

### *An Interview with Kyla Rowland*

I recently had the opportunity of interviewing Kyla Rowland, who joins Dianne Wilkinson and Bill and Gloria Gaither as one of the greatest songwriters of her generation. (At the right is the cover of her most recent solo album, reviewed by Adam Edwards [here](#).)



**DJM:** *For how long have you been writing songs?*

**Rowland:** I wrote my first song when I was 27 year old, and I am now 62.

**DJM:** *Who are your musical influences?*

**Rowland:** Well, my greatest writing influence has been Fanny Crosby. I also tell William Cowper's life story so many times; there never has been and never will be a more poetic or perfect lyric than "There is a Fountain"—a visually stunning song.

**DJM:** Which song was your first major cut, and which group recorded it first?

**Rowland:** My first song was "He will Row You Over the Tide."

I was with Word; Donnie Sumner, J.D. Sumner's nephew, helped me get started. It wasn't a long, drawn-out process; it was an overnight thing.

These were the days where if you had a decent song, many groups would record it. The Cookes recorded it first, then the Inspirations, then the Kingsmen.

Those days are just about gone—but what a wonderful thing that was for the writers, and especially those at Word, because at the time Word had quite a roster of artists: the Happy Goodmans, the Rex Nelon Singers, Wendy Baywell and the Sunliters, the Inspirations, the Florida Boys—and I could just go on and on. The Word writers got the first pitch to all these major groups.

**DJM:** What brought those days to an end?

**Rowland:** It's simply because the artists wanted identity. They wanted one song performed only by them and recorded only by them; they wanted to be identified with that song. Everyone subsequently started hoping that each song they single would become a signature song—and that completely eliminated most other groups from recording the song.

**DJM:** Was the change gradual?

**Rowland:** The change was gradual—it truly was.

There are still exceptions; another group had already charted "Long as I Got King Jesus" before Brian Free took it to the top. It still does happen.

**DJM:** Do you often see a case where a group records a song but doesn't single it and then another group performs it?

**Rowland:** That's called recycling songs—it's a writer's dream. It does happen, quite often. The song has to be exceptional—or the song itself may not be that exceptional, but it's just a song that did not fit that group. They recorded it, but never singled it, and rarely or never performed it. Another group heard it and said, "That fits us."

**DJM:** How long were you with Word?

**Rowland:** I signed with them in about 1975 and I stayed with them until 1985. That was the best company to work with; no writer could have ever been involved with a better company than Word. They were on top of everything at all times, and if they told you they were going to pitch a song, they pitched it. When they left Southern Gospel, there were a lot of broken hearts--Ann Ballard, Aaron Wilburn, Dee Gaskin, and me—and we just kind of fluttered and floated around for a few years. Many of us went to Eddie Crook for a year or two, but his his roster of artists was not that big yet, so we didn't linger there.

**DJM:** It appears that for some time in the 1980s, you had fewer songs published. Is that correct?

**Rowland:** That's absolutely correct. I call it my six silent years. Those were six of the best years that I ever had, for this reason: I started self-publishing. I'm not a pitcher. I do not pitch my songs. My rule is that to know that it's God—I let the artist call me. The artists were not used to calling me, they were used to calling Word. So I stockpiled the songs.

In the meantime I was singing with my brother, Ron Martin—the Rowlands. We recorded six or seven albums—you're talking about at least seventy songs. Subsequently, because I recorded all of those songs, when I went with Daywind I had a catalog of songs ready. At least 90% of the songs I have gotten recorded by Daywind artists have come from that catalog of demos that my brother and I recorded during those times.

My brother is such a tremendous singer, his voice is just unbelievable. He sang songs like “God Saves Old Sinners,” “Thinking of a Mansion,” “I'll Just go with God,” and “Royal Descendant.” With us, they never really did get big, big, big.

But Choirs began to sing them, so they took up a life of their own in the South. So I had two things going there—I had choir after choir after choir singing these songs, and then I had all those songs already demoed and cataloged and ready.

During that time, too, it was one of my best writing periods. When you hear songs like “I Rest My Case at the Cross,” “One Scarred Hand,” and “There Rose a Lamb”—we didn't send them to radio, we just recorded them.

**DJM:** When did you join Daywind?

**Rowland:** Fairly recently, around five years ago.

**DJM:** Are there any artists that never recorded one of your songs that you wish had done so?

**Rowland:** No.

**DJM:** How many songs have you written?

**Rowland:** Around 2000.

**DJM:** How many of these have been published?

**Rowland:** You know, I honestly have no idea.

**DJM:** I listened to the interview you did with Daniel Britt at NQC last year. You said you'd done several songs in which God moved so powerfully that they were more of God than of you, but “There Rose a Lamb” was really the only one discussed. Which were the others?

**Rowland:** They were One Scarred Hand and Safe Thus Far.

**DJM:** Do you ever craft a melody with a certain singer in mind?

**Rowland:** No.

**DJM:** Is a complete list of your songs available anywhere?

**Rowland:** We are about to put on the website a list of my identifiable songs—of those that have been recorded and even those that have not been recorded—with credits, publisher, and year.

(Note: The song list has now been posted, at: <http://kylarowland.com/songs.htm>.)

**DJM:** Of all the songs you have written, which songs mean the most to you?

**Rowland:** One Scarred Hand.

**DJM:** Why?

**Rowland:** My son was 18 years old. He had been a precious little boy, but he just stayed in trouble. When he was a teenager, his troubles became more serious. When he was 18, he had a gorgeous, beautiful future. He had his college paid for; he was almost but not quite a basketball phenomenon. He was leading in all statistics, captain of the team. He had a future just laid out for him.

He broke one night at a basketball game and came home at halftime. He was captain of his team, but he quit at the half. He left home that night and I didn't see him for four years.

The night he left, I had not slept a wink. That morning, my left eye was swollen to a slit where I had cried all night. I laid my head down on my bed and Jesus did not send the Holy Spirit. He did not send angels. He came Himself. I did not see him, but I knew He was there.

The only words I said, was “I have no prayer. My heart is empty.” But He came, and in my spirit, I saw him extend one hand to me. In my heart I could see the scar.

He said if you lay your burden right here I will take care of it. And in an instant—that's how quickly it happened, after 18 years of living with it—I was relieved of that burden. Whether he came home dead or alive, I would be fine.

I went to my typewriter. I had no thought process—my fingers just moved over the typewriter. I did not write one word of the song myself.

The end of the story is that about four years after he left, I got a telephone call a few days before Christmas. I heard this deep voice on the other end. He said, “Momma.”

I said, “Barry is that you?”

“It's me.”

I said, “Your voice has changed.”

Then he said, “I'd like to come home for Christmas if you'll have me.”

I said, “If I'll have you? Of course I'll have you”

He did. It was just a few days before Christmas that he came home. And when he got out of his truck, I ran to get him. I hugged him so tightly and I kissed him all over. Finally I looked up into his eyes, and this was a completely different man. The one who had left was angry—at me, at the world, at himself—but this face I looked was just like looking into...I don't know, there was something angelic about the look in his eyes.

He was crying. I said “Barry, there's something different about you.”

He said, “Momma, I finally made it right with the Lord.”

He was 23 when he came home; now he's 38, so that was 15 years ago. He is one of the strongest Christians. He teaches a Bible class, has his own singing group, he's at church every time the

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door was open—he's a prayer warrior.

God is exactly who He said He was. When He said He was the deliverer—He's that and more. If He can rescue my son, he can rescue anybody. Mothers and fathers who are struggling with children on drugs and alcohol—they need to hear that God still rescues children.

My other songs—except for He Will Row You Over the Tide and Safe Thus Far—I have written with God's help. But with these three, all I did was watch as the lines began to appear.

*Thank you to Kyla Rowland for granting the interview, and to Adam Edwards ([www.southerngospelcritique.com](http://www.southerngospelcritique.com)) for helping set it up.*