

HE POINTS 'EM TO HEAVEN



Jimmy and Frances Swaggart



Jamie Buckingham

At 5:00 a.m. Jimmy Swaggart, dressed in jogging shorts and sweatshirt, walked through the posh lobby of Washington D.C.'s International Inn on his way to an early morning run around the nation's capital. With him also in jogging outfits, were his wife Frances and his New Orleans attorney, Bill Treeby.

Once the trio hit 14th Street they didn't stop for the next six miles. Past the White House, along The Mall where the early rays of the sun caught the spire of the Washington Monument, around the Lincoln Memorial and back to the hotel.

Staunch believers in physical fitness, Jimmy and Frances eat only one meal a day—at 4:00 p.m. And they jog.

"My limit is six miles," he said, looking firm and muscular. "But Frances goes ten easily."

"I have to keep in shape if I'm going to represent my Lord correctly," he added. "If I put on an extra ten pounds I feel sluggish, short of breath. I can't sing as well."

At 43 years of age, the drawling Louisiana preacher/singer looks great. His stomach is hard and flat. His arms muscular. His face, which laughs easily, is relaxed—but lean. He shows little evidence of the hundreds of thousands of miles he travels each year making him one of the most popular gospel recording artists in the world.

"It's a matter of discipline," one of his aides told me. "Jimmy's not special. He's just more determined."

Southern evangelist Jimmy Swaggart hooks up the two most powerful forces in the world—and they are not radio and TV

Jimmy Swaggart does have determination. And when it is combined with that indefinable thing called "the anointing" . . . there's no one better when it comes to singing and preaching.

Eighteen members of Jimmy's team had flown to Washington the day before in Swaggart's new turbo-prop Gulfstream airplane. Two others had

arrived in the 18-wheeler semi which carries all the equipment, including Jimmy's grand piano. They were there for one of the many preaching/singing crusade meetings Jimmy holds around the nation, and everyone had his or her job. The musicians left the hotel early to set up their instruments and sound system in Constitution Hall. Jimmy's 23-year-old son, Don, who helps manage the operation, was mapping out the activities for the evening. Jimmy and Frances had headed downtown to meet with congressional leaders.

On the way back to the hotel from the Capitol the black cab driver stared at his passenger. "Hey, I know you. I see you on TV all the time."

When Jimmy asked if he were a Christian the cab driver said he was reading the Koran—"searching for the truth."

"Don't limit yourself to the Koran," Jimmy smiled as he handed him a tip. "Read the Bible as well. There is no truth outside of Jesus Christ."

Jimmy's like that. Narrow in his theology. Single-minded in his mission. Dogmatic in his preaching. Un-



Donnie and Debby Swaggart and their daughter Jennifer, with Mom and Dad.



bending in his refusal to mix the entertainment world with his ministry. A perfectionist in his music.

Biographer Robert Paul Lamb calls him the most powerful radio preacher in the world. Millions agree. Except for Billy Graham his face is probably the best-known of any TV preacher in America.

His headquarters are in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, just a few miles from where he was born. The buildings, the size of two football fields, house the world's largest Telex duplication system, turning out tapes at the rate of 780 an hour. A series of printing presses produce one million pieces of gospel literature a month. His magazine circulation is at one half million. He is on 600 radio stations, 300 TV stations and has produced 33 musical albums. His records have sold six million copies.

"Music is the second most powerful force in the world," he says. "Only the preaching of the Gospel is more powerful."

There was a time when some of his fellow Assemblies of God pastors rejected him because of his music. They

said his singing and piano playing sounded too much like his cousin, rock 'n roll star Jerry Lee Lewis.

But there is a difference. A big difference. And as I sat that night in Washington's Constitution Hall I realized Jimmy was right about the power of music.

The auditorium holds 3,400. It was filled and many had been turned away. I arrived with Jimmy three minutes before the service was to start. Our car pulled into an alley behind the auditorium and we slipped into a back door. A few dignitaries were present to shake Jimmy's hand, plus the usual number of Christian "pushers." The pushers are those who constantly push past the barricades and come running at every celebrity with things they are pushing. In this case it was the manager of a small gospel radio station who wanted an interview and two men with songs they hoped Jimmy would publish.

Jimmy handled them all with patience, yet gave them no time. He was heading toward the stage and would not be turned aside.

"I'm glad to meet you. Write me a letter." He never stopped walking, and suddenly he was on stage. For a moment I was stunned. I remembered the times I had come to such meetings with the late Kathryn Kuhlman. She had spent long minutes walking the halls behind the stage, praying, seeking God. Shouldn't Jimmy have done the same? Then I remembered he had locked himself in his hotel room and spent all afternoon on his knees. There was no need to stop for a final prayer—he was ready to go.

And go he did. With no introduction, not even nodded acknowledgement of the burst of applause when he walked on stage, he was at the piano, his fingers flying over the keys.

Donnie had been on stage, preparing the people. But it was Jimmy they were waiting for. They were on their feet as his piano roared into gospel ragtime. The musical group—three guitars, drums and organ—picked it up. Ray Ludwig, seated at the organ next to the piano, glanced at Jimmy's flying fingers and suddenly they were

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in unison—Jimmy at the piano, Ray at the organ. The people were no longer applauding. Now the building rocked as they clapped in thunderous unison, keeping time with the beat.

Jimmy doesn't sit straight at the piano. He sits on the bench sideways, half facing the audience, his wrong foot on the pedal.

Minutes later Donnie was back at the microphone with a simple introduction: "Your evangelist, my Dad, Jimmy Swaggart."

"Well, praise the Lord!" It was the

first words the evangelist had uttered on stage. Then his mellow baritone voice flowed evenly into "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine."

I have been in thousands of evangelistic and healing services, but never have I sensed the anointing of the Holy Spirit as much as I felt it that night under Jimmy Swaggart.

He was singing again—his own arrangement of "He Brought Me Out." Hands were raised across the auditorium as the people joined in. They had seen him on TV. They had read his

book, *To Cross a River*. They had heard his records and tapes. But suddenly it wasn't Jimmy Swaggart who had captured their attention. It was Jesus Christ. For in a way better than any man I had ever seen, he led them from Constitution Hall into the Courts of the Heavenlies. The people were no longer listening to Jimmy Swaggart, they were worshipping God.

Then his fingers were off and running on the keyboard—camp meeting style. His right foot, which faced the audience, was stomping out the time.

"Oh Yeah!" someone in the crowd shouted. And everyone was clapping and pounding their feet on the floor in unison beat.

Almost before the song was over the mood had changed. He dropped the tempo to a whisper and sang softly, "His Name is Wonderful." The backup singers picked up the devotional mood and a great hush settled over the audience.

"Some of you are lonely, you have problems too big to handle. . . ."

Swaggart calls himself an evangelist, and his preaching is loud, dynamic and dogmatic. But the spirit of the pastor is always there. "As you sing, God appears. Demons have to flee. Depression goes away."

Softly, the crowd joins in, singing that great Gaither chorus of praise, "Hallelujah!"

I left my place behind the stage and wandered through the crowd as I had done in those early days when I was writing for Kathryn Kuhlman. But these were different from those who attended the Kuhlman miracle services. These were mostly "salt" people. Salt of the earth. Blue-collared and callous-handed people. People who were trapped in the daily confines of work and financial woes, who desperately needed someone who came from where they are and could understand.

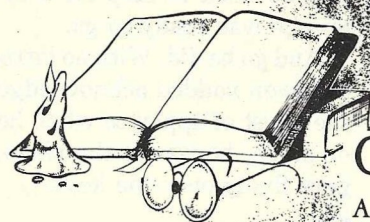
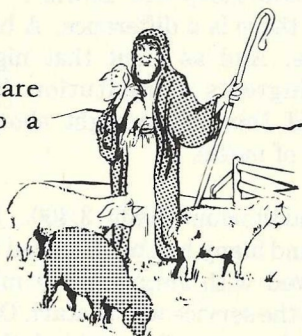
They knew Jimmy. They knew he had dropped out of school to work on the drag lines in the Louisiana muck. They knew he could have been bigger than Elvis, or the Beatles, or his cousin Jerry Lee, had he accepted the rock 'n roll offers. They knew he chose to go with God, even if he starved. They saw Elvis grow fat and addicted. They saw the Beatles break up and



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scatter. They saw Jerry Lee with his troubles. And they saw Jimmy Swaggart, moving on with God. They were proud of him and they loved him.

And he loved them back. Pausing at the piano, he said, "Hey, why don't you stand up and hug a bunch of necks. This old world needs a lot of loving."

He sipped a glass of water as the audience responded to his suggestion. Then he was back at the piano, singing, "I'll Be Somewhere Listening for my Name."

The people were dancing in the aisles now, clapping hands, hugging necks. In front of me four women were dancing in a circle, holding hands. A man, holding his wife's hand, was skipping up and down the aisle. Those who couldn't get out in the aisles were waving their hands in time to the music, shouting and singing.

Two rows down I saw three couples dancing back and forth in the seats, hands in the air, bodies moving in rhythm. They couldn't do it in church. The Billy Graham type music didn't lend itself to freedom. But here, with a Blue Grass beat and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, they could dance. And they didn't care who saw them. The young and old, the fat and lean, the rich and poor—all caught up in the second most powerful force in the world.

"I'm on my way to heaven," Jimmy sang.

The crowd picked it up. "ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN."

Suddenly it was reciprocal. First Jimmy at the piano, then the crowd singing back. "ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN." It grew faster and louder, over and over. Every hand was raised. Every voice was shouting.

A man was skipping up and down the aisle holding a year-old child in his arms. He was shouting and singing, face bathed in tears and smiles, bouncing the child: "ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN, ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN, ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN, ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN."

Some would call it emotionalism. And perhaps it was. But where else can God's people give vent to that natural, powerful impulse to dance before the Lord. Swaggart gives them the grand opportunity to let themselves go in camp meeting style.

Yet, where in the old pentecostal

camp meetings there might have been three thousand people all "doing their own thing," Swaggart—with his musical leadership—brings the natural rhythm into syncopation and has the people expressing, with powerful decency and order, physical worship.

Because it is in rhythm, and not discord, there are no individuals out of control—no chandelier swingers or aisle rollers. Down near the front I saw a woman begin to jerk, flinging her arms in muscular spasms, but the symphony of the body in worship, the

rhythmic clapping and dancing all around her, quickly brought her back into line. As David used musical therapy to soothe demon-oppressed King Saul, so Swaggart uses it on today's frustrated, emotion-starved people.

Through the Holy Spirit I realized people were being set free from old inhibitions which made them slaves to their bodies, slaves to public opinion. To chain their hands to a hymn book, or nail their feet to the floor, would

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have removed the power that came from clapping and dancing. It was far more than an emotional release; it was the power of Spirit-anointed music bringing deliverance and release.

I couldn't help it. I put away my note book and got out there in the big middle of it. A fat woman grabbed my hand. "Hallelujah, brother!" She shouted. And away we went. Down the aisle, dancing before the Lord ...
ON MY WAY TO HEAVEN.

I finally broke away, out of breath, and turned to look up in the balcony. In the far back row I saw hands raised, waving in time to the music. I wanted to cry. Those back rows were as alive as the people dancing in the aisles.

Jimmy introduced his granddaughter Jennifer. The people loved it and moved back to their seats, exhausted but happy. Donnie's wife, Debby, brought the baby to the piano bench.

"She started talking at age six months," Jimmy chuckled. "But I was the only one who understood her. You see, I have the gift of interpretation of tongues."

The people shouted. Applauded. And laughed.

There was a lot of laughter that night. Like heaven, I thought.

Jimmy sings a lot about heaven. The people he sings to don't have much on this earth and they are reaching out for a better world. But it's not just the words, it's the music itself which seems to bring the ministry.

Swaggart has taken all three—body, soul and spirit—and blended them to minister to the whole man. While some songs elicit nothing more than foot-stomping, hand-clapping emotional release, others touch the soul and some open the spirit to hear from God.

There was a time, after Kathryn Kuhlman died, when I said I thought the day of the great rallies was over. I'm not so sure after having been with Jimmy Swaggart. Even though I am a firm believer in church-centered healing services, one-to-one evangelism and submission to small groups, I also see the need for the giant rallies and

crusades. They are indispensable. Not only do they bring the body together, but they touch thousands of people who would never be touched in small groups and through institutional churches. They give encouragement to tens of thousands of prayer groups and churches which are moving in the Spirit. They are a great means for winning the lost to Christ.

Some men are called to stay at home and preach in their local communities. But there will always be with us the evangelist—the man who travels, taking the Gospel to those who would never darken a church door. And when the most powerful force in the world—the preaching of the Gospel—is combined as expertly as Swaggart does it with the second most powerful force in the world—music—the combination is unbeatable. ☩

For more information about Evangelist Swaggart, see *To Cross a River*, the story of Jimmy Swaggart, written with assistance from Robert Paul Lamb and published by Logos International in 1977.