

Jack the Singer

My father had a fine baritone singing voice. This was “discovered” when he was about 16 years old in 1938, and his family lived in a house on the New River in Ft. Lauderdale. The house was next door to a church, and the preacher heard Jack singing in the shower one day through an open window. He subsequently asked him if he would like to sing in church sometime, so Jack started working on some gospel songs accompanied at the piano by his grandmother, Elsie McMillen, who by that time was living with her daughter and the two boys. This venture proved to be a success, and it ignited a passion in Jack for vocal performance that continued for the rest of his life.

Met his wife, Carol, when they sang together in the Park Temple Methodist Church choir in 1957. When I was young, they would sing duets together when travelling somewhere in the car, and I would listen from the back seat. When I was about 5, I asked them to stop singing so that I could concentration on the music I was composing in my head, and to my knowledge, they never sang together again. Now, I truly regret having done that.



In the Summer of 1971, at the age of 12, I became my father’s music teacher. We were in North Carolina finishing up the last two weeks of the Horn in the West show, and he had been hired to sing *Sunrise Sunset* from Fiddler on the Roof at a wedding. Dad had a good ear and could memorize music easily, but he couldn’t sight-read and that song was a real challenge to him since we didn’t have a recording of it. I had been playing the trumpet for about a year by that time, so I used it to play the melody of *Sunrise Sunset* along with him (transposing into the right key) so that he could learn the song. This began my career as his vocal coach, taking over where my great grandmother had left off.

As I became a more proficient trumpet player, Dad and I would often perform together at whichever church he had been invited to. Typically, we would pick four or five hymn tunes that both Dad and the pianist or organist knew well, and I would improvise countermelodies to add in on the later verses. Most memorable of these was at an Assembly of God church in North Miami which had purchased the old drive-in movie theatre next door. After our performance, the people inside the church applauded while those outside in cars honked their horns in approval.

At Christmas time, 1983, and in a manic state, Dad found a Salvation Army band playing on a street corner, and he talked them into letting him sing with them for a while. He recorded this performance on a portable cassette machine, and then would not rest until I had dubbed the result onto a demo tape that he could send to Pat Robertson in hopes of being invited to sing on his television show. This kind of thing had been one of Dad's dreams for a long time. Later, I learned that just after WWII, and still in the Army Air Corps, he and a friend had requisitioned a transport plane and flew it from Florida to New York City so that Dad could audition to appear on the Arthur Godfrey TV show. This audition was not successful, nor did we ever hear from Pat Robertson.

For his 80th birthday in 2002, Jack's children collaborated on the production of a compact disk featuring some of his performances. The CD was sent out to all the friends and family who knew Jack in order to commemorate this milestone though, sadly, the Alzheimers and Dementia had rendered him unable to understand that this was happening. Nevertheless, that CD ended up playing an important role in the events surrounding the end of Dad's life.

In October of 2005, Mom was in the hospital with the beginnings of the Cerebellitis infection that was so debilitating for her in the last five years of her life. Dad was in the hospice center just across the street. I had a Fall Break scheduled at the University, so I was able to go to Florida to relieve my sister, Kim, who had been managing things there. I left Springfield at 3:00 AM to drive to St. Louis and take the red-eye to Ft. Lauderdale. So it was still morning when I arrived at the hospital, and I started going back and forth between parents in their separate buildings.

Mom wanted to go see Dad, so I got permission from the nurses (or so I thought), loaded her into a wheelchair and took her out to the car. Then we drove across the street to the hospice, and I witnessed the very last encounter on this earth between my parents. The boom box next to his bed was continuously playing the CD we had made of Dad's music. He was breathing but not otherwise responsive, and the social worker told me he was in no pain. Mom said goodbye to him, and then said to me, "let's go."

When we arrived back at the hospital, it was clear that I had misunderstood the nurses about having permission to take Mom out of the hospital, even for a short time, and they gave me some trouble about it. Thirty minutes later, Kim called with the news that Dad had died, and that I needed to go back to the hospice to sign the paperwork. When the head nurse on Mom's

floor learned of this, she pulled me aside and told me she was now very glad that I had taken her to see him.

Back over at the hospice center, I signed the paperwork and I saw Dad for the last time. It was then that the social worker told me that she had stopped in his room a few minutes after Mom and I had left, and at that time he was still breathing in a very labored fashion. About five minutes later, she walked by the room and heard his performance of the Malotte *Lord's Prayer* playing on the boom box, and when she entered the room to check on him, he was gone.

When I arrived back at the hospital to be with Mom, one of the Sisters of Holy Cross hospital had arrived in the room to provide comfort. I recounted to her the story of taking Mom over to see Dad just the hour before, and her response was, "he was waiting for her."

At Dad's memorial service I ended my eulogy with the following words: On that day, in the moment of "*The Lord's Prayer*," the Lord God came to my father and said, "Jack, wouldn't you like to come sing in my choir?" And Dad was very happy to do that, and knowing him as I do, I expect he has already talked his way into singing a solo or two.

