



Remembering the call

Russ Taff has performed as lead singer for The Imperials, as a member of the Gaither Vocal Band, and as a solo artist. The recipient of nine Grammy awards, Taff, 53, spoke openly to TPE about the pitfalls of fame, the gospel music industry, and his priorities of ministry.

tpe: You were raised in the home of a Pentecostal preacher.

TAFF: Dad was truly a pastor — caring, loving and helping people. Being a good pastor

is one of the hardest jobs on the planet. Mom was a singer. She never won a Grammy. She never sang outside of her little town. She never sang in front of thousands of people. But she spent her life on her knees in prayer. These are my roots.

Somewhere along the line God picked me up and gave me an international forum for singing. When you're younger you can get caught up in the albums and you become a product. You have to do better than the last record; you have to win one more Grammy. You start judging yourself by other people's opinions of you. You can very easily forget your roots and lose your first love — the reason you're doing what you're doing.

tpe: And that happened to you?

TAFF: Sometimes it takes something profound in your life to make you stop and say, "Wait a minute, that's not why I started this in the first place." You cry out to God like David — bring me back to the place where I first felt Your call.

The Gospels tell how 5,000

people gathered to hear Jesus and He said, "If you don't eat My flesh and drink My blood, you can have no part of Me." Thousands turned and walked away.

The Holy Spirit asked me, "Are you willing to do that? Rather than being driven by record sales, will you sing anything and say anything no matter what it costs you? Even if the whole crowd turns and walks away?"

It was a real time of surrender. I was doing my best — but I got so caught up in the business of Christianity and the business of doing the Lord's work that I was missing what He was trying to do.

tpe: Was there a time when you became lukewarm in your faith?

TAFF: It came at a time when I was trying to follow powerful label people. I pulled away from the men who were challenging me spiritually.

In America if something is successful in our eyes, we think it must be of God. If a church is growing and has a TV program, we assume it must be doing well. When, in fact, the minister in the ghetto who has 20 people off

the streets is smack dab in the middle of God's will. Numbers, in churches or in record sales, are not the thing to follow. We have to pursue the heart of God and the anointing.

I was 22 and was pulled out of a little bitty town in Arkansas and thrust into an international ministry. I didn't have that understanding. Things started getting bigger every year and I started spending, spending and spending. After a while, you can become a slave to your bills. A friend of mine, who is part of a huge ministry, said, "When you build a religious monster, it eats money. And when it runs out of money, it will eat you."

I don't want to pass judgment on anybody. It's not my place. But when you become a slave to that monster, you don't think you could afford to stop everything for six months and fast and pray. I think that's why the apostle Paul just built tents, to keep his overhead low so he could take off in any direction God wanted him to go.

I had built my version of a "religious monster." You find yourself taking dates that offer the higher dollars. The Holy Spirit tells you to go somewhere for free, and you resist. Meanwhile, the ministry was growing and people were telling me I was doing great, but inside I was getting colder and colder.

So many preachers and musicians fall because they keep moving away from that place of surrender to the Holy Spirit. They become a commodity. It's a very divisive thing when you allow



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the evil one to wedge something between you and the Holy Spirit and the anointing.

tpe: How did you bounce back?

TAFF: Thank God there were some men in my life that I listened to. They saw me floundering and flew to Nashville for a spiritual intervention. These were men of God, men I trusted, men I believed. The Holy Spirit had spoken to each of them. They had seen me pull away from them for some months. That day I listened to what they had to say. I was in a very vulnerable place. That day, in prayer, we agreed to put the horse back in front of

the cart, to deal with things in my spiritual life, and then to get riding again for the Lord.

tpe: What advice do you give to people who find themselves in a similar place?

TAFF: During that cold time in my life, God connected me to an outreach in Nashville called the Magdalene House, which helps prostitutes get off the streets with job training and counseling. So many of these women have been molested by a family member or neighbor. They have deep emotional scars. But I found such great joy in helping them out. I found more purpose and meaning

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Russ and Tori Taff with daughters Charlotte (left) and Maddie Rose



in the ministry and he hasn't lost any of them.

I congratulated him. I said, "That's my prayer, as I'm singing and ministering and preaching, that my kids follow me and stay with me and I don't lose them."

tpe: When you aren't traveling, what's your typical day like?

TAFF: I used to be on the road 3-4 weeks at a time. Now I do mostly weekend ministry. When I'm home, I pull the morning shifts — I'm up fixing breakfast, running carpool, being involved in the kids' lives. Everything falls into place when you're a good husband and a good father.

tpe: As you look at the gospel music industry, are there trends that concern you?

TAFF: When I started, contemporary Christian music was so fresh. There were Joshuas and Calebs who said, "Let's take the land." Today so many of the Christian labels have been bought up by big, secular companies.

The first thing they do is trim the fat and try to create a profit margin. They have to answer to the hierarchy and pencil pushers. So, even if God were to give you a word or call you to do something specific, you have to clear it with secular executives, cross your fingers, and hope you get funding.

It's frustrating to watch Christian music labels become like the world; it becomes about the bottom line. I've been praying God will raise up independent companies like the one owned by Bill and Gloria Gaither.

helping them than all the music awards or magazine reviews that are so temporal.

Too often we place our ministry value on ticket sales and everyone's approval. God could care less about that. He wants to see us caring for and loving people. Do we see the hungry and try to feed them? That's what Jesus is looking at. Jesus loved the poor; He loved the downtrodden; He loved the hurting. He could have ministered to kings, but He spent much of His time with the poor.

God gave me this singing voice and I thank Him for it, but He didn't give it to me to build a career. I wake up every morning and ask the Lord, "What do You need me to do today to build Your kingdom?" I help out at the Magdalene House because it keeps me focused; it keeps me on track. When I lay my head

on that pillow at night, I need to know I've shown the love of Jesus to somebody.

tpe: You divide your time now between the Gaither arena concerts and your solo tours.

TAFF: Yes. Bill Gaither has been a dear friend and mentor for 26 years. After three years and two records with the Vocal Band and my solo tours, I was traveling so much my wife, Tori, and two daughters sat me down and said something had to give. They reminded me my first ministry was being a husband and a dad.

I've seen too many ministers do a wonderful work for God but lose their family. It's awful and it's sad. Then there are ministers like the one I was with recently. He's been at it for 35 years. He has his kids involved with him

tpe: What are you seeing that encourages you?

TAFF: There are younger artists who are really set on following Jesus. They're serious about ministry. They're not afraid to buck the system — to do what God is telling them to do — regardless of what the label thinks.

I'm also seeing growth in churches among the young people. When I was a senior in high school we put a band together and started Monday night services. Dad let us do the music we wanted and let us preach the way we wanted. By the time we graduated, 85 percent of the student body was born again. Kids were getting saved in study hall and in the locker rooms.

Today we have to avoid the

"praise wars." The older folks like one kind of music and the younger folks like another kind, and there's been a lot of tension in the church. I'm just praying that young people will give a little and the older folks will give a little and not let a wedge be driven between them over music. I don't think God cares as long as we are worshipping Him.

tpe: How do you want to be remembered?

TAFF: I hope my life challenges people to be involved in their church, to be involved in their neighborhood, to make a difference wherever they are — even if it's just one person reaching out to a family that's hungry. I hope people say, "Yeah, Russ was a good singer, but he

really cared about people and his community. He loved his wife and kids and he went out of his way to help others."

tpe: Anything you'd like to add?

TAFF: We need to pray for the younger Christian artists, because they are facing what I faced. Some have reached out to me and I've been able to talk with them. But they need us to pray that God will help them remain faithful to His calling. **tpe**

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