

# Thurber, John Wendell (1931–2019)

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## DAN SHULTZ

Dan Shultz, emeritus professor of music, Walla Walla University, has researched and written extensively about Seventh-day Adventist music history and musicians. His publications include *A Great Tradition*—a history of music at Walla Walla University, and the *Adventist Musicians Biographical Resource*—an encyclopedia with biographies of over 1100 Adventist musicians. He founded the International Adventist Musicians Association, serving as its president for ten years and editing its publications and website for over thirty years. Shultz and his wife, Carolyn (nee Stevens), live in College Place, Washington.

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John Thurber sang second tenor in the Voice of Prophecy King's Heralds quartet during the 1960s, served as a teacher, choral director, pastor, and conference president, and was noted for innovation as a conference and union youth leader.



King's Heralds 1962-1967: Jack Veazey, John Thurber, Jim McClintock, Bob Edwards (front center)

Photo courtesy of Center for Adventist Research.

## Education and Early Success

John was born in Hartford, Vermont, on October 6, 1931, the youngest of three children of Leon Temple and Julia Mildred Putney Thurber. His mother was one of five musical sisters who often sang as soloists and in various combinations at camp meetings and churches all over New England. His father was an amateur violinist who also sang tenor. In the Thurber home, the coming of Sabbath was met quietly and meditatively as the sun set. They would gather around the piano as a family and celebrate by singing favorite hymns!

John's musical debut came at age three, when he led a song in an evangelistic meeting. He and his older brother, Wayne, often sang duets when they were young boys. When John was ten, the family moved to South Lancaster, Massachusetts, where, as a sixth grader, he sang in a male quartet for the first time<sup>2</sup>

He went on to attend South Lancaster Academy (SLA) and Atlantic Union College (AUC), also located in South Lancaster. While John was a freshman at SLA, the AUC quartet invited him to sing first tenor with them. The

group was mixed racially, and it was Thurber's first exposure to the singing of spirituals. The group became very popular, and in his sophomore year they entered and won a regional Ted Mack Talent show singing *Li'l Liz I love Ya*. They were all set to proceed to the national competition in New York when AUC's president informed them that they could not perform because the program was sponsored by Old Gold cigarettes.<sup>3</sup>

## The Adelpian Quartet

This was a huge disappointment for John and left him disillusioned and uneasy about his relationship with the church. At the end of his junior year he traveled with his family to visit with his brother, Wayne, who was teaching music at Southern Missionary College (SMC), now Southern Adventist University, near Chattanooga, Tennessee. He ended up staying with him and eventually sang in the Adelpian Quartet, a popular group on campus and in the region.

They sang together from 1950-1952, averaging twenty performances a month. A guest appearance on the Adventist television program Faith for Today led to an invitation to become part of the program. The quartet represented SMC on recruitment trips for which its members were given full-tuition scholarships.

Near the end of his stay at SMC, when the Adelpian Quartet disbanded, John, along with Jack Veazey, who had also been a member, joined with Jim McClintock and Duane Stier to form a new quartet called the King's Men. This group sang together for a year.<sup>4</sup>

## Music Educator

While Thurber was at SMC, his musical growth was influenced by members of the music faculty, including his brother, Wayne, who used John as his assistant in conducting Collegedale Academy choral groups; Harold A. Miller, a talented composer and voice teacher; and Adrian Lauritzen, chair of the music department, who was an inspiring musical mentor. Lauritzen also helped Thurber begin his teaching career, when he invited him to teach at the college following his graduation with a music education degree in 1956.<sup>5</sup>

While still a student at SMC, John married Patsy Fogg in May 1953. They would have three children, John Michael (Mic), Sherry (Juhaz), and Gary.<sup>6</sup> Patsy would assist John throughout his career, especially in their home and marriage ministry presentations.

In 1957 Thurber accepted an invitation to teach music at Atlantic Union College. The position included both teaching and serving as an assistant dean of men, and both roles interested him. He also directed the choral program at nearby South Lancaster Academy during his three years there. Glad to be back in New England, Thurber took advantage of the opportunities afforded in nearby Boston to begin graduate studies.<sup>7</sup>

## Voice of Prophecy Years

Though he enjoyed his years at AUC, Thurber readily accepted a call in 1960 to direct the vocal/choral program at Glendale Academy (GA) in California. The promise of a little less activity had great appeal!<sup>8</sup>

After just a year at GA, Thurber received an invitation from Wayne Hooper to replace him in the King's Heralds quartet, part of the Voice of Prophecy (VOP) evangelistic ministry also headquartered in Glendale. Thurber began singing with the quartet during the summer of 1961 as they toured to camp meetings across the country.<sup>9</sup>

The invitation to join the VOP quartet came as an exciting surprise. Thurber's quartets at SMC had interacted, even sung, with the King's Heralds at different times, and so members of the VOP group and those at SMC were acquainted with one another. When, after Thurber's first year, two positions opened in the VOP quartet, both of those chosen to fill them, Jack Veazey and Jim McClintock, had been part of the SMC quartets. This group sang together for five years before Thurber left in 1967. During that time, the quartet joined with Del Delker and Maurita Phillips Thornburgh to sing in a group under Hooper called the Hymnsingers!<sup>10</sup>

Starting in his first year at the VOP, Thurber organized and directed a large male chorus known as the King's Men. When he left, Wayne Hooper, who had been assisting him, assumed leadership of what had become a popular singing group in Southern California.<sup>11</sup>

## Youth Evangelist

In the summer of 1966, while with the VOP, Thurber was ordained to gospel ministry by the Southern California Conference.<sup>12</sup> While music would remain integral, youth became the central focus of Thurber's ministry after he left the VOP in 1967. He accepted a call to serve as youth evangelism and temperance secretary (director) of the Texas Conference. In Texas, John worked with his brother, Wayne, who held a similar post in the Southwestern Union Conference.

He also worked with young people in creating an innovative outreach program, Adventist Youth in Action (AYA), that combined youth-oriented music with personal witnessing. Decades later, participants Terry and Cheryl Westphal St. Clair described how AYA started and the success it enjoyed:

In the summer of 1968 [John] brought a group of young folk from around Texas to the Houston area, settling on Rosenberg to open a youth outreach center called "The Gate". . . . Using graphic artistry and using some young men that came from Kansas after academy graduation to do colporteur work, this became the place for young people to be. Leaders talking about God and His love and grace for all turned hearts and lives around toward a positive relationship with Jesus. . . . A youth ministry in Texas was born and exploded around Texas' young people, and the man that facilitated this movement—John Thurber—oh, how we loved him!<sup>13</sup>

Late in 1971 Thurber took a new position as Youth Evangelism, Family Life and Ministerial Association director in the Carolina Conference. Patsy collaborated with him in giving leadership to family life ministry. During his first

year there he launched a similar program in Charlotte, North Carolina, where the Gate opened as “a coffee-house style dialogue center” in the summer of 1972.<sup>14</sup>

After more than eight years in the Carolina Conference, Thurber accepted a call to pastoral ministry at the Paradise Valley Church in southern California. Just over a year later, in 1981, Ellsworth S. Reile, who had called Thurber to the Carolina Conference a decade before, now as president of the Mid-America Union, called upon John and Patsy again “to serve in the very important areas of Youth Ministries and Family Life” for that union, headquartered in Lincoln, Nebraska.<sup>15</sup>

In 1986, Thurber accepted the presidency of the Dakota Conference. After a year in that role, he returned to the Southern Union in the role of conference revivalist for both the Florida and Georgia-Cumberland Conferences.<sup>16</sup>

## Revivalist and VOP Field Representative

John returned to the VOP in 1990, this time as a field representative. In the three years he devoted to that role, he spoke, sang, and assisted in other ways in a variety of programs.<sup>17</sup>

It was during this period that he experienced what he later described as one the most moving experiences of his career. In 1992 he traveled with members of the VOP to Brazil to assist in celebrating the 50<sup>h</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the VOP in that country. Several meetings were held, attended by 20,000 to 50,000 persons nightly, and hundreds were baptized each evening.<sup>18</sup>

## Legacy

After the Thurbers retired in 1993, John continued to assist in music ministry in many ways. They were living in Lincoln, Nebraska, when he died on February 3, 2019, at age 87.<sup>19</sup>

As a member of the King’s Heralds and as a choral conductor, John Thurber’s musical ministry touched lives around the world through broadcasts, recordings, and at large church gatherings. As a teacher, administrator, and youth leader who served in six of the eight union conferences in the United States, Thurber exerted a widespread influence on young people, illustrated in the experience described by Mike Tucker, who became speaker-director of Faith For Today: “John and his brother, Wayne, are the reasons I am a Christian and a minister today. . . . I could never repay them for the difference they made for me.”<sup>20</sup>

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### SOURCES

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## NOTES

1. John Thurber, *With a Song in My Heart*, unpublished autobiographical manuscript in author's possession, received, 2005.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.; Dennis Pettibone, *A Century of Challenge: The Story of Southern College, 1892-1992* (Collegedale, Tennessee: The College Press, 1992), 171; John Thurber, interview with author, 2005.
5. Thurber, *With a Song in My Heart*.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.; author's personal knowledge from interactions with Thurber as a music major who witnessed his work at Atlantic Union College.
8. Thurber, *With a Song in My Heart*.
9. D.V. Pond, "Change in King's Heralds," *Pacific Union Recorder*, November 20, 1961, 3.
10. Wayne Hooper interview by Dan Shultz, February 10, 14, 2005.
11. "Patton Replaces Thurber in VOP King's Heralds," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, September 11, 1967, 1.
12. S. A. Yakush, "Southern California Ordains Three," *ARH*, May 26, 1960, 20.

13. Terry and Cheryl St. Clair, tribute to John Thurber, Facebook post, February 7, 2019, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/xmayor/posts/10215186962080954>.
14. "Answering the Call," *ARH*, January 1, 1972, 23; H.V. Leggett, "Youth Evangelism," *Southern Union Tidings*, January 1972, 7.
15. E. S. R[eile], "Thurber Directs Youth and Family Life," *Mid-America Adventist Outlook*, September 17, 1981, 13.
16. "On the Move – Georgia-Cumberland," *Southern Tidings*, December 1987, 18.
17. Thurber, *With a Song in My Heart*.
18. Ibid.
19. "John W. Thurber, Second Tenor of the King's Heralds Quartet, Youth Worker, Passes to His Rest," North American Division News, February 5, 2019, accessed November 4, <https://www.nadadventist.org/news/john-w-thurber-second-tenor-kings-heralds-quartet-youth-worker-passes-his-rest>.
20. Quoted in "John Thurber Dies at 87," Fulcrum 7, February 11, 2019, accessed November 4, 2020, <http://www.fulcrum7.com/news/2019/2/11/john-thurber-dies-at-87>.

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