

God gives honky-tonk crooner new voice, reason to sing_61305

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Country
singer
Johnny
Bush
performs
a benefit
concert
for the
Baptist
Child &
Family
Services
Youth
Ranch.
(Photo
by Craig
Bird)

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By Craig Bird

Baptist Child & Family Services

LULING—Johnny Bush, who has made a career singing about—and much of his life living—hard times, recently performed a benefit concert for people who understand exactly what those ballads really are about.

“Some people think it's strange to see a honky-tonk singer at a Baptist function,” he told the crowd at Baptist Child & Family Services Youth Ranch near Luling, where he headlined a benefit concert for the emergency shelter for abused children.

“But I think it is every Christian's duty to help others less fortunate. These kids know what it's like to get the back of a hand. This is a chance to give them a helping hand instead.”

The Texas Country Music Hall of Famer now is in his fifth decade as a performer. But the extra emphasis on “Christian duty” is just a few years old.

“You're hearing a miracle tonight,” he explained. From 1972 to 1986, he couldn't talk except in a strangled, raspy whisper. And for a lot longer than that, he ran from a personal relationship with God.

One night in 1972, with his recording of “Whiskey River” at No. 1 on the charts and his cross-country tours sold out, his vocal chords clamped shut. Doctors couldn't find a cause or a cure—even though they tried everything from acupuncture to addictive-level doses of Valium.

His professional world crumbled. With pain, Bush could force enough air through his vocal chords to perform an occasional small show, though the soaring range that led fans to call him the “Country Caruso” was cut in half.

But in the mid-1980s, two events—one medical and one spiritual—changed his life. In 1985, new speech therapy exercises gave back 75 percent of his range and some limited speech. And in 1986, he talked with Buckner

Fanning, then-pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, about faith, God and vocal chords.

“I wanted God back in my life, but I thought God was mad at me for my music,” Bush explained. “Plus, I didn't want to embarrass my daughter by showing up at Trinity (where she had been an active member for several years) and having folks feel I shouldn't be there.”

Fanning told Bush that, while God certainly wanted to play an active part in everyone's life, he also wanted his children to be healthy and whole. So in 1986, Bush joined Trinity. Since then, every Sunday and Wednesday when he is in town, Bush is seated in his familiar pew. And if some people still condemn his material and venues, his fellow musicians have welcomed his open faith.

“They ask, 'Would your church really let somebody like me come to worship with them.' And I just grin and say: 'You bet. Why don't you try it and see,'” Bush said.

Through 2002, the throat exercises kept him singing—but just barely. Then his daughter, Gayle Litton, approached him about helping out Alpha Home—a Trinity ministry to women with alcohol and drug abuse problems.

“His response, 'What can I do? I can't even read bedtime stories to my grandchildren?’” she recalled. “My response was, 'How should I know? Ask God yourself.' But I guarantee that if you turn your life over to servanthood, he'll give you the tools to do what he wants you to do.”

Days later, a throat specialist called about a new procedure to treat the symptoms of spasmodic dysphonia—injecting Botox directly into the throat. Suddenly, he could talk—and sing—without pain.

“Since then, I've been doing about 100 concerts a year and packing in as many benefit performances for folks like the Youth Ranch and Habitat for

Humanity as I can," Bush said.

He remains convinced his honky-tonk songs have a solid a moral lesson.

"These are tormented souls who have made some bad mistakes, and if you make those same mistakes you'll wind up in torment too," he insisted.

Real country music and real Christianity share a common commitment to one thing, Bush feels—"to be honest about the realities of life." But for Johnny Bush, that now includes the honest reality of a loving Lord who cares about everybody—even folks who go to honky-tonks.

In one of his hits from 40 years ago, Bush protested that God had made his life tough. "This time you made me a mountain, a mountain that I may never climb," he sang. He certainly felt that way many times as he struggled with his throat problems.

But the renewed Johnny Bush is seen in a Christian song he recently wrote: "I want a drink of that water that the Man turned into wine."

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