



‘Oh, Happy Day:’ Acclaimed gospel singer Lillie Knauls set to perform Sunday at Quail Lakes Baptist Church

**By Lori Gilbert
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Before Top-40 radio stations played “I Don’t Know How to Love Him” and “Superstar” from 1970s “Jesus Christ, Superstar” and “Day By Day” from Godspell, which premiered a year later, the radio waves blared the hip “Oh, Happy Day.”

Only that song, by the Edwin Hawkins Singers, wasn’t written by Andrew Lloyd Webber or any other contemporary composer. It was written in the 18th century and could be found in any hymn book.

Hawkins, leading a choir for the Church of God in Christ, saw, it, created the arrangement and recorded it with a choir in 1968.

“Then a hippie in a warehouse was throwing away records and he saw it, put in on the turntable and the first song was “Oh, Happy Day,” explained Lillie Knauls, who was part of the choir. “He took it to KSAN radio and said, ‘play this.’ The rest is history. It was 50 years in June since we recorded it.”

Knauls will sing “Oh, Happy Day” during the three Sunday services at Quail Lakes Baptist Church, and then again when she gives a solo concert at the church beginning at 6:30 p.m. Sunday. The concert is free and open to the public

“I don’t (get tired of it),” Knauls said. “People don’t either. They keep rocking and singing.”

Hawkins, who passed away in January, created the soulful rendition of the hymn that not only won the 1970 Grammy Award for best soul gospel performance, but was the first popular gospel song to enjoy mainstream success and play time.

Knauls was a member of Church of God in Christ in San Jose, where she lived and worked for the telephone company. Hawkins was organizing an elite choir and she'd drive to Oakland every Monday to sing. Hawkins came in one night with "Oh, Happy Day."

The group recorded an album with the hope of raising money to send the church's youth choir to a competition, and the album made its way into the hands of KSAN disc jockey Abe Kesh and it became a hit.

The Edwin Hawkins Singers were, too.

"We were with all the stars of that day: Diana Ross, Tom Jones, (Engelbert) Humperdinck, Blood, Sweat & Tears and Zeppelin," Knauls said. "We sang our gospel and we'd have to sing that song in every concert."

Knauls continued working at the phone company and planned on staying for 30 years before enjoying retirement, but in 1978, after 22 years, she took a leap of faith and devoted herself to singing full time.

"I knew God was calling me from the company," Knauls said. "I was telling my mom, who was a bit apprehensive, because I was living with her and she was on a fixed income. I stepped out in faith and to this day God never failed to meet the needs of my life. If you do what God wants you to do, he'll take care of you."

And how did she know he was calling her to sing?

"I was part of a church across town that wanted me as soloist for a weekly television program," Knauls said. "I got to be known as a singer. It was predominately a Caucasian church and (the pastor would) say, 'Here's Miss Lillie, my soul sister.' People kept asking me to sing. I got so many offers that God was telling me he had another assignment for me."

That was 40 years ago and Knauls, who celebrated her 80th birthday in April with a luau, hasn't stopped.

She's traveled the world, sings with the Gaither Vocal Band on television, but is making her debut in Stockton on Sunday. Ken Olson, who'd seen Knauls at a church in Redwood City, arranged for her to appear at Quail Lakes.

"I thought it would be good to bring her to Stockton, to have a singer who represents the black community," Olson said.

In addition to "Oh, Happy Day," Knauls said she plans to sing "Amazing Grace," Andraé Crouch's "Through It All" all and the most requested song when she travels, "His Eye Is On the Sparrow." She does a blend of older and contemporary music, some ballads, some up-tempo like the always-popular "Amen."

A soulful '60s hit helped launch her career, but she still reveres the original hymns.

"Last Sunday night I was in Everett, Washington. There were 1,500 people there an hour and a half early to hear the old hymns, the hymns they remember singing growing up. Hymn-book songs are popular today. I love it. Those songs have messages about encouragement. They can inspire and told how faithful God can be. You can learn theology. I love singing them.

"I just did a hymns project, a CD of old songs: 'Amazing Grace,' 'Rock of Ages,' all the ones people love listening to."

Knauls grew up singing in her church choir, first in Fort Smith, Arkansas, then in Seattle, where she moved with her mom and six siblings after her father died when she was 13.

"You always want to sing in the choir in a black church," Knauls said. "When I moved to San Jose, right away I got into the choir. That led to Monday nights going to Oakland."

And the rest, as she said, is history.

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