



# Music In His Soul

**R**alph Carmichael '47, the son of an Assemblies of God pastor from Quincy, Illinois, had no formal music education but became one of the most important figures in Christian music in the twentieth century. He heeded no boundaries between secular and sacred music types, and used musical techniques perfected in his work with artists like Nat King Cole to re-invent gospel music at a time when the use of brass and string instruments and upbeat arrangements was considered worldly and profane. Now regarded as the father of contemporary Christian music, Carmichael led a revolution that forever changed "church music."

The home of Ralph and Mar Carmichael sits atop a mountain ridge in Ventura County and offers limitless views in three directions, from Simi Valley to the Channel Islands twelve miles off the coast.

Carmichael, a cowboy hobbyist and former owner of a dozen Arabian and miniature horses, wears a cowboy vest, boots and a bolo tie with a clasp marked with a "C." He is tall, with an arm span that measures six feet six inches. When he first started conducting, he once noted, he looked like a wounded helicopter.

He shows visitors into his office, where he still composes at the piano his parents bought when he was a child in San Jose. The room is furnished with cowboy art, a leather saddle and a clock that whinnies on the hour. An honorary doctorate degree from VU hangs next to the door. A Dove Award sits unassumingly on a wooden chest in the living room.

Speaking with Carmichael is like having an insider's tour of music history with a guide who is full of music and mischief. Sometimes he leaps to his feet or breaks into song to demonstrate a point. He laughs often. In the background, classical music plays constantly as he discusses his life and career.

Carmichael was born in 1927 and grew up in Illinois, North Dakota and San Jose, California. His father pastored for fifty years. His mother Adele was an accomplished Bible teacher ordained by the Assemblies of God in 1918. (She passed away in 2003, at 101 years old, on her way to teach a Bible study.) Both parents loved the Lord

deeply but also flouted conventional Pentecostal mores. Adele dressed fashionably and fixed her hair and "it didn't impinge her godliness in the least," says Ralph. Later, both parents attended San Jose State teachers college, scandalizing their ministry colleagues.

When Ralph was three years old, his father put a violin in his hands, perhaps out of spite that his church had forced him to give up the instrument when he'd been converted. The fiddle, they had said, was an instrument of the devil and would keep him from maturing in Christ. But for Ralph, it was a revelation.

"That started my curiosity for sounds, chords, rhythms," Ralph says.

He was never without a music lesson, even during the Great Depression. He played in the Teenie Weenie Orchestra in Quincy, and soon picked up the trumpet and drums as well, on instruments donated by former professional musicians who had been converted. Ralph's father let him listen to all kinds of music and scorned the idea that the radio was, as many Christians called it, the devil's little black box.

"I was captivated by the chordal explosions I heard on the radio," Ralph says. "I felt a sadness that we didn't have that in our church. Our church orchestra sounded weak and terrible by comparison. It was embarrassing. Why? Why did we have to settle? Why couldn't we use those gorgeous rhythms, sweeping strings, the brass, the stirring chords? That started to control everything I did."

As a teenager he played violin with the San Jose civic symphony and attended big band concerts. Everything he heard he "took apart to see how it was made ... then found a little cubby hole for it and tried to use it somehow" in his own arrangements. At 17 he enrolled at SCBC, now Vanguard University, to become a preacher like his father, grandfather, three uncles and five cousins. But one day someone heard him practicing his violin, and soon he was recruited to play at chapels, weddings and evangelistic crusades.

"Within thirty days of being in college, my life was already consumed with music," he says.

He started a campus men's quartet, ensembles and mixed groups of

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all kinds, blending jazz and classical music techniques with gospel songs and hymns. His musical “experiments” proved instantly controversial. His bands were unwelcome at many churches, and he was not allowed to store the baritone saxophone on campus because of its worldly associations with big band music. Had it not been for Edna Harrison, president Irvine Harrison’s wife, Carmichael’s college career might have been cut short.

“The president’s wife was my best PR person,” he says. “She raised the money for our band uniforms. When we got criticized she stood in the breach and helped us. She was a great source of encouragement.”

He might have left SCBC for another reason, too: he was failing miserably. As he flourished musically, playing his violin at Youth for Christ rallies at the Hollywood Bowl and touring California with his gospel ensembles, he all but ignored his studies. To make it worse, he was plain ornery, he says.

He played pranks on the head of the music department, like putting a live chicken down a fireplace during a campus choir concert. At one point the president confined Carmichael to campus for a semester because of an offense. He sneaked off anyway and rode his Harley Davidson motorcycle around town all night.

“The school was very tolerant of me,” he says. “They cut me all the slack in the world. Here I was flunking and not only that, I wasn’t paying my bill.”

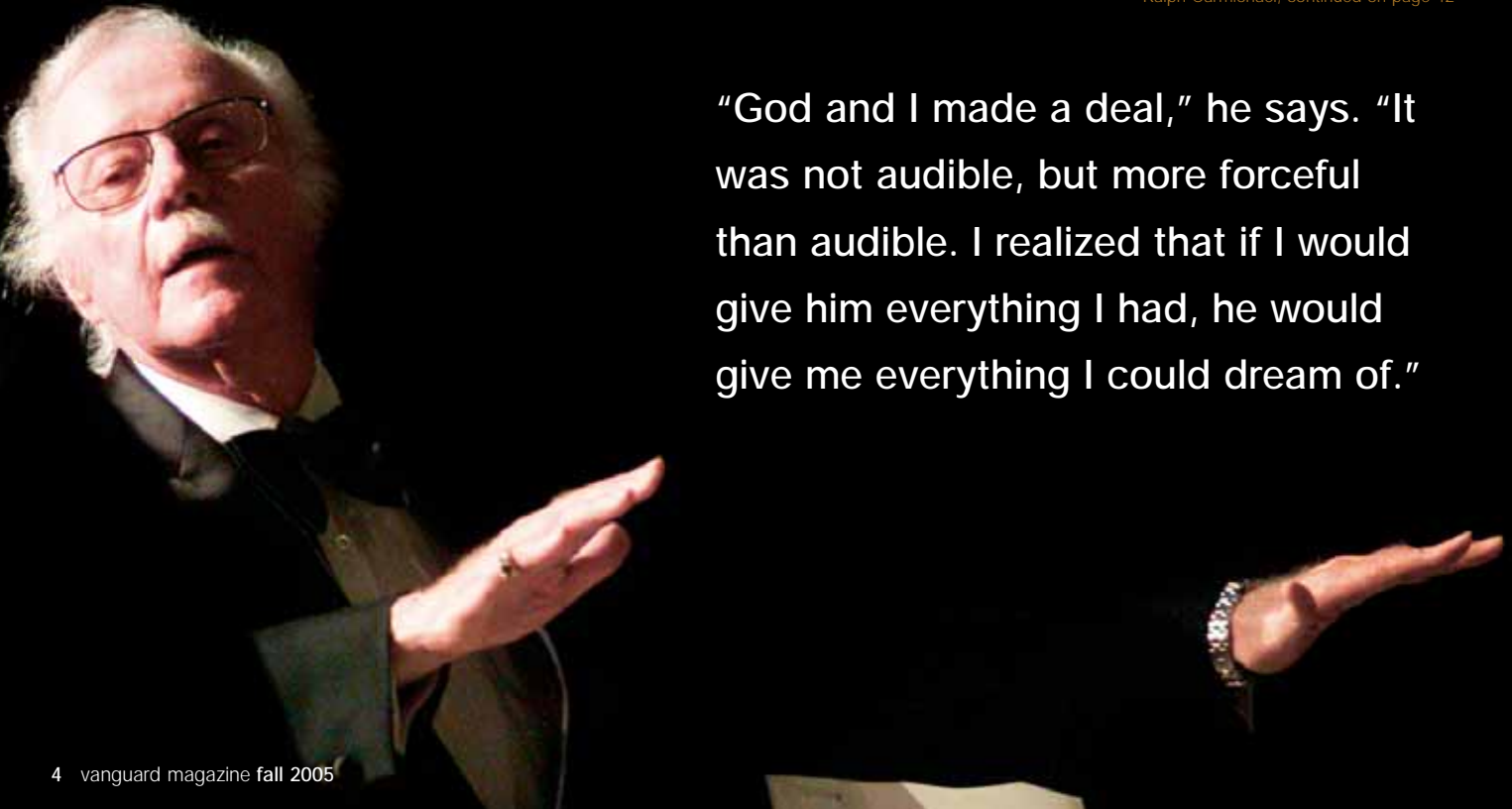
After four years, Carmichael had failed so many classes that he was not allowed to graduate. But his musical skill was so apparent that the school asked him to produce their graduation exercises at Pasadena Civic Auditorium. He was allowed to cross the stage in cap and gown and receive his “diploma” — a blank folder — with a wink from President Harrison. Almost immediately, the school hired him on their faculty to start their new department of evangelistic

music; half his salary went to pay his outstanding student bills.

As a professor at SCBC, his musical efforts culminated with the formation of a full-sized band which began playing events around town. Reaction was mixed from the Christian community. One church made them hide the drums behind a curtain; a pastor in Oakland stopped the band mid-song because the music sounded too worldly. But after a performance at a men’s fellowship in Pasadena, Carmichael’s band was invited to audition for television. So began the “Campus Christian Hour” on Channel 2, which drew so much hate mail from Christians that the station asked for more shows.

“That changed my life because originally I only wrote when it was convenient,” says Carmichael. “Now I had a weekly thirty-minute show I had to write for. I learned what it means to fight deadlines. It’s not unlike a pastor who has to deliver a new ser-

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“God and I made a deal,” he says. “It was not audible, but more forceful than audible. I realized that if I would give him everything I had, he would give me everything I could dream of.”



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mon and Bible study every week.”

After six months, the Christian response began to change. People sent contributions and thanked Carmichael for making music their children enjoyed. A year into the show, “Campus Christian Hour” won an Emmy, which Ralph received from California governor Earl Warren. The show lasted 76 weeks, until the local union shut them down for using non-union musicians.

Carmichael then became minister of music at several Los Angeles churches. He had also written and arranged for Bob Bowman ’36 and John Broger’s ’39 “Call of the Orient” radio program, and felt comfortable accepting his first invitation to score a Billy Graham Association film in 1951. It was the first of twenty Billy Graham films he would score, including *Joni* and *The Cross and the Switchblade*. During this time, Carmichael married Evangeline Otto and they had a child, Carol.

By the late ’50s, secular producers had taken notice of Carmichael’s radio and film work. He was invited to assist the composer at “I Love Lucy” and was soon arranging music for that show, and for “Bonanza,” “The Roy Rogers & Dale Evans Show” and for singer Rosemary Clooney. He scored the movie *The Blob* and arranged and composed music

for a Bing Crosby Christmas special, which prompted his denomination to strongly suggest he not apply for renewal of his ordination.

Carmichael first conducted in Capitol Records’ Studio A on a groundbreaking orchestral hymns project for Earle Williams of Sacred Records. The album was too controversial for Christian radio and it almost bankrupted Sacred Records, but the mixer on the project was so impressed with Carmichael that he took the recording to Capitol’s president. The label invited Carmichael to arrange music and conduct the orchestra for a project they had in the works — a Christmas album by Nat King Cole. The album eventually sold millions.

That started eight years of touring and recording with Cole, and led to work with dozens of other artists including Peggy Lee, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Jimmy Durante, Lena Horne, Don Rickles, Red Skelton and Roger

Williams. With Williams, Carmichael scored half a dozen albums and won a gold record for “Born Free.” Studio A at Capitol Records became Carmichael’s second home.

But his marriage and spiritual life were suffering. Years earlier, around the time he came to SCBC, he had committed his life to Christ and “God and I made a deal,” he says. “It was not audible, but more forceful than audible. I realized that if I would give him everything I had, he would give me everything I could dream of.”

Now, twenty years later, Carmichael felt he had drifted from his part of that commitment. He was working almost non-stop, taking stimulants and neglecting his family. He and his wife divorced, and Ralph found himself arranging music ’round the clock in a motel room while his personal life and finances fell apart.

“It wasn’t fun anymore,” he wrote later in his autobiography. “It was survival.”

In despair he began writing hymns and

Above: In Studio A at Capitol Records. At right: Ralph and Mar Carmichael. “When I do a concert, the only reason is to glorify God and share the story of the gospel,” he says.





Christian choruses, some of them for the Billy Graham Association films he had continued to do. Feeling spiritually renewed, he longed for an outlet to publish his work, but most Christian publishers shunned him. He was finally able to convince Jarrell McCracken of Word Music to co-found Lexicon Music with him. That label, along with Light Records which Carmichael also founded, would prove revolutionary, launching the careers of Andrae Crouch, Dino, the Winans, the Rez Band, Bryan Duncan and Reba Rambo.

Commissioned by the Billy Graham Association to score the film *The Restless Ones*, Carmichael composed “He’s Everything To Me” which sold four million copies and became a Christian classic. He also wrote “Love Is Surrender,” which was rejected by a Youth for Christ film project, but was recorded by the Carpenters on their album *We’ve Only Just Begun*, which sold millions. In 1965, Ralph married Marvella Grace.

By 1970 Carmichael had left secular music entirely and committed himself to innovating church music. He wrote a folk musical, *Tell It Like It Is*, with Kurt Kaiser of Word Records, which sold more than 250,000 copies and captured the excitement of youth culture and the message of the gospel. In 1968, through Light Records, Andrae Crouch became the first black artist distributed by Word Records; it was possibly the first black gospel album released by any white gospel label.

Carmichael began holding hundreds of

Christian music workshops around the country, and was often heckled for bringing rock and roll into the church, just as he had met resistance earlier for bringing in jazz and swing. As if to help emphasize the point, Elvis Presley recorded Carmichael’s song “Reach Out to Jesus” on his 1971 album *He Touched Me*. The album won a Grammy.

During the ’70s and ’80s, the contemporary Christian music industry Carmichael had helped create began to flourish. Carmichael served as president of the Gospel Music Association during the early ’80s, was musical director for the Young Messiah tour in the ’90s and was inducted into the GMA Hall of Fame.

Today, Carmichael has made 200 records and written more than 3,000 arrangements, which are filed away neatly in his home library. At 78, he’s having “the time of my life with the big band” he takes to some of America’s largest churches. He still conducts music at Billy Graham crusades, records in Capitol Records’ Studio A and recently made three albums with the London Symphony Orchestra and Choir. He has upcoming symphony concerts in the Philippines and Sweden.

He dreams that some day VU will have a top-quality big band, symphony and concert hall. He feels it’s “time for me to pay back for how they gave me the freedom and their blessing to experiment,” he says. “I want to do everything I can for them.”

Top left: Ralph Carmichael with Hal Lindsay, Jimmy Baker, George Burns and Cary Grant. Top right: Arranging music at his home office on the piano he grew up with.

As for his legacy, he hopes he has “freed us up to use all the musical forms to communicate the gospel message and theology,” he says. “I’m for everything that works. To categorize certain types of music as spiritual or non-spiritual is a mistake. Let’s use it all.”

He recalls the plaque that hung in his childhood home which read, “Life is short, ‘twill soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

“Through the years, that was my compass,” he says. “When I do a concert, the only reason is to glorify God and share the story of the gospel. I want people to get their money’s worth, to hear something technically excellent, but I want them to be surprised to leave with something intangible — or maybe the only tangible thing — and that is their spirits are lifted. They met with God. God take me out of commission if I ever leave that purpose behind.”