

Review: Kurt Kaiser: Icon and Conscience of Contemporary Christian Music

June 23, 2025

Kurt Kaiser: Icon and Conscience of Contemporary Christian Music

By Terry W. York (Big Bear Books)

Terry York, retired professor of Christian ministry and church music at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, hits all the right notes in his biography, *Kurt Kaiser: Icon and Conscience of Contemporary Christian Music*.

York's book beautifully illuminates the musician's contributions to the changing landscape of sacred music in the 20th century while balancing the nuances of his musical genius, spiritual grounding, and commitment to the church and authentic worship with the business of contemporary Christian music. ☒

Well-researched and documented through personal and family archives, oral histories, interviews, recordings, and both published and unpublished sources, York paints a portrait of an extraordinarily gifted man God used to touch hearts and connect church worship and culture in fresh ways.

The story began Dec. 17, 1934, in Chicago with Kurt's birth to Otto and Elisabeth Kaiser, the middle of their five children. Eight years earlier, Otto had immigrated from Germany with 32 members of his family, although he

had lost an older brother in World War I. Elisabeth joined him after accepting his marriage proposal by letter.

God, music and family filled their home. They attended a Plymouth Brethren Church, read the Bible, prayed and sang hymns each evening.

Kurt, who lived with health issues throughout his life, picked out his first tune on the piano at age 4 or 5, demonstrating his perfect pitch. The children took lessons from Frau Liesch, who had studied with a student of Franz Liszt. When his high school orchestra needed a cellist, Kurt taught himself.

God never wasted a moment preparing the extraordinary musician for his call. At age 9 or 10, Kurt accompanied kids on a radio program and a couple of years later regularly improvised background story music for a cowboy radio serial.

From there, he played for Youth for Christ rallies and spent his junior year in Montana with Montana Gospel Crusades where he met missionary Jim Elliott, who deeply affected him, and Patricia Anderson whom he married in 1956. Countless encounters with individuals whose names read like a religious and musical “Who’s Who” impacted his future, as did two music degrees from Northwestern University.

York weaves in details of the talented musician’s move to Waco to work with Jarrell McCracken and Word Records, where he recruited, arranged, occasionally accompanied and produced albums for a host of artists. In a town with “a Baptist church on every corner,” the Kaisers put down roots at Seventh and James Baptist Church, where they raised their four children.

Kaiser graciously worked with the Baylor Religious Hour Choir that performed on NBC television his best-known composition, the musical *Tell It Like It Is* (1969) written with Ralph Carmichael.

His song “Pass It On” from the musical and his later “Oh, How He Loves You and Me” (1975) continue to appear in hymnals, be performed in worship and sung around campfires. With music and musicals, he sought to bring youth to Christ and church and keep them there.

York takes the reader through the sale of Word and the company’s move to Nashville, the parting of ways, the decision to remain in Waco, the formation of Kurt Kaiser Music and a myriad of awards, including Doves, honorary doctorates and induction into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

Yet, “fame never came home to live,” because Kaiser saw his music as a prayer and lived with an attitude of “look what God can do.” A music minister at heart, he was generous, consistent, authentic, principled, gifted, discerning, inspiring, insightful, warm, humble and demanded high standards with grace.

Kurt Kaiser’s earthly life ended at age 83 on Nov. 12, 2018, but his music lives not only in the notes he wrote and the lyrics he penned, but also in the lives of those who heard God’s whisper through his music, responded and continue to “Pass It On.” Thank you, Terry York, for passing on Kurt Kaiser’s legacy in a biography that can teach us all.

Kathy Robinson Hillman, former president

Texas WMU and Baptist General Convention of Texas

Waco