was it! So I was asked to join the East Coast

Boys on resonator guitar in '79.... About six or seven months after I joined, Hal Kemp left the group and I was moved to banjo."

In February of 1983 a chance encounter led Charlie Louvin to hire Derwin. "For me to audition for Charlie, my dad got out of bed and brought me a banjo, and one of my then students dashed home and got his resonator guitar for me to use. That night I saw an opportunity to possibly put me and Danny back on the stage together again. I told Charlie he needed to hire my brother to sing the tenor part, and he said, 'Well bring him along next week to the Opry, and we'll give him a listen.'" A week later the brothers Hinson both belonged to Charlie Louvin's band and had played the Grand Ole Opry together. After a year with Louvin, the Hinsons departed to form a band for some work in Las Vegas starting in March 1984. A strike in Vegas, however, scuttled their plans, and "One by one we watched the great little band we had assembled just dissolve before our very eyes."

Back home in Wilmington, broke and bored, Derwin and Danny needed a new plan. Soon Derwin had one: talk their way backstage at a country show in town and

audition for one-time bluegrass musician Vern Gosdin, who was hot on country radio at that time. The Hinsons had met him at the Opry while with Louvin. "So Vern agreed to meet us, he did not remember until later that we had met before.... Later he confessed he thought of the hardest thing he could think of at the time, a hit he had going in the gospel field called 'Jesus Hold My Hand.' Oh we jumped on those parts with so much enthusiasm, it almost scared us! Vern perked up about 200%—smilin', singin', rared back [and] let it rip!

"'You're hired,' he shouted as cheerful as a kid. 'You're hired!' 'Now wait,' his manager cautioned. 'Vern, there some things we need to work out.' 'Work em out. These boys are hired!', shouted Vern again... We traveled for almost two years with Vern Gosdin, and I'll tell anyone he is a great man to work for, as well as with, and a good man to call friend."

From there the Hinsons joined the Wayne Lewis Band, which included Art Stamper on fiddle. They played with the former Blue Grass Boy for the last two years they resided in Nashville and for the first year after they returned to Wilmington. Meanwhile, Derwin on banjo, Danny on mandolin, and Wayne's son Kenny Lewis



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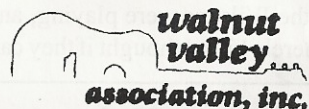
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on bass helped start a very special scene in Hendersonville, Tenn., an eastern bedroom community of Nashville. The three joined Larry Cordle and Glen Duncan as the Restless Heard, playing bluegrass Wednesday nights at the Bell Cove Club.

"Mr. Bill Monroe went to church [nearby], so every Wednesday evening after church he would wander on in, eat a salad, and always play anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on how he was feeling. What a thrill. Wednesday nights at the 'Cove became a big event! Out of this came Lonesome Standard Time. Me and Danny worked with Restless Heard until we moved home due to daddy's illness. Our last week with Restless Heard happened to fall on Mr. Monroe's 50th anniversary with the Opry. He asked if we would play on the TV portion. Wow, of course we did it."

November 1989 found the Hinsons back in Wilmington and longing for the community of serious pickers that only Nashville can offer. "We played very little for almost one and a half years. It was a really big adjustment from where we had been for almost eight years. In March of 1991 we formed what we had hoped to form as soon as we got home, which was the Special Edition with Tommy Simmons on guitar and Joey Canady on bass. We went almost straight into the studio and recorded 'Take One,' and that fall did a gospel project, 'Take Time To Praise Him' and the next spring recorded 'Hog Wild'."

Although the Special Edition offered strong harmonies and exciting picking, lineup changes plagued the Hinsons in a part of North Carolina where professional bluegrass musicians could not be quickly located. They joined a Thursday night gig band called High Cotton to keep in shape. Then Danny and his wife relocated to her hometown in Tennessee, and Derwin was on his own again. He formed the last version of Special Edition from among his own picking students. After a revelatory New Years Eve concert at the Calvary Baptist Church in Wilmington, Derwin and guitarist Aaron King convinced the others to make Special Edition all gospel.

Once David Farrior joined on fiddle, the group became quite busy from August of 1995 through January 1996. Although they enjoyed the music, both King and Farrior soon decided that they wanted to pursue more conventional forms of ministry, and Derwin found himself again disbanded. "Well heartbroken would be



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dropping your pick before you go on stage compared to this; I was crushed. I came home that night and wrote some words to a song, 'Lord Guide Me.'

"The next day after the band broke up, a friend of mine, Stephen Gilliam, said to me, 'Derwin, why don't you do it all yourself? You play all the instruments, sing every part, why not?' Well I did not want any part of this, I told him I liked being the side man, doing whatever part but being in the back. Well, I did not have any luck finding people to form a new Special Edition. Finally, Stephen who had talked to me about this idea he had every time he

saw me, said, 'Look, I'll tell ya one more time... You should check into it, think about it, and then do it!'"

Derwin agreed to pray on it. "It seemed I got an answer almost immediately. Go for it... I would be the one man, high-tech redneck for the Lord! Now I am having a ball! I hope to do this for many years, no headaches, no egos to deal with... "It's a musician's dream, related undoubtedly to why band members make solo records.

Hinson has also placed his presentation on record with "I'll Be Back Again," which he released on cassette and CD (none of his beloved 8-tracks) in 1997. While one sees it in other styles of music, how often on a bluegrass gospel album does one read: "Produced, arranged, engineered, and mixed by Derwin. All instruments and vocals—Derwin." It certainly sounds like a band live in the studio, not one person recording individual parts and splicing them together. The record mixes classics like "Satan's Jeweled Crown" and Gosdin's "Goin' Up" with Hinson's originals, including the country gospel number "I'll Be Back."

But can he take his presentation of bluegrass gospel to the bluegrass audi-

ence? "Knowing the bluegrass crowd the way I think I do, the only hope I have to sell them on the idea is that knowing that I, the one they are seeing, played and sang everything they are hearing. Then maybe they will accept it, since tracks are the only way to do it."

Unless you've seen Derwin Hinson in action, you can only imagine the scene. A nicely dressed man, entering middle age with salt and pepper hair, dashes about, taking a break on the 5-string, sliding up to the vocal mike, removing the banjo and shifting to mandolin and appearing right on cue for his next break and lead vocal. It is all Derwin, and 90% of his music is bluegrass. No one can deny that his show proves completely different. The passage of time will reveal whether we'll find Derwin and his stacks of tracks for the Lord at bluegrass festivals.

Today Derwin is a single dad raising his four children with the help of his mother Marlene.



*Art Menius has contributed to BLUEGRASS UNLIMITED for 15 years. He is Associate Festival Coordinator for MerleFest and a member of the Boards of Directors for IBMA and the Old-Time Music Group.*



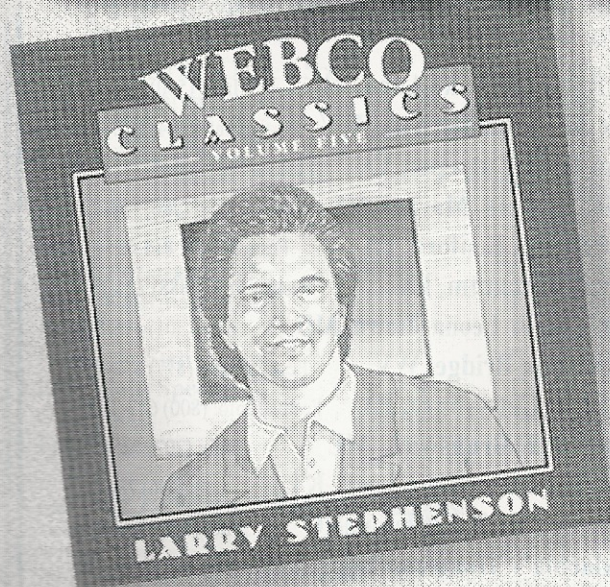
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