

Lutcher, Joseph Woodman (1919–2006)

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Joe Lutcher, a nationally-renowned jazz saxophonist and band leader, became a Seventh-day Adventist in 1953 and thereafter put his “converted saxophone” to use on behalf of evangelism and societal uplift.

The Latest Jazz Sensation

Joseph Woodman Lutcher was born December 23, 1919, in Lake Charles, Louisiana, to Isaac Skinner Lutcher (1881-1962) and Susie Garrett Lutcher (1892-1972), the fifth of seven children in a musically-talented family. After a tour of duty in the U.S. Navy during World War II, Joe moved to Los Angeles in 1945 where he launched his music career, following the footsteps of his older sister, Nellie Lutcher (1912-2007), already famous as a night club singer and recording artist.¹

During the next five years, Joe also rose to fame as an alto saxophone virtuoso with a band he formed, “The Society Cats.” During the next five years they recorded three national Top 20 chart hits for the Capitol, Specialty, and Modern labels, and were acclaimed for playing “swing, bebop, jazz and sweet music with equal ability.”² Lutcher’s biggest hit was an Afro-Cuban style song that he composed, “Mardi Gras.”³ He and his band also performed with some of the leading popular musicians of the day including Nat King Cole, Sammy Davis, Jr., Billie Holliday, Dinah Washington, the Will Mastin Trio, and the Mills Brothers.⁴



Joe Lutcher with Bible and “converted sax” in front of Ten Commandments poster. Credit: Associated Press Wirephoto, September 30, 1960, courtesy of Douglas Morgan.

Conversion

Lutcher's disenchantment with show business began in 1953 after he returned from touring to his hometown of Los Angeles. He continued performing in night clubs but was troubled by recurring stomach ulcers along with feelings of inner emptiness and a longing for greater meaning in life. As he was concluding arrangements for a move to a new apartment, a conversation with his new landlady, a Seventh-day Adventist named Ida Samuels, turned to the Bible. Mrs. Samuels told him that he needed to consider Matthew 6:33 to resolve his inner struggle: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." Impressed, Lutcher began studying the Bible with her and began attending the Wadsworth Avenue (later University) Seventh-day Adventist Church where he was baptized by Adolphus E. Webb in October 1953⁵

Lutcher was the first of four high profile Black entertainers to join (or return) to the Adventist church during the 1950s. He was followed by singer Joyce Bryant (1955), actress and model Vivian Cervantes (1955) and Richard "Little Richard" Penniman (1957).⁶ Lutcher brought Little Richard to the Wadsworth Avenue church where the latter was baptized in December 1957, following the dramatic experience in Australia earlier that year that led him to cancel the remainder of an international concert tour.⁷

Converted Sax

After his break with show business, Lutcher declared that his alto saxophone had been converted along with him. "Whenever I play now," he said, "I do so with eternal values in mind, knowing that I must give account some day for what my music says and does to people."⁸ He made himself available as a self-supporting, lay evangelist and during the ensuing four decades lent his abilities to an array of evangelistic endeavors—supporting large-scale efforts by leading evangelists such as Byron Spears in Oakland (1956) and Eric C. Ward in Los Angeles (1972), teaming with Little Richard for youth-oriented series in 1960-1961, leading his own smaller-scale series, and appearing at a wide array of church gatherings such as youth rallies, camp meetings, and conferences.⁹

However, after sacrificing a lucrative career in the secular music industry, Lutcher had no clear career path forward. He worked hard and innovated along several lines of activity, persisting through periods of financial struggle. In 1954 he took work in a Los Angeles cafeteria and later as a custodian earning \$303 per month—then a living wage but a far cry from earning that much or more in a single night as he previously had as a performer. Lutcher also started a business in 1956—Jordan Records which sold religious records and sheet music and also produced some recordings on its own "label."¹⁰ Later he ventured into radio broadcasting, beginning with the program Forward in Faith that began airing weekly on KALI in Los Angeles in July 1960.¹¹ For all of their good influence, these efforts did not prove financially sustainable long term.

"Let's Say It With Music"

It was through another aspect of his lay ministry—outreach to those marginalized by an affluent society—that Lutcher ended up making the greatest impact with his converted sax. Not long after starting Jordan Records, he, along with some fellow church members, began a mission on “skid row” in Los Angeles, partially supported by a small grant from the Southern California Conference. The mission provided food and clothing to those in need, nightly gospel services with Bible films and talks, spiritual counsel, and help with finding employment.¹²

Observing oppressive economic and social conditions in the Watts section of Los Angeles, Lutcher began to envision music as a means for societal uplift, particularly in broadening the horizons of at-risk Black youth and helping open doors of opportunity to them. He organized concerts in public housing projects, offered young people musical training and involved them as performers and organizers of the concerts and related events. He composed and recorded a tune in 1960, “It’s a Good Thing to Love Everybody,” that became something of a theme song for his movement to draw young people out of a cycle of poverty and crime and see the value of love as the principle for societal interaction.¹³

An improved social atmosphere became evident in the area where Lutcher conducted his program. He was called upon to direct the Youth’s Musical Opportunity Clinic, a five-week summer program for underprivileged teenagers in southeast Los Angeles, first funded in 1965 with a grant from the Urban League. The clinic built on the young people’s talents and intrinsic love for music and took them to a higher level with opportunities for training in performance, classes in composing and arranging, and educational field trips. The point was not so much preparation for a musical career as to help young people see what they could accomplish through disciplined effort. Another goal was to “motivate them to ‘say it with music,’ instead of with a Molotov cocktail, a knife, or a gun,” as Lutcher put it, alluding to the explosion of outrage over racial oppression that spread through several American cities, including Los Angeles, in the mid-1960s.¹⁴

With the urban violence in mind, Lutcher composed “Let’s Pray for Peace” in 1967 as a new signature song for his campaign to bring social change through music.¹⁵ Similar initiatives came in the 1970s, with a program to educate children about ecology, conducted in 23 schools throughout Los Angeles, and an annual community sing-along in the 1980s, alternately using “Let’s Say it With Love” and “Let’s Pray For Peace” as the theme song.¹⁶

“Music is still the greatest communicant in the world,” Lutcher said in 1970, summarizing his philosophy. “Music has always been an emollient to the black people . . . using music any message can be sent right to the soul. We have so many problems in this world. . . . We’ll have a better world only when people realize that there is no reward in hate under any circumstances but there can be a reward with love.”¹⁷

While recuperating from heart surgery in 1999, Lutcher composed a song entitled, “Mother I Love You, Oh Yes I Really Do.” Not only intended to honor mothers, it was the signature tune for a new campaign to bring about “closer relations of respect, love, harmony, and obedience” in families.¹⁸ By then, Lutcher was in his 80th year. He died seven years later in Los Angeles on October 29, 2006.¹⁹

Contribution

Among the many recognitions of his contributions, the Los Angeles City Council passed a special resolution in 1967 citing Lutcher's "efforts in helping to promote universal peace through musical education directed toward the youth of the community."²⁰ He was similarly honored by the city's Human Relations Commission in 1977.²¹

Joe Lutcher forsook wealth and fame to take a place "in the vanguard of Christ,"²² dedicating himself to evangelism and "crusading to save minority youth in the inner city from the wages of drugs, gangs, and poverty."

²³ Asked to play his converted saxophone at the 1990 General Conference session in Indianapolis, Indiana, Lutcher chose to play "The Lord is My Light," based on Psalm 27. "I joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1953, after leaving show business," he said. "There was always something I wanted, but didn't find it until I accepted the Lord. Since He is my Light, I want Him to be everybody's Light."²⁴

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