

At 102, George Beverly Shea to receive lifetime Grammy award

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(RNS) Prominent Gospel singer and longtime Billy Graham associate George Beverly Shea will receive a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 53rd annual Grammy Awards this weekend (Feb. 12) in Los Angeles.

Shea will be honored along with several other Lifetime Achievement Award recipients including Julie Andrews, Dolly Parton and the Ramones. At 102, Shea is one of the oldest living persons to be honored by The Recording Academy.

For more than 60 years, Shea was the signature soloist at Billy Graham crusades. He says he still sings as often as he can.

"You know, you keep tuned up with the Lord when you love the songs that are written about him," Shea told the PBS program "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly."

A Canadian pastor's son, Shea says music was always a part of his life. He was working at a Christian radio station in Chicago in the 1940s, when his baritone voice caught Graham's attention.

"Mr. Graham phoned me and then wrote me and asked me in 1947 to become a part of his team, (to) `sing a little quiet song before I speak,'" Shea recalled.

Shea sang at almost every Graham crusade, and according to Guinness World Records, he has sung before more people than anyone else -- an estimated combined live audience of 220 million people.

"They didn't come to hear me. They came to hear Billy Graham," he said.

Shea said it was a privilege to be on the Graham team, adding that his favorite part of a crusade was watching the waves of people stream forward after Graham gave the altar call.

"Your head is supposed to be bowed in prayer, but I like to say I peeked a little bit," he laughed.

During his 80-year career, Shea recorded more than 70 albums and wrote several popular worship songs. He was nominated 10 times for a Grammy and won in 1965.

"Someone said, 'Why have you been doing this all these years?' I put my thumb up to the air toward heaven, and I said I've been doing it for him," Shea said.

Shea said his faith keeps him going at 102, and sees every day as a gift.

"I don't know when heaven will loom up for me, but we have to look forward to it," he said. "I hope there will be an organ up there to play. Oh, boy, I love organ music."