



"The Gospel Greats" Celebrates 30 Years Of Broadcasting

A Conversation With Paul & Shelia Heil

By John Lanier

Celebrating thirty years on the air, "The Gospel Greats" is one of the longest running syndicated gospel music radio programs heard around the world. As creator and host of the popular show, Paul Heil is undisputedly the most beloved and well-known radio personality in gospel music. His wife, Shelia, works faithfully behind the scenes, handling most of the listener correspondence, scheduling interviews and managing the office.

I find Paul and Shelia to be very gracious people of strong faith, unwavering conviction and Christian integrity. It is always a pleasure to visit with them. Here are highlights from our recent interview...

John: Paul, you're actually now in your fifth decade of radio, television and commercial announcing. Take me back to where your career began...how did it all start?

Paul: I've had a fascination with broadcasting - and, more generally, the news media - for almost as long as I can remember. By late grade school I was editing the school newspaper. I was editor of the high school paper my senior year. But my interest was turning to radio. By 7th or 8th grade I had built a little radio station in my bedroom closet, and it actually broadcast to the neighbors (FCC Part 15 restricted radiation device, if you're curious about its legality). Before I was out of high school I was working part-time at a local radio station. And I've been involved directly in radio ever since (although I was a television news director for two years back in the late 70s).

John: The Southern Gospel music industry and fans have honored you with numerous awards for your involvement in Southern Gospel music over the years. In addition to hosting your radio program, "The Gospel Greats," you were a founding member of the Southern Gospel Music Guild and served as president of the organization for nine years. You also served as vice president of the Gospel Music Association, and you're a member of the advisory board for the Southern Gospel Music Association (Hall of Fame and Museum). You obviously have a great love and appreciation for Southern Gospel music. When did this interest begin?

Paul: My interest in Southern Gospel music goes 'way back.' My folks had LPs in the house by the Blackwood Brothers, Statesmen and other major groups of the day, and

we'd listen to them regularly. And we'd attend major concert events, such as those the Couriers did (the all-night sings) in Harrisburg, PA. But my actual professional involvement didn't begin until I started "The Gospel Greats" program. My brother had a singing group and read the Singing News, a copy of which he shared with me. Their Top 40 list seemed a perfect basis for "The Gospel Greats" program, and remains so to this day (with a once-a-month Top 20 Countdown).

John: And here you are thirty years later still enjoying the success of "The Gospel Greats"... Happy 30th Anniversary!

Paul: Thank you! "The Gospel Greats" program was first aired the first weekend in February, 1980. The first program aired on a handful of stations, but the first to actually sign up was WRIS in Roanoke, Virginia, a station that still carries the program to this day. The Gospel Greats has always been a syndicated program. It did not start as something local and then expand. In fact, the program wasn't even heard in my hometown until many months after it became available.

John: Working mostly behind the scenes, your wife, Shelia, has been a tremendous asset to the program. Wasn't it shortly after the premier of the show that the two of you met and later married?

Paul: We met a year or so later at a local Christian radio station that was carrying my program. (What a surprise, huh?) One day, when I stopped by the station to deliver a tape, I met this young lady who was doing volunteer work there. She was familiar with the program, but not the host...

Shelia: ...When someone at the station told me who he was, I refused to believe it, thinking that the program must be

done in Nashville or somewhere else, surely not locally. In time, that misconception was cleared up. And the rest, as they say, is history.

John: (To Shelia) Paul attributes much of his success to your faithfulness and tireless labors you endeavor together, and you both are a tremendous blessing to your audience. How would you describe Paul in one word?

Shelia: Integrity. Paul is a man of integrity. His integrity comes across in that he feels his production should be as good as - or better than - any secular show, since this program is associated with, and for the glory of, God. And that concern is shown by the amount of time it takes to produce a "little" two hour program. He holds to high standards of living. One time I remember Paul telling me that if there was anything that he did that would bring down the name of Jesus, he would quit producing the program. He feels strongly that how he lives needs to reflect Jesus Christ. That is integrity. I am proud of Paul. I'm proud of what he has accomplished. Most of all, I am proud of the way he lives his life - for Christ - and with integrity.

John: Paul, during the span of your broadcasting career, what are some of the most notable changes you've seen in the Southern Gospel music industry?

Paul: One change I have been very happy to see is that I believe there is much more ministry focus in Southern Gospel music today by the major artists, in general, than was once the case. Although it's always been there because of what Gospel music is, today it's more overt, more out-front than in the past. This is a very good thing. "Negative changes" occur when artists (1) forget the ministry foundation of the music or (2) take the music outside those (subjectively defined) parameters of what stylistically can be called Southern Gospel. They can do what they want stylistically, of course, but let's not call it Southern Gospel if it's outside those parameters. Unfortunately, it's hard to define what those "parameters" are, and,

like most things, it differs from individual to individual.

John: To the delight of listeners, special editions of "The Gospel Greats" aired during the month of February, commemorating the show's 30th anniversary.

Paul: Yes...on the first weekend, I did something I had never done before. I brought back the 'Featured Artist' segments from our very first program thirty years ago. The featured artists were the Happy Goodman Family, and our interview was with Howard Goodman. I have since heard from a lot of people who say how great it was to hear Howard's voice again. I even used the very same 'Featured Artists' songs that I did back thirty years ago. I had other guests on the program, too, reminiscing about the past thirty years and about "The Gospel Greats" program. It was fun.

A couple of weeks later, Bill Gaither was my special guest throughout the entire two-hour program. It's very rare for me to wander outside my studio to do a program, but this was recorded in his office in Indiana.

John: Having interviewed hundreds of people throughout your career, you have a treasury of memories. Could you share a memorable moment that comes to mind?

Paul: I remember interviewing the late J. D. Sumner one time. We were both sitting in my car at an outdoor event, using a portable recorder. J. D., of course, was known for his gruff persona. But anyone who really knew J. D. knew that he had a heart as big as all outdoors. During that interview I asked J. D. how, in years future, he would like to be remembered. I looked over and saw his eyes watering up. He said, "I'd like people to remember the real J. D. Sumner." So now you know.

John: In your newsletters and correspondence with listeners, you and Shelia always share words of truth from the Bible and offer inspirational thoughts. I want ask each of you to briefly share your heart concerning the current social, political, cultural and spiritual cli-

mate in our country. How do we cope with the uncertainties we are facing as a nation today?

Shelia: I believe God is speaking to this generation as we look at the shape of the world. I believe He is saying, "Wake up." I am a firm believer that time on this earth is short. The end for us could come by death, after which we'll be raised from the grave. The end could come by watching Christ come back in the clouds. Either way, I think it is soon. This should fill us with joy. To anyone reading this, who is filled with fear at the thought of your life ending on this earth, I'd invite you to look to Jesus Christ. He is waiting for you to approach Him. He is closer than you can imagine but He won't step in where He isn't welcome. If you reach your hand and heart out to Christ, He'll accept an invitation to come in and cleanse all your sins. Then you can live a life filled with His peace and you can anticipate His soon return to claim you.

Paul: I believe it is absolutely essential that we as Christians hold on to the basics of the Gospel. We must embrace (and live out) the fundamental truths of our faith. There is absolutely no room for compromise or equivocation. We're seeing far too much of that today from people who call themselves Christians, even some in leadership. What's happening to our society is the result of the church's failure, all too often, to abide by the fundamentals. There is a right and there is a wrong, and God's Word is the final arbiter. And I believe there is more need today than ever to share the Gospel boldly with everyone possible. The time is short.

Our nation truly is facing many uncertainties, but in such times it's great to know the One about whom we can be absolutely certain - the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. And our faith in Him can be sure. Keep praying. He is still in control, and we can watch everyday with curiosity and even excitement to see how He's going to get us through this awful mess in which we find ourselves as a nation and as a society.

www.thegospelgreats.com

