

YOU CAN HAVE YOUR MTV. GIVE ME OLD-TIME GOSPEL MUSIC

It is gratifying to know I share something in common with one of Georgia's preeminent authors, Terry Kay. Unfortunately, it is not the use of the English language. While Kay and I have access to the same nouns and verbs, he strings his together into award-winning novels. Me? I am still trying to figure out where all the commas go.

What we share is a fondness for gospel music. I like gospel music better than peanut butter and jelly, but I have been reluctant to confess it, lest you think me an unsophisticated hick who can't tell the difference between a piccolo and a pickaxe. It took Terry Kay writing on the subject in a recent issue of Southern Living magazine to make me admit my love affair with gospel music.

I grew up listening to the Statesmen Quartet (Hovie Lister, Jack Hess, Doy Ott and Jim "Big Chief" Wetherington — the musical equivalent of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Joe DiMaggio and Mickey Mantle in the same lineup), the Homeland Harmony Quartet, the LeFevre Trio, the Sunshine Boys, the Blue Ridge Quartet and many others I could name, except I might give you a serious case of eye-glaze.

Like Kay, I have discovered gospel music on television. Every Saturday evening, the Woman Who Shares My Name and I watch Bill Gaither's Homecoming Show at 7 PM on one cable channel and then switch over to another channel at 8 PM and watch it again. It hurts that many of our gospel favorites are dying off and the ones who remain are wrinkled and wear toupees. When Glen Payne, lead singer of the Cathedrals, passed away a couple of years ago, we grieved. Another member of the Cathedrals, George Younce, died a few weeks ago, and we grieved again. I can only assume that God loves bass singers, because gospel music has lost Younce, Rex Nealon and J.D. Sumner in just the past few years. Adding them to Big Chief Wetherington and Big Jim Waits means that isn't thunder you hear. That's the Heavenly Choir's bass section.

I grew up in the East Point First Methodist Church, and on Sunday night we sang all the great hymns — "Rock of Ages," "Life Is Like a Mountain Railroad," "Beulah Land" and "Love Lifted Me." Today, many Methodist churches don't even have Sunday evening services. My church doesn't. We do have an active youth program, but I wonder if the teenagers ever ask to sing "We're Marching to Zion" on Sunday night, like we used to do? One of our most popular services is an alternative service that features electric guitars and drums. I guess even church music has to have an MTV beat these days. A lot of young adults attend our church, and I am pleased that we are savvy enough to offer them music with which they can identify. Still, I bet if they sang "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder," just once, they would love it.

I pick on the Baptists a lot because they are always quoting scripture about how women can't be preachers, but look the other way when it comes to divorced male preachers. However, when it comes to singing, the Baptists have us beat by a mile. I doubt they would let anybody mess with their old-time hymns. Unfortunately, the Methodist Church has a lot of liberal weenies trying to make us politically correct. Awhile back, some of them tried to remove "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" and "Onward, Christian Soldiers" from our hymnals because these two classic hymns mentioned war. The Baptist would have rightfully run the weenies out of town on a rail.

I am grateful to my friend Terry Kay for saying what I have should have said a long time ago about gospel music. I am finally out of the closet. That fellow you see at the red light singing his head off is me. There is a good chance I am harmonizing with my Cathedrals CD, featuring the beloved Glen Payne and the incomparable George Younce.

God bless gospel music and all who sing it. Can I have an Amen?