

Amazing Grace

Lanny Cook - June 2019

I grew up enjoying a wide variety of musical genres, from Country to Rock and Roll, and from Classical Instrumental to Jazz. I guess you could say that I have a rather eclectic taste for music. As a baby boomer I grew up with some of the greatest music ever composed and better yet, some of the most legendary performers the world has ever known. Of course, everybody loved the music of Glenn Miller, Mitch Miller and Lawrence Welk back in the big band era. These amazing bands served as the precursor to my arrival into this world in the mid 1950's. I still remember sitting around with the folks and the grandparents watching Mitch's bouncing ball or Lawrence Welk's champagne music show on a Saturday evening.

There were extremely talented singers back in the 50's and 60's who knew how to sing and who also had the talent to put their heart and soul into every song they performed - Andy Williams, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Jim Nabors, Frank Sinatra, Perry Como, Sammy Davis Jr., Dean Martin, Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Tom Jones, and even Elvis. I was raised on legends like Eddie Arnold, Tennessee Ernie Ford, Slim Whitman, Hank Williams, Audie Murphy, Glen Campbell, Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers.

Of course, the musical variety shows of the 1970's like Hee Haw, the Smothers Brothers and Carol Burnett provided both comedy and great music on a weekly basis through my younger years. As a teenager and then into adulthood, I grew to love Chicago, Santana, Three Dog Night, Jim Croce, Bread, the Moody Blues, Captain and Tennille, the Carpenters, Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers, Donnie and Marie Osmond, the Jacksons, Sonny and Cher, the Partridge Family, Paul

McCartney, Tony Orlando, Neil Diamond, Johnny Cash, the Beatles, the Monkeys, the Mama's and the Papa's, the Beach Boys, Celine Dion, Whitney Houston, George Strait, Garth Brooks and a multitude of other musical legends.

My love for a wide variety of music was instilled in me as I participated in school bands beginning in the fifth grade, including concert bands, marching bands and jazz bands. So, of course, I was exposed to all sorts of music during those days. I loved Jazz, I loved the 1812 Overture, Fanfare for Trumpets, Tuff Sax, In the Mood and when I hear a John Phillip Sousa march it stays with me for hours as it takes me back to those days of marching in parades with our 150 piece high school marching band. As a trumpet player I was inspired by the likes of Herb Albert and the Tijuana Brass, Doc Severinsen, Louie Armstrong, Maynard Ferguson Chuck Mangione, Cat Stevens, Chicago, the Doobie Brothers, and even Santana. The brass sections of those amazingly talented entertainers still send goosebumps down my spine as the symphony of greatness resonate from the bells of the horn sections through the talented lips of gifted performers.

My love for music didn't stop there as the show tunes from Broadway Musicals also provided hours of enjoyment throughout the years. I love many of the songs from a multitude of Broadway hits, and each song has a special place in my heart – Joseph and His Technicolor Dream Coat, Cats, Man of La Mancha, South Pacific, Lion King, Phantom of the Opera, West Side Story, Oklahoma, Fiddler on the Roof, Frozen, My Fair Lady and Jesus Christ Superstar. The point of all this is that music of all sorts has always been a big part of my life. I can't imagine trying to live without great music to inspire, relax or soothe the savage heart.

As I look back on the wide variety of musical styles that have touched my heart, I have to say that it is the gospel music that I grew up with and continue to listen to on a regular basis that has had the biggest and most consistent impact on my life. I

remember so many Sunday evenings at the small community church where I grew up, sitting around singing the old gospel hymns with a piano accompaniment. That ole time gospel music somehow manages to go deeper than any other music. It doesn't just inspire, or encourage, or even just touch my heart and mind, it speaks directly to my soul. It reaches down and touches the very essence of my being. Gospel music doesn't just add to life! Through an encounter with Jesus you are given life. Gospel music is all about the gift of Life! It's all about the Way! It's all about life transformed and forever changed!

Through the years I've had numerous opportunities to serve as the Host for a gospel sing-along at my local church. At the last night of good ole fashioned gospel music, I realized what the difference is between the music of my faith and the secular music that has brought me endless moments of enjoyment throughout more than 60 years of life. It's not the difference in the notes, the melodies, the harmonies, the discord or even the lyrics that makes gospel music different than all other types of music. The difference lies in the inspiration from the composer of all creation. Gospel music isn't born through inspiration, meditation, perspiration, education or self-reflection. Gospel music is born through a personal encounter with the Creator Himself.

Did you know that there was no such thing as gospel music until after Jesus arrived? When Jesus began His ministry nearly 1,994 years ago the gospel Music scene exploded and even without a radio station gospel music filled the hearts and minds of the multitudes within the Promised Land.

Gospel music was born thru personal encounters with Jesus - like the woman with the issue of blood who reached out in faith to touch the hem of His garment, or the blind man who cried out to Jesus and his vision was restored; the woman at the well, the lepers who were healed from their affliction, or the dead who were raised from the grave. It was a personal encounter with Jesus that turned John Newton's life around,

causing him to pen the lyrics to one of the greatest hymns of all-time, "Amazing Grace." Then of course there is Horatio Spafford, credited with penning the lyrics to "It is Well with My Soul" after the tragic loss of four daughters who drowned at sea. Gospel music is born in the valleys and through the tragedies of life.

At the darkest moments in life, when a soul cries out in desperation for a Savior, a melody of grace will fill the heart, mind and soul of the one in anguish. God's grace resonates through anyone humble enough to admit they are too hurting or sick, too weak or broken; too sinful or lost to make it on their own. When anyone cries out to Jesus, miracles happen – when they do that excitement can't be contained, it has to be shared; that's what gospel music is all about – Jesus' response to our cries.

The first record of gospel music entering the scene was at Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. It erupted like a flash mob, singing and giving praise to God – the Messiah had officially arrived. All the personal encounters people had experienced with Jesus culminated at this most significant moment in time as the throngs were singing new songs to their Redeemer. The mob was so exuberant, the religious leaders told Jesus to shut them up because their Gospel Music was too loud. It was too annoying! It was too much of a distraction of their contrived religious propaganda! But Jesus told them, if He was to "silence the crowds, the stones would cry out in praise." (Luke 19:40)

I used to think when Jesus referred to the stones crying out He was saying we shouldn't take our faith for *granite*. I now realize Jesus was referring to the prophetic words found in the book of Ezekiel, where Jesus proclaimed "He would remove hearts of stone and replace them with new hearts of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:26) Jesus was telling the religious leaders they had taken God's Word for granite! They needed to make a choice. They could hang on to their heart of stone, or they could accept Him for Who

He is and receive a new heart of flesh. The Good News had arrived - the time had come for hearts to be changed.

As I reflect back on the last 60 years of my life, I finally realize what the difference is between gospel music and all secular music. The difference lies in an encounter with Jesus. What do all gospel songs have in common? True inspiration comes not through any human means. But rather, it comes through the ultimate lyricist and composer of the faith. Hebrews 12:1, 2 shares this thought: *Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Gospel music provides the soul with a touch of the divine. Every gospel song ever written possesses this same common thread - it has flowed out of the heart and the mind of a sinner saved by grace. To me, gospel music provides encouragement through a great cloud of witnesses who have all had personal encounters with Jesus. Gospel music is a reminder that if I *"fix my eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of my faith,"* I will be able to make it through this world with a song in my heart and the melody of grace flowing out of my lips. I just have to always remember to say, *"'tis so sweet to trust in Jesus!"*