

## Press

### Vocational Passion

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The Intelligencer

There are usually signs all along the way. Some of them subtle and seemingly serendipitous, some that arrive with a clarion urgency or astounding synchronicity. And sometimes, if our focus has been steadfastly elsewhere, or our fears prove more powerful than that inner tug, we may fail to recognize the call. For gospel artist Conrad Miller, it could have been the time his R&B group, The Soulful Seven, lost all of its equipment in a fire and was forced to disband when they couldn't raise the money to replace it all.

Or perhaps it was when, after years of being a dedicated student of opera, he learned that as a tenor, his voice wouldn't reach the maturity necessary for an opera career until he was well into his 30s. It could even have been the seeming abandonment of his Muse when after years of writing songs — he penned the "hit" "Carla, My Love" for '70s soul crooners The Softones — he hit a lengthy dry spell.



"I just didn't have anything to say anymore. It just wasn't there," recalls Miller, who shifted his focus to his career in the pharmaceutical industry and raising a family. And then tragedy struck, and he could no longer ignore the pull of something greater. He released his first gospel CD, "My Journey," a collection of uplifting original songs rooted in classic gospel with a nod to his R&B heyday, on his own Millcon Music Ministries label this year. "These songs are not my songs," says the Buckingham resident, who also serves on both the deacon board and as a member of several church choirs, including The Back Bench Boys, at Second Baptist Church in Doylestown. "These are God's songs. I'm just the vessel in which he planted them."

He still has a full-time job, working for MTI, a pharmaceutical marketing company, in Langhorne, but he has enthusiastically embraced his vocation, despite the unimaginable pain it took to realize his calling. Miller, a native of North Little Rock, Ark., who grew up in Grambling, La., has been involved with music on some level for most of his life — singing it, playing it, writing it. But it was only following the suicide of his daughter Lauren — in 2005, the day after her 16th birthday — that he realized he was not meant to keep his songs to himself. "I was never motivated to go into the studio, despite the occasional thoughts I'd have about it," says Miller. "When Lauren died, that was the point at which I had to go into the studio. I didn't have any choice."

"My Journey," produced by Grammy, Stellar and Dove Award-winning producer Steven Ford and partially recorded at Forge Recording Studios in Oreland (as well as a Delaware-based studio), is surprisingly affirming, even celebratory, coming from a man who admits that he still carries "a big hole in (his) heart" from his daughter's death. With Miller's warm, smooth vocals and the disc's melodic, uncluttered arrangements, the songs speak to God as both salvation and consolation, while also paying tribute to the example of faith set by Miller's parents and expressing his own gratitude for the many blessings in his life.

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"The songs minister to me," says Miller. "They calm, they soothe, they uplift, they refresh and invigorate. ... The whole objective of the project is really to share the word that God has shared through me with people, and if one person's life is changed, I'm cool with that."

His daughter, a bright young woman who suffered from anxiety and depression, shares a co-write on one of the tracks, "Jesus Is the Way." A singer herself who also wrote poetry, she offered that line to her father when the song was just a melody in his head without any lyrics. Though Miller grapples daily with the agony of losing her, he has found a measure of solace in his grief, certain that her actions were prompted by a change in her medication only days before her untimely death.

"That was not Lauren that did that," he says. "The thought process going on then was not Lauren's thought process. ... As much as I miss her — and only people who have lost a child can appreciate where I am emotionally — I'm OK because of my faith. God needed her more than I did and more than I do. Her work here was done."

It is that faith that reignited his songwriting passion when he believed he had nothing left to say, even though he had set his sights on a music career since he was a boy. Miller grew up singing in the church — his first performance being an unscheduled rendition of "Oh My Pa-Pa" at his grandfather's funeral when he was just 4 — and taking piano and trumpet lessons. In high school, he formed The Soulful Seven with his brother Doug (now a member of the Count Basie Orchestra). The group was signed to MGM Records — home to artists such as Lou Rawls and the Righteous Brothers — and spent five years gigging throughout the region before their career was cut short, following the fire that broke out in their rehearsal space. Miller was studying voice and trumpet at Fort Hays State University in Kansas at the time.

He nonetheless continued to pursue his music training, honing his vocal skills in opera as a graduate student at the University of Michigan. It was in Ann Arbor that he also began to explore composing and songwriting in the R&B vein. But even with such an unwavering passion for music — "I started college as a business major but having grown up with music as a major part of my life ... I lasted one semester without it," he says — he was reluctant to take the artist's path. Though he continued to write songs, including "Carla, My Love," after moving to the Northeast and taking a job in pharmaceuticals, he put any musical aspirations on the backburner. Yet with his spiritual discipline and devotion beginning to flag, Miller found himself in a strange "in-between place," aware, even if vaguely, that he was not living the life intended for him.

"There's a big gap that ... most of us go through to some extent when we leave home to go to college and we start making our own decisions and doing all those things that our parents didn't allow us to do," he says. "For many of us, we stop fighting the calling we have and it takes different lengths of time for different people to get to a point when they recognize their calling in life and accept it. "When I embraced that I had not been living the way I'd been trained and consciously recommitted myself (to God), my Muse came back."

Initially, he believed his music ministry would be relegated to the church, especially following the warm response he received to one of his songs, "In Your Time," which he performed at Second Baptist in memory of the victims of Sept. 11. But now that he has released his first CD, Miller is certain he's on the right track. The most poignant affirmation came one night when looking at a photo of his daughter, he wondered why God had taken her and not him. His answer arrived in that still, small voice that is often the bearer of truth.

"I distinctly heard the words, 'Because I have something for you to do,' " says Miller. "I still thoroughly enjoy business. It's just that now I'm in a very different place, obviously spiritually, but physically and emotionally, too. The fire's back, and I have work to do."