

“Oh Happy Day” – The Edwin Hawkins Singers (1968)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Bill Carpenter (guest post)*



Original label



The Edwin Hawkins Singers

If four-time Grammy Award winning singer, songwriter and choirmaster Edwin Hawkins had been a record label executive and had to pick his own radio singles, then his multi-million selling 1968 recording of “Oh, Happy Day” probably would not have become the global anthem that it became in the heart of the counterculture, civil rights and Jesus movements in the late sixties and early seventies.

“My mother had an old hymnal and I had a knack for rearranging hymns,” Hawkins says of the song that first surfaced on his custom-made LP “Let Us Go into the House of the Lord.” The song was recorded at the Ephesians Church of God in Christ (COGIC) in his hometown of Oakland, CA to raise money for the church’s 40+-member youth choir to attend a convention. ““Oh Happy Day’ was an old hymn and I rearranged it. It was actually one of the least likely songs to become a hit. There were some much stronger songs on there. We were going to hand-sell the album in the Bay Area. We ordered 500 copies. Lamont Bench, a Mormon guy, recorded that album on a two-track system. All 500 copies sold.”

One of those albums fell into the hands of Abe “Voco” Keshishian, an influential DJ at KSAN 94.9 FM in the Bay area, who started to play “Oh Happy Day” on his “Lights Out San Francisco” blues and rock program in early 1969. Then, Dan Sorkin, a morning DJ at powerhouse station KSFO 560 AM--when AM radio was the proving ground for Pop music--in San Francisco, began pushing the song as well.

The song created enough of a stir on the west coast that sixteen record labels started bidding on rights to release the song nationally with Buddha Records winning the bid. “I wasn’t planning to go into the music business and I wasn’t looking for a record deal,” Hawkins remembers:

The record's success decided my fate. I learned the business the hard way. Some people thought the label had something to do with the religion because of Buddha, but that was just a name. A Jewish guy named Neil Bogart [who later founded Casablanca Records and launched the careers of KISS and Donna Summer] owned it. We signed the contract Easter Sunday night in 1969. He and his partners flew out to see me and brought me a check for \$5,000. Coming from the projects of Oakland, CA, that was a lot of money to me.

And the rest was history as the song caught fire on pop signals from coast to coast and even crossed over to R&B radio. Gospel historian Bernice Johnson Reagon reminisced in her 1992 book, "We'll Understand It Better By and By," "A graduate student at the time, I remember hearing the remarks of an African-American DJ when he introduced the song on WVON, a soul music radio station in Chicago: 'Here's a new song climbing the charts. I don't know what to call it. It sounds like gospel and it sounds like soul. Whatever it is, the beat has a groove. I like it and I'm gonna play it.'"

What made "Oh Happy Day" resonate is anyone's guess. The original version by British educator Phillip Doddridge was published in 1755--four years after the composer's death --and was sung in a yearning plea similar to some Appalachian songs which, of course, have roots in traditional Old English and Scottish songs. Aside from revising many of the lyrics, restructuring the melody and speeding up the tempo in general, Hawkins unintentionally transformed the song from a church hymn into more of a mainstream pop record with a catchier arrangement of the chorus that featured subtle jazz drumming, some Latin percussion and an echoey upright piano groove that buttressed the slick but passionate choir harmonizing against soloist Dorothy Morrison's earthy, straight-from-the church vocal technique.

Once the Buddha Records machine was in motion, "Oh Happy Day" reached No. 4 on the Billboard Pop singles chart and No. 2 on the UK pop singles survey in 1969 and the choir had been marketed and pushed further than any other black gospel ensemble had been up to that time. It spent two weeks at No. 2 on the Billboard R&B singles chart as well. Suddenly, the group was the toast of Hollywood. They performed on network television programs such as Dick Clark's "American Bandstand," "The Hollywood Palace," "The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour," and "Happening '68," among others. In 1970, the group won a Grammy Award for Best Soul Gospel Performance for "Oh Happy Day" which has since sold over 7 million copies in the ensuing four decades.

"Oh Happy Day" was like nothing in mainstream gospel music at the time and was controversially jarring to many in black church circles. "We preach, and the Bible teaches, to take the gospel into all the world, but when it all comes down, we don't want to do that with our music," Hawkins said at the time. "And the church world is quick to criticize that.... I think sometimes that it is out of jealousy. Someone has succeeded, and people don't like it. A lot of that goes on."

In spite of the notoriety, the Edwin Hawkins Singers still had an immense influence on the gospel community. The Emotions, a top R&B group, would later cover the group's

tune “A Long Way to Go” and young choir leaders, such as the dynamic Myrna Summers, and Hawkins’ equally-talented younger brother, Walter, all began to experiment and to expand their musical palettes beyond the tried, tested and accepted gospel arrangements of the period following the success of “Oh Happy Day.”

From a cultural standpoint, “Oh Happy Day” and its utopian message of pacifism and spiritual purging came to symbolize the Jesus Movement during the Nixon Administration. The song served as an unofficial anthem for the young hippie generation’s embrace of non-traditional Christianity and rebuke of the Vietnam War.

Buddha Records tried to build upon the pop success of “Oh Happy Day” by molding the Edwin Hawkins Singers into more of a message group than a gospel act. They recorded their own versions of top ten feel-good hits such as “O-o-h Child” by Buddha label mates The Five Stairsteps and The New Seekers’ “I’d Like To Teach the World to Sing” but none of their releases matched the success of “Oh Happy Day.”

“Oh Happy Day” has since been covered by a diverse bevy of artists such as Joan Baez, Elvis Presley, Jason Mraz, Big Mama Thornton, Susan Boyle, Aretha Franklin, Aaron Neville, The Oak Ridge Boys, jazz pianist Ramsey Lewis and the Godfather of Gogo, Chuck Brown, to name but a few. Even the Beatles’ George Harrison once said that the song inspired his chant “My Sweet Lord,” a number one pop hit in 1970. “I was so thrilled with ‘Oh Happy Day’ by the Edwin Hawkins Singers,” Harrison is quoted as saying in www.beatlesbible.com, “It really just knocked me out, the idea of that song and I just felt a great feeling of the Lord. So I thought, ‘I’ll write another “Oh Happy Day,”’ which became ‘My Sweet Lord.’”

Over the years, Hawkins has sought to create another tune with the impact of “Oh Happy Day” and has ended up writing some standards within the gospel world such as his own 1981 hit “Worship the Lord” and Jennifer Holliday’s “This Day.” Still, that second “Oh Happy Day” has been elusive, so Hawkins has periodically updated the song for a new generation of fans. In 1998, he released a 30th anniversary Euro disco version of the song on his “Love is the Only Way” CD and a more urban dance-flavored version in 2011 on the “Moses Tyson Jr.’s World Class Gospel Jubilee” CD.

As recent as 2011, the Edwin Hawkins Singers’ original rendition of “Oh Happy Day” had reached number three on Billboard’s Gospel Digital Songs Sales chart--just a little more evidence of the song’s enduring beauty and relevance.

Bill Carpenter has written hundreds of music-related articles (R&B, Gospel, Pop, Country and Blues) for publications as diverse as “People,” “Living Blues,” “Goldmine” and “The Washington Post.” He’s also written CD liner notes essays for Warner Bros., Time-Life Music, and Sony Music. His book “Uncloudy Days: The Gospel Music Encyclopedia” (Hal Leonard Publishing, Inc.) earned an NAACP Image Award nomination in 2007. Carpenter was also a featured voice in the acclaimed gospel documentary film “Rejoice & Shout” (2010 Magnolia Pictures).

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.