

Marsha's tears: An orphan of the church

by [Mark Allan Powell](#) in the [March 17, 1999](#) issue

Why are people ripping "For Those Tears I Died" out of songbooks and hymnals? It's one of the most popular Christian folk songs to come out of the '60s. It's been translated into 12 languages. There's hardly an evangelical songbook in which it doesn't appear. Written by then 16-year-old Marsha Stevens, the song expresses adolescent piety, yet its images of baptism and liberation are universal. Liturgical purists may think the song too personal or sentimental, but a lot of people count those elements as strengths. It's probably the second-best Christian campfire song ever written (right behind "Pass It On"). So what's wrong with it?

To answer that question, we have to look at Stevens's story. Thirty years ago Stevens epitomized what the media called "the Jesus Movement." *Life* and *Time* ran cover stories on the phenomenal revivals erupting in southern California and spreading across the country. Don McLean took a potshot at the movement in "American Pie" ("The Father, Son and Holy Ghost, they caught the last train for the coast"). Hippie Christians--Jesus freaks--were baptized in the ocean and embraced evangelical Christianity with a passion they usually reserved for sex, drugs or rock-and-roll. And Stevens was their teenage princess.

Stevens fronted what was arguably the very first contemporary Christian music group, the Children of the Day. The band made six albums, toured relentlessly and touched millions of lives. The group consisted of Stevens; her husband, Russ; her sister, Wendy; and a multitalented friend, Peter Jacobs. They had a jazzy folk-rock sound that sometimes recalled Peter, Paul and Mary and occasionally anticipated Fleetwood Mac. They also drew on classical influences, performing madrigal renditions of pieces like "All Breathing Life" (by Brother Bach, as Jacobs used to say). Pretty tame by today's standards, but back then--during the guitars-in-the-sanctuary wars--the band was avant-garde.

As a side project, Stevens joined with others in making a record for Maranatha called *The Praise Album*. It was followed by *Praise 2*, *Praise 3* and so forth, popularizing "the praise chorus" as the standard liturgical form for evangelical (especially nondenominational) assemblies. Maranatha's praise albums sold phenomenally well, and Vineyard and other companies have made copycat versions. Today, contemporary Christian music is a multimillion-dollar industry, with Dove awards, summer festivals and popular magazines like *7-ball* and *CCM*. It is not uncommon for singers like Stevens to become millionaire celebrities, to perform with symphony orchestras, and to sell out major venues.

But Stevens's destiny has been different. She's been singing and testifying for three decades, hosting public love-ins for Jesus and cranking out a new album every couple of years. Possessed of an incredible voice, perceptive songwriting abilities and growing theological maturity, she should be as successful as Amy Grant, Sandy Patti or Margaret Becker. But she lives in an RV and uses taped back-up when she sings her songs in churches. Many have forgotten her.

Like many children of the Jesus Movement, Stevens had a troubled youth. She remembers childhood as a time of terror, a time she doesn't want to talk about. "Let's just say that when you grow up with an alcoholic in the house, you learn that night is a time to hide," she states. She hid curled up in bed, crying the eponymous tears of her most famous song. Then, high on Jesus, she married young, thinking she had found a musical and spiritual soul mate. The second *Children of the Day* album featured the wedding songs the couple wrote for each other. Her contribution is still a popular selection for weddings, though it's been retitled (from "Russ's Song" to "'I'd Like to Write a Song for You"). His song for her was a beautiful ode: "You're a gift from heaven above . . . You were meant for me, and I was meant for you."

Seven years and two children later, the marriage ended. When her husband told her, "You need to find someone else," Stevens replied, "You know, I think it might be a woman."

She was totally unprepared for what happened next. Christian singers had gotten divorced and had had babies out of wedlock, but the scandal that accompanied Stevens's revelation of her sexual orientation was like no other. "The Christian community excised me from its life," she says. Some people from Stevens's church came over to insist she take the "Jesus Is Lord" sign off her door. People started ripping her songs out of their songbooks. The record company tried to deny her

royalties, appealing to a "backslider clause" in her contract that allowed such exclusion if she renounced the Christian faith.

Fourteen months later, when her lover's daughter died of a congenital heart disease, Stevens was told it was divine vengeance and that her own children would be next. She was no theologian, but she knew that the idea that "God killed our baby because we loved each other" couldn't be true. She wandered for a while, trying to find a Christian home. "The church didn't want me, but I just missed Jesus too much to stay away." She'd sit in the back pews of a church until someone recognized her. Then she'd never return. To put bread on the table, she worked as a registered nurse.

Today Stevens travels full time, touring the country with her life-partner and sound technician, Suzanne McKeag. They do as many as 200 concerts a year, many at Metropolitan Community Churches. The MCC has recognized her as a lay evangelist. Her children have escaped divine wrath. Daughter Naomi is working on her master's degree in social work. Son John works in management and sometimes sings with his mother.

I caught up with Stevens at First Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio. This American Baptist congregation, noted for its welcoming approach to gays and lesbians, was "disfellowshipped" from the Columbus Baptist Association at the association's assembly in 1995. The theme song for that assembly was "For Those Tears I Died."

The concert in Granville was more a worship service than a gay pride rally (though Stevens has done both). Her focus is on Jesus, to whom she sings hymns of praise. Still, she's open about who she is: a lesbian who loves the Lord. "Don't let any church rob you of this treasure," she tells the mostly gay audience. "The gospel is for you. Jesus Christ is for you. Don't miss Christ because of Christians."

This concert goes off without a hitch, though a similar one scheduled recently for a Methodist church in Lafayette, Louisiana, aroused such a storm of protest that the congregation reneged on its invitation and the program had to be moved to another site. The potential for controversy gives Stevens media appeal. An article in the *Colorado Springs Gazette* compared her to Anne Paulk, who with her husband now leads Focus on the Family's Exodus program for gay people who want to become heterosexual. It began, "Ann Paulk is a wife, mother, and former lesbian. Marsha Stevens is a lesbian, mother, and former wife." The article asked if Stevens had tried

to change.

"I never felt like I had to come out to God," she says. "I had to come out to myself and to others, but it wasn't like God didn't know. And, yes, I've told God many times, 'If you want to strike me straight, go ahead. I will be whatever you want me to be.' But it hasn't happened." She says, "I never felt that Jesus didn't want me. How likely is it that I would love Jesus more than he loves me? But I did feel for a while that I had let God down. God gave me that song when I was only 16, so I knew I should be singing for people. And no one wanted to hear me sing."

Now she thinks it was all part of God's plan. "God gave me the song *then* to reach people *now*. People come up to me and say, 'I grew up singing that song in church. I didn't know you were gay.' It becomes a bridge from the past to help them come home. We talk and we pray, and I tell them, 'If there's a place in God's family for me, you know there has to be room for you, too.'"

Stevens's ministry is not so much gay advocacy as it is gospel advocacy. She knows the exegetical arguments that sustain biblical interpretations favorable to the gay cause, but she hates to get into those arguments. She doesn't like to be put on the defensive. One of her albums is titled *I Will Not Behave Like Prey*. "I try to get gays to stop focusing on how a few scripture passages don't apply to them, and try to get them to see how much of scripture does apply to them," she says.

Stevens isn't really at home in the liberal Protestant tradition that would make her a poster child for how to survive in the face of homophobia. She's a conservative evangelical, strongly committed to the authority of scripture and passionate about having a personal relationship with Jesus.

She and McKeag named their company "Born Again Lesbian Music" (which yields a neat acronym). Some churches that are not put off by the "lesbian" part are suspicious of the "born-again" label. The concept of saving souls seems a bit antiquated to them. Others, of course, just think she's saving the wrong kind of souls. But Stevens does have her fans--they're called "Marshians." And she's made a splash in the gay and lesbian community. Two of her records have appeared on an annual Top 20 list published by the *Gay Music Guide*, a secular periodical. Reviewer Will Grega wrote, "If Marsha Stevens is the house band in heaven, even I'll be good!"

Still, she repeatedly encounters what she calls "identity theft." So many gays have only negative associations with the word "Christian." Stevens assumes the burden of

proof this brings. Gays and lesbians need to see Christians acting with love. "Jesus did not say we'd be known by our righteous standards or low divorce rate or obedient children," Stevens claims. "He said we'd be known by our love." On the other hand, the only way for gay and lesbian Christians to win the respect of the evangelical community is "to let Jesus' love shine through us in ways that put our opponents to silence," she says. Signing autographs after the show, she writes "Romans 12:21" above her name. She argues that gays and lesbians must let the church see the fruit of the Spirit in them. The first Christians had to be convinced that God was calling gentiles as gentiles--and they weren't convinced primarily by exegesis. She tells gay Christians to "sow to the Spirit, reap the fruit of love." Then the church will see that this, too, is of the Lord.

Last summer, at the Billy Graham Evangelistic Training Camp, Stevens told a missionary who challenged her ministry, "It's not for you to decide whether I'm a wheat or a tare. Am I sharing the gospel? That's the question. I love our Lord and I will sing for him and witness for him till the day I die. Then, if *he* says I'm a tare and sends me to hell, so be it. It isn't your concern."

No matter how much we may argue over interpretations of scripture and debate the ethics and origins of homosexuality, no one who is sensitive to things of the Spirit can deny that God is using Stevens to bring Christ's love and mercy to people whom God apparently has not forgotten. She is conservative Christianity's worst nightmare: a Jesus-loving, Bible-believing, God-fearing, lesbian Christian. The existence of people like Stevens must be factored into the debate. The only lesbians I can find in the Bible--the ones so famously condemned by Paul--are idol-worshiping and God-renouncing. People like Stevens are not easy targets. Maybe this is why, thus far, the evangelical churches and the contemporary Christian music industry pretend she doesn't exist.

In 1998, *CCM* magazine celebrated its 20th anniversary with a gala issue featuring "Where Are They Now?" updates on 28 Christian artists of a former time. We learned that Lewis McVey now performs as Tigger at Disneyland and that Pat Terry writes country songs for Travis Tritt. But Stevens was not mentioned. She was interviewed for a similar piece in 1996, when Maranatha celebrated its 25th anniversary. The reporter did five such profiles, but *CCM* found room only for four, at least three of which focused on decidedly lesser stars. Larry Norman is usually called "the father of Christian rock." Stevens would be its "mother"--if anyone remembered her. *CCM* recently asked more than 30 critics to rank the 100 most significant Christian songs

of the rock era. I would certainly have put "For Those Tears" in the top five. It was nowhere on the list.

Stevens takes all this in stride. She found out how it works a few years back--when she learned of a "Children of the Day Reunion Tour," featuring all the other band members, but omitting her. Children of the Day without Marsha Stevens is a bit like Peter, Paul and Jane.

When the mail brings another packet of hymn pages, ripped from a songbook by some church that just got the word, Stevens pulls them out and immediately turns them over to see what's on the other side. Once it was "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." "Well," she said, "at least I'm in good company!"

All she can do is to keep on singing. One of her songs draws on Matthew 5: "The light of the world, it is our occupation./No hiding in shadows in this new vocation." Another takes its imagery from a classic hymn: "No matter what way this world defines us/Nothing is stronger than this tie that binds us." The lyrics of a third are a variation on Martin Luther King's words: "I dream of a land where all children can be free/ To grow and mature into what they're meant to be/To love whom they love with no fear of penalty."

Some of her music continues to have universal Christian appeal. She recorded an entire album of inclusive language hymns--edited renditions of such standards as "I Love to Tell the Story" and "(Your) Eye Is on the Sparrow." Last year she released a Christmas album, recorded in Nashville with a chorus of gay and lesbian singers from all over the nation.

Promoters tell her, "If you'll just tone down the lesbian bit . . . leave out certain songs and don't say certain things from the stage . . . we can get you on this tour, get your albums into the Bible bookstores." Stevens knows a few Christian stars who've taken that route, but she refuses to do so. She recalls appearing on Pat Robertson's *700 Club* during a brief, earlier phase of her career. "When I was with people like Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart or Jim and Tammy Bakker, I knew that if they knew the truth about me, they wouldn't want me there. It didn't seem fair--to them or me," she says. "Besides, does the world really need another middle-aged female Christian singer? Check out the racks!" She's decided that her calling is to "make contemporary Christian music for the gay, lesbian, bi and transgendered Christian community. It's a narrow field, but, hey, it's wide open!"

She says she likes the lifestyle her lack of commercial success makes necessary. Stevens and McKeag live on offerings from churches across the land. "I'm living the hippie dream," she says. Stevens is still a Jesus freak.

Five years ago, Stevens met the other Children of the Day alums at her mother's funeral. Her sister had asked her to stay away--or at least not to bring McKeag. But both were there. Then one of the band members asked her to join him for a song, and the rest joined in. The first honest-to-God Children of the Day reunion took place then and there. They ran through the old catalog together, the harmonies falling into place and the chords ringing out in unison. "Are you just being nice to me because my mother died?" Stevens asked.

"Oh, Marsha, you know, we all get over ourselves in time," one of her former associates answered. Might the times still be a-changin'?

In 1993, conductor Ralph Carmichael took Norman Miller's *Young Messiah* on tour, enlisting contemporary Christian singers in an exciting new rendition of Handel's classic. The show featured the most impressive gospel line-up ever assembled: Susan Ashton, Stephen Curtis Chapman, Carman, Christine Dente, Michael English, Steve Green, Larnelle Harris, Phil Keaggy, Twila Paris, Sandi Patti, Wayne Watson, BeBe and CeCe Winans, and many more. Carmichael is a veteran music producer and composer of countless '60s-era camp songs--he should perhaps be called "the grandfather of Christian rock." By all rights, Stevens should have been front-and-center on the stage. Twenty-one years earlier, it was she who received a standing ovation from a crowd of 200,000 at Explo '72 by leading her band in a folk-rock version of "The Hallelujah Chorus."

Now she's content to be in the audience. Carmichael did ask her to meet with the group. She says that she'll never forget the way he made the offer: "Marsha, I want to get you a backstage pass for the tour." Pause. "I mean, I want to get you two of them."