



Oakwood College (now University) Aeolians, after their concert at the World's Fair, directed by Alma Blackmon, 1982 - Knoxville, Tennessee.

Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

# Oakwood University Aeolians

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The Aeolians is an Oakwood University choral ensemble that, since its founding in 1946, has thrilled the hearts of hundreds of thousands and been a primary instrument in the university's public relations activities!<sup>1</sup> The ensemble has regularly ministered at Oakwood and other local church services, assisted in fund-raising, attracted students to Oakwood, and repeatedly garnered national and international acclaim for its excellence in music performance. In all, the Aeolians has served the university, the church, and God.

The Aeolians was created in an environment in which music had always played a vital part. From its inception in 1896 the Oakwood School included music in its academic curriculum, worship, school programs, community outreach, entertainment, and student recruitment. Male, female, and mixed ensembles of various sizes were organized by the administration, individual staff members, and students. Some groups lasted several years, while others bloomed, then ceased to function when the participants graduated or departed. When a Department of Music was formally added to the academic program in 1919, an official College Choir was organized. It was comprised of both students and staff and directed by a music faculty member or another faculty/staff member with appropriate musical ability. The choir performed not only on campus but in

neighboring churches and schools. At least once each year it also traveled farther afield as Oakwood's ambassadors for student recruitment.<sup>2</sup> In 1944, when Eva B. Dykes with her prestigious Radcliffe PhD in English Philology arrived on the campus to chair the Department of English, she was asked by the chair of the Music Department to direct the College Choir, because she was also an accomplished musician.<sup>3</sup> Dykes quickly determined that there should be another permanent group: a nucleus *crème de la crème* of musical talent—one that could more easily travel on a small budget.<sup>4</sup> Membership was contingent not only on musical ability but also on a certain minimum GPA, a campus job, and good citizenship. Students earned two credit hours each semester. Dykes set the limit at 16—four in each section to allow for quartets and octets—and with her classical mind-set named it the Aeolians.<sup>5</sup>

The Aeolians' diverse repertoire always included classical anthems, other sacred music, and Negro spirituals. Dykes held sectional rehearsals of Aeolians males and females twice each week, at 5:30 in the morning, while College Choir rehearsals continued in the evenings without a hitch. One Aeolian remembers those early mornings when Aeolian girls rolled up pajama pants legs under their outerwear and demurely attended rehearsals. Dykes permitted no socializing or chitchat during rehearsals. The group practiced faithfully and hurried back to the dormitory to prepare for mandatory worship and breakfast beginning at 7:00.<sup>6</sup> Thus was established for both director and students the commitment, self-sacrifice, discipline, and hard work that would be required to achieve the excellence that Dykes envisioned.

In 1946 the College Choir with its Aeolians core gave Oakwood's first annual performance of Handel's *Messiah*, singing the Christmas and other selections from the great oratorio.<sup>7</sup> The concert drew an appreciative, racially mixed audience from the city of Huntsville, although the city was still governed by Jim Crow laws. True to Dykes's vision, the Aeolians served the College well. Garland Millett, an Oakwood student in the 1940s and Oakwood president from 1954 to 1963, reflects on the contributions of the Aeolians to Oakwood: "Dr. Eva B. Dykes, the founder and first director of the Aeolians, deserves our undying gratitude for starting what for years has been a mighty river of joy and praise. . . . Overall, the Oakwood Aeolians not only delighted and lifted audiences across the land, but also immensely enhanced Oakwood's name and fame throughout the country."<sup>8</sup>

In 1956 one of the first Aeolians soloists, who was then on the music faculty, was appointed director. Joni Mae Pierre-Louis (1927–2009) increased the number of Aeolians to forty and greatly expanded their travel itinerary.<sup>9</sup> The group did tours on the West Coast and as far north as Massachusetts.<sup>10</sup> Further race relations bridge-building occurred in 1956 when they performed to full capacity audiences at Southern Missionary College (now Southern Adventist University).<sup>11</sup> Pierre-Louis' Aeolians also sang at the 1965 World's Fair in New York and was featured on NBC-TV. One Huntsville TV station recorded tapes of performances for rebroadcast during the Christmas season.<sup>12</sup>

From 1972 to 1985 the Aeolians was directed by Alma Montgomery Blackmon (1921–2009). An experienced, renowned music teacher, choral conductor, accompanist, and singer, Blackmon immediately recognized the

awesome responsibility and privilege of molding the promising talents that she would audition for her choir. She was also a nurturer: the doors of her home and refrigerator were always open to her “beloved Aeolians”; each year she invited one or two to reside at her home and thereby lighten their financial burden, and they all automatically took to calling her “Ma.” The amazing renaissance that occurred soon became standard fare as Blackmon cultivated what came to be called the “Aeolian sound.” That sound is described by a music professor formerly an Aeolian under Blackmon’s directorship: “The combination of excellent music training, youthful black voices belonging to Christian Seventh-day Adventists, and the blessing of the Spirit of God urged forth a sound that was unique, unaffected, vibrant, powerful, rich, and spirit-filled.”<sup>13</sup> More than 230 concerts were presented in 32 states and several foreign countries.<sup>14</sup> Goals of student recruitment, fund-raising, and public relations were met and passed. According to Calvin Rock, Oakwood’s president during the Blackmon era, “Oakwood’s growth from approximately 600 at the beginning of the seventies to over 1400 by the middle eighties must be attributed in a large degree to the public favor that the Aeolians were so instrumental in establishing.”<sup>15</sup> As Rock put it: “Some schools have a basketball team; others send out a football team; but Oakwood has the Aeolians.”<sup>16</sup> Blackmon’s Aeolians’ first album, “*Oh Freedom!*” sold more than 10,000 copies on its release in 1974.<sup>17</sup> Since the Blackmon era there has been an Aeolians Alumni chapter that continues to function with scholarship fund-raising activities and occasional concerts.

On the campus, in Huntsville, and further afield, the Aeolians under Blackmon elicited enthusiastic reviews and wild applause in public gatherings secular and religious. The group performed in churches, schools, parks, and great concert halls. It continued to breach racial barriers in Huntsville, performing regularly with the University of Alabama in Huntsville wind ensemble and the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra. The choir performed at a Huntsville event in which the speaker was United States president Richard Nixon; it functioned as divine service choir for General Conference; it sang in the Sierra Leone Embassy in Washington, D.C.<sup>18</sup> It made several telecasts for Breath of Life TV programs. It performed annually at the Festival of Negro Spirituals sponsored by the Alabama Consortium of Higher Education (ACHE). The Aeolians presented concerts in the Bahamas, Bermuda, Virgin Islands, and Canada. Aeolians successfully auditioned for membership in the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation and under its aegis enjoyed two European tours. The first (in 1981) was to Romania, where students had opportunity to observe a Soviet Communist culture and discreetly share their faith only through the Negro spirituals that were a part of their repertoire.<sup>19</sup> The other tour (in 1983) was of England, Scotland, and Wales, where the group performed in several historic cities, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) taped an Aeolians concert.<sup>20</sup>

In 1988 Ricky Little, a former Aeolian, responded to a call to create another revival of the Aeolians, after a slump following Blackmon’s retirement. He was eager to “reestablish certain traditions which I felt were hallmarks of the Aeolians’ vibrant legacy as well as to give new direction.”<sup>21</sup> About his mentor Alma Blackmon he said, “Her intimacy with music was inspiring; her skill and command of the language of music was formidable; her talents and professional experience as a singer, pianist, coach, teacher, and conductor were awesome; and her

knowledge was vast. On top of all this, she was a dynamic personality, a brilliant intellectual, and an extremely successful fund-raiser. Under her leadership the *Aeolians* were elevated to a very high standard that I knew must be continued."<sup>22</sup> In his six years with the *Aeolians* Little realized his goals. In 1991, after they made a guest appearance at a concert of the Huntsville Community Chorus in the city's Concert Hall, a music critic wrote: "[The *Aeolians*] were superb, singing fine arrangements of six spirituals. I hardly knew what to admire most: their razor-sharp alertness, their rhythmic and dynamic subtlety, their contagious pleasure in music-making, or their seamless strength from section to section. They were one disciplined instrument, fully alive to their music, their conductor, and to each other."<sup>23</sup> Roy Malcolm provides a succinct summary of Little's contributions: "As conductor of the *Aeolians* he built a choral program which resulted in 62 tour engagements; multiple national television appearances including *Good Morning America* and the *Breath of Life* telecast; and gave performances before the prime minister and governor of Bermuda, and United States president Bill Clinton."<sup>24</sup> The visit to Bermuda led to the formation of the Bermuda chapter of *Oakwood Alumni*.<sup>25</sup>

Following Ricky Little was another outstanding former *Aeolian* who was excited about maintaining and enhancing the *Aeolian* sound—Lloyd Mallory. Under Mallory's directorship *Aeolian* activities seemed to multiply. His first year was *Oakwood's* centennial year, and there was much singing for church and guest speakers—including Secretary of State Colin Powell and former astronaut Mae Jemison.<sup>26</sup> In the grand Centennial closing ceremony, the *Aeolians* with the Huntsville Symphony Orchestra presented the cantata *Will Lift Up Mine Eyes*.<sup>27</sup> They drew thunderous applause. Tour followed tour, as university president and enrollment management personnel witnessed the returns of *Aeolians'* performances—in students, funds, and favor. One music critic of the Huntsville *Times* claimed: "The *Aeolians* could sing passages from the phone book and still make you feel the presence of the Divine."<sup>28</sup>

While Lloyd Mallory was director, the *Aeolians* rendered two mini concerts in the White House and presented several concerts in Jamaica. Other memorable trips found the *Aeolians* singing in America's most famous concert halls, before celebrities and high government officials, and competing with the nation's best choirs.<sup>29</sup> In response to the university's introduction of a new fund-raiser called 20/24, the *Aeolians* were on the road for nine successive weekends in the summer of 1998 singing as many as six times during the Sabbath hours, in churches and at camp meetings as far away as Nebraska and New York. Financial returns were good, new students applied to *Oakwood*, and thousands of hearts were blessed.<sup>30</sup> During the Mallory era the term "surround sound" became popular for the powerful, resonant music emanating from the *Aeolians*.

In the 1990s the university appointed Roy Malcolm (1934–2018) as *Aeolians* manager, who would take a leading role in arranging concerts and tours. Malcolm was extremely efficient. His personal interaction with the *Aeolians* inspired the production of *The Aeolians: Directors Recall Precious Memories* (College Press, 1999), which has served as the definitive handbook for the *Aeolians'* first 50 years.

In the twenty-first century the Aeolians has continued from strength to strength, as visionary directors, blessed with an unceasing stream of promising students, commit themselves to making the Aeolians the best that it could be, and motivating singers and instrumentalists to “reach beyond” as they develop their God-given musical gifts and render service to the world. Aeolians’ music ministry in the campus church and at school functions continues unabated, and SDA churches are their most frequented venue in every city in which they sing; but horizons have continued to expand.

On March 30, 2003, the Aeolians, under Julie Moore Foster, performed at the Alabama Music Hall of Fame in Tuscumbia, Alabama, where it was being honored with the unveiling of its own bronze star in the Exhibit Hall’s Walk of Fame.<sup>31</sup> The Aeolians was the first college/university choir to be inducted into the 13-year-old institution.<sup>32</sup> The performance that clinched the honor had been done years earlier when under Ricky Little the Aeolians had been invited to participate in a Black History Month celebration at the museum.<sup>33</sup> In 2004, with director Foster, the Aeolians made a historic trip to Poland at the invitation of the artistic director of the festival of Wratislavia Cantans. In the host city of Wroclaw, Aeolians presented 13 concerts in imposing cathedrals and ornate castles, to enthusiastic applause and compliments.<sup>34</sup>

Since 2008 the Aeolians has been directed by Jason Max Ferdinand, a director of amazing talent who has taken the choir to new heights. Stellar performance has followed stellar performance, often in venues where not many years ago African Americans were not allowed entry or were permitted limited Jim Crow entry.<sup>35</sup> In December 2011 Mayor Tommy Battles presented the Aeolians with the key to the city of Huntsville, and December 3, 2011, was officially declared Aeolians Day; the same procedure was repeated in December 2012, with December 5, 2012, named in their honor.<sup>36</sup> The ensemble has long been recognized as “an authoritative exponent of Negro spirituals and work songs which express the yearnings of their forefathers to be free.”<sup>37</sup> Following its earlier triumphs, for two consecutive years, 2010 and 2011, the Aeolians was awarded first place in the iSing HBCU Challenge, hosted by Reid Temple AME Church in Lanham, Maryland.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the group has been outstanding in its performance of other kinds of sacred music on national and international stages.

In January 2012, as part of the Russia-U.S. Bilateral Presidential Commission on development of cooperation between Dmitry Medvedev and Barack Obama, the Aeolians was invited to participate in the Second International Moscow Christmas Festival of Sacred Music—the only U.S. choir and the first Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) choir to perform in the festival.<sup>39</sup> In July 2012 Aeolians competed in the Seventh World Choir Games, held in Cincinnati, Ohio, the only choir from Alabama and the only SDA choir to do so. In the three categories in which it entered—Music of the Religions, Musica Contemporanea, and The Spirituals—it was awarded a gold medal.<sup>40</sup>

In 2017, after presenting several concerts in England and Scotland, the Aeolians traveled to Llangollen, Wales, to participate in the Choir of the World competition at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, recognized as “one of the most respected accolades in the choral calendar,” with the winners receiving the prestigious Luciano

Pavarotti trophy. Rounds of keen but friendly competition ended with the Aeolians being awarded the 2017 Choir of the World Luciano Pavarotti trophy while director Jason Ferdinand received the first-time-awarded Gwobr Jane Davies Outstanding Conductor Award.<sup>41</sup> There was no resting on their laurels for Ferdinand or the Aeolians. In his article “A 60-Year First—the Aeolians of Oakwood University,” *Oakwood Magazine* guest writer Riter D. St. Luc gives a brief exposé on the Aeolians’ historic selection for performing at the 2019 national convention of the American Choral Directors Association (ACDA). The process of selection involved submitting three songs and being one of 27 choral groups selected by blind listening from two hundred applicants. In the ACDA’s sixty-year history, the Aeolians was the first HBCU choir to be selected, and its selection showed that the choir had defied stereotypes among the world’s most respected musicians and musicologists that black groups are not physiologically capable of superior performance of the works of Mozart, Beethoven, and other European classical composers.<sup>42</sup> At their actual performance in February 2019, each group of three songs drew tears and thunderous ovation, and their director—already known and knowledgeable—had the pleasure of seeing the Aeolians highly commended by “choral legends” whom he had previously known only from reading about them and listening to their recordings.<sup>43</sup> In the wake of the 2019 ACDA convention,<sup>43</sup> hundreds of laudatory messages expressed thanks for changed lives. Ferdinand reminds the Oakwood constituency: “We at Oakwood must not take for granted the treasure that we have. We have the ability to heal and the ability to bring hope.”<sup>44</sup> By God’s grace, Oakwood’s Aeolians continues to serve.

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## NOTES

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3. Lela Gooding, "The Achievement of Eva Beatrice Dykes" (Oakwood College, 1980), 8, 14, 17, 29, Oakwood University Archives. See also Malcolm, 3.
4. Malcolm, 5.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Jessie Godley Bradley, interview by author, Huntsville, Alabama, February 11, 2019.
7. Malcolm, 5, 6.
8. *Ibid.*, iv.
9. *Ibid.*, 15.
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14. *Ibid.*, 64.
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21. Ibid., 107.
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30. Ibid., 146–148.
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44. Ibid., 44.

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