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# THE BIRMINGHAM SUNLIGHTS PERFORM AFRICAN-AMERICAN GOSPEL MUSIC



Photo by Steve Graubeger

**Wednesday  
December 7, 2005**

**12 NOON - 1 PM**

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**Library of Congress**

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**Washington, DC**

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# THE BIRMINGHAM SUNLIGHTS

What is known as the "Birmingham Sound" was nurtured by the historical migration of African-Americans from the farm to the industrial mill and mine settlements of Jefferson County, Alabama in the early twentieth century. Before World War II, quartets were already extremely popular in Birmingham, and there were regular friendly competitions called "Battle of Song" between quartets, to the great enjoyment of the audiences. The Birmingham Sunlights are another link in this chain of tradition.

The Birmingham Sunlights were formed in 1978 with music director James Alex Taylor, his brothers Steve and Barry, and two others. In 1979, Ricky Speights and Wayne Williams joined the quartet; Taylor's brother Everette came into the group in 1985. Bill Graves was invited to join the long established group in 1996. All of the singers except Bill Graves were brought up in the a cappella singing tradition of the Church of Christ brotherhood in Birmingham (Graves originally hails from Bay Minette, Alabama).

Much of the Taylors', Speights's and Williams's early singing experiences were with choirs in the Church of Christ that traditionally use no instrumental accompaniment. Singing as youngsters within the social structure of the church greatly reinforced their love of a cappella gospel music, and that love is now exhibited in their energetic and uplifting performances. It may seem odd that there are seven members of the "quartet," but this arrangement is not that unusual for many African-American gospel quartets in the south.

The Taylor brothers grew up in a musical family. Their father, Everette Sr., sang in quartets such as the Four Blue Eagles, and was personally acquainted with many of the local Birmingham quartet personages such as Aguster Maul of the Delta Aires, and Joe Watson and John Lawrence of the Four Eagles.

After first becoming a professionally polished group in their own right, the Sunlights eventually developed a learning relationship with senior Birmingham quartet groups the Sterling Jubilees and the Shelby County Big Four. James explains that while the Sunlights were already a professionally active group they were missing that certain something, their "niche" that creates excitement during a performance. This is something they gained from the tutelage of those senior Birmingham quartet groups.

The Sunlights' repertoire is a mixture of standard quartet gospel songs and traditional spirituals. However, they do not limit themselves specifically to older traditional quartet repertoire; they also bring fresh, original ideas to their own inimitable style of a cappella quartet singing.

For over twenty-seven years the Birmingham Sunlights have carried on their mission of a cappella gospel music throughout the United States and the world. They have appeared at the National Folk Festival and numerous other venues across the nation. They performed in France as

ambassadors of Alabama traditional culture and have toured five countries in Africa and performed extensively in the Caribbean and Australia under the auspices of the United States Department of Information and the United States State Department. They have dedicated special performances to the Queen of England and the Prince of Monaco. During the famous Alabama blizzard of 1993, the group nearly missed their national performance on a live broadcast of Prairie Home Companion with Garrison Keillor, due to the exceptionally heavy snows in Birmingham.

## Individual bios:

Barry "Papa Pump" Taylor (58), business manager, sings bass and lead. He is the eldest Taylor son. He is a decorated Vietnam veteran. He is a master plumber/pipefitter and holds a BA and MA in education.

Quartet director James Taylor (54) (tenor, baritone, and lead), moved to Memphis for the music scene, and found success as a recording artist in the 1970s. He returned to Birmingham in 1978 to form the Birmingham Sunlights. He works as a master plumber/pipefitter.

Everette Taylor Jr. (52), the third oldest son, sings tenor. He began singing at the age of seven. He is a veteran and a master plumber/pipefitter.

Steve Taylor (48), the fourth Taylor brother, sings baritone. He is also a master plumber/pipefitter with an MA in education.

Wayne Williams (50) sings tenor, baritone and lead. He has been with the Sunlights since 1979. He has a BA and an MA from Alabama A&M University. He is an instructor of carpentry and cabinet making.

Reginald "Ricky" Speight (49) sings baritone and lead. He has been singing with the Sunlights quartet since 1979. Speights works as a real estate agent. He is both a veteran and a reservist.

Willie G. (Bill) Graves (55) is from Bay Minette, Alabama. He has a music degree from Alabama State University. He has been active in the church and in the community as a musician and choir director for over 25 years. He teaches adult education.

Steve Grauberger  
Alabama Center for Traditional Culture

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site [www.loc.gov/folklife](http://www.loc.gov/folklife)

