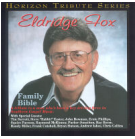


Tribute To Eldridge Fox

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Written By Guest Columnist: Jim Stover

When the Southern Gospel Music Forum graciously offered me the opportunity to write something about Eldridge Fox for this website, I wondered if I had enough insight into this legendary gentleman to do the piece justice. Then I thought to myself, I'll write what I know from the perspective I've had over the years.

Long before I ever came into the field of Southern Gospel and many years before I ever attended my first concert I knew of two Gospel quartets. One of them was The Kingsmen and just for the record, the other one was The Inspirations. In 1975, as a young appliance salesman I called on an account in my hometown of Asheville, North Carolina. In the office of that downtown business, heartily engaged in a conversation with another person who was present, sat Eldridge Fox. They were discussing the Elvis Presley concerts that had just taken place at our Civic Center. I remember having this thought, "Man, that's Eldridge Fox and he's a Gospel singer." I wasn't so impressed with the fact that he obviously seemed to know Elvis. His Christian witness preceded him and that's what impressed me. I knew Eldridge Fox was a fulltime ambassador for Christ. Later in my life I came to realize that we all are called to be one.

Now I'll fast-forward to the year of 1990. A songwriter friend of mine by the name of Michael C. Williams had been taking his songs over to Eldridge for several years. Foxy, as busy as he was, always took the time to listen to them and to offer his advice. He gave Mike something every struggling songwriter needs even more than a royalty check - encouragement. The great quartet man would say, "Well, that's not quite what I'm looking for, but keep trying." And the reason I know all this is because my friend had started a song he just couldn't seem to get past the first verse and part of the chorus with. He asked me if I could help him with it. He'd been working on this particular song for quite awhile, ever since the death of both of his parents in fairly close succession. I invited Mike to come to my home for a writing session and together we worked on what was to become "Wish You Were Here," a song the Kingsmen took all the way to the top of the charts in 1991 and then named Song of the Year in 1992.

I tell all that only to convey one important fact - over the course of his life, Eldridge Fox has been a friend and mentor to countless unknowns, up and comers, struggling writers - you name it. The stories of the many people Foxy has helped along the way in the field of Gospel music would fill volumes. But he didn't do it for the recognition or for some monetary reward. These acts sprang forth from a generous heart and a desire to give something back to this field of endeavor that had been so good to him. The bottom line is - it was the Jesus inside him always coming out!

In February 1995, I had the very good fortune of coming to work for Crossroads; a company Eldridge had a hand in forming. This is where I

really got to know the soft-spoken gentleman up close and gain some real insight into what he was all about. At that time, I was working in our sales department calling Christian bookstores. Whenever Mr. Fox came by, he always made it a point to come into our room and say hello. He usually left us with a good-natured “sell Kingsmen” directive as he walked out the door. We all loved him!

November of 1996 is a sad month in the annals of Gospel music history. Late that month the Kingsmen held their annual homecoming concert in the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium in Asheville. Who would know at the time that it was to be Foxy’s final performance with the quartet he’d started so many years before? The

evening also marked their fortieth year and as I recall, many Kingsmen alumni were present onstage. There were presentations being made, congratulatory messages from politicians and celebrities being read, and things of that nature. After the ceremonial aspect of the evening had gone on for awhile, Eldridge walked to the microphone and said, "This is nice, but these people came tonight to hear us sing." Yes, he was concerned about the fans first and foremost. That has always stuck out in my mind. Concern for others and their needs is the defining mark of true greatness in my estimation. Ironically, it was only a matter of days after the Asheville concert that Foxy had the first in a series of strokes that incapacitated him and left him unable to board the Kingsmen bus. Life on the road, something he'd known for the better part of his life, was now behind him. Even though he had to trade his berth on a custom coach for another vehicle known as a wheelchair, Eldridge Fox didn't lose his indomitable spirit or keen wit. That's something

about him that has really impressed and inspired me. And what a memory he has! If he ever met you once, you can be sure he hasn't forgotten you. Another handy gift Eldridge has is that of having one of the best ears around for recognizing hit songs. He knows what people will like. Even after his stroke he was still picking hits. When we were listening to the first single from a particular Kingsmen album he told me, "That's not the best song on the project." He went on to say that it was "The Next Cloud" and sure enough, that's the song that went to number one!

The trophies and awards Foxy and his Kingsmen picked up along the way would probably fill a good-sized storage unit. But his

real life's accomplishment won't be found hanging on a wall somewhere. It's found in all the living, breathing human beings that he helped to guide and gladly assisted as they made their way through this world.

To me, as I stated earlier, the true mark of a great man is best illustrated by how he treated others and his willingness to invest his time in them. And speaking of great men, another giant of the faith, Mr. Martin Cook of the Inspirations had this to say about him. "Eldridge has always, always had his heart in Gospel music. He has loved it. He always tried his best to help and encourage as many people as he could. And he always tried his best to be a good friend to as many people as he could."

All I can add to that is Amen.

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