

The Allen Boys Interview conducted May 2021, at the House of God Church in Mt. Airy, NC

JR: The chief overseer, like the head over all the churches was a female, now it's a male we have a new one, the founder of the House of God church was a female. It's never really been an issue in this church, it's just the way it is. Once you step across into the pulpit there's no gender anyway, that's pastor or bishop, that's just the way it is.

– I think it's pretty balanced now, it's nothing to go into this church and then go to Wilmington and it still be females and Raleigh it be a male and so on, it's pretty much balanced and to some people it's just shocking.

His is his dad, but his grandfather was the Chief Overseer. But it's common in the house of god and you don't think about it until you're asked.

BRAHM: I know y'all as the Allen boys but could you please give your names and where you're from.

RM: I'm Ransey Moore, 36 I'm originally from Mt. Airy but now I'm staying in Charlotte.

JR: I'm JR Farmville, Richard Farmville, I'm 42 and I'm from Mt. Airy and live here in Mt. Airy, North Carolina

EJ: I'm EJ Trice, I am 31, I'm from Pierre Park, Louisiana and I live in Winston-Salem, North Carolina

BRAHM: What is Sacred Steel?

JR: Sacred Steel is a tradition from the House of God church, mainly using a steel guitar whether it be a lap steel or pedal steel. Our church tradition is, a lot of times you think of a keyboard or an organ when you think of church. In our church we use a steel, not necessarily as another instrument but as another voice. So lets say in a song like "Jesus on the Main Line" and the crowd responds back "Tell him what you want" the steel also responds back and at times actually takes the lead.

When it gets to the praise part of the song, when the words are done or there's no longer anyone singing, then the steel actually begins to sing the song back.

In the house of god church you hear them say, the steel is like a voice from heaven, it is the closest thing to the angels singing. That's what the steel is to the sacred steel and the House of God tradition.

BRAHM: How did y'all get into this type of music?

RM: As far as the music itself, that was pretty much born and raised here in the church. It kind of came upon us, you could say. It's not like we got up and were like we want to play this, it kinda just happened. Our parents as well as the ones in this church told us with the upbringing, it kinda sounded a little rough in the beginning, it was a little screechy. It sounded good to us.

A guy named Malcolm was the one who actually gave us our first opportunity.

JR: It was outside of a church in Enu park.

RM: From there we just kinda took off, people were interested in what we were bringing to the table and we were excited. It was just, we are still doing, we still play from the heart. So we might do one show a certain way and the next time we do the song it may not come out that way because it's just the way it is. And people will ask us, how is it that y'all are playing these songs and you are smiling and laughing? Because that's just the way we feel.

We're not even really concerned about the outside things, we're looking at each other like 'oh that was nice' and the song takes over. It's nothing for us, we'll take a slow mellow song and all of a sudden it'll just take off so you know it kind of came on us. You can call it a gift.

BRAHM: How long have y'all been playing together?

JR: The Allen Boys, the group itself, we've been around for about 20-25 years. But as far as in church, it's something that you've just done so, we were all babies when we started, literally everyone under 7 when you started an instrument and then graduated to the next one. It was just an afterthought, you've just done it you know.

Or he's been playing for a long time so I want to play something. Or everybody wants to start with the drums, so you stalk the next drummer and you're waiting on him to do something so you have an opportunity.

RM: It started with you on drums (JR)

JR: The time is really endless, it is hard to say how long, but we did come up with like 25 years because our other guitar player in the group, Cameron, he's the youngest and he just turned 30. And he was one of the little peapods when we were playing. And just piggybacking on the first question, when we started we were the number one funeral group in town here for the longest, as kids, I'm talking about

I think I was 9, he's (RM) is 5 years younger than me and we would either leave school early, or we didn't go to school and go to the funeral home or the church and they would set us up in the corner because we were requested - so we did a lot of funeral gigs for a long time. So that's where we started on the funeral circuit.

(Laughs) playing people home, and when I say we did a lot of gigs we did A LOT of funerals. Can you imagine being a kid and adult coming up to you, "I want you to play my funeral." And we're like "ooookay" that's where we started.

BRAHM: Would it be the same type of music as what you'd play in church?

JR: Yes, or whatever their favorite song was. A lot of people say we have coined the it could've been an R&B song, or an old Soul song, or even a Country Western song but whatever it was we would end up going to church with it and that's what they were after anyway, because it's hard not to give church, when all you know is church. Even with our influences outside of the church and with secular music, somehow it ends back with church. You know what I mean? I guess that's our niche.

BRAHM: Are there any artists that have influenced you in your sound or that you try to model yourselves after?

EJ: Well being that I come from Louisiana, it's kinda hard to put in on a particular artist because growing up we had Gospel, you had Aretha Franklin, Mahalia Jackson, you had James Cleveland. But then on the funkier side I grew up around Zydeco, so you grow up around these great Zydeco musicians and then you go into New Orleans you got the Meters, you've got the Barcays, you've got all of that. Honestly I would say genre of music or other artists we place ourselves after, it's really God man, because that's the sound we go for, because it's such a mix. Especially since I've joined on we've got a little bit of New Orleans, we've got a little bit of Country, a little bit of Funk, a little bit of Jazz.

Even though they are different churches and you have different sounds, it's still rotating around a bass, but you've got different sounds. These guys they're more heavy, a little bit more country. Then you go down to Louisiana or backwoods Virginia where we're from and you got a lot of Jazz with a little bit of Funk behind it. So it's really hard to say any particular genre or artist because we are such a mix of everything.

BRAHM: You said that no matter what the song is, you go to Church on it. Could you elaborate on what "Going to Church" means?

JR: GOing to Church, that's the beauty of Sacred Steel, there is no genre with Sacred Steel. One of the things the Allen Boys use a lot is F.A.D.E. Forget About Your Day. So as a feel of music, or a medicine. So in medicine a lot of times, you have a tylenol, what does tylenol actually take care of? A headache, a pain? It's whatever you need, and that's what Sacred Steel is for us. So when we say "Go To Church" we mean you end up in a praise trance. Regardless of what we started out with or whatever the song may be. We did one a couple weeks ago, Rocksteady, by Aretha Franklin, it's a funk song. Well by the time we got done with the funk song it was like a church drive and then its back. And what we mean is once you get lost in that trance whether its EJ on vocals and steel and you hear a little bit of that New Orleans come in there, or from Ransey where he plays a little bit of funk and also that soft R&B, somehow he

slides R&B into this hard funk song. That's what Sacred Steel is really built on, what you feel, because in our church services it goes from - so one of the things is songs in church can be passed around. In the House of God Church, we still do what some say is the old way of doing services. It's a congregation where you have two devotional leaders and their job is to when there is that dead moment to have that song, they have that song, or when it's time for prayer they lead you there.

But anyone in the service can stand and sing. So let's say the three of us, if it starts out with "Come on in This House Y'all" how EJ is feeling with "Come on in this House Y'all", how I'm feeling, and Ransey, it's going to be three different ways but its coming from the same spirit. So that's how you're getting into a trance because you are getting a piece of everyone and you take three people with the same song and it's going to reach somebody and it's going to reach them in different ways.

Sometimes we end up in situations where you're going out for a gig or they call and they say, we want to use y'all but we don't really have anything for y'all's genre. "Well, we're not a genre, but us on a night where you are just having people come in and you just want free reign music because that's where we come in."

Because it's hard for us to come up and tell you, even in Sacred Steel. If you took 5 different Sacred Steel artists we're all different and like EJ said it's where you come from. Same music, same bass, but you're going to get a different sound from New York, you'll get a different sound from Atlanta, North Carolina, Miami, New Orleans....we could play the same song and all play them differently. But you know the basis of the songs, a lot of times when we do covers its like I'm going to give you this part so you'll know what the song is, but then I'm going to give you us and we are a mesh of music so you're going to get what Ransey's feeling, what I'm feeling and this is where the laughter comes in, because EJ may be feeling something totally else but its working, you know, that's what those smiles are and from the smiles that's where the audience is able to tie-in.

That's why it's so hard because we don't have any records yet, but it's hard to give you the Allen Boys in a recording studio.

It's a conversation.

BRAHM: Do any of your family members play instruments or did you get handed down the instrument?

EJ: Yeah, laughter. For me it was, my grandfather played accordion and steel so it got passed down to me. All my brothers play, it's 18 of us, so all of them play their all professional gospel musicians and they play for some of the top gospel musicians in the country. My mom was a big jazz organist back in the day. For me it was just simply, you're gonna do it. Because your brothers do it, your sisters do it. It was always in my blood so it came natural.

For these guys too I'm sure. Like JR said, if you're growing up in the church you are kind of put in this situation where you are watching the musicians and going ok, when's my turn? So growing up in the church your biggest focus as a kid, and your fascination and your infatuation going to be what's going on in this corner. Because that's the cool thing to do. For us, we had a man named JB Alberman who was my uncle, he was like BB King of the church so all of us that played guitar were like, "Oh man we can't wait boy let him get sick one time!" Laughter

Those guys were our rockstars and for us growing up in the church we didn't know anything different. We went to church Monday night, Tuesday night, Wednesday night, Thursday nights - four a weeks. And so you become accustomed to it so it's like what can I do to put myself in there. So as a kid you look over in this corner and see these rockstars and you're like I want to be a rock star. These guys are like our Jimi Hendrix, our BB King, our Buddy Guy, our Miles Davis, all of that. We didn't know anything else so as far as the influences go and we've been handed down to it, it was really not an option.

You have those of us that play in the church that are like, I want to do it. But for some of us like Ransey said, it's a gift. All of us have gifts and when you are placed with that gift you know your place in the church.

BRAHM: EJ your lap steel, is that an heirloom?

EJ: No, I do have a 1952 Fender Stringmaster 6-string that belonged to my grandfather. This one was bought as a knockaround because all my steels got stolen, *laughs* I got'em back though, but this is my favorite one.

RM: It's sacred

EJ: Talk bout sacred man, the lord won't let'em take it away. *laughs* This one here is a couple of years old, it has some wear and tear on it though, lord knows it do. But this will be an heirloom for sure, it'll be passed down to somebody.

BRAHM: It's got 8-strings, how is it tuned?

EJ: It is tuned in E7, which is E D B G# E D B E, your chords are two finger chords.

BRAHM: Is it mainly for single-note runs or do you play chords?

EJ: Oh you can chord on it, yes sir, you can do a lot with that particular tuning. Mainly I use it for single notes, but like they say when you are in the church service you ain't got time for that. You gotta pick up when it's just 4 musicians you never know who's lagging behind you're gonna have to catch up so no matter what the tuning is you're going to have to catch up regardless.

BRAHM: Have y'all taught any people how to play music? Do y'all have any kids, have you taught them to play?

JR: I've got one right there, (points to his teenage son in the corner of the church) he plays drums, a little bit of bass, a little bit of guitar, a little bit of steel. But I'm the parent of I buy the instrument and I leave it in the living room. Somebody'll pick it up, I have 6 kids. Honestly that's how we were taught, in a way we're all self-taught, but with a teacher if that makes sense. Because a lot of the time your first few years with the church musicians is by ear, even though you are learning technique. For me, I went to learning notes and I got completely confused, but you can play a song I've never heard before and I can pick up on it *snaps fingers* and that's where mine is and that's kinda where I lead my children to, I want you to desire it first, you know what I mean.

Just like, since we are spiritual and we are in the church, for each one of us it's like your calling. So the same way the minister was called to preach, this is our ministry, and you're going to desire to know more and you're going to desire to do more, and you're gonna want to learn so you can give, and push out your gift, and enhance your gift.

There's a few guys in the church that like bass because I do have my own unique style a lot of the time. We grew up in this church, everybody was a guitarist, everybody played guitar, most people play steel, so when you pick up a bass, everybody is a drummer, its bassists few and far between. So our bass playing a lot of time, yes we do a lot of runs but you'll catch us emulating the songs also. So that's where the different bass playing is, so when someone actually does sit with me I have a tapping style where I'm tapping a lot of the notes. Because some of us, especially he and I (points at Ransey) we emulate the drum. So if we have a drummer that's weaker and unsure we can play out exactly what we want you to play, on bass, while he is playing steel. Because our job is to drive him, you know. I don't care how they started out, we're pushing that song, and then we'll come back. That's just the teaching that we've done through, another example of sacred steel, where it is different than what you normally hear. And yes the chords may be the same, but Jazz has this way, Rock has this way, Country-Western has this way, Sacred Steel? How did it feel? It didn't matter if the chord was a little off, how do you fix it? He's gonna bend the string and then it shapes through and it's like, how did you do that? "I don't know" it's that feeling because there is no right or wrong way, how does it feel? That's my teaching when we do have little seminars with the youth, learn your instrument but get to know your instrument. And that doesn't always mean, but it should don't get me wrong guys, it does mean know your notes and all that but understand that sometimes from the heart your fingers will move if you allow them to, there is no write or wrong way a lot of times it just getting that feel out to produce that medicine to others.

BRAHM: So often you hear about people who know theory but they lack the feeling and it is almost robotic.

JR: It hurts. I know you know, but just hear me out, just try it! And the other thing with the learning is you gotta have a foot. If you don't have a foot in sacred steel, now what I mean by a foot is you gotta have a heavy pounder where honestly if Ransey is doing his job your only going to hear the steel every once in a while because after a while it goes from bass, guitar,

steel, and after a while all you hear is WOOMP WOOMP WOOMP and that's when you know you're in the trance. Because it's off his foot. So in the House of God Church whether its Jewel Dominion, Keith Dominion, whatever dominion, in the House of God Church once that spirit comes in, all you hear is the bass drum. Because it's driving you and you'll hear your own heart beat. And that's your one accord, when your heart begins to take on the bass drum and that's how you know if you got you a real sacred steel drummer because if he don't move you...sometimes if your sweatin', we go to some shows and sometimes some of our audience members, it was hard for us in the beginning because we're used to the clapping, the yelling and all that so you go into a show and you've got a few people there and they are enjoying themselves but they're enjoying themselves like this (slightly rocking back and forth and tapping finger on his knee) and that bothered us at first and that would drive us harder, but then you look and you see them sweat beads dripping off them, and we're like, yeah we got'em. They're there! And they're only doing this (slightly rocking back and forth and tapping finger on his knee) but we understand now that that's how they express, and like we said, coming from the church we want you to fall out, but we're learning though over time, like I said we're at 25-30 years now, now I know if we can just get them to sweat just raise up, we know it's finally there.

BRAHM: So you play in the church, and you had your funeral circuit. What are some other types of places y'all have played?

JR: COLlege circuit was big. We did Chapel Hill, Asheboro, Asheville, did everywhere up there. Wake, Duke, we run around we were doing all the colleges we would do a lot of radio stuff we would go in with little pieces and they would try to hook us up the best they could and then we would talk a little bit and then you get to play. So we would do festivals, we were on the festival circuit real heavy, trying to get back into that because once you have families life takes over. Churches, but the other side of the churchers were you have the youth groups, because our style is so un-traditional, traditional to us, but un-traditional to others, and then you have the arts. That's the place we're in now, because we're not old I mean you think of Jazz and Blues, that's old music, so when you're first doing interviews and stuff *scoffs* Now you're understanding that you are one of those R.L Barns are the Muddy Waters, the originals, and you just didn't realize it. Now we're coming into this we call it the Arts Circuit. My kids and I call documentaries when we're on them, PBS'in. Now we're doing things where we are doing arts and history and going to museums and playing.

RM: A lot of black history programs.

JR: And it's crazy to us because it's new to the Black people! Outside of the House of God Church, because growing up you just imagine, everybody has church like this.

RM: It's normal.

JR: It's supposed to be, in our minds but as you get older you find out. We'd go to music stores before a show, and you look up on the wall and there's a dobro, so how do we attract people to the show? Grab the dobro, get some sticks in the corner, grab a guitar, grab a bass, and we

give you a show. And “What in the world, those black kids over there with this country instrument and that don’t sound like my brother-in-law!” You know? And then, “we’ll be down there at so and so tonight”

That’s how we’d draw people in and how at a younger age, how we picked up more of the shows because honestly we didn’t know we were having fun. We were hitting stages, having fun and getting a check. We didn’t understand at the time what we were putting out there.

BRAHM: You said “Dominion,” “it doesn’t matter if it is this dominion or that dominion it’s still sacred steel” so what does that mean?

JR: So in the House of God Church, Church built in 1903, established 1903 so through the years the steel guitar came in, in the early 30s. So when the church split, our Overseer or our Founder, Mother Tate. The church had split so therefore for financial reasons there became a Keith Dominion, a Lewis Dominion, a Jewel Dominion. So then over the years, each time the church splits it gets a different name so that’s where the dominions come in, but there is still that same heartline.

Anyway Willie Easton is the Sacred Steel father. It was his brother, if I recall, that brought it in, but he’s the one Willie Easton that created the Sacred Steel “voice” not just playing like a guitarist or whatever, he began to make it sing. To where it sounds like the guitar was singing out the melody or singing the words. So he is like the father of Sacred Steel in the church. Now as you go down the lines you have others for pedal steel or lap steel. For the House of God, is Henry Nelson. Henry Nelson was Willie Easton’s son-in-law, just younger. That’s who we grew up under. He’s the one who came in with the 6-string Fender and taught you that I don’t necessarily need a drummer but it’d be nice because he would play the rhythm, the drum, the words, everything by himself.

AJ Ghent he is the youngest, he is his grandson. Aubree Ghent was his father, and Aubree Ghent’s father was Henry Nelson. And AJ Ghent still does a style of his grandfather that is priceless. Because he can do everything while the guitar is still singing.

Derek Trucks, part of his style comes from Aubree Ghent, but it’s the House of God is its origin. People can tell you and it can be debatable except with people from the House of God. The Allman Brothers, so it’s amazing how people compare Allman Brothers, Derek Trucks, all the different genres but at some point in their life, they stepped into a House of God Church. Because to a lot of people they’re like “oh that’s slide music”, No that’s the House of God! It sounds just like our churches, every piece of it. And you start running they ages, they wasn’t in the 30s because it sounds just like that time. And it’s amazing because we’ll be like, He got that from...and start calling out steel players over the years, our legends.

RM: Every steel player has some kind of signature, they hit a certain riff or a note and you know that.

JR: Now let's say we are getting ready to play church. (Turns to EJ) Can you play the "Well, well, well..."

EJ plays a riff

JR: What you have to take into consideration there, that's from like the 60s and the 70s and we're still doing it. The only difference is, the only difference between then and now is that we've learned how to clean it. But it's the same origins, so it's hard for us, House of God kids, no matter what dominion you come from, it is hard for us to take (Allman Brothers/Derek Trucks) into consideration ... because we know where that came from because to this day, with Henry Nelson, Robert Randolph the Family Band, that's what we hear because we know that's what we heard. He's still doing a lot of what we grew up, and we're all family too (points to Ransey and EJ) we all grew up together, going to the same church, so everybody knows everybody and everybody knows exactly what that is, so it's amazing because you can't shake it and the other beautiful part is that we are a part of that.

So let's say like Henry Nelson, when we were little kids and he would come in, it's like (perks up, eyes open wide) "He's here!" him and that little 6-string Fender and he would put that bad boy to work.

BRAHM: It's like a family recipe you know it when somebody else tries to pass it off. So Dwayne Allman was going to a House of God church and stealing everybody's riffs?

(Everybody laughs)

JR: Yeah, and we love it, but it's just like "Oh My God! You know he did that, blah blah blah"

RM: Going back to us and the playing and getting into that zone that we kinda forget about everything going on around us. JR had mentioned Asheville when we was doing the college circuit. I know he remembers this, up there it's really cold, really cold. We went up there. They had us on a stage in the middle of the campus, no shelter no nothing. I remember I had on a hoodie and a jacket, playing. It was so cold, we had a female singer with us, it was so cold she couldn't sing. So we just told her to just go sit in the vehicle and get yourself together. So we decided we was just going to have fun with it and the rest of the show we just did straight church, no oh let's do this song, just straight church. By the time we got done, everybody was jumping around, we had done came out of all of our clothes, I had on a short sleeve shirt. I remember a couple of dudes in the crowd had no shirts on and they were still wanting us "more, more more!"

JR: Police came (laughs)

RM: They didn't even know that the whole entire time all we did was play church. Played church the whole time, from the time we told her to go sit down, from that point on he hit that signature "whoa, whoa, whoa" from the time we did that they were literally jumping around and we were

having fun on stage and before we knew it we had finished off the whole gig and we were sweating and never mind that we were still outside, the temperature had not changed. And that just lets you know the power of music itself. So when you take the power of music and you take the band that is on stage is vibing with that crowd you forget about your day. That's that F.A.D.E. I'm pretty sure they can't tell you anything that happened prior to that gig but they can tell you, "oh i remember when y'all did this or y'all did that." I'd say for a couple of weeks, we'd start hearing from a couple of folks that were following us around, "Man that UNC-Asheville gig, y'all just rocked out." and we would just look at each other and laugh because we're thinking at that point we're thinking "Oh well y'all enjoyed that we had no structure, no set list, we had no time frame of what was going on, all we knew was we had to play that last hour so that way we could.

JR: We played about 20 minutes on one jam, just one tune and we had the best time ever.

RM: They were so into it, I remember this, I do it every now and then when we are playing and we get really hype and we are laughing. There was a guy there, and I'm playing, we're going into it. And he makes eye contact with me and he says (starts pumping his fist) "rock out, keep going' keep going" when we are trying to finish. Those are the shows that we love, once we get to that point, in our mind we are like we achieved that goal of letting them get into that zone or zone out but we have fun on stage as well. And once you get into you forget, like oh we had 20 minutes or we had 30 minutes, nobody even cared that we had a 20 minute song, nobody cared, and that's the joy of playing, you know what I mean? And that's the power of the music and it still blows people's minds, 'y'all play this in church?' We do this, what? some of our services can, and this is no lie they can co-sign, our church services normally start at 7:30 and sometimes our service will not stop until twelve o'clock

JR; Yeah

EJ: *sighs* yeahhh

RM: And at that point, the people in charge is like sit down, try to sit down. People are still up (clapping) wanting to go. Y'all gotta go to work in the morning, did you forget about that? (laughs)

JR: Forgot about today AND tomorrow. (laughs)

RM: You see them the next day and it's like 'whoa, service was amazing last night, but I was so tired!' Well you forgot about everything going on around you, mission accomplished.

BRAHM: That's great. Well can you give us a little sample of the music so we can wrap this up?

JR: We'll give you a little sample of church, this is "Praise the Lord Everybody"

Music starts 47:55
53:22

BRAHM: Y'all don't need a pastor. Let's just say for an hour of service, how much of it is music?

JR: Let's see, you've got the opening song.

BRAHM: 59 minutes? (laughs)

RM: Sometimes it is.

EJ: The whole first hour.

JR: Sometimes you have a praise service in the beginning of the service so its the opening song, depending on how things go, the opening song can be just the opening song. Or it can open a whole door of, we have had plenty of services over all our years of being in here, so we've known the church 31 years, so we'll go with the 31 years where a majority of it where the speaker doesn't speak, just gets up and says his words. Some Sundays its just praise and they'll get up at the end and say, this is what we needed today.

BRAHM: So who makes that call?

JR: The Pastor. Cause a lot of times if it's going and the people are going, somedays you just need a day of purge, just purging and praising all and give God it all.

BRAHM: So if we want to come to a service, what time do we need to get here?

JR: Sundays at 10 o'clock. It's supposed to be an hour and a half, sometimes 2 hours. So we're here Sunday til you want to leave because sometimes we want to leave and sometimes we don't. And sometimes we get out of there at 2 and it's like, my hands hurt (laughs).