

My Story

by Phil Keaggy

As I look back over the many twists and turns of my life, I can't help but recognize that none of us can really advance to a place of "being" without the loving influence and impact of others in our lives. For me, much of that influence has come from my family.

I was born the ninth of ten children to James and Marguerite Keaggy on March 23, 1951. We lived on a farm in Youngstown, Ohio. It was not a commercial farm, but a humble number of acres with a little house that still stands.

As a toddler, I shared a bedroom with five older brothers (the eldest, Jim, had been killed in a car accident when I was just two). Our sister Peg, who had married before I was born, lived with her husband in a small apartment above the garage next to our house. Another sister, Mary Ellen, who is twenty years older than me, was a beautiful singer and actress who had moved off to Hollywood. Rounding out the family was my baby sister, Geri Beth, who very much resembles our dear mom, and to this day is especially close to me. With so many family members making up the walls of my young world, I felt welcome, secure, and loved.

Dad, a World War II navy veteran, was a structural ironworker who worked as hard as any man could to provide a humble income for our family. He was also all about providing fun and adventure. When I was just four years old, Dad made a quarter mile racetrack for our motorcycles and midget racecars. He then worked with my brothers to create a hill climb course which soon drew a lot of interest from local bikers. I can still remember observing Sunday afternoon picnics and races at the track. Our home movies of these events show me running up the hill with our dogs while the riders were taking a break. Sometimes I'd even be on my little bicycle with its training wheels buzzing down the quarter mile track in between races, having a grand time!

And Mom. . . there was no one like her in the whole world, to me—to all of us. She was the most gracious and loving person I've ever known. You felt welcomed if you were a guest in our house, and she made each of us children feel we were the most special child alive. Even today when I speak to my brothers and sisters about Mom, one would get the impression that each of us had a special connection to her loving heart. I'll never forget her love, patience, and kindness.

There was always music in the house where I grew up. With Mary Ellen being a singer and my brothers bringing home records of their favorite music, I was introduced early on to an array of diverse talent. There was the classical music that Dave loved, such as Montovoni and Ravel. Mike brought home recordings of great vocal groups and soloists. Bill, who is eleven years older than me, had Elvis in his collection. Fats Domino, The Ink Spots, Johnny Ray, The Everly Brothers, The Hilltoppers, and others were playing on Dave's Magnovox turntable all the time, and I loved them all.

But it was Scotty Moore, Elvis's guitar player, who really caught my ear. His guitar sound entranced me when I heard Elvis's 1956 recording of "My Baby Left Me," and from that day on, I began collecting Elvis's music.

In those days, my world was music, records, record players, and speakers of all shapes and sizes. It was a wonder to me how music could be recorded and played through a needle, a tone arm, tubes, amplifier, wires, and speakers—all to my delight! Every now and then a particular song would catch my ear and grab my heart—each magical tune foundational to me becoming a musician. And no one in my family ever discouraged this influence.

In 1956 the music briefly came to a halt when I had an accident that resulted in my losing the middle finger on my right hand. I had gone to get a drink of water at the old water pump behind our house, and when I stood on its old wood base the foundation gave way. Suddenly the pump broke through the base catching my hand between the faucet and the concrete.

As I screamed in pain and terror, I saw my father racing down the hill from our house to rescue me. I had never before or since seen my father run so fast. He took me up in his arms and called Mary Ellen, who drove us to the hospital. I was frightened, but I recall vividly how my dad, wearing his red and black plaid shirt, held me to his chest and comforted me. My mother soon joined us at the hospital and suffered there with her little boy.

I remember the ether and falling into unconsciousness. Brown paper bags full of little toys greeted me when I awoke, but it was the visits of dear family members that soothed the anguish of this traumatized little boy.

Just two weeks after my accident, while I was still in bandages, my little sister Geri Beth lost her big toe on a bicycle accident. With so many children in our family it seemed inevitable that accidents would happen, but it was a somber time at the Keaggy's. Mom and Dad were feeling a lot of pain, remembering also the loss of our eldest brother Jim, whose accident had occurred just a few years earlier.

Through these and other trials, my mom never lost her faith in God. She was a praying, godly woman. And how blessed we were to know her comfort! She was always there for us kids, as well as for Dad who worked so hard and suffered from harsh memories of the war. Even though Mom had a lot of demands on her, I can't recall a moment when she displayed an unloving attitude. Through her faithful example, the influence of a loving God was ever-present in our home.

I believe that I am a Christian today because of the prayers of a mother who believed in a loving God, and who prayed that someday He would use me to inspire and bring hope to others through the talent He has blessed me with.

It was a few years later that I recall the remarkable sense of discovering my "being." I was ten at the time, the same year I received my first real guitar—a Sears Silvertone acoustic. One day while visiting Gram, my mom's mother, I distinctly remember examining my hands, overwhelmed with realizing my "aliveness." I felt a sense of wonder and a bit of trembling as well. I was growing up and, in a child's way, realizing that I had a purpose that was bigger than myself, though I wouldn't fully understand it until nine years later.

In the meantime, I endured school like every kid, though I was never studious. (Mom said I had brains, but just didn't apply myself.) I was insecure because of my height and self-conscious about my missing finger. I remember I would raise only my left hand when asking questions. In third grade, I had my first communion photo taken with my class, and while all the kids were proudly smiling at the camera, there I was examining my missing finger. I wish I still had that photo—I was totally in my own world that day, and that's how I felt much of the time.

On Christmas Day, 1962, my brother Dave surprised me with my first electric guitar. I'll never forget that morning! Within a year, I had learned some Beach Boys and other surf music, as well as some of Dick Dale's guitar work. I still had much to learn about jazz and classical players; but whenever I played, people would tell me I had a special gift. Dad was proud of me and would often ask me to play that "Strobee." He loved, as he called it, my "fast and fancy guitar playing." Soon after that, when I was in sixth grade, I heard the Beatles for the first time at my grandmother's home and felt another confirmation that music would be my life. At the time I had no idea of the impact these lads from Liverpool would have on the music culture that would follow in the wake of their success. All I knew was that something about the way their vocal blend fused with the tone of the electric guitars sent me running full of inspiration to my own guitar.

Looking back, I can see that God used those early influences to shape and mold me to desire the world of music and art so that one day I could bring the message of the good news of His Son to others. At the time, I had not yet accepted Christ as my Savior. But that day would soon come, spurred on by a tragedy I never expected.

When I embraced the guitar as a child, I felt like a rocket that had been launched. Looking back, I can see that through the challenges, trials, and temptations of the teenage years that followed, I was being prepared to give this gift back to my Creator-Redeemer, though I didn't know it yet.

On February 14, 1970, while I was on tour with my band, Glass Harp, my mom was the victim of a head-on collision. When she passed away several days later, I was devastated. It was during this time of grieving that I came to a point of decision. Through the loving encouragement of my sister Mary Ellen, I gave my heart, life, and music to Jesus. Of course the bigger truth of it all, as I've come to discover, is that He gave His heart for me. What a wonderful God and Friend!

In spite of the tragic loss of my mother, 1970 ended up being a year full of joy and freedom in many ways. It also presented new challenges, the first of which was to learn how to serve God with my music. From my place in the band, I began to openly share my newfound faith with the only audience I had—our fans. I felt a passion to do this. The Bible had become real to me. I had good news to sing about and to talk about, and I found myself sharing Christ both on and off the stage.

After recording four albums with Glass Harp, each of which stated my personal faith in Jesus, I felt led to leave the band. This was not an easy decision—we were very close as band mates and as friends. I had known two of my band mates since childhood. Together we had shared the grand and exciting experience of becoming Decca recording artists, and had worked hard to achieve local and limited national success. Still, I felt a pulling to go out on my own, not knowing where it would take me.

In January 1971, a year before leaving the band, I met a young girl named Bernadette who would become my beloved wife. We married in July 1973, and for the past thirty years now she has been my dearest and most beloved friend this side of heaven.

About six months before Bernadette and I got married, I recorded a collection of songs titled "What a Day." No longer part of Glass Harp, I had no record label for this project until a man named Scott Ross heard it and believed it could be the debut album for a new label called New Song records. In 1974, the album was released with limited distribution. As people came to listen to it, I received letters expressing the blessing of this little project. Within a couple of years, Word Records re-distributed this album along with a second solo recording.

The earlier Glass Harp albums combined with these solo efforts opened doors for me to share in the music ministries of truly gifted artists such as Love Song, Paul Clark, Randy Stonehill, Barry McGuire, Honeytree and others who were pioneers in the Christian music movement. Many albums came about in the years following, each representing my faith and my experiences walking with the Lord.

It was during this time, in fact, that I went through some of the most difficult experiences of my life. Between 1975 and 1977, Bernadette and I suffered the loss of our babies—three premature boys in '75, a son we named Ryan who lived only three days in '76, and a miscarriage at four months along in '77.

Since those days, God has blessed Bernadette and me with three beautiful, healthy children—Alicia, Olivia, and Ian. These children, now mostly grown, are our truest treasures on this earth. But those earlier losses affected us deeply at the time. While many songs were borne out of this painful season, at the end of it I was dry. I longed for a way to express deeper feelings—feelings words couldn't describe.

This culminated in the recording of my first instrumental project, "The Master and the Musician" in 1978. This was a musical departure for me and it satisfied a desire to play my heartstrings in a different way. Once again God was providing a new way for me to communicate His message to others through music.

Many years of life lessons, frequent travel, and numerous recordings have only reinforced my desire to be the musician God wants me to be. I continually search for my voice artistically and seek new ways of expressing it. With a catalogue of over forty-five albums now, I still find much pleasure in the creative process. It's all a great adventure—one that might never have happened if not for the love

and support of friends and family who have shaped and encouraged my development as an artist, a musician unto the Lord.

And so in closing, I must say that I believe the art of being has to do with the art of giving, the art of loving, and with being in love. After all, scripture tells us that "it is more blessed to give than to receive," and that the only thing that really matters is "faith working through love." To believe we are important for who we *are* is to believe we have potential to love and give.

Music and the love of my family were gifts to me before I could do something to earn them or even realize how valuable they were. They are still gifts to me from above and they continue to help me discover who I am.

As an artist, I find no greater satisfaction than knowing that my gift of art holds significance and importance to another. Each one of us is fulfilled when we give out of who we are and find that our gift is received. As we continue to give of that which was given to us, we see a continual confirmation of our "being." And that's why I carry on.