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He touched us

December 20, 2007 ¦ Mitzi Bible

Many can remember the days when Doug Oldham would take the stage at Thomas Road Baptist Church and, with his strong voice, belt out “The King is Coming” on “The Old Time Gospel Hour.”

It was the 1970s and the name Doug Oldham was synonymous with gospel music.

“People don’t realize that back in the day he was filling up auditoriums all over the country," says Charles Billingsley, TRBC’s current worship leader.

The fact is Oldham was internationally known, too, with fans from Canada to Holland (where he was No. 1 in gospel music for a while) to all across England (where he sang for the queen). He was on the road quite a bit, having first traveled with evangelist Benny Hinn and with the Billy Graham Crusades. He even traveled by bus with the Rev. Jerry Falwell to church and school auditoriums as they raised money for the new Lynchburg Baptist College in the summer of 1971; Doug provided the music while Falwell Sr. preached.

Now, 30-plus years later, Oldham, 76, is not the traveler he used to be. He is in a wheelchair due to a broken back two years ago. His wife, Laura Lee, jokes that “he still rides, just now he gets pushed,” to which Oldham laughs and says, “See? Everything goes full circle.”

But just a year after his injury, Oldham was able to make the trip of a lifetime.

In November 2006, with his nurse accompanying him, he flew to Nashville to be inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame.

“I’m in there with Elvis and all them ‘big shots,’” Oldham jokes in an exaggerated southern twang.

Oldham received the honors after an introduction by his close friend, gospel music icon Bill Gaither. His family was there to see him receive the award (all but one daughter who could not make the trip).

“Not all awards are historic, but I think that particular one was because of the major contribution he made,” Gaither said in a telephone interview. “It was a very deserving moment.”

Gaither, who started out as an accompanist for Oldham, calls his friend a “unique communicator, with a great heart.” He said he is inspired by his faithfulness to Christian music, a popular genre that Oldham “had a special role” in developing.

“People liked him because he sang with such feeling,” Gaither said. “His spirit in spite of his bad health is amazing to me. The optimism I hear in his voice in spite of the fact I know he has endured a lot of pain with his back is amazing.”

Oldham said being confined to a wheelchair made the trip to Nashville “kind of wild,” but it’s actually been kind of wild for Oldham this past year — in the way of awards.

In August, Oldham received the first-ever Lifetime Champion Award from Thomas Road Baptist Church for his years of Christian service. In October, a remodeled room in the Fine Arts building at Liberty University was named Oldham Recital Hall; he was honored at a faculty festival and ceremony there when the work was complete. The same anonymous donor who made the renovation possible also donated money to start the Doug Oldham Music Scholarship program at LU.

“I am excited because it’s (the honors) all coming at a time when I have a broken back,” Oldham says. “It’s kind of fun that the Lord is using this time to have all these crazy things come in — totally unexpected.”

Although the Hall of Fame gained Oldham national recognition, he says he treasures the honors he received right here at home.

Billingsley, who presented the TRBC award along with the Rev. Jonathan Falwell, says he still has a phone message saved from the day after he presented the award and Oldham called to tell him, through tears and weeping, how blessed he was to be recognized in that way.

“It was a no-brainer he would be our first [recipient],” Billingsley said. “He represents true Christ-likeness in that he is broken and humble and a true worshipper — I find great inspiration in him because of that.”

Dr. John Hugo, chairman of LU’s Department of Music and Humanities, says the choice to name the updated hall after Oldham, who sang for five presidents, recorded more than 64 albums and earned two Dove awards, was a natural decision.

“It seemed to me that he had done so much for the ministry and he needed to be recognized. … He brought prestige and visibility to the music at Thomas Road Baptist Church and here at Liberty.”

When asked what he considers his top accomplishments in life, Oldham says, “I just reckon people who have found the Lord … because you don’t sing for the awards, you sing for the Lord. People always ask what my favorite song is and my favorite song is whatever reaches out to the people to challenge them to serve the Lord.”

Oldham’s wife says she has received “hundreds and hundreds” of letters (and they still flow in to this day) telling Doug what one of his songs meant to someone at a particular time in their lives.

“It’s always very personal,” she says. “I think that is probably one of his unique qualities — he touches people so at a personal level, rather than as a concert singer. He touches their heart.”

Through the years, Oldham has seen many changes at Thomas Road Baptist Church, including the loss of Falwell Sr. this year. His death hurt him deeply.

“Outside of my family, he was the best friend I ever had,” he says. “I didn’t see how the church could begin to continue — he was so great, so good.

“And then,” Oldham says, “Jonathan just walked in and picked it up. … I look back now and remember what Jerry used to say: ‘God knows when we have fulfilled what He gave us to do.’ And I’ve come to believe that the Lord was saying Jonathan will take us into a whole new era, a new generation.”