

I'm So Glad

by Con Chapman

The boy had decided he needed to sell his music equipment—the p.a. system, his amp, his compact organ. His band had broken up and wasn't going to get back together. He was leaving town at the end of the summer, to where exactly he didn't know yet.

He put an ad in the paper, asking \$500 for the p.a. system, \$100 for the organ, \$100 for the amp. He was being optimistic and he knew it, but he'd never sold anything in his life before and he figured if he didn't start high he wouldn't get anything.

The p.a. system was black, and he was glad he'd talked the other guys in the band out of getting the sparkly blue or green covers they had urged on him. He was the only one who ever had a job on the side, so he always ended up fronting the money when they bought something common like lights or risers or the sound system. Everybody was supposed to chip in from their share out of the band's earnings, but at \$150 to \$350 a night for the five of them there was never enough left over after they paid for gas and burgers

or whatever, so when the band broke up he ended up owning all the big stuff.

"You . . . uh . . . all right with all that equipment you got out in the garage?" his dad had asked him one night at the dinner table, not knowing exactly what the deal was.

"Yeah," he had answered in a tone that suggested he knew what he was doing. "The other guys ended up owing me money, so it's all mine now," he said. "I put an ad in the paper."

"Okay," his dad had said. "Just thought I'd ask." Since his father had never shown much interest in the band before the boy figured he wanted the garage cleaned out so he could park his car inside when the fall came.

The phone rang and his dad answered, then called to him from the pantry. "It's for you—somebody calling about the equipment," he said as he handed him the receiver.

"Hullo?" he answered, and the man at the other said he was interested in the sound system and wanted to take a look at it.



"It's at my house on Harrison," the boy said.

"Well, I've got my two little girls here so it would be kinda hard for me to get over there. Can you come by my place with it?"

The boy was silent for a moment. He wanted to go out and ride around, but he wasn't sure that anybody else would be out, and he needed to sell the thing soon.

"I guess," he said after he thought about it. "Where do you live?"

"On Lamine, over by Housel Park," the man said. "It's 701 Lamine—grey shingle, one story, you can't miss it."

"All right," the boy said. "It'll take a while, I have to load it in my car."



"I ain't goin' nowhere," the voice at the other end of the line said cheerfully.

His father helped him put the three pieces—amp and two speaker columns—in his car. The only way they could fit it all in was to fold down the front passenger seat and the back seat and take out the panels that separated the back seat from the trunk. Once they did that, the speaker columns would just fit in the length of the passenger side of the car if you left the trunk open.

"Let me tie a rag on the trunk lid," his dad said. "Otherwise you might get pulled over."

"It's not a big deal."

"You don't want to eat into your profits with a traffic ticket," his dad said with a smile. He was glad his son was getting rid of the thing and apparently giving up on his desire to be a rock star. Plus he wanted the garage back.

The boy let his dad tie the trunk to the trailer hitch on the back of his car, then took off slowly from the curb, his dad watching him with a friendly smile, the first one that had crossed his lips in weeks. "Buy low, sell high," his dad said as he waved, and the boy waved back.



He crossed Highway 50 carefully, then made his way over to the north side of town where there was still a thin strip of homes occupied by white families on the other side of the Katy tracks before you got to the black neighborhood. He drove by Housel Park, remembering the bad year he'd had in Little League there. He'd hated how his dad would stand behind the backstop when he batted—it made him more nervous that he already was.

He found the street he was looking for and turned left and spotted the caller's house right away. There were two scrawny, pale-faced girls in a front yard that looked more like a vacant lot, with scrub weeds sticking up wherever there weren't bare patches. The girls' faces and legs were dirty, and they were sucking on multi-colored popsicles. They seemed to be waiting for him to arrive.

"Daddy, the man's here with the music machine," the taller of the two girls shouted, and the other ran in the house, the screen door banging behind her.

He pulled in the driveway behind another car and a man came to the screen door in a sleeveless undershirt and grey khaki pants loosened at the waist, holding a can.

"Howdy," he called out. "Hold on there, I'll be out in a second to help."

The boy looked at the house and the yard and the kids and tried to think of some way he could politely excuse himself or just leave; he couldn't imagine that the man could have \$500 to pay for

something that he was into for \$600 since only two of the other kids had given him their shares.

He got out of the car and waited for the man, who appeared in a minute with the girls trailing behind him. He hadn't put on any more clothes, just cinched his belt.

"Reverend Cloyd Haskins, pleased to meet you," the man said. He had grey stubble on his face and had left his can inside. The boy extended his hand and the man shook it. "My wife is working the counter at the Big Boy Drive-In, so I appreciate you coming over while I watch my girls."

The girls gathered themselves into the man's sides, and he ran his arms around them. "That's a mighty nice sound system you got there," he said and the three of them began to inspect the speakers. "You think you and me can lift that into the house?"

"They aren't that heavy," the boy said. "The insides are mainly empty."

"All right then, let's give it a try. Girls, go hold the door open."

A dog came around the corner of the house and started to bark, but the preacher shooed him away. "Go on, Duke—git outta here. Nae Ann—come git Duke and put him in the pen."

The taller of the two girls came back to the car and led the dog away after grabbing him by the collar. The shorter girl stood at the door holding it open, and the boy and the preacher worked to get one of the speaker columns out of the trunk.

"I got this end," the man said, and the boy balanced the other end on his knee before getting his arms underneath it.



"I'm ready," he said, and the two carried the column coffin-style across the yard, up the concrete steps and into the front room.

"Just set it anywhere," the man said. There wasn't much room—the boy figured you could have fit their living room into the kitchen at his house.

They went back out and got the other speaker, then the boy retrieved the amp and brought it inside.

"You got to show me how to set it up," the man said, breathing over the boy as he plugged the amp into an electrical outlet, then plugged the speakers into the amp.

"That's all there is to it," he said. "Then you switch it on and plug your microphones or instruments into the front here."

The man dug around in the corner where he had a sit-down style organ and produced a microphone. "Here's my microphone," he said, and then after unplugging a cord from a little amp on the floor, "here's the organ."

The boy inserted the two plugs into jacks, then adjusted the volume to cut down the feedback as the girls covered their ears. "If you'll go back over to your organ that will stop."

"Oh, so just like on Baseball Quiz, when they tell you to step away from the radio when you call?"

"That's it," the boy said.

The man turned on his organ and played a few chords with gospel voicings. He looked up approvingly, then pressed his foot down on a pedal and the sound grew louder.

"That's a real pretty sound you get," the man said. "How does it do with the microphone?"

"It's fine," the boy said. "We used to run three mikes through it, no problem."

"Nadine, put poppa's microphone into the clip there," the man said, and the shorter girl came over to his side and pushed the microphone into a plastic holder near his face.

The boy nodded while the man said "Testing, 1, 2, 3" into the microphone.

"Would you like to hear some of our church music?" the man asked.

"Uh, sure, whatever you want to try," the boy said.

"Sweetie, go get your tambourines," the man said to his daughter, and she ran to a bench near the door, took out two tambourines, and handed one to her sister.

"You all ready to praise the Lord?" the man said over swelling chords.

"Yes!" the girls cried.

"I'm . . . so . . . glad," the man sang, and his daughters answered "I'm so glad!"

"I'm so glad . . ."

"I'm so glad!"

"I'm so glad that the Lord saved me!"

"I'm so glad," the girls answered again.

"If it had not of been for Jee-sus, well I don't know where I'd be."

The three continued in this vein for another verse and chorus, then wound down with the girls slowly shimmering their tambourines instead of banging them on their hands, while their father returned to the tonic chord after an arpeggio up the keyboard.

"That's what we play at our services," the man said with pride to the boy who smiled back at him a little. "What kind of music does your group play?"

"Uh, we play half psychedelic and half soul."

The man gave him a look mock disapproval. "*We* play soul music, music for your soul.

You all probably just play that huckle-buck music they play all night down the block," he said as he jerked his head northwards.

"Yeah, well, people like to dance to it," the boy said, somewhat defensively. He didn't want to stay there all night and chit chat; he remembered in health you could get pellagra from walking across a poor person's yard. "Are you interested in it?"

"Well, son, it's like this," the man began, then turned to his daughters. "Git the man a glass of iced tea, would ya?"

"I'm okay, thanks."

"Naw, really now, we got to talk this thing through."

The girls scurried into the kitchen, excited to play the role of hostess.

"Have a seat," the man said, and the boy picked up a TV Guide from a chair and sat down.

"Throw that anywhere," the man said, and the boy tossed it onto a footstool.

"I've got me a church, it's little now but it's growing," the man began. "We're in the old New Hope Baptist building, you know where that is?"

"I used to date a girl who went there," the boy said. They didn't dance at New Hope Baptist, and he had broken up with her his sophomore year.

"Okay," the man said, as if he'd been asked to approve. "Well, we draw our congregation from all walks of life, jest like Jesus. The lame, the halt and the blind, you know what I mean? The meek and the poor."

"That's what church is all about, right," the boy said. He didn't have any interest in the poor saps, but he thought he'd be agreeable so he could make a sale and leave.

"You have *hit the nail right on the head!*" the man said, inflamed. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a

rich man rich to enter into the kingdom of God. Matthew chapter 19, verses 23 and 24.”

The boy sat still, then shifted on his seat as the man looked at him, his eyes wide open. “I remember that one,” was all he could think of to say.

“Well, I am not taking any chances, boy,” the man said. “I want to enter into the kingdom of God, and I will not let money keep me out of them pearly gates. I'm gonna meet my mother in glory one of these days—you know that hymn?”

“Don't believe I do,” the boy said.

“Girls?”

The two girls straightened up and folded their hands in front of them, glee-club style, then began to sing. “I'm gonna meet my mother in glo-o-ry, I'm gonna meet my mother in glo-ry, one of these days, hallelujah, I'm gonna . . .”

The boy heard them out, the father watching and leading them a little, opening his mouth wide when they sang “glory” so they'd enunciate properly.

“Ain't they precious,” the man said, beaming, when they were done.

“Sure are,” the boy said. “Look, do you want to buy the thing or not?”

“Well, that's what I was leading up to. I am not blessed with riches. I seen the price you was asking and I—well, I just can't afford it.”

The man didn't sound sincere, but the boy couldn't decide whether he should just stand up to go or try to haggle with him. “Well, what can you afford?” he said after a few moments.

“You was asking five hundred—all I've got to spare is two hundred.”

The boy felt angry for the first time. "If that's all you had you shouldn't have asked me to come over."

"Well, now how was I to know that your amp and your speakers wasn't broken, huh?" the man said with a big smile. The girls just stood there staring at the two of them—the boy wished the man would tell them to go to bed or something.

"I'll take four hundred, but that's as low as I can go," the boy said.

"Well, I appreciate that, but it's easier for you to come down in price than it is for me to come up. Look at them two little girls, would you?"

The boy looked at them, and they turned down the corners of their mouths. He wondered if their father had taught them how to do that.

"I'm going on a trip, I need money," the boy said. He was genuinely irritated, and the harder tone in his voice wasn't something he put on for affect.

"That may be, that may be," the man said. "Still, you don't *have* to go on a trip."

"I have to get out of this stinking town."

"You may *want* to leave, but my girls *need* to eat—that's the difference."

The boy pursed his lips together and exhaled out his nose. "I didn't tell you to be a crummy preacher," he said.

The man drew back as if genuinely offended, but the boy could tell

he was posing. "Girls—do you think I'm a crummy preacher?" the man asked, his features contorted to look like he was about to cry.

"No daddy, you're not crummy at all!" the taller of the two girls said. The shorter one started to cry, and both came over to their father and hugged him.

"Looks like that's just your opinion, young man," the preacher said.

"There, there, honey," the man said into the little girl's ear. "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but mean ol' words won't hurt your daddy at all."

The boy sat in silence, determined not to make the next move. "It's up to you," he said. "You're the first person to call, I'll just take the stuff home and wait."

"Could you leave it here for awhile?" the man said. "I believe I wrenched my back carrying it in here."

The boy stared unflinching into the man's eyes, and the man stared back, smiling. "I can't leave it here. Make a better offer or I'm taking it away by myself."

The man patted his daughter's on the back; the little one was sucking her thumb, and she looked at the boy out of the corner of her eye from her father's thigh, where she had laid her head.

"Well, I suppose if I make a special appeal next Sunday, I *might* be able to raise another—say—fifty dollars."

The boy thought it over for a second. "So—two hundred and fifty?"

"That's right."

The boy looked at the man, and tried to add up in his head how much he thought he'd get for his organ and his amp if other people gypped him the same way. He figured he'd get another hundred dollars, which would pay for three months' rent in his friend's apartment if he moved east. He ought to be able to find a job by then.

"All right, I'll take it."

"Yay!" the bigger of the two girls yelled as she jumped up and clapped her hands.

"Aw, thank you, thank you, *thank you Lord!*" the man exclaimed. He stood up and moved to hug the boy, and the boy didn't have time or room to avoid his grasp. "This is gonna make our little church into a great *big* church, ain't it girls!"

"Yes daddy," the little one said.

"So . . . you want to settle up?" the boy said.

"Sure, sure, I'm a man of my word, let me just go get my check book."

The boy stiffened. "I want cash."

The man turned and faced the boy. "Uh, well, sure, I guess that's okay.

What did we say?"

"Two hundred fifty."

The man pulled a chain wallet out of his pocket, unzipped the

leather pouch, and took a handful of bills out. "This is my route money, I got to turn it in tomorrow morning, but I can get to the bank before then," he said as he began to count out twenties and tens.

The girls stood and watched the man lay bills down on the footstool, wide-eyed and silent.

" . . . two hundred and forty, two hundred and fifty" the man said as he finished. The boy picked the bills up and counted them again, just to be sure. He had a view of himself as he did so, and he thought he seemed mature.

"They're all there," the boy said when he was done. "Pleasure doing business with you," he said in a facetious tone that didn't persuade his gut he'd gotten the best deal he could.

"Same here," the man said. "I know that's gonna sound mighty nice this Sunday."

The two shook hands, and the boy headed out to his car. He closed the open trunk, folded down the seats, got in and turned the ignition.

"You'll have to come over to the church some time," the man said as he picked up the younger girl and cradled her in one arm.

"I . . . uh . . . don't think I'll be coming back anytime soon," the boy said as he put the car in reverse.

"Well, whenever," the man said. "We got black and white in our choir, and we make a joyful noise."

"I'll bet you do," the boy said, meaning to be sarcastic but realizing that the effort was lost on the man.

“Okay, well—good luck wherever you're going,” the man said as the boy pulled out.

“Thanks—best of luck with those speakers.”

The girls waved at him as he drove out into the street, then the taller of the two chased him for awhile yelling “Thank you” as she ran.

He turned onto the street that ran by the ball park. He thought to himself that his dad didn't know how much he'd spent on the stuff, or how much he'd asked for it, or what it was worth to him.

