

Copyrighted Material *"Anyone who reads this book and listens to Calvin Newton sing will discover what I have known all along—he is the finest gospel singer there has ever been."*

—Jake Hess

# Bad Boy of Gospel Music

THE  
CALVIN  
NEWTON  
STORY



**Russ Cheatham**

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**Gospel Music**

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# **Bad Boy** of **Gospel Music**

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*The Calvin Newton Story*

**Russ Cheatham**

University Press of Mississippi / Jackson

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In all, ninety-one people were interviewed between July 1997 and July 2002. Some of the interviews lasted only a few minutes, while others consumed hours. Several people were interviewed more than once. A few

followed up with letters containing additional details or memorabilia. Unfortunately, six of those interviewed have since passed away.

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# Prologue

*Alexandria, Indiana, 1994*

On the video, a group of gospel music singers, many of them senior citizens, a few of them legends, have just concluded a heartfelt rendition of “The Old Rugged Cross,” one of the most popular hymns of the twentieth century. The room is filled with emotion. Some have their eyes closed in prayer, while others seem lost in somber reflection. Written by a Methodist minister, this powerful song recounts a tale of suffering, shame, and lost sinners. It seems the perfect foreshadowing for the story about to be told. A handsome sandy-haired man, now standing, clutches a microphone expertly, just as he has done hundreds of times previously. As the song ends, with the words “and exchange it some day for a crown,” he begins speaking softly in a smooth tenor voice: “When I was in high school, my daddy was a ‘Holy Roller’ preacher and I was a boy soprano. So, I got beat up every night—I did.” A sprinkling of smiles and light chuckles occur in response to the mention of “Holy Roller” preachers and getting beat up every night. The speaker continues, raising the index finger of his right hand into the air. “So, I said, ‘I got to stop this; this is killing me.’ So I learned how to box. Suddenly, nobody bothered me.” The man’s eyes light up and his voice quickens. “I could sing as high as I wanted to.” The audience, composed entirely of entertainers, are now listening in rapt attention, even those who know how the sad story ends. The leader of the group, who is smiling, plays soft tones on the piano as the man continues to tell what is obviously the story of his life.

“So, then, somebody said, ‘Cal, you can sing. I want you to sing in my quartet.’ So, I thought, ‘Well, I know how to make it; all I got to do is be

tough.’” (The statement is illuminating, for it reveals how at an early age a young man learned to cope with the world: through fighting and rebellion.) He adds, in a voice now quavery and uncertain, “Thought I could handle it by myself, you know. And in the process I alienated most of you people that I love.” At this point, the man, although surrounded by people, feels alone and vulnerable. Yet, throughout his life, he has never been anything less than candid, and he’s holding nothing back here, either; he’s laying bare a soul scarred by himself and others.

The booming reassuring voice of Bill Gaither, the man seated at the piano, can be heard saying what others felt—“God bless you, brother.” But there were probably a few who wanted to “amen” the part about the speaker having alienated people, for he had been good at that.

While he speaks, various photographs are shown: a happy eleven-year-old boy wearing a suit and clutching a Bible; a serious young man in boxing trunks; a proud teenager who is a member of the world-famous Blackwood Brothers Quartet; a young adult member of the Oak Ridge Quartet, the forerunner of the popular Oak Ridge Boys. The final photograph shows a young man in a Hollywood recording studio with two other young men, making an album that changed the course of southern gospel music. All are pictures of the speaker at various stages in his life; however, they capture only the highlights of that life. Other pictures, taken when there were numbers under his chin, weren’t shown.

The camera returns to the speaker, who now lowers his head, knowing things are about to become unpleasant. The humor vanishes and the man’s story turns poignant. He says, using a boxing metaphor, “I’ve wanted to get back with you guys for the last thirty years, but nobody would give me a corner. And I don’t blame you, because you were afraid.” He quickly adds, “You were not afraid of me physically; you were afraid I might mess up.”

“Well, I did mess up,” he says emphatically. “In a prison cell in Atlanta, Georgia, where not only did I have my friends alienated from me, but my family—I was helpless to help them.” He doesn’t say so, but being separated from his family and powerless to help them was the lowest part of his life, a life that if charted would show a zigzag of stratospheric highs and unfathomable lows.

He mentions that Jake Hess came to see him in prison, and the camera shows Jake staring warmly and intently at him. The man's friendship with Jake goes all the way back to the 1940s when the two young singers were so hungry they stole peaches. Jake stood by the speaker when most other gospel singers abandoned him. Jake's name was the first one signed on a petition to get the man out of a Tennessee prison. Jake's expression is one of pride for his headstrong but lovable friend. The man turns and says, "I love you, Jake."

"I saw a guy killed every week for thirty-two months in prison," he says, exaggerating the number of persons killed but not the time served, almost three years in perhaps the toughest prison in America, a period when the institution was totally out of control. Bodies that had been stabbed or set on fire were carried out on gurneys so regularly that it must have seemed like every week. Things were so bad there that congressional hearings were held to try and determine how organized crime had seemingly wrenched control from prison officials.

Reflecting on a lifetime of mistakes and misdeeds, he shakes his head sadly and laments, "Thirty years of my life that I could have been singing gospel music—because I messed up—is gone now. I'm almost sixty-five." Sixty-five? His youthful looks, energy, and vitality give him the appearance of someone in his mid-to-late forties. He looks great, which is amazing, considering his long history of substance abuse.

Trying to make sense of his past, he explains, "When I started out, my dreams and aspirations were as great as anybody's in the world." His voice trails off, leaving the listener to conclude that his dreams along the way evaporated into illusions and finally disillusionment. His life somehow got away from him, and he paid dearly, being imprisoned by the government and banished from gospel music. The latter may have hurt more than the former.

Yet if he was banished, why is he now being featured on a popular video? He answers by saying, "One day I wrote Bill a letter and said, 'Bill, nobody ever asks me to sing. Nobody ever asks me to come to a singing. Nothing.' That man truly forgave me." He motions with his head towards Gaither. "You know the bible says to forgive is to reinstate. That's hard to do," he says. "*That's hard to do!*" The audience nods, yes, it is hard, but yes, Gaither did, and we do, too.

He continues with a few more brief remarks, including asking the audience if they know that there are angels. The camera shows Roger McDuff nodding in agreement. “I know there’s one, and I bet there’s more than one,” the man says. (A wag would probably say that he needed an entire angel band to look out for him, given his wildness. There would have been lots of overtime, for sure.)

Regaining his composure, he says with a flourish, “I love you all.” Turning to Gaither he asks softly, “You want me to sing?” Bill Gaither’s response is yes. What follows is a stunning rendition of “Hide Thou Me,” which leaves the audience amazed at the man’s superlative voice.

Calvin Newton’s testimony and subsequent solo on the Gaither video *All Day Singin’* capture the essence of a remarkable man and his incredible story. This book presents the story again, with additional details, insights, and perspectives. It tells of a handsome, talented, charismatic entertainer who, through sheer self-destruction, squandered a golden opportunity to become a legend in gospel music. He was truly gospel music’s prodigal son, mimicking the young man from the biblical parable who “wasted his substance on riotous living.” And, like the prodigal son, he was ultimately welcomed back by a forgiving patriarch, and later honored by the profession from which he had been exiled.

Many who are knowledgeable about southern gospel music are aware of Calvin Newton’s problems with drug abuse and crime, yet few, if any, truly understand the forces that compelled him to behave in such a dysfunctional and self-destructive manner. This book attempts to provide the reader with an understanding of why he did the things he did, and why he was the way he was.

While portions of the book relate episodes of great unhappiness, it is ultimately a story of the triumph of the human spirit, revealing how in moments of bleak despair and seemingly endless adversity, a man’s unconquerable will, coupled with the support and devotion of a strong, loving wife, enabled him to conquer or at least subdue the inner demons that he had grappled with throughout his life.

Calvin Newton is best known as a talented gospel music singer, and a good portion of this story is devoted to chronicling his experiences in that profession. However, Calvin was exiled from gospel music for most of his adult life, and much of this book covers his struggles off stage and out of the spotlight. Unlike many of his colleagues whose lives were firmly embedded in gospel music, Calvin traveled in a number of realms and had significant experiences in other endeavors, including stints singing popular, country, and rock and roll music as well as extended periods having little, if anything, to do with music.

In addition to being a biography, *Bad Boy of Gospel Music* is a candid, behind-the-scenes look at southern gospel music during its heyday—the late 1940s through the mid-1960s—revealing that beneath the facade of smile-a-while/sunny side/happy faces, there was an underworld of cut-throat competition, business chicanery and threats, promiscuous sex, adultery, and rank hypocrisy. This book is by no means an indictment of the profession, but attempts to take a more balanced, objective, and critical view than previous books on the subject.

As this is written, Calvin Newton is seventy-two years old and in remarkably good health for someone his age; he is also intelligent and articulate. He has, however, suffered two mild strokes that have caused memory loss, and his long-term memory has been affected by the mere passage of time. His recall is additionally hampered by the fact that he has never been detail oriented; instead, he is a classic extrovert—someone who has spent his life participating in events rather than standing off to the side observing them.

Consequently, much of what is recounted in this book is the result of a synthesis of information from numerous sources. For that reason, the book is primarily related in the third person, although the subject—Calvin Newton—willingly participated in the project and was the main source of information. However, the author assumes complete responsibility for all statements, representations, and depictions herein, and anyone taking issue with any portion of it should do so with me, not Calvin Newton.

I wrote this book for several reasons. One is that I find Calvin Newton to be an extraordinary person who has lived an unusual and highly interesting life, worthy, in my opinion, of being memorialized. In addition, I feel that he has never been fully recognized for the contribution he made to southern gospel music, primarily through the tremendous influence he exerted on individuals and groups who later dominated the field.

Finally, my interest in Calvin Newton goes back to his appearance with the Sons of Song in my hometown when I was a teenager. Their incredible, mesmerizing concert that day—particularly Calvin’s performance—remains one of my most salient and cherished childhood memories. I subsequently learned that countless others who saw Calvin during that period were similarly impressed. Seeing the Gaither video rekindled that memory, and, more than that, filled me with a resolve to share his story with others. Here it is—I hope you enjoy it.

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# 1. Ancestors

*“Jails, penitentiaries and ropes are yawning for them . . .”*

Newton is an English name, and a most prestigious one at that. Sir Isaac Newton is considered by many to be the greatest scientist of all time. Grade school children the world over have been taught that Sir Isaac’s discovery of the law of gravitation came to him as an epiphany, when an apple fell from a tree and struck him in the head: what goes up must come down. Another Englishman, John Newton, composed one of the best-known anthems to the power of God’s mercy—“Amazing Grace.” Calvin Newton is related to both, according to several family members who traced their ancestry.

Calvin’s cousin, the late Dolly Keeling, was the unofficial family historian. Over the years she amassed volumes of handwritten notes, letters, newspaper clippings, photographs, and official records attesting to births, marriages, and deaths in her large and unusual family. Dolly’s memory was keen, too. She recalled personal experiences as well as stories handed down to her from older relatives about family saints and sinners whose behavior ran the gamut from fighting to praying, drinking to abstinence, and killings to conversions.

Consulting both her written records and her memory, Dolly Keeling recalled, “James Newton moved to Kentucky from Virginia in the early part of the 1800s, bringing his wife and fifteen kids. He bought forty thousand acres, which was almost three full counties. Some of us went down to see the area one time and it was beautiful.” James Newton was Calvin’s great-great-grandfather. Dolly was asked what happened to all the land.