

Sock Monkey Productions – John Edmonds profile

FX

Piano Creeking

John Edmonds:

Okay, this is *What a Friend we Have in Jesus*, an old hymn I used to play for my grandmother many, many, many years ago.

MUSIC:

What a Friend We Have in Jesus played by John Edmonds on a *very* out of tune piano.

Dips under circa 4' in and fades under next clip.

John Edmonds:

This is the piano I learned to play on. I have no idea how old the piano is. It used to be a player piano and player pianos were not stylish in the 40s and 50s so my grandmother had it gutted. Biggest mistake she ever made 'cause it would be so valuable now if it still had the insides. But I love it. This is just like a member of the family. I don't have it tuned. I don't have anything done to it.

Rachel Hopkin:

And it doesn't bother you the tuning?

John Edmonds:

[Burps] Excuse me. I'm sorry. [Laughing]

Rachel Hopkin:

[Laughing]. It's like 'don't even bring that question in here'!

John Edmonds:

No it doesn't and I'll tell you why. When I first started playing in churches, nobody tuned their pianos. They were in horrible condition so you just make that adjustment with your ear. In fact, to me that twang is so reminiscent of a saloon sound that I actually kind of like it.

MUSIC:

End of *What a Friend we have in Jesus*.

XFADE WITH MUSIC:

Music from rehearsal in John's Church. You can hear John saying something about "the words".

Music dips under my script.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT:

The piano in *this* church has been tuned. This is the Mount Zion Baptist Church in Bowling Green where John Edmonds is music director. John is also a singer, teacher, recording artist, producer, arranger, composer, ensemble player AND the recent recipient of Celebrating the Arts award from the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He's rehearsing the church's youth choir with choir mistress Selia Helm Brooks.

FX

Hubbub from rehearsal

Selia Helm Brooks:

Yes mam

Rachel Hopkin:

Tell me what John's contribution to the music scene around here is

Selia Helm Brooks:

Everything. Because of his experience, his knowledge, his wisdom. His anointing. His leadership.

Rachel Hopkin:

What do you mean by his anointing?

Selia Helm Brooks:

His blessings. What God has blessed him with. Not everyone is capable and blessed with the talents and the knowledge that he has.

MUSIC:

Music from rehearsal fades up and continues. You can hear John leading everyone. Then dips under next link and fades out.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT;

Like the kids here today and like so many other gospel musicians, much of John's early musical education took place in his local church. There was also a lot of music in his family home in the Shakerag District of Bowling Green, where his parents had a family choir. However, there were some early doubts about whether John, or JB as he was known then, had any talent

John Edmonds:

As a youngster, I couldn't carry a tune. I thought I could. I loved to sing and I remember one time when I was maybe about five or 6 ... Things were always going on in Shakerag. There was this big variety show that the community put on at the old State Street gym and I had been selected to sing with this other little girl. She was a year older than I am 'cause we're still good friends. She had on a gown and I had on a little suit with the string tie and we sang *They tried to tell us we're too young*, the old Nat King Cole hit. And it was really cute but it really hurt my feelings back stage when we were getting dressed, I heard my mother tell the little girl's mother "You make sure that sings really loud because JB can't carry a tune."

Rachel Hopkin:

So what happened that suddenly, the talent started to emerge?

John Edmonds:

Well actually, even though I didn't have talent, my parents encouraged me to take piano lessons and I joined the youth choir at church. And seeing other musicians on television and hearing them on the radio too. WLAC radio out of Nashville was what was called a clear channel and on Sunday night they played gospel and that's when I first started hearing the Clara Ward Singers and Brother Joe May and of course, Mahalia Jackson.

MUSIC:

Title of Piece – *Didn't it Rain*

Artist – Mahalia Jackson

CD title – Live at Newport 1958

CD label – Sbme Special Mkts.

CD number - B0012GN396

Dips under

John Edmonds:

In later years, well, not in a lot of later years, I think I was 15, I had the opportunity to hear Mahalia in concert and meet her and also meet Mildred Falls, her accompanist. And I credit Mildred Falls with teaching me how to play gospel because at once I started buying Mahalia Jackson records, I would listen to Mildred Falls play over and over again to the point where I wasn't hearing Mahalia but I'm listening to what Mildred is doing and I would try to duplicate it. And the bad thing at that point when I was trying to learn this, the piano was at my grandmother's house and she lived on State Street and we lived in Chestnut Street and my grandmother didn't have a record player so I would have to listen to the record over and over again at my house, then go back through the alley and through the streets and I would go in and I would try to remember what I had heard and I would try to duplicate in on the piano.

Rachel Hopkin:

Have you any idea what was it about her playing that kind of captured you so much?

John Edmonds:

Ha. Now let me see. Abandonment. Freedom. But still with classical skill to it.

MUSIC:

Didn't it Rain continues

John Edmonds:

My aunt was a member of the Society Guild who were sponsoring Mahalia Jackson in Indianapolis and my aunt also knew how much I admired Mahalia so she called my grandmother and said "see if you can arrange for JB to come up" and we drove up there and went to the concert. The place was packed and I think that was the first big gospel concert that I had been to. And afterwards, with everyone else, I made my way on stage and stood in line to get autographs. She had gotten so tired by the time she got to me, she was simply putting MJ. You know, she didn't even look up to the people. And I was trying to think of something to say and when I got there and she put the MJ on mine, all I could think of to say

was “I sure enjoyed the program”. And she stopped writing and she turned around and she said “thank you, sweetie”. And my heart melted. The story is not over yet. After, my grandmother had been mingling and talking with other people. My grandmother had never met Mahalia, my grandmother didn’t know her. She even sometimes miscalled her Matilda Jackson when she would ask me to play some of her records. So my grandmother grabs me by the hand. Mahalia hasn’t left the stage yet. She said “come on. I want to introduce you to Mahalia”.

Rachel Hopkin:

So you went up to see her twice?

John Edmonds

Yes. I got the autograph and of course, I tried to explain this to my grandmother. No, she would not have it. You know, “Mahalia’s going to know who you are”. So she goes up and she says “Mahalia, I want you to meet my grandson”. I’m saying “Thank God she remembered her name”. And she said “he came all the way from Bowling Green, Kentucky which is 200 something miles away, just to hear you.” And someone had evidently told her that – she said “oh, is this the boy? Come here, let me get some sugar”. So she put her arms around me and grabbed me and kissed me right here on my cheek and that just made my life.

MUSIC:

Didn’t it rain? – end of track, fades out.

John Edmonds:

By 1964, I had formed a gospel group and we wanted to do more than just sing locally, so I started booking us different parts of the country. So every summer, we would take a road trip that would take us all the way to the West Coast and then back, singing in churches. A lot of the places that we went, I never knew what kind of situation we were going into. The people knew who we were because I would always send out promotional material to set everything up but we went to a church in Beatrice, Nebraska. Very few people have heard of that place. But anyway, there was only one black lady in the city, and we had no idea ‘til we got there. And of course, in those days, I didn’t ask for a guarantee of a certain amount of money, I just asked that they provide places for us to stay, feed us, and give us a love offering. So we stayed in the homes of white people. And of course, I’m not one who’s easily offended, especially when I know that none is intended but we were staying with the family in Beatrice, we were there for the whole weekend as a result of us doing concerts, and the family’s oldest son and his family were coming there for the concert. So the little boy was about 4 or 5 years old and he adored his grandfather, so as soon as the family pulled into the drive way and the car stopped, he opens the door and he’s running in there and he’s screaming “Grandpa. Grandpa”. Can’t wait to see him and he walks in the door and he sees these black people sitting there. And he freezes. He just stops. He’s not frightened or anything but he just looks at us. And his grandfather says “don’t mind him, he’s never seen any of you all before” [Laughter]. And I can imagine that some people would have been offended at a statement like that but I thought it was really endearing and before the weekend was over the little kid was just all over us, you know.

MUSIC:

Title of Piece – *Go Where I Send Thee*

Artist – John Edmonds and Stephen Webber

CD title – Tis the Season

CD label – Willow Shade

CD number – BCOM4800

John Edmonds:

There was one year when we did Los Angeles and one of the ladies there told me that there was a man in Hollywood who was auditioning new talent and so we went out and we auditioned for him and he said he loved us and he wanted to sign us up so we relocated in LA in the Summer of 1970. But the guy I had signed with, I guess he was the biggest disappointment for us. All he did was go through the trade papers, see where there were auditions, see where there were showcases being held and take us to those. I could have done that on my own.

MUSIC:

Go Where I Send Thee continues

John Edmonds:

One night he had us singing at a strip club. I think he just saw in the newspaper where people were welcome to come in and audition. And you can imagine the expression on the peoples' faces when we came in and started singing gospel music, you know. And they were very polite and the applause was nice. It was hilarious. [laughing]

Rachel Hopkin:

And what did you think about it?

John Edmonds

Oh I didn't mind. I'd sing anywhere.

Rachel Hopkin

But they...

John Edmonds:

I mean, no one was stripping at the time.

Rachel Hopkin:

I was going to say...

John Edmonds:

No, no.

Rachel Hopkin:

That's all right. That would be really, really odd. [laughing]

John Edmonds:

No, that didn't happen. He fell through. I had to come all the way back to Bowling Green and hook up with Nashboro before I could ever get an album. So it was not until 1974 that we actually signed with a major record company.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

In the meantime, John began travelling all around the world performing to American troops for the United Services Organisation, including those stationed in Vietnam.

John Edmonds:

I wanted to go over there because the neighbourhood I grew up in in Shakerag on Chestnut Street, three doors down a young man had enlisted and his parents had signed for him to go into the army at 17 and as soon as he was put in, they sent him to Vietnam and he was killed there so I definitely wanted to be a part of going over there and entertaining the troops

Rachel Hopkin

And what was that like?

John Edmonds:

Vietnam was very different. I got to go there three times and each time I could see differences. Some of the places you could tell the war was going on but you know, for the most part it was just like any American city except for the fact that you didn't see so many automobiles. We saw a lot of bicycles and rickshaws and we got a rocket attack one night. We were at a place out from Camp Eagle and we were singing *Come on in this House* and of course you hear rockets fired constantly from the time you're out at these bases, a lot of times because they're firing out to kind of ward off an attack while you're there performing. Anyway, all of a sudden, the audience kind of jumps up to their feet and they started running out of the tent and the first thought that hits my mind was "Gosh, are we doing that badly?" And then an officer runs up on stage and they grabbed the young lady that's with us and they said "This way. Follow us" and we had to run, I don't know how far it was but it seemed like we ran for at least a mile or two and then we went inside bunkers and we stayed in there

MUSIC:

Title of Piece – *I'm on the Battlefield for my Lord*

Artist – John Edmonds

CD title –

CD label – Creed

CD number -

Dips under

John Edmonds:

The USO Director told us when he first hired us, he said "I know you guys are gospel singers but 50% of your job on these tours is to sing and 50% of it is to socialise with the service men. If someone offers to buy you a drink, don't be prudish, accept the drink". So we did, so when we went to the bunkers after the rocket attack, they brought out fists of liquor and we sat in there and we drank for the next couple of hours.

MUSIC:

I'm on the Battlefield for my Lord continues.

XFADE WITH:

ANNOUNCEMENT:

At this time Village Gate takes great pleasure in presenting Clara Ward and the Ward Gospel Singers

APPLAUSE

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

When John wasn't dodging rocket attacks for the USO, his career was also getting off the ground back in the US –thanks not least to the legendary gospel singer Clara Ward of the Clara Ward Singers. She had become one of John's musical heroines, albeit gradually.

John Edmonds:

The first recordings I heard of her voice, I was totally turned off. I thought it was much too nasal. I had been taught you don't sing through your nose, you sing through your diaphragm but what really captivated me was the first time I saw them on television and saw their showmanship. They had choreography, they were like the gospel version of the Temptations with their moves and all of that. That just fascinated me so that drew me to them, so then I started to listen more to her and I realised how pure and beautiful and natural her voice was. I never dreamed I would one day meet her and actually become friends with her.

MUSIC:

Title of Piece – *Come on in the Room*

Artist – Clara Ward and the Clara Ward Singers

CD title – Meetin' Tonight

CD label – Vanguard Records

CD number – 015707004626

Dips under

John Edmonds:

My group was on tour and we had just finished some dates in Phoenix, Arizona and we had a couple of days off and we wanted to go to Disneyland because I knew the Ward Singers were regulars at Disneyland every Summer. And we spent the whole day at Disneyland and of course they didn't perform until 8 that night and then we actually got to meet her. I can understand how someone who's a fan of the Rolling Stones or Elvis Presley would feel upon meeting them. That's exactly the way I felt upon meeting Clara Ward. She was just such a HUGE influence on me.

Rachel Hopkin

How did it come to be that you started working with her?

John Edmonds

Well, my group, there was three of us. We had relocated to LA in 1970 and we were struggling, we were trying to find work so my two friends that sang with me, they said "Why don't you call Clara

Ward?" I said, well "How am I going to call Clara Ward? I don't have her number. I don't know." And they said, "Well look in the phone book" and oddly enough, she was listed. So I called and she pretended to remember who we were from Disneyland. But she was so gracious, she said "Mom and I have a meeting tonight that we have to go to at 7. Why don't you all drop by at 6.30 so we can meet you". And this was all a pretence because when we got there, we stayed there until about 9.30 at night because she immediately remembered us when she opened the door. She had us to sing for her and just took us under her wing and from that point on, they were always calling up asking if I were available for work.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Although Clara Ward was only in her forties when John knew her, her health was very poor.

John Edmonds:

This was the last, this was in, this was November 19th, 1972, and she died the following January so this was her last big concert. This was her first big concert for a church orientated audience in 20 years and it was in Nashville and she had called me the previous month and asked if I would be there to play piano, so I did, and we were on the way to the War Memorial Auditorium, she was looking out of the car window and she said, "This must be the wrong place, all these people aren't coming to hear us. Church people don't come out like this anymore for us." I said "Clara, these little old ladies are grey haired and they're carrying bibles". She thought we were at the place where Jackie Wilson was performing that same night but no, they packed the place to see her that night.

MUSIC:

Begins to fade up on track recorded live at that concert.

John Edmonds:

And at the end of the concert, she introduces all of the singers in the group and she introduces me so that really is a plus, hearing her say "At the piano, from Bowling Green Kentucky, John Edmonds" [laughter].

MUSIC:

Continuation of track recorded live at the concert. You can hear Clara Ward introducing John. Fades out.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

By this time, John had moved back from LA and began performing with his group at Nashville's Opryland. They were the only black gospel group working there regularly.

Rachel Hopkin

What was it like working there?

John Edmonds:

Horrible, it was such hard work. It was just like working in a factory. We had to punch a time clock. We worked six days a week. We had one day off. We did 6-7 shows a day. We performed outdoors in the heat. What else was bad about it? The pay was average, the pay was adequate. But the problem back then in 74 and 75 was that the musicians' union was strong in Nashville but performing groups, there was no strong representation there of the union, and the way I was able to get my singers

comparable salaries to what they deserved, I took them down to the musicians' union and had them sign up as tambourinists which didn't sit too well with the personnel at Opryland.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Opryland personnel may not have loved John, but record producer Shannon Williams did and he signed John and his group to the major label, Nashboro. A song John had written gave the resulting album its title: *I May Never pass This Way Again*.

MUSIC:

Title of Piece – *I may never pass this way again*

Artist – John Edmonds

CD title – I may never walk pass way again

CD label – Creed (Nashboro)

CD number -

Fade under

John Edmonds:

Ooooh. It had so many fabulous qualities

MUSIC

I may never pass this way again continues

John Edmonds

The recording took almost a year. First off, we went into the studio and we recorded piano, drums and bass guitar and our vocals. We went back in and we recorded, we doubled our background vocals to give it a fuller sound, and then Shannon Williams painstakingly started adding and adding and adding. He brought in an organist from LA and he brought in members of the Nashville Symphony Orchestra to add strings and it was just a long drawn out process but when I listen to it even today, to me it sounds comparable to anything that's being put out today

MUSIC

I may never pass this way again continues and fades down

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Since that first Nashboro album, John has made 14 others. He is currently working on a new cd with Zachery Tichner, another Bowling Green musician. John has been firmly based in back here in Kentucky for the past couple of decades where he's been involved in the local music scene in many different ways. Currently, he's getting an organisation off the ground called Sky-Inspired which is devoted to promoting all kinds of local arts. He and a guest performer recently packed out the Bowling Green coffee house, Greener Groundz, for a fundraising concert.

FX

Hubbub from Greener Groundz

MUSIC:

John Edmonds singing

Erika says “John Edmonds”. Applause

Music Dips

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

The eagle eared among you may have recognised the voice you just heard as belonging to none other than Erika Brady, host of Barren River Breakdown, professor of folk studies at WKU, and John’s co-performer tonight. She’s been working with John for about a year.

MUSIC

John and Erika singing together

Dips under

ERIKA BRADY

I started working with John really on a whim. I’ve been a singer for a long time (although not a performing singer in Bowling Green) mostly in the area of country music, broadly understood but I had just invited him to sing at a church in Bowling Green in the summer of 2009 and I had enjoyed it so much and had been thinking throughout “what fun that must be to sing in that style”. I grew up on r&b. That’s really what you turned on the radio and listened to, so I knew I had an inner Aretha and I had a hunch that John might be the one at this late stage in my life to unlock her.

Rachel Hopkin

And has he?

Erika Brady

[laughing] The audience would have to pronounce on that but I do have a tremendously fun time. He’s wonderful about finding songs that I enjoy singing and that are tremendously liberating, and he’s just terrific fun. He’s the best company you can imagine.

MUSIC

Song ends, raucous applause etc

XFADE WITH

MUSIC:

Title of Piece – The Universe is Yours

Artist – John Edmonds and Stephen Webber

CD title – Tis the Season

CD label – Willow Shade

CD number – BCOM4800

Fade under

Rachel Hopkin

How important is your faith to your musical life?

John Edmonds:

It's all of it. Oh. You have to have, at least, in my life, you know, to sustain me through from day to day. I have to have that faith and belief that God is going to be there to bear me up regardless of what happens.

Rachel Hopkin

Do you have any ambitions remaining?

John Edmonds:

Oh Good lord, do I ever? I want to win a Grammy [laughing]. There's so much more I want to do. I want to write more. I want to produce more records. What other ambitions do I have? I'd like to buy an island in the Pacific somewhere. [laughing]

Rachel Hopkin:

There's a lot of maintenance with an island [laughing].

MUSIC

Track fades up and ends

END PROGRAMME. DURATION 29 MINUTES