

## *A Conversation with Kim Collingsworth*

I had the opportunity to talk with one of Southern Gospel's best-loved pianists and altos, Kim Collingsworth, before a recent Collingsworth family concert. Since I interviewed her husband Phil earlier this year (read that interview [here](#)), I tried to avoid covering the same ground in this conversation.

**DJM:** *Even though I know you tell your story in more detail on your Personal DVD, could you briefly tell us how you first became interested in playing the piano?*

**Kim:** Actually, I didn't start out with any ambitions to play the piano or take piano lessons. On a Sunday night, when I was three years old, I was in church, sitting in the front row, and my daddy preached a message on the gift of wisdom that God gave Solomon.

People say you can't remember that far back, and I don't remember a lot of the details—but I do remember what the message was about. He said that God gave Solomon a gift of wisdom because he asked for it.

Somehow, that made an impression on my little mind. I went home and put my PJ's on—I can take you to the spot—in fact, we showed the spot on the DVD—where I got down and begged the Lord for a gift. The only thing I remember after that is getting in bed and thinking, “I can't wait to see what I'm gonna be when I wake up in the morning!”

I never dreamed that it would be music. I didn't have any interest in music that I remember, up to that point. (Of course, I was really too little to remember much of anything.) My mother can probably tell my story better, with the age and time of when I began to play, but it was very shortly after that that I began to play the piano. And that was apparently the gift that I was given!

**DJM:** *And you started playing for church a couple of years after that?*

**Kim:** Actually, I was about seven when I started playing for church. My mother was the pianist, and the church organist resigned his position, so my mother moved to the organ and put me on piano. And that was my beginning in church music!

**DJM:** *Off the wall: Do you know how to play organ as well?*

**Kim:** Yes—I love to play the organ! I play for a lot of weddings, and enjoy it!

**DJM:** *Do you play pipe organ, with the pedals and all?*

**Kim:** Yes! I don't necessarily understand everything about the pipe organ and wouldn't be considered a pro, but I certainly love to play it.

**DJM:** *That's neat! Now I noticed in the behind the scenes on another DVD that you made a couple of piano recordings?*

**Kim:** I did.

**DJM:** *How old were you when you did those, and what were the names of those recordings?*

**Kim:** Ah, let's see. I did three. I was thirteen for the first one, fourteen for the second one, and fifteen for the third one. They were called *Kimberly Keaton at the Keyboard Number 1, Number 2, and Number 3*. It was pretty simple!



**DJM:** *Hymns?*

**Kim:** A mixture.

**DJM:** *Okay. What else did you include?*

**Kim:** Oh, I loved Floyd Cramer's style, and while I didn't play his songs much, I would take "Farther Along," "The Old Country Church" or some similar song, and kind of adapt it to his style. I always enjoyed doing that.

**DJM:** *So you didn't do any recordings after that for a number of years, till you were with Phil?*

**Kim:** That is correct. Actually, I did play for a couple of college groups when I was in junior high and high school, and they made some recordings that I accompanied on.

**DJM:** *On the recording, or just in the live concerts?*

**Kim:** No, actually, on the recording.

**DJM:** *If you remember, what college groups were you with?*

**Kim:** It was a quartet and a mixed group from Union Bible College. This particular college also had an academy and a high school, and I was a student in their academy. I was in the seventh and eighth grades when I started playing for their groups.

**DJM:** *So then, you met Phil in the mid-80s and got married in 1985?*

**Kim:** Actually in 1986. When I met Phil, I was 14. I had just come out of the eighth grade, and he was going into his freshman year of college!

Phil attended a college in Cincinnati called God's Bible School and College. His sister, Connie Hilligoss, was the high school choral conductor at the school I attended, and before Phil started college that fall, he came to visit her. She promptly said to him, "I have three girls I want you to meet." I was the third one he met, and we just clicked.

**DJM:** *So right before you got married in 1986, I understand you began performing together?*

**Kim:** Yes. About six weeks before we got married, we sang for a camp meeting at Lower Lights Camp Meeting in Petersburg, Michigan. That was our first debut as a couple!

**DJM:** *Then you did camp meetings together for the next ten or fifteen years?*

**Kim:** For thirteen years. We did revivals during the spring and the fall, and we'd do anywhere from about eight to ten camp meetings in the summer.

**DJM:** *So what led your family to decide to branch out into doing more concerts, other than just camp meetings?*

**Kim:** Well, I'll be perfectly honest, God led us in this journey, and I'm very serious about that.

The music that you do for camp meetings and revivals would be completely different from what we do for concerts. By that I mean that you would sing maybe two or three songs a night. You would sing one right after the congregational singing. Then they would have prayer and an offering, which we would play offertory for. Then we would always sing one right before the evangelist or pastor got up to preach.

We loved music deeply. And it was becoming less and less fulfilling to us to just fill that role every night, doing two songs. And the logistics of traveling with small children and staying in people's homes...I mean, Tuesday through Sunday, we lived in someone else's home. We'd have Monday night off and hit it again that following Tuesday.

**DJM:** *One day off?*

**Kim:** One day off. And then we'd do Tuesday through Sunday, Monday off, Tuesday through Sunday, Monday off.

I don't know that we can really say that we just decided to change, but the Lord decided to change us and move us in another direction.

**DJM:** *So was it gradual, or was it more of a sudden shift?*

**Kim:** Here's the deal. At Christmas time, they usually don't have revivals or camp meetings, so we were basically without a job. Once our kids came along—Brooklyn, I believe, was four or five, and Courtney was about three—we put together a series of songs about Christmas, and fun songs about the holidays. If I remember correctly, we got about two invitations to come to two different churches and



sing on a Sunday night. So we did a grand total of two Christmas concerts that year.

We enjoyed doing it very much, and the kids loved it. One thing led to another, and the next Christmas, we got more invitations. Well, we did that for three or four years, maybe. At the end of the third or fourth year, we had quite a little repertoire of Christmas concert music, mixed with instrumentals. The kids would recite Scripture and dress up in costumes—it was really something! It was sweet, more than anything!

**DJM:** *Do any videotapes exist?*

**Kim:** Yes! I have videotapes of this. They are priceless to me, because of the children.

But anyway, through that, by the end of the thirteenth year of doing singing revivals, we started getting calls with this question: “Do you ever do concerts other than at Christmas time?”

And the answer was, “Well, not really.”

That question led us from one thing, to the next, to the next. And the Lord began to close some doors, and open other doors for this concert ministry. Invitations started coming in, and it became very clear that God was leading us in another direction. And that's how we got here!

**DJM:** *So when you were doing those two or three songs, did those ever include piano solos, or did you really not do many piano solos during those years?*

**Kim:** Never.

Let me take that back—almost never. And let me tell you why: For every offertory, Phil always played his trumpet. Phil has a degree in trumpet performance and it just seemed like the thing for him to do, and I always just accompanied him. I enjoyed that role.

**DJM:** *Hmm!*

Kim. Always—for every offertory. We had six or ten arrangements of trumpet music. We would sing the first song, he would play the offertory, and we would sing the last song before the evangelist got up.

I didn't have a desire in the world to do solos!

**DJM:** *So why did you start?*

**Kim:** You can thank my husband for that. *(laughs)*

I had made those previous recordings, and always played when I was playing for the other groups. But I kind of like to take the back seat, and I enjoyed myself. I was raising my kids, and I didn't have to worry about anything like that.

But when we started doing the concerts, Phil started saying, “Why don't you play 'O Holy Night'?” or “Why don't you play this or that?”

And it just grew out of that. I don't really know how to describe it. It just sort of happened. The people seemed to like it. The people seemed to receive it well and were very responsive and gracious.

**DJM:** *So was “How Great Thou Art” a turning point for you, in getting full orchestration on a track?*

**Kim:** Really, to be honest, there was another song before “How Great Thou Art.” It was “Amazing Grace.” I leased a track—or bought, I believe it was, a demo—this was way back before we were doing orchestrations.

Phil asked me to play that. I played it for a banquet, and I worked and worked around the orchestra, and created piano parts, and arranged it, and I made it the best I could.

That, probably, was the turning point, right there, now that I think about it. I guess we've never

really just sat down and thought about this stuff. It just happened!

Phil is of the philosophy, in anything we do—if the children would sing, and it was received very well, well, then, that's something that works. Let's build on that. That's kind of the way he has always operated.

But once we did “Amazing Grace,” and the response was positive, he kept asking me to play. Then “How Great Thou Art” was second.



**DJM:** *Did you ever record that rendition of Amazing Grace?*

**Kim:** I did. It's on *Silver and Ivory*.

**DJM:** *Then you did “How Great Thou Art,” then “It is Well”...*

**Kim:** Before that, I did “Salute to the Troops.”

And, of course, we did stuff like “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho.” And, to be perfectly honest, I really stressed over that. That was at the beginning of the ten years—you know, we've been doing this for ten years—and, when we were getting ready to arrange *Silver and Ivory*, Phil said, “I want you to arrange a piece of music for “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho.”

I was like: “Oh, do I have to?”

He was like, “I really want you to do it. I think you'd come up with something really cool on a song like that.”

So we were at North Vernon Church of the Nazarene in Indiana. We sang there that morning, and were scheduled there that evening, also. In

between concerts, I went into the church sanctuary, sat there, and arranged “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho.”

Probably, of all the fast music I have ever played, that one is still the most requested. I don't know why. This very weekend, it's been requested both Friday and Saturday nights.

**DJM:** *Do you play much classical music, or was the “Hallelujah Chorus” more of a departure for you?*

**Kim:** No, I don't play much classical music, but I have always, ever since I was a child, had a great appreciation for it. I was one of those kids that geekish—is that a word?

**DJM:** *I'm not sure!*

**Kim:** Well, let me put it this way: When you came over to our house, it was not uncommon to find me on the floor in a corner somewhere with a pair of headphones in my ears, and holding a little cassette player. I would have cassettes of choral groups and choral samples, and I would listen to choral arrangements or classical music, for long periods of time. I was a little bit geekish in that way! And I've always had an appreciation for classical music. Always.

**DJM:** *Was “Hallelujah Chorus” the first classical piece you've recorded?*

**Kim:** That I've recorded? Yes, probably so.

And the only reason for that is that the genre that we play in...they don't do classical music. The reason I chose the “Hallelujah Chorus” is not because it's classical in style, but because of the lyrics. The election was coming up last year, in '08, as you know.

**DJM:** *You taped it in March?*

**Kim:** The initial idea was March, and we did it in April. I chose that particular piece because there was a lot of uncertainty last year, there still is. And that song just reminds me, over and over, that we're not of the kingdoms of this world, but of another kingdom! God is going to reign, and have the final say regardless of what happens in our world. It just seemed appropriate for the economy, the time, the shape our world's in.

**DJM:** *Is it more difficult for you to play than the other songs you do, based on hymns?*

**Kim:** No, not really. I enjoy playing it.

**DJM:** *Do you play it frequently? Because I don't think I've heard it live yet.*

**Kim:** You've not heard “Hallelujah Chorus” live yet?

**DJM:** *I don't think so.* [Whether intentional or not, they did conclude their program with that song that evening!]

**Kim:** I do play it frequently. A lot of people are still requesting “How Great Thou Art.” And to be honest, I don't like to play “How Great Thou Art” every night.

Two reasons: I take the songs that I play dead serious. And I get tired of music quickly, because of it. I don't want things to become commonplace, to where I can just spit it out, and go through motions that aren't reality. I want the songs to be real and I want them to be fresh to me, so I set aside “How Great Thou Art” quite frequently—unless someone just emphatically requests it. Otherwise, I just give it a break.

**DJM:** *So with getting tired of songs easily, is it a challenge for you to be in a cycle where you do a new recording every two years?*

**Kim:** Yes, sometimes it is. But when you have recorded several CDs, you have a lot more songs to choose from. There's more variety—more opener songs, more fast numbers, more to pick from.

I think it also helps that we have the four children, and we can shift back and forth from mixed trios to ladies trios to family ensembles, to violins, to piano, to trumpet, et cetera. That helps us a lot in

not tiring so quickly of our music these days.

**DJM:** *All right! Since this wasn't out when I interviewed Phil earlier this year, could you tell us a bit about the new project?*

**Kim:** Well, *The Answer* has been in the making since January. We started choosing the music around that time, and then Wayne Haun came to our home in March and spent a couple of days. We listened to what felt like hundreds of demos—I don't think it was that many—but we began to more seriously confirm our choices of repertoire.

In every CD that we do, there are special moments where the Lord confirms to us, “I want you to do this song, or this song.” Such is the case with *The Answer*.

We were having a prayer meeting in our home one Tuesday night. Phil and I were discussing the fact that we felt like we were missing something on this new CD. I said to Phil, “We need something that is going to tell the people in the audience that don't know anything about a relationship with Jesus, and that come to our table crying because their homes are broken, things are going bad, their finances are shot, and everything is just bad. We need a song that straight up tells them that Jesus is the answer to their problems.”

As we were sitting in that prayer meeting that night, the song “Jesus is Still the Answer” came to my mind. It's an old Lanny Wolfe song; we've always loved Lanny Wolfe's writing. I jumped up and said, “Oh, let's go to the music room!”

It was about 11:30 at night. Courtney walks out of her room—she was the only one of our kids up at the time. I ran the song by her, and said, “What do you think?”

She said, “I don't even know it.” (Of course, she's 18.)

We went to the music room, and began to teach her “Jesus is Still the Answer.” While we were trying to sing it, we could hardly keep the tears from flowing. Courtney looked at me and said, “Mama, this is it!”

We have been singing that song for two weekends. And I'm telling you what. That song is old, but the message is timeless. And the crowds are absolutely responding in just a fantastic way. You can tell they're relating to it. It's ringing their bell. You can tell they agree—Jesus is still the answer.

**DJM:** *You also included an old hymn, “I Want a Principle Within.”*

**Kim:** Oh, my! A hymn that's 260 years old, written by Charles Wesley.

The very reason we chose it was because of the lyrics. We have four teenagers...

**DJM:** *Olivia's a teenager? [shock!]*

**Kim:** Oh, I'm sorry—I have three teenagers and one pre-teen! They're going through times of decision making. A lot of pressure, and peer pressure. I think one of the things we want our children to catch in this song is, “Listen to your God-given conscience. Right is right, and wrong is wrong.”

This song literally talks about having those principles in place. What a great song!

**DJM:** *So why did you choose Great is Thy Faithfulness as your piano solo for this project?*

**Kim:** You want to know why?

**DJM:** *Yes.*

**Kim:** My teenage son begged me to play that.

**DJM:** *Really?*

**Kim:** I don't know why in the world a teenage boy would pick, “Great is Thy Faithfulness,” but he has asked me for quite some time, for several, several months, “Mama, please, would you play a rendition of 'Great is Thy Faithfulness'?”

So I don't know. I kinda toyed with it, but I thought, "Well, if my teenage boy wants to hear it, then I'm gonna record it!"

**DJM:** *Since I have no anticipation of interviewing Olivia any time soon ... I understand she has a new project coming out. Could you tell us a little bit about that?*

**Kim:** It came out last Friday—a week ago Friday. It's called *Then and Now*. That name was chosen by Olivia. What we did was, we took every song she has done from every project. You see her at every age—there's pictures inside of the booklet that show her at those ages. And then we added four brand new tunes, that kind of fit her in the age she's in now.

It's a very, very cute CD, if I have to say so myself!

I was like, "Should we bring these old ones out, and do this?" But when I got the finished copy, I put it in the CD player, and I sat there and grinned for a solid thirty minutes. Of course, part of that's the momma coming out in me, and remembering ... a little sentimental. But it's just a really cute CD for kids.

My first idea that it was going to be a good project was when two little girls, who happen to be my nieces, were at my house when the CDs came. We popped the CD in. Those little girls are four and six. They came flying into the music room when they heard a little girl's voice, and promptly sat down on the floor. They sat there mesmerized the entire time we played the CD.

So I thought, "Well, that's a good sign if kids like it—that's who we did it for."

**DJM:** *Now about Olivia's solo on your new CD, "Oh the Thought that Jesus Loves Me"—her voice has matured!*

**Kim:** Very much.

**DJM:** *So was "My Favorite Things" probably the last cute solo, and we can look for more serious stuff from now on?*

**Kim:** Well, on her new CD, *Then and Now*, she does have a new one called "God Makes a Lot of a Little." It's adorable, very kiddish. But, you know what...probably with "My Favorite Things," we were coming in for a landing on the little girl stuff, I have to tell you. She's growing up!

The last song on her new CD is called "Little by Little," and it says, "Little by Little, I'm changing, I'm growing / Little by little, I hope that it's showing / I'm not who I'll be / I'm not who I was / I'm somewhere in the middle / But God is changing me / Little by little." Well, that's Olivia right there—it fits her very well!

**DJM:** *So what do think it is about piano and Southern Gospel? Is it just that piano is what was available at the start of the genre of music, or do you think there is just something about the style of music that needs a piano?*

**Kim:** Well, you know, I would probably not be the authority to answer that question. I've always loved Southern Gospel music—I grew up listening to the Cathedrals, and many other groups—but I never remember hearing it with anything but a piano and maybe a bass. I don't go back before the days of that, so ... I don't know.

It's a great instrument, of course, and I'm prejudiced, but I'm not sure how to answer that question.

I just think it fits.

**DJM:** *I've just wondered if there was something you could do with eighty-eight keys that a guitar, with six strings, couldn't quite match for keeping up with four male voices or family groups.*

**Kim:** I don't know about that. I think that the rhythm you can play with a piano—of course, you

can play it on a guitar, too—but there's something about the piano that identifies a quartet, when the pianist begins to play stuff that just bounces around while the quartet is doing their thing. I don't know, it just fits!

**DJM:** *Is there any question you've hoped someone would ask you in an interview, but nobody has ever asked you?*

**Kim:** Oh my, let me think here. Good question!

I don't know that I have ever wished anybody would ask me this question, but you may find this interesting. You know, I've played a lot of big ballads on the piano. It's partly because my husband loves them, and he likes me to play them. My husband is a very bombastic person—he would laugh if I said that, but he knows it's the truth! The bigger, the better. That's just him.

To be honest, I am the exact opposite. And people don't realize that. My choice of piano playing would be easy listening or accompanying. It's my favorite to play. Sometimes I'll go into my piano room, and literally, it'll be like a devotional time, and I'll do nothing but sit there and play easy-listening church music, and become absolutely blessed beyond words because the lyrics just move me deeply.

I think people may find it interesting that my first choice of music is not big, bombastic piano playing. Although, I enjoy it—if a song calls for exuberance—it's just not my first choice.

**DJM:** *Certain songs do—*

**Kim:** Yes, some just call for it. You can't play everything easy listening, and I know that. If the song calls for big dynamics, I love to play it. The Bible does say to praise God with the cymbals, with the harps, and with the stringed instruments...so I guess it could fall in that category.

**DJM:** *I count pianos among the stringed instruments!*

**Kim:** Me, too.

There are many nights I'll say, “Oh, just let me play something easy listening!”

**DJM:** *Is there a connection between that and why you end “It is Well” and “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” on soft and gentle finishes instead of big endings?*

**Kim:** Yes and no. The reason I ended some of those that way is to have variety. I don't think everything needs to end with a crash.

The other thing was, take “It is Well With My Soul”: The essence of that song is about peace. So I like to end it peaceful. I didn't want to end it by giving somebody indigestion.

And “Great is Thy Faithfulness”—I ponder that thought, and it moves me deeply. There are stories that each of us have about the faithfulness of God in our own lives. When I ponder those stories in my own personal life, I don't feel like jumping up and down. I feel like bowing at His feet and thanking Him for His faithfulness. So that's probably why I ended that one that way—with that gentle thought about the faithfulness of God.

**DJM:** *To jump topics entirely: Did you homeschool your children from the start, or is that something that came up a little later?*

**Kim:** Actually, I have homeschooled the children for twelve years, and started when each one was in kindergarten. With the exception of a two-year sabbatical which during part of that time I was pregnant with our youngest child, Olivia, I have always homeschooled them. The reason for this is, more than anything, is because of the logistics of road life.

**DJM:** *I don't really know how many of my readers are, but do you have any thoughts or advice you'd like to pass along to moms who are raising their children on the road?*

**Kim:** Absolutely. I would say: Make your kids a priority, even above your job on the road.

Homeschooling has never been easy. There have been many days I wake up and wish the school bus had picked them up. And then there have been many days I thank the Lord that the school bus didn't pick them up. I'm not a pro, and I'm certainly not seasoned by any means, just because I've homeschooled for twelve years.

But I will say one thing that has worked for us so far, is we have tried our best to let our kids know that their own personal interest mattered to us, over our traveling, over our singing, et cetera. Consequently, we've turned down a lot of dates because of this. I think it's important that the kids have a life, and that they have activities other than just the road. I think it helps them to like and enjoy the traveling more, when they have the other opportunities, if that makes any sense.

When Brooklyn turned twelve, we sat down and chose several events that we determined to make an annual priority for her and the other children as they got old enough. Examples of that would be the annual youth camp for teens that takes in a lot of sports activities, a youth convention (with some great youth oriented speakers) that they look forward to every year, along with several other events. Our booking agent knows not to book those dates.

It has also helped our kids to feel somewhat normal when we take and register them for these events as just part of the youth group, and not someone who is coming in as a special guests to perform and to be put on a pedestal, as it were.

**DJM:** *Do you have any other thoughts or comments, and could you end with how readers can get in touch with the group?*

**Kim:** They can go to our website, [www.thecollingsworthfamily.com](http://www.thecollingsworthfamily.com). We're on Facebook now—can you imagine?

**DJM:** *Who does those updates?*

**Kim:** It's between Courtney, myself, or our our office manager, Dannette Lavy. Our office phone number is 513-553-0658.

Let me just say one thing, in closing. It is such a privilege to do what we do. I don't ever want to take it for granted. My biggest prayer is that we stay focused on reality—that really, what it's about is uplifting and magnifying Jesus and pointing people to the Cross.

I think people in the seats are hungry for God, for something fresh. Sometimes that's a tough job for us, to always be fresh. I think our fellow travelers on the road all understand and would agree with me on that. It just makes me realize how frail we are as humans and how much we need God's help to make a difference in people's lives.

What a privilege to serve in this way.