

Tribute To Jake Hess

Written by Scott Evans

Saturday, 20 September 2008 17:46 - Last Updated Thursday, 25 September 2008 20:07

Jake Hess

The Ultimate Singer

BORN: DECEMBER 24, 1927; DECEASED: JANUARY 4, 2004



Jake Hess recently passed away and I decided to invite a few special people to give you their thoughts on Jake as a bit of a tribute to the man who, for a number of years, defined Southern Gospel Music! He was a one of a kind and a very

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special individual. Read on to see just how special he was:

JAKE HESS OBITUARY (written by Deana Surles Warren):

Columbus, GA - Beloved gospel singer Jake Hess died early Sunday at East Alabama Medical Center in Opelika, Ala. He was 76.

Funeral services will be at 2 p.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 7 at Morningside Baptist Church in Columbus, according to McMullen Funeral Home. The Rev. Bill Shorey will officiate, assisted by Bill Gaither and Dr. Michael Guido.

The family will receive friends from 6 to 8 p.m., Tuesday, Jan. 6 at McMullen Funeral Home, 3874 Gentian Blvd., Columbus.

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Jake was born Dec. 24, 1927 in Mt. Pisgah, Ala., the youngest of 12 children born to the late Stovall and Lydia Hess of Haleyville, Ala. He has lived in Columbus since 1993. His wife, Joyce, who died in 2000, predeceased him.

Survivors include his daughter Becky and husband Brent Buck of Columbus; son Chris and wife Cindy of Columbus; son Jake Jr. and wife Judy of Murfreesboro, Tenn.; 10 grandchildren: Emily Trotter and husband Jim; Brent Buck, Lauren Buck, Ansley Buck, Megan Hess, Natalie Hess, Casey Hess, Jake Hess III, Hannah Hess and Emma Hess; and one great-grandchild James Purdy (Bo) Trotter IV. A sister, OmaDee, of Haleyville, Ala, also survives him.

These were his family by blood but Jake also leaves behind Bill and Gloria Gaither and all of his "Homecoming" friends. For the past 10 years they have been his musical family, caring for each other and singing gospel music on stages around the world.

At the age of 16, Jake left home in Haleyville to join The John Daniel Quartet. Since then, he has been on the road, making music for more than 60 years. In 1948, he became lead singer of The Statesmen Quartet. Joining with Hovie Lister,

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he began a magical 15 years in which the legendary group recorded for RCA Victor, sang on network television, created one of the earliest syndicated TV shows and blessed audiences all over the country.

In 1963, Jake founded The Imperials, hand-picking the members from other quartets. They too were a groundbreaking group that set new standards in gospel music.

Through the years, Jake's powerful voice and unique styling influenced generations of singers — including a young Elvis Presley, who often hung around concerts where The Statesmen were performing. Jake's influence on the rock 'n' roll superstar is well documented and Elvis' affection for him continued over the years. Through it all, Jake told Elvis that he only wanted to be his friend. In 1977, Jake sang at Elvis' funeral, just as he had services for Hank Williams in 1953.

In later years, Jake joined The Masters V, composed of Hovie Lister, Rosie Rozell, J.D. Sumner and James Blackwood. He is the only surviving member of that quartet which won a Grammy Award in 1982.

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In 1993, believing his career was over and with his health declining, Jake moved to Columbus where he intended to play golf — even if he didn't keep score — and to enjoy being with his family. He never dreamed there would be more songs to sing. That changed with the success of Bill Gaither's "Homecoming" videos. They brought Jake's message to an entirely new generation of fans. This experience blessed Jake and those around him for he was able to become a mentor to young singers who respected him for his unyielding spirit and his unique musical gifts. Jake has continued to record, as an individual artist and with The Old Friends Quartet.

Over the years, he received numerous honors. He was a member of the Southern Gospel Music Hall of Fame and Alabama Music Hall of Fame, which also presented him the American Music Award. He was a founding member of the National Quartet Convention and received a Life Achievement Award from SESAC. He won four Grammy Awards: for "Beautiful Isle of Somewhere" in 1968; for "Ain't That Beautiful Singing" in 1969; for "Everything Is Beautiful" in 1970; and for "The Masters V" in 1982. In 2002, he won the Southern Gospel Music Association Award for Best Video with The Old Friends Quartet.

Over the years, Jake's family has lovingly shared their father and grandfather with his friends and fans. They did so because they knew that all Jake ever wanted to be was a gospel singer. They appreciate the prayers his wonderful friends have offered during his illness and ask that in lieu of flowers donations be made to the Guido Evangelistic Association in Metter, Ga. 30439.

AN ACCOUNT OF JAKE HESS' FUNERAL (written by: Deana Surles Warren):

Columbus, GA - With buses in the parking lot and bottles of water in their hands, generations of Gospel singers gathered for a funeral Wednesday, January 7. Two hours before the service, in a room at the rear of the church, they sat on either side of the piano as Bill Gaither ran through the music they would sing. "Jeff Easter," he said, "you got your harmonica?" "Yessir, 12 of them," said Easter, whose drawl would make Minnie Pearl sound like she hailed from Brooklyn.

Of course he had his harmonica. For on this day all the singers knew to do was sing. Music is their life, just as it was the life of Jake Hess, the singer whose life they came to celebrate. So they sang, joining in on Gospel songs first sung by four men and a piano, when quartet music was played on AM radio and recorded on 78 rpm. Some in that room had sung with Hess when their hair was their own.

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From across the room, Jeff Crews stood up. He's 28, young enough that all he knows about Hess and The Statesmen Quartet came from stories the old-timers so fondly tell. Crews sings with Paid in Full, a trio that Hess went to New Albany, MS, to hear when the guys were in college. With his introduction, their career has blossomed. Leave it to the young fellow to offer wisdom to the old singers. "Jake told us not to be misled by nostalgia, that these are the good old days," Crews said.

Nevertheless, the past was evident as the service began and the singers, 100 voices strong, filled the choir loft at Morningside Baptist Church in Columbus, GA. In the church were more than 1,000 people, people who knew Hess as family, friend and singer in a career that covered 60 years.

Hess, the son of an Alabama sharecropper, started singing when his audience was the backend of a plow mule. He left the farm when he was 16 and as recently as December 6 was on a stage in Atlanta, singing a final song. He died Sunday, January 4, 11 days after his 76th birthday.

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He sang Gospel, but as the Rev. Michael Guido noted, other possibilities came Hess' way, all because he was Elvis Presley's favorite singer. Guido remembered being summoned to Hess' home in Atlanta in 1957, the year Presley went into the Army. When the rock star told reporters Hess was his favorite, stardom came looking for the quartet singer. "I have a decision to make, and I need help," he told Guido, an evangelist from Metter, GA. Through the night they prayed. Hess described the deal that the record label dangled. Whatever Hess said, the minister's answer was the same. "Jesus said seek ye first the kingdom of heaven." In the wee hours, Hess made up his mind. He said no. "Jake showed he couldn't be bought or compromised," Guido said Wednesday.

Emily Braswell Trotter, who eight weeks ago gave birth to Hess' first great-grandchild, shared another side of the man who 10 years ago moved to Columbus to retire. She talked about a grandfather who enjoyed practical jokes, loud suits and the Atlanta Braves and a man who slept best on a bus. Trotter put his death in the context of a traveling singer. "He's only on a trip singing," she said.

In recent years, Hess held a front-row seat at Gaither's "Homecoming" concerts. They were spurred by a series of videos on which Gaither

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assembled singers of past and present. Through that medium, Hess sang one more time Wednesday on a giant screen hung in back of the choir.

There was music and there were laughs, usually involving the hairpiece that had become image as much as fashion. On the screen, his grandson, Brent Buck, got into the act. Gaither commented on Brent's head of wavy locks and asked him where he got all that hair. "From Papa's suitcase," he answered, delivering his line perfectly.

The Rev. Bill Shorey, Hess' pastor at Morningside, talked about visiting him in the hospital and how he had walked a medical tightrope. "He suffered more medical problems than some small towns," Shorey said.

Then, with Jeff Easter soulfully playing his harmonica, the choir sang about "Amazing Grace." Sonya Isaacs delivered an unorthodox

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arrangement that Hess would have applauded.

Gaither then talked about the boyhood idol who became his buddy. "In a way, I've lost my best friend, but I have lots of memories," he said. Gaither also described how Hess lived for today. "Most people live in the past or future; Jake lived in the present."

Gloria Gaither, the lyricist in the Gaither family, told of Hess' ability to make a person feel important. "I'm just one of the many people who thought he thought I was special." She also mentioned his habit of saying he was "nothin' but fine" when anyone asked how he was feeling, concluding that now he is in a place where he could say he was "nothin' but fine" and not be lying.

When the service ended, friends told stories, from one-time boxer Calvin Newton to record producer Michael Sykes. Newton was a

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Golden Gloves champion, once fighting in a prelim when heavyweight champ Joe Louis fought an exhibition in Columbus. He was a rising star in Gospel music only to have his career shattered when he was sentenced to the federal prison in Atlanta for forgery. "Jake was the only one who'd come see me," Newton said. "He even brought his kids."

Eight months ago, Hess went to the studio to record a final album. He wasn't content to live on past hits. He wanted more. "He always wanted to raise the bar," Sykes said. "He was a pro's pro."

Late Wednesday, with the sun setting and the moon starting to rise, Hess was buried in Juniper, GA. A lone guitarist played softly and there was one more song. "It Is Well With My Soul," they sang, and for just a moment, there was harmony.

JAKE HESS ... A GENUINE AMBASSADOR FOR CHRIST (written by Jim Stover, Crossroads Records)

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I wish I could say that I knew Jake Hess well and for a long time, but unfortunately I didn't have that pleasure.

However, since Crossroads Music Group had the distinct honor and privilege of releasing Jake Hess's final two solo recordings, I was blessed to meet and interact with him a number of times over the last three years.

Without question Jake Hess was a great man and an American original in every sense of the word. There really is something especially descriptive in the term "southern gentleman"—if I ever met one, it was Mr. Jake Hess. This world will never see another like him. He was indeed one of a kind.

No, I wasn't lucky enough to know Jake Hess for a lifetime, but I'm positive that for a lifetime he treated all people equally. I sensed it when

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I initially met him here at the studio. After introducing myself, I spent fifteen minutes or so with Mr. Hess listening to the “All of Me” tracks being recorded and engaging in some light conversation. I knew right away what a dear and gentle soul he was. He was totally unaffected by his lifetime of celebrity.

After that, my interaction with Mr. Hess was primarily by telephone. I will always cherish the memory of our conversations together. Whenever I called to report on his single or to see if he was up to doing an interview, Jake never failed to express his appreciation for the work I did on his behalf before hanging up. I consider it a tremendous honor to have represented Jake Hess as a radio promoter for Crossroads. He was a divinely gifted song stylist. Completely unique.

My heart and prayers especially go out to the Hess family in the loss of their precious loved one. And to the rest of us who are still here and must continue laboring. Jake Hess will be missed by hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. Whether one knew him well or casually, there's no way you can help but deeply admire and respect his sterling character, sparkling personality, and the originality and tone of that God-given voice he was blessed with. Jake had a sparkle in his voice as well as in his eyes!

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Now that he's gone home to be with the Savior he served so well, there is a huge empty space in this world that can never be filled in, paved over, or otherwise eliminated. Thank God we have a legacy of Jake Hess recordings and especially the Gaither videos. Seeing Jake sing is as refreshing as hearing him.

Elegant, classic, honest, honorable, distinctive, gentle, faithful, original.
If we ever decide to downsize our English vocabulary, following are two words that could easily replace the preceding ones and many others of like kind...

Jake Hess.

PAUL HEIL OF THE GOSPEL GREATS REMEMBERS JAKE HESS

Jake Hess was one of a kind, in so many ways. He had a unique personality. He had a unique singing style that has often been emulated, but never equaled. He was a man of integrity. I've never heard a bad word about Jake Hess. Everyone has always spoken of

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him with the most admiration. He was a gentleman. He would treat everyone humbly and with respect. He loved to sing. That should be quite obvious, but it really was a passion of his. He loved the Lord and loved singing about Him. I believe he especially loved to sing "relationship" songs -- songs about our relationship with the Lord, and His love for us. And he was consistent. Jake was always Jake. Every time we had a chance to interview -- or just chat -- he was always the same. And that was a good thing. With Jake's passing, we surely have lost another giant of the Southern Gospel music field. Considering how many health problems he's had for so many years, though, we should thank God we had him, his music, his influence and his example as long as we did! Jake will definitely be missed.

- Paul Heil

PS: The second hour of "The Gospel Greats" program airing the weekend of January 24th/25th was a special tribute to the life and music of Jake Hess.

**JOHN MILLS OF KSGI RADIO IN WICHITA, KS
REMEMBERS JAKE HESS**

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Jake Hess was truly one of the GREAT legends and pioneers in the Gospel Music field. Over the years I have met many, many singers. NONE of them have ever been as kind and thoughtful as Jake. He has been my favorite Gospel Music artist to speak to for years. I had that opportunity on several occasions. The last time I had the privilege was the evening of the last Gaither Homecoming Concert in Wichita, in 2003. I was doing some live interviews with many of the singers performing that evening, like Bill Gaither, Lauren Talley, Dean & Kim Hopper, Sheri Easter and many others. But, my absolute thrill was to have Jake sit down and the two of us talk about his distinguished career in Gospel Music. That was truly the highpoint of my 15-year career in Christian radio.

I do know quite a bit of Gospel Music history. I used that knowledge in my interview with Jake last year. I wasn't trying to show how much I knew, but I was just trying to show my listeners how much this gentleman meant to the Industry in which I work and love. After we got off the air, Jake told me I told him things about his career that he had forgotten! When he got back to his record company, he told them that John Mills, the DJ in Wichita, knew a whole lot of gospel Music history. He complimented me so highly that Jim Stover of Crossroads Music called me up and relayed that information to me. What an

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honor for me.

I don't get star struck any more. I've come to realize that these gospel artists are regular people like you and me. However, Jake was a true legend. He was a true pioneer. He was the founder of the Imperials back in 1963. Over the years he sang with the Statesmen, Imperials and Masters Five. In his latter days he was a member of the Old Friends Quartet. He has been a mainstay in the Gaither Homecoming concerts and videos. More than all of that, he really was a kind man.

A few years ago, I walked backstage at a Gaither Homecoming Concert. Jake was speaking to the late Bob Cain. I was walking by and Jake stopped talking and looked at me and asked, "How are you Sir" and reached out and shook my hand. He did this before he knew I worked for a radio station.

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Jake sang many years about going to Heaven. I have to believe that Heaven is much brighter with Jake there.