Me and my colleague, Stephanie Little, arrived at Church of the Living God at approximately 7:45 PM. I had talked to Quay earlier this week to line up this interview. The interview will take place after choir practice. When we arrived, there were roughly 10 vehicles out in the parking lot. We entered the church to see, on the left row of pews, 7 people singing in practice. After they finish a song, the lady leading the choir tells us to come in and take a seat. The music is amazing as it was last time I went there, even though this was just practice. The basic structure of the practice and the music is as follows: the woman leading the choir sings most of the verses while the choir acts mostly as a back up chorus. They sing basic refrains and lines in harmony. The leader is left free to improvise and embellish the song how she chooses. The choir was arranged with 2 men in the back singing bass, then 2 ladies in front of them, and finally 3 ladies in front of them. There were 7 choir members total, along with the leader. The leader was singing facing them with a microphone and has an amazing voice and doesn’t miss a note. She can sing as powerfully as anyone I have ever heard. If I am not mistaken, some of the songs they practiced were “I Come to Receive My Blessing” which was an up tempo song and “I Really Love You” which was a slow song where they sat down (she called it a “sit down song”). She concluded with some announcements, one of which being that they were going to Indianapolis.

After practice, some of the musicians were sitting around talking. These were Quay Wortham (drums), Jeremy Flemons (guitar), Joe Wortham (sings bass), and another guy who sang bass with Joe in the choir (didn’t get his name). Also, there was a younger woman standing there with us as well. They went on to talk shop about the kind of music they played and much of its history, concerning Bishop Lorenzo Harris, who they said started this type of music. Much like any other modern music scholar, they were talking about Youtube.com videos of these musicians. Also, they mentioned burning me some cd’s on their laptops. I found that they were not playing strictly out of some oral tradition through church members, but rather very much with the modernity of the times. They were talking about the Campbell Brothers, the Lee Brothers and, even, Robert Randolph. Jeremy said that he listened to these bands just for entertainment. Joe went on to say that he had some problems with most of these groups. I would like to ask him more about this some other time. Jeremy was also talking about going to the music store in Tupelo and the people he had met there. They asked me if I was a musician, which I replied I was and I told them my interests. They then asked me if I would like to play the pedal steel,
so I opted to because I thought it would be a fun experience. He showed me how it was tuned. They use 8 strings and it is tuned to an open E tuning, like that of a standard guitar. Also, the extra lower 2 strings are tuned exactly the same as the lower 2 strings of the basic 6 (they repeat). The tuning is as follows: E,B,E,B,E,G#,B,E (from low in pitch to high in pitch)

After I muddled through for a minute or two, we all laughed noting how hard it is to play the pedal steel. Jeremy went on to show how some players use different tunings and how the country tunings differ from those that they use (i.e. E9th tuning). I thanked them for the lesson, then they left.

Now Stephanie and I began to get set up for the interview with Quay. I am the interviewer and Stephanie is the recorder. He is relatively short (roughly 5’9”), thin and one of the friendliest people I have ever met. When he speaks to you he has a constant grin and look of true kindness in his eyes. He is clad in his work clothes: a gray shirt and pants with an Oxford Housing Authority patch on his shirt. We begin the interview and I ask him questions concerning general matters: where he was born, his childhood, etc. I was amazed to learn that he was self-taught. He said he asked his mother for drum lessons when he was a child, and she told his basically that if God intended for it to happen, then it would. He said he always wanted to play drums and had no interest in playing any other instruments because he wanted to be a master drummer, as opposed to a jack of all trades/master of none. He said that most of his learning had consisted of watching other drummers. He recalled going to Tupelo and listening Bishop Lorenzo Harris and his band (he apparently started this type of music). He said growing up that he listened to a lot of religious music and country music. I asked him who is favorite country artist was and he told me Kenny Rogers. He also said he liked and remembered the song “Baby’s Got Her Blue Jeans On,” which I thought was an interesting song for a religious drummer to like, although the song does have a prominent cowbell part.

One thing I was interested in was the use of drums in the church service. He said they had always been there. He recalled being young and Associate Pastor Boles’ mother playing a sawn-off desk with a broom handle in the church service. I was also interested to find out that there are women who play in the bands as well. He said that he had seen women playing drums and lead guitar and keyboards. However, he did say that he had not seen women playing the pedal steel, which I found interesting. I don’t know if this is a predominantly “male-oriented instrument” or what. I went on to ask him what he thought was integral about playing in the service to which he had some very insightful answers. I was glad to learn his take on how the spirit of the Lord came over the congregation, thus making it a completely holy experience. I also asked Mr. Wortham about the state of this music today, which he thought was very strong indeed. He seemed to have no problem with bands playing traditionally religious music even in non-religious settings.

One of the main things about Mr. Wortham is that you can really tell how strong his faith is. When he spoke of religious matters, he would get very serious and his face would be concentrated. However, after he was done with an explanation, his face would light with joy. He seemed very happy to teach us about his faith and the importance he sees in living his daily life through God. He explained to me that a person will become a product of what they surround themselves with. This was his reason for listening to gospel music regularly. He especially likes the WAFR station out of Tupelo. He likes it
because it keeps the Christian community updated with legislation in Washington D.C. as well as local matters that affect their lives. He likes the music they play as well. He says that radio stations should be informative as well as entertainment. He seems to be very active in these matters. The church holds services on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays, all of which he plays drums in. He practices on Tuesday and then on other days. This means he spends a great deal of time at the church and it truly is a fixture in the community. In regards to practice, he said that his band at church never practices, they just play during the services. At the close of the interview, we thanked Mr. Wortham several times and departed. We left around 9:45 PM.