

A Sacrifice of Praise

Bill and Gloria Gaither were recently named Christian Songwriters of the Century. Their legacy is marked by down-home charm, family values and an adoring audience that keeps on growing.

Guy Penrod and Marshall Hall look like they just stepped out of a Western movie. Joined by the youngest in their gang, Wes Hampton from Alabama, the three musicians meet almost every Friday to catch a plane.

When their flight touches down they will hook-up with the prime reason for their travel and success: Bill Gaither. He is the quartet's fourth-and key-member, their mentor, and the Gaither Vocal Band's founder and sustaining creative force.

The quartet teams with other singers, as well as comedians and speakers to perform for sellout crowds of perhaps the most loyal audiences in the music business. Concerts are held on Friday and Saturday nights, and the group returns home for church on Sunday. It's a weekend scenario they repeat nearly every weekend of the year.

Hall speaks for all of them as his blue eyes twinkle. "Nobody's got a gig like this," he says.

'You Feel Like Family'

He's right. The Gaither Vocal Band on tour outsells Elton John. And it has been a benchmark for countless other vocal groups for more than 20 successful years. On tour, Gaither Vocal Band also outsells rock stars Rod Stewart and Fleetwood Mac. But Bill Gaither is quick to downplay his success, and he reminded Charisma that Elton John does far fewer concerts than his gospel band.

The Gaither Vocal Band perform 60 concerts a year for which

fans buy more than 1.1 million tickets. (Concertgoers pay \$18 to \$50 for a seat, a modest fee compared with the \$1,400 some fans paid for the most expensive seats to a Rod Stewart show scheduled in London in December.)

The Gaither Vocal Band is the hottest commodity in Christian music today thanks to Bill, 69, and his wife, Gloria, 63. Their music, an upbeat blend of Southern and traditional gospel mixed with contemporary praise and worship, has a style all its own that can't be easily categorized.

One sign of their success is in the awards: In 2000, the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) honored Bill and Gloria as Christian Songwriters of the Century.

They've penned numerous time-tested classics, including "Because He Lives," "He Touched Me," "There's Something About That Name" and "Let's Just Praise the Lord." After four decades of writing and performing more than 600 songs and hymns together, the couple's popularity is increasing, not diminishing.

Once or twice a year many of Bill and Gloria's fans join them on a cruise ship for seven days of concerts.

They sail the Caribbean in the winter and to Alaska in the summer, and although the ship holds 1,848 people, the cruise sells out each season.

Every week more than 12 TV networks carry their programming. Since the first of their series of more than 100 Homecoming videos debuted in 1991, Christian video sales have more than doubled.

The increase no doubt has been helped by the more than 14 million Homecoming units sold. When Bill appeared on the QVC shopping network, the videos sold at the rate of 5,000 a minute.

Yet the Gaithers' adoring supporters do more than buy products. They are supporting a ministry of faith, love, family values-and laughter.

"They're a wonderful group to work with," says Linda Addaman, who welcomes Gaither fans to the Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis every November for the annual Praise Gathering. It has been held in Bill and Gloria's native state for the last 30 years.

Music groups, soloists, comedians and speakers all perform. The main events are held on the Gaithers' one-of-a-kind stage with an "in the round" setup. It's similar to their Family Fest-a three-day, family-focused event they hold over Memorial Day weekend each year in Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

Guitarist Keith Williams, whose friendly onstage banter with Bill has made for smooth performance transitions for the last 13 years, says the Gaithers' honesty keeps people coming back for more.

"They have managed to relate to people ... [but] not on some Bible-thumpin' level," he says. "They don't alienate. Their ministry is arms spread out."

Sue Buchanan, a humorous author and longtime close friend of Gloria's, recalls the way a member of a motorcycle gang reacted upon spotting the couple in a restaurant late one night.

"We're all sitting around talking, and this gal with real dark hair, black leather, chains, gothic-looking, kept staring at Bill and Gloria. Pretty soon she came over and fell into Gloria's arms crying, 'My momma and daddy always listen to you.'"

Says Buchanan: "They're just good, solid people God uses, and the effect is of volcanic proportions."

Bank of America Vice President Kent Weeks takes clients to Gaither concerts because, he says, "They pull you in and you feel like family."

Part of a Bigger Picture

A Gaither event is not all about the Gaithers, however. It isn't meant to be. One of Bill's specialties is launching the careers of other artists. He has introduced his audiences to Amy Grant, Sandi Patty, Michael W. Smith, Mark Lowry, Larnelle Harris, Carman and many other Christian artists.

Michael English was a member of the Gaither Vocal Band for nine years before embarking on a popular solo career that ended with his withdrawal from Christian music in 1994 when he made a public confession of personal failure. He has re-emerged as a musician and occasionally tours with the Gaithers, telling of God's redeeming grace found at low points.

Bill also enjoys welcoming a variety of Christian speakers to his platform. "I think every theological part of the body of Christ is important," he notes.

Lead singer Penrod observes: "It's not about being pigeon-holed with one kind of a philosophy you agree with 100 percent. Bill can have a Tony Campolo and then put a Jim Cymbala up there."

It's obvious that the Gaithers consider laughter to be good medicine onstage and off. There is much poking fun at themselves publicly and privately.

"We ought to laugh more," Gloria says. "Regular life is funny and stupid and sacred like it is."

To help prompt onstage laughter are humorists such as yarn-telling Carl Hurley and Taylor Mason-a puppeteer, piano player and comedian all rolled into one act. Guests who take

themselves too seriously don't fit in the program.

"Over the years, the only ones I can remember who I don't think made a major impact ... were those that brought in their bodyguards, wanted to make sure they got this many minutes on the program," Gloria told Charisma. "They had their managers and their agents. We'd just say: 'Why don't you stay home next time?'"

They're just trying to keep life in perspective, Gloria points out.

"One of the things I think Jesus wanted people to know is, it's not your story. The story has been going on before you got here and will go on after you leave," she explains.

That "being part of a bigger picture" aspect is a key theme of the Gaithers' music. As former Vocal Band tenor David Phelps, who last summer moved on to a solo career, points out: "[The music] is very positive. There's hope for tomorrow. No matter what you're going through, you can get through it. There's a bigger thing going on, bigger than just what's happening to you right now."

Longtime Gaither friend and business associate Dwayne Buchanan notes that the music conveys a sense of heritage. "People still want to hear those songs. It's a part of their life."

And amid that musical legacy, Gaither Vocal Band has been a reliable constant for more than two decades. Except for Bill, the members have changed over the years.

Newest Gaither Vocal Band member Wes Hampton, 27, joined the group in 2005. Hall, in his early 30s, is a graduate from Bill's college alma mater, Anderson University in Anderson, Indiana, and has been with the Vocal Band more than a year. Penrod was a session singer before joining 11 years ago.

Bill and Gloria write most of the Vocal Band's music, and

Gloria is the primary lyricist.

"I think a great message set to simple music is a piece of portable theology," she says. "Hardly any of us remember the sermons we have heard. But songs, time and time again, have gone with people to the bathtub, the coal mines, wherever they went, and made a difference."

Songwriting, however, wasn't Bill's original goal in the early years. As Gloria points out: "I look back and think God's will for our lives has been the interruptions."

Laying Down a Dream

Bill Gaither was 19 when he came to the harsh conclusion that he didn't have what it took to be a gospel music singer. Fresh out of Stamps-Baxter School of Music in Nashville, Tennessee, he had a dream to be part of a quartet.

But after pouring his heart into promoting his own foursome, the group flopped. That marked a turning point in his spiritual life. "For the first time, I truly placed my life in God's hands," he says.

He enrolled in college and moved back to his parents' home in Alexandria, Indiana, a decision that enabled him to sing for fun on the weekends. In 1956, with Bill on the piano as emcee, he and his sister Mary Ann formed the Gaither Trio with their brother, Danny.

The group soon disbanded. Bill's first attempt to regroup was triggered after he talked to a friend who had visited the Holy Land. Bill compared his friend's trip with a spiritual journey and within a few hours composed "I've Been to Calvary."

Without his own group to sing the song, he gave it to friends-the Golden Keys Quartet-and the positive response they got from listeners encouraged him to write two more. Thrilled at first to get his songs published, Bill turned down a second

contract for the next ones he wrote, deciding instead to start his own publishing business, The Gaither Music Company.

"I felt strongly that something good was about to happen, that my songwriting career was about to take off," he explains. "I wanted to be sitting in the pilot's seat rather than the passenger's."

The first song The Gaither Music Company published was "Have You Had a Gethsemane?" It captured what already was becoming a life lesson for Bill: "Out of surrender comes victory; out of death comes new life."

At that time, in 1959, Bill's primary job was teaching English at Alexandria High School. That's where he met and fell in love with Gloria Sickal, who was a college student but working as a substitute French teacher. The couple married in 1962.

Right away Gloria became Bill's songwriting collaborator. They wrote from their daily experiences, in response to sermons or Scriptures that inspired them, and from the lives of the people they knew.

The song they probably are best known for, "He Touched Me," was inspired from a conversation with a revival preacher in 1963, who had told them: "You ought to write a song about how God touches lives."

The next morning before church, Bill sat at an old piano, and the song flowed out of him: "He touched me / Oh, He touched me / And, oh, the joy that floods my soul / Something happened and now I know / He touched me and made me whole."

After healing evangelist Kathryn Kuhlman used the song on her radio and TV shows, the Gaithers' backroom "warehouse" started bustling with requests for the printed music. Over time, "He Touched Me" was recorded by such well-known artists as Kate Smith, Jimmy Durante and Elvis Presley.

People wanted to know about these inspired songwriters, so Bill scrambled to put the Gaither Trio back together, which would now consist of Bill, Gloria and Danny. The three developed a friendship with Nashville producer Bob MacKenzie and formed a production company that signed talents such as Michael W. Smith. MacKenzie introduced them to arranger Ronn Huff, with whom Bill and Gloria collaborated to create Hymns for the Family of God, the best-selling hymnal to date.

The Gaither Trio released Back Home in Indiana with MacKenzie in 1970. By then their popularity had begun to explode.

Huff came up with the idea of writing a musical that incorporated the Gaithers' songs along with narration that could be personalized for individual congregations. Alleluia: A Praise Gathering for Believers was the first gold record in Christian music.

Eventually Danny left the group, and Bill and Gloria wondered if they should continue. MacKenzie encouraged them to carry on and change the format of their concerts.

Gary McSpadden replaced Danny, and they created a weekend-long event in Indianapolis they called Praise Gathering, which included speakers such as Corrie ten Boom and Max Lucado as well as painters, dancers, soloists and mass choirs. Today, 30 years later, the gathering has become a tradition.

The Gaither Vocal Band was born when Bill, Gary and two of their backup singers harmonized around a piano backstage for fun. Bill was so amazed by their blend that he took them onstage, and the four sang a gospel-quartet classic. The crowd, though unfamiliar with the musical style, loved it—a response the quartet got in every city on their tour until the Vocal Band became the highlight of the program.

The Family Business

Today the Gaither Vocal Band is the program. Just shipping

products to keep up with sales from their mail and Internet orders has necessitated full-time telephone operators and a 10,000-square-foot warehouse where more than a half million packages are handled each year. The entire Gaither operation employs 125 people.

Gloria is a sought-after public speaker, and not just in Christian circles. She's a John Steinbeck scholar and presented a paper in Japan last summer about her studies of the American novelist. Mostly, however, her time is spent at the retail center, Gaither Family Resources, where she's the key buyer of their books and gift items.

Bill is almost apologetic about the company's success. What most of his audience doesn't know is that the Gaithers don't spend most of their profits on themselves. They recently gave \$3 million to Anderson University (affiliated with the Church of God; Anderson, Indiana)-and they also set up a \$2.2 million Gospel Music Trust Fund to help aging musicians who don't have retirement savings.

For the Gaithers, Christian music is about giving. It's also about hard work. During a typical week, an amazing buzz of activity goes on related to the family business. It all revolves around the rural house Bill and Gloria bought as newlyweds in 1965. Next to the home is the Gaither Music compound where Homecoming videos are sometimes taped in the couple's state-of-the-art studios.

Touring as often as the Gaither Vocal Band does requires a well-landed approach to life on the road. After Penrod, Hall and Hampton leave Tennessee on Fridays, they get a lot accomplished by the time they're back with their families late Saturday night. Bill usually travels by the Gaithers' bus to the first venue and is there a day earlier.

"While it's taxing, it's not impossible," Penrod says. "We don't spin our wheels on the road. If we're out there, we're

working.”

A key reason for the weekend-only tour performances is that for the Gaithers family time has always been a well-protected priority. “We’ve only ever been gone on the weekends,” Gloria says. “We felt it was important to have a regular life. We’ve guarded that very carefully.”

The couple have three children and five grandkids. Married 43 years, Bill and Gloria show no signs of slowing down. They’re always on to the next idea. In recent years, though, they’ve been to many funerals of close friends and family.

Bill draws the conclusion: “There’s a time to live and there’s a time to die, and you get it in perspective and live your life and say: ‘I don’t know how many more years I have. I’ll do the best I can with what I’ve got.’”

But he adds: “Somehow, I feel like our best years are yet to come.”

Marsha Gallardo is a writer based in Spring Hill, Tennessee, near Nashville, and a frequent contributor to Charisma.

The Secret of Genuine Praise

Gloria Gaither has blunt advice for worship leaders.

Gloria Gaither has strong advice to up-and-coming songwriters. She told Charisma of an experience she had during a recent writer’s workshop held by the Gospel Music Association.

After some 250 writers, publishers and others had gotten comfortable for the session, she asked them: “How many of you are involved in praise and worship? Either you write praise and worship, you lead a team, publish, or record praise and worship.”

Almost all the audience members raised their hands. So she asked a second question: "How many of you, who obviously spend your life in praise and worship, have read First and Second Kings in the last two years?"

Three hands went up. Gloria leaned forward.

"Then what right have you to go through the Psalms to pick out a few positive lines here and there?" she asked. "Because most of the Psalms is beating the chest and lament and 'I don't know if God exists' and 'I don't know where He went' and 'I don't know if He loves me.' Finally the psalmist resolves a few things-and we'll find one little line and have it on the screen by Sunday morning. But what right have you to take his line that he paid for if you don't know what he paid to get it there?"

Praise, she tells them, has to be the outcome of a "gut-living life" and is sincerely real for those who have tried it on the caldron of pain and survived. "When that happens, you will praise Him," she told a now-rapt audience. "You can't stop it. But to just walk in on Sunday morning and start with the punch line? I don't think you have the right."

Marsha Gallardo

Classic Lyrics

'Because He Lives' remains one of the most popular Christian songs of all time.

An onslaught of lows hit the Gaithers all at once. Around them raged Vietnam War protests and racial conflict. Their private world was rocked by a divorce in their family. Bill contracted mononucleosis, which drained him of energy. When they decided against a financial deal with a close friend, the man turned vicious, accusing them of using the gospel for financial gain.

Bill fell into a depression that crippled his spirit and took away his ability to write songs. The only bright spot was

finding out Gloria was unexpectedly pregnant, just three months after the birth of their second daughter.

But, they wondered, what kind of life would their baby have with all the darkness around them? The answer came to Bill just before their baby was born: "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow."

"How sweet to hold our newborn baby / And feel the pride and joy he gives / But greater still the calm assurance / This child can face uncertain days / Because He lives."

Together they later completed the song and added the chorus: "Because He lives I can face tomorrow / Because He lives all fear is gone / Because I know He holds the future / And life is worth the living just because He lives."

Published in 1971, it's become one of the best-known and best-loved songs that Bill and Gloria have written. Having a song written to commemorate one's birth would please almost anyone, and for Benjamin Gaither it's meant direction as well. "It made me feel like maybe there was a calling on my life," he told Charisma.

A publishing company owner, "Benjy" not only writes songs and performs but also created the children's video series Gaither's Pond, inspired by childhood days at his family's pond where he spent time wondering what the fish would say if they could talk.

Through his company, Live Bait Productions, he has produced animation-Wobot's Christmas-and collaborated to make the story into a feature film, titled Hoodwinked. He has many other animation projects in the works as well as the beginnings of more film production.

For a Christmas present, Gloria framed that sheet from her

yellow legal pad and gave it to Benjy, a poignant reminder there's hope in every situation, because He lives.

Marsha Gallardo

New Faces in Gospel Music

The McRae sisters- Kelly, 19, and Annie, 21-make up this duet based in Waynesboro, Mississippi. Their 2004 debut CD *Traveling On* (Daywind) produced a *Singing News* No. 1 song titled "If It Had Not Been the Lord" and two other hits. Annie has been nominated as 2005 Songwriter of the Year and Female Vocalist of the Year by the Southern Gospel Music Guild. *Southern Gospel News* says of the duo: "The McRaes are the future of Southern gospel. ... The future is in good hands."

Mercy's Mark – Nominated by the Southern Gospel Music Guild as 2005 New Artist of the Year, *Mercy's Mark* is raising the standard among vocal quartets, according to *Southern Gospel News*. The Grove City, Ohio-based group of Anthony Facello, Chris West, Garry Jones and Josh Feemster delivers the more traditional quartet style. Named Horizon Group of the Year at the National Quartet Convention in September, *Mercy's Mark* has just released Volume 2 of its *Southern Selections* CD series.

Second Mile-newly formed by Donny Henderson and Buddy and Kerri Mullins-combines contemporary vocals with a broad musical experience with artists such as Mark Lowry, Jaci Velasquez, Poet Voices and The Greenes. In concert, the group uses music, media and humorous stories while ministering in local churches. Based in Spring Hill, Tennessee, *Second Mile* currently is at work on its debut release. Dove Award-winning pianist Channing Eleton joined the trio in November.

Lauren Talley, 21, began performing in 1996 with her parents, Roger and Debra, as the newly formed Talley Trio. The group has had six No. 1 singles, but only recently has Lauren begun branching out with her own solo projects. She has received two *Singing News* Fan Awards for Favorite Young Artist in Southern

gospel and is a 2005 Harmony Honors nominee for Female Vocalist of the Year. She has appeared on CBS-TV's Touched By An Angel and can be seen in the film series The Missy Files.

First Love – JP Miller and husband-wife team Troy and Katy Peach came together less than a year ago to form First Love, based in Hendersonville, Tennessee, and described by Southern Gospel News as a “young and exciting new trio” with lots of potential. Their debut CD, First Love, released last May (Resting Place Music), and the single “What A Day That Will Be” currently is climbing The Singing News Top 40 chart.

Crystal River Quartet – Formed by Zack McGill-lead singer of this quartet that includes Jeff Snyder, Dusty Barret and Jeremy Lile-Crystal River emerged recently with an independent CD release, CRQ. Their first single, “For the First Time,” is currently playing on Southern gospel radio stations nationwide. The Knoxville, Tennessee-based quartet all are in their early 20s and are reaching their audience in part through their solid Web presence at .