

When Harry Connick Jr. Broke Out 'The Old Rugged Cross'

As popular singer and actor Harry Connick Jr. begins the second season of his popular daytime talk show, *Harry*, he continues to profile and highlight the inspiration found in guests from all walks of life. While entertainment icons appear occasionally to talk about their latest projects—including Billy Joel who recently performed a piano duet—Connick's focus is squarely on everyday people.

As he enjoys "the time of his life" with a one-hour party every day, Connick, who also serves as executive producer, recently took some time to speak with *Charisma News* about what makes the show so fun, how faith is a frequent topic for his guests, and his love for gospel music.

The segments of *Harry* talking about real-life heroes makes the whole show more of a 'feel good' hour. Why is it important to profile them?

We have an hour of television every day, and I have to sit down and figure out how to spend it. You have to prioritize, because there are a lot of different pieces of my life. Music was going to be a priority and it was going to be all throughout the show anyway, so then it came to 'What are we going to spend our time talking about?' I love talking to people who make other people feel better. They're everywhere. I had an interview with a guy today, Jake Olsen, who is a long snapper for [the] USC football team who's blind. He lost his eyesight completely when he was 12 years old. I asked him, "When you were 12, you were going into this surgery knowing that you were never going to see again. What do you do when you're down? What do you do when you feel like you can't go on?" I can't imagine what that must have been like. He went on to say, "Here's what I do. I focus on the blessings that I

have. If all I did was sit around thinking about what I don't have, I would be depressed." It makes you feel good to hear how other people navigate through life. I love doing that. I love meeting everyday folks and just spending some time with them and learning about them. It's fulfilling to me. I sincerely enjoy it and I think, hopefully that comes through.

On a recent episode, someone was talking about faith and you mention that some people were surprised they could talk about it and you said, "Of course you can." You've had Tim Tebow on the show, and you're not afraid to spotlight faith talk. Why is that?

I think no matter what faith you're talking about, if somebody wants to talk about their faith, it's usually a good thing. It's usually about how it helps them get through tough times or whatever. I just can't believe we've gotten to a point where it's a novelty to talk about it. My show isn't a religious show, and I'm certainly not going to stand up there and preach, but I try to show by example what I believe to be right. This goes back to saying, "What am I going to do during this hour of television?" Everything that I do is based on things that I find entertaining and I find right. If somebody wants to come on and talk about their faith, absolutely come on and talk about it. Now you're not going to hear me stand up there and preach, because I don't like to be preached to by somebody like me. I like to be preached to by somebody who knows how to do that. But I believe you can say the same things in your actions. If somebody has a message they want to speak about, I support it by any means.

It's not always a focus on talk shows. Sometimes it's downplayed or off-limits.

I think ultimately it's a good thing. Two of my executive producers are Jewish. They're brothers named Justin and Eric Spangle, and they're not Christian. But they happen to believe in good things, and I think that's what we try to celebrate in

our show, these things we all have in common and positive messages and the fact that we're brothers and sisters. Let's celebrate together and be thankful for what we have and do a positive show that everybody can watch together. It can be emotional, exciting, funny, all those things, and we can all sit down and watch it together. I don't understand why that's such a novelty but we are certainly having a good time doing it.

I saw a video of you singing "The Old Rugged Cross" online. What place did hymns and religious music have in your musical development?

I had an interesting development, because I was brought up Catholic, so I heard the traditional music they played in Catholic Church, but I also grew up going to a lot of gospel churches, too, Baptist churches, with my mother and father. My dad was the district attorney of New Orleans, and it's an elected position, so he would go to all kinds of places to meet and many of those places were Baptist churches, and I heard a lot of that music and just loved it. It's always been dear to me. I happen to love gospel music anyway. I listen to it whenever I get the chance. I love singing those songs. I'm sure at some point I'd do a gospel record, too, just because it's fulfilling to sing those songs. I like singing those songs.

What do you have lined up for the rest of the season?

The thing is, our show is not a celebrity-driven show, so when we do have celebrities on, it's really fun. There will be some great surprises coming up on over the year. We're focusing on things that people respond to, like the 'Leading Ladies' segment. We have this fun segment called "Do Re Me," where people win stuff. We're always talking to inspirational people and playing music. It's just going to be a great season. I'm just excited about it. I really love doing it.

On a recent episode, you had a young man who you invited to play the clarinet for everyone. He has to be one of the coolest clarinet players now, right?

Our show is very spontaneous. I had never seen that kid. I didn't know what he was going to ask. I didn't know anything. That's not very common nowadays in television. When people say that, they ask, "Was that planned?" It was legitimately not planned. You can't write stuff like that. You're depending on an audience member to perform. You can't really ask that of people. So when I do that "Can Harry Help?" segment, I have no idea what the questions are. I don't think about them or think about answers. I legitimately think on the spot, 'What would I do or say in this situation?' So when that kid started saying his, it just turned to something else. I turned to my buddy Jeff and said, "Can he play your instrument?" He said, "Yeah, come on down." You really can't plan that stuff. It never works. We do that every day and that's how I like it and people seem to like it.

DEWAYNE HAMBY is a communications specialist and longtime journalist covering faith-based music, entertainment, books, and the retail industry. He is also the editor of the White Wing Messenger, director of communications for the Church of God of Prophecy and author of the book Gratitude Adjustment. Connect with him at or on Twitter –@dewaynehamby.