



circa 1973

## We Were CHILDREN

by  
**Andy Smith**

Recently, I picked up some extra work at a local theater. I was on the crew that would unload trucks and set up for performances, and then break them down and load up the trucks for their next city. A stagehand. It was hard work, but I enjoyed it.

I would usually show up early and hang out back stage, especially if it was a group I wanted to hear, I could always catch the last set of their performance.

On this particular evening, the performers were a Christian Rock group I had only heard of, but was not familiar with. The place was packed with young people as the noise and energy was intense. As they drew to their electrifying conclusion, I was truly amazed at how far gospel music had come for these young people.

We were heading into a new decade, the '70s, and the Jesus Movement was just at it's infancy. Youth for Christ and Campus Life rallies were becoming the trendy place to be for young people. Bible studies and Christian coffee houses were popping up everywhere, and a new sound in gospel music was desperately trying to catch up to this new youth movement.

My best friend, Norm Johnson, and I were right in the middle of this new world. Seniors in high school, Norm and I had experienced so much of the great music of the sixties together. We saw Janis Joplin, Hendrix, Cream, The Doors - if they were in San Diego, Norm and I went to see them. When we both got into the Jesus Movement, we wanted to take our love for Rock & N Roll and channel it into this new world of emotional highs.

We wanted to start a band, but Norm was just learning guitar and my only claim was that of being the class poet in high school. That would not make a very impressive band.

Norm approached Stan DeKoven who was a few years behind us in high school, but we had seen him at several of the Campus Life rallies and knew he was a good singer in the choir. He was a very popular guy and we felt if we could get Stan in our band, we might be able to get others.

The good news was that not only was Stan in, he had a friend, Jerry Hom, who played a smooth guitar who wanted in as well.

This was very exciting for Norm and I. Having a real guitar player and vocalist on board certainly gave us cause to celebrate.

We started practicing and writing songs about Jesus. We worked hard and the chemistry quickly brought us tightly together.

Our first performance was at Stans church. It was not noteworthy musically, but emotionally, we felt great. We were on stage singing new songs about Jesus in a world of hymnals and we felt that we were headed in the right direction.

We also felt as if we were missing something. Jerry suggested that we try to get Jim Smith in our band. A very popular athlete who was loved by all, Jim also played bass and was known for his singing. If we could land him, our group would certainly be poised to blaze this new trail of gospel music.

I remember when I heard that Jim was in, thinking for the first time that our group was going to really make a difference. I still think that adding Jim Smith to our band was the most significant move we made.

So we were all set. We called our group *CHILDREN*. We were all committed to the group and were showing up at Norm's basement every Thursday night to work and create the new songs that we felt would become the staples of this new Jesus Movement.

The energy level at practice was intense. Each of us would bring ideas for new songs every week. Jerry and Norm had new chord progressions they wanted to play with. I always had lyrics, Stan and Jim always had ideas to toss around. It was a very fertile environment. We would get lost in Norms basement laughing, arguing and sweating through every new idea, sometimes into the early morning hours.

Norm had also taken an interest in the equipment side of music. It seemed like every week, Norm had new sound equipment for us to work with. By the time we got out and started performing, we had a full range of equipment that made our opportunities even greater. In the

early going, I am certain that many of our invites were more for our good sound system than our musical talents.

As we started out, most of our performances were at small settings. There were some settings where the five of us and our sound system took up more room than the audience. There were a lot of Christian coffee houses popping up everywhere at the time, and it became routine for *CHILDREN* to cram into one of these places to test out our new material. I am sure that at many of these performances, our sound system was not necessary. But Norm was learning how to use our equipment and insisted that we always take it no matter how small the audience. This would serve us well as we became more popular and became quite good at setting up and using our sound system to our advantage.

From inception to performing and moving up the ranks of the Jesus Movement music scene in San Diego did not take long for *CHILDREN*. There are several reasons for this.

First, the intensity and focus that the five of us gave to *CHILDREN* was incredible. Every Thursday, we would work so hard wrestling with every note until we got the sound we wanted. I have never been involved with a more intense group than *CHILDREN*. We worked hard at making every song sound great. We were focused and solidly determined to be a part of this new music.

Secondly, our timing was great. Before us, gospel music was hymnals and songs you sang at church. With Christian coffee houses, Bible studies and youth rallies popping up everywhere, the youth were hungry for music that was fresh and they could relate to. *CHILDREN* rose quickly because we were so creative in our song writing. It wasn't long before we could perform for two hours and play nothing but original, fresh new material. Most of the other groups starting out then would play many of the standard Gospel songs with an acoustic flavor and maybe one or two originals. *CHILDREN* played only original music.

Lastly, *CHILDREN* connected because we truly represented what the Jesus Movement was all about. The main theme of the movement was a relationship with Jesus no matter what church you go to. Many of the groups we played with early on came from individual churches. Every church was trying to get involved with this new movement and they all produced gospel folk groups that would perform while their youth group passed out flyers in the crowd encouraging people to join their church. Though their music was good, these groups were often seen as church recruitment tools more than a part of the movement.

*CHILDREN* didn't have to worry about this. The five of us represented the Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist and Community churches. We each had our own home church, but understood that the movement wasn't about a church, it was about a relationship and our songs reflected that.

The chemistry of *CHILDREN* was a wonderful mix. The five of us came from such diverse backgrounds and brought a wide range of talent to the group. We were acquaintances when we started out, Norm and I being the only ones with any relationship prior to *CHILDREN*, but our love for one another grew quickly as there were no egos that created friction within our work. We were all happy to be a part of it all and had the personalities that would draw out the best of each other throughout our experience.

By 1972, *CHILDREN* had become a solid participant in the Jesus Movement music scene of San Diego and southern California. We were regulars at Youth for Christ and Campus Life rallies as well as coffee houses, Bible studies and church gatherings throughout the area. At this point, we were booked solid for several months in advanced. With each performance, *CHILDREN* was getting more comfortable as a group and our music became much more entertaining. Our creative skills had produced so many new songs that we were able to design every performance for the situation. We had songs we would never play at churches - pushing the envelope a bit too much - but were well received at coffee house settings. Our confidence grew as we knew that no matter where we performed, we had the songs that would fit well with the surroundings. Our calendar reflected this as we were booked solid in almost every type of setting the Jesus Movement had at the time.

It was about this time that world events would force *CHILDREN* to make some changes.

The United States was involved with this conflict in Viet Nam which was creating quite a stir on the home front. President Nixon decided that since young people were doing anything to get out of the draft, he would have a draft lottery in order to make some sense out of the ordeal. They put all 365 days into a hat. If your birthday was chosen from 1-150, you would have to make plans on joining the military. If your birthday was 151-250, you were safe only until things got worse. If your birthday was 251 +, you didn't have to worry about it.

Jim and I were in the first draft lottery. Jim was not concerned. He was willing to do his part if called. I was a basket case. I was the furthest thing from a military guy that you could

find. For me it wasn't a political stand, it was a personal stand. I had no genes that had any desire to be in the military. War or no war, I wanted no part of the military life.

Jim's birthday was chosen #46, I believe. Mine was chosen #287.

Jim joined the Army and served two terms in Europe, never having to go into harms way.

I took over the bass duties as *CHILDREN* looked to regroup and maintain their place in the music scene of the Jesus Movement.

We had two females join the group. Denise was Norm's girlfriend who had a soft alto voice and a very pleasant stage presence. Debbie was the girlfriend of a guy who was working with us as the sound tech at our performances. She was a polished vocalist with a strong voice and versatile range. They both brought a new sound to our group and a new dynamics.

After a short break to get the girls up to speed and give me time to figure out the bass, *CHILDREN* moved quickly to reestablish itself as a mainstream performer in the Jesus Movement.

Musically, we were even better than before. The female vocals gave us a much fuller sound and enhanced the possibilities of what we could do on stage. Norm, Stan, Jerry and I were seasoned performers now who were good at adapting to the many varieties of opportunities within the music scene of the Jesus Movement. Though we missed Jim immensely, we continued to move forward in breaking down the walls of this new world of gospel music.

Until *CHILDREN* called it quits in 1974, we were a solid fixture of the Jesus Movement music scene in San Diego.

Outside of San Diego, *CHILDREN* never made a name for itself. Again, we were the essence of what the Jesus Movement was all about as we were not sponsored by any particular church or group. We were a melting pot of young people who simply wanted to write and sing songs about Jesus. We made no money and were unable to afford any recordings outside of the one session we had just before we broke up as a commemorative keepsake.

The new gospel music that came out of the Jesus Movement didn't really take hold east of the Rockies until 1975 or so. By then, *CHILDREN* had dissolved and were busy getting degrees, married and creating our own children. But I'll always be proud of the time we had. We broke down a lot of walls in gospel music and opened the door for many of the marque groups that would follow.

Many years later, as I watched this Rock ‘N Roll gospel group performing, I smiled to myself. I know this group has no idea who *Children* was, and I would be foolish to say anything about it. But I couldn’t help but think of how lucky I was to be a part of a new era in music that enabled this group to express their faith in such an energetic way.

*CHILDREN* did well.



circa 2018