

# RONNIE MILSAP

## *'Then Sings My Soul: 24 Favorite Hymns and Gospel Favorites'*

It's rare that an artist with more than four decades of accolades to his credit would continue to seek out new challenges, but that's precisely what country soul legend Ronnie Milsap has done with *Then Sings My Soul: 24 Favorite Hymns and Gospel Favorites*, his first foray into gospel music. The unflinchingly uplifting double-disc finds Milsap revisiting his North Carolina childhood for a collection of songs that capture a remarkable spirit -- one sure to resonate with listeners regardless of their musical and cultural backgrounds.

"You know, we've all made this journey through life, and I've always been more of a spiritual person than to say that I'm one in an organized religion," says Milsap. "My belief system is what it is, and this kind of music has always been a big part of my life, and to finally have the chance to get to actually put the spotlight on this side of me as a person is unusual. For a long time, I was shy about recording gospel music because I didn't necessarily want to show the inside of my soul but now, the spiritual side of me is really shining through."

To illuminate that side, Milsap went back to the deep, rich, gospel tradition of hymns like "Holy Holy Holy" and "Amazing Grace"-- both presented here in breathlessly ethereal fashion -- and transported himself to more modern times for a sweetly soulful "People Get Ready" that would surely elicit a smile from author Curtis Mayfield. Sonically, the repertoire runs the gamut from the storefront-church rollick of "Swing Down Chariot" (which finds Milsap taking the lead role in a joyous four-part harmony fest) to the stately elegance of "Rock of Ages" (a showcase for his ever-pristine piano stylings).

"Music has a way of making you feel something in your heart, in your soul," says the singer. "It did it centuries ago, and it still does today, that's why Mozart and Beethoven are still popular. You know when something is so good and has been written so well that the idea can't be said any better? The old hymns are just like that; they still hold up, and they still make people feel something- they inspire everybody."

In addition to the old favorites, Milsap found inspiration in a group of newer songs that round out *Then Sings My Soul*. On "Up to Zion," he immerses himself in the electrifying immediacy of traditional gospel, while "When Jesus Was All I Had" -- penned by Muscle Shoals-based Donnie Fritts -- brings a bluesy-yet- introspective tone to the proceedings.

"It's amazing, the deeper I got into the project, the more I felt about it. When we first started just choosing the songs, working through the arrangements, we knew we were on the right track. But when I finally got into the studio, it turned out to be such an incredibly, spiritual experience. I became very moved by what we were doing. I know that's going to translate to the listener. I know that's going to translate to my fans."

Ronnie Milsap spent the first six years of his life in a small rural town in the Great Smoky Mountains hamlet of Robbinsville, North Carolina before moving to Raleigh to attend a school for the blind -- where he began studying violin and piano, studies he'd continue for the next 12 years. Music's lure proved powerful for the young Milsap, and while he'd pursued his studies diligently in order to make the grade at law school, a chance meeting with Ray Charles prompted him to take another path that was about to open to him.

“I went to a Ray Charles show while I was in college and somehow they let us backstage,” he recalls. “I was introduced to Ray Charles and I said, “Mr. Ray Charles, you’re my hero. You’re the man I look up to. I emulate your music, but I’m faced with a dilemma. I’d love to be in the music business, but all my advisors tell me I have to have an academic life. So I’m going on to study law and become a lawyer.” And there was a piano in the dressing room, and Ray said, “Well, play me something.” So I played him three songs, and Charles said, “Well, son, you can be a lawyer if you want to, but there’s a lot of music in your heart. If I were you, I’d follow what my heart tells me to do.”

Milsap did just that, recording a handful of singles in Atlanta before moving to Memphis, where he joined forces with super-producer Chips Moman and, by 1969, with Elvis Presley -- for whom he played piano on hits like “Kentucky Rain” and “Don’t Cry Daddy.” Although he was making a name for himself as a versatile studio musician, Milsap was set on being at center-stage, rather than in the supporting cast, a goal he’d achieve by 1974, when he scored his first number-one country single, “Pure Love.”

He’d go on to top the country chart more than a dozen times in the ‘70s, with such enduring hits as “Let My Love Be Your Pillow” and “What a Difference You’ve Made in My Life” -- the latter of which is reprised on *Then Sings My Soul* with an all-new recording and arrangement. His peers responded just as strongly as the public, awarding Milsap six Grammys and a dozen CMA Awards, including four turns as Male Vocalist of the Year. The success he achieved in the country arena would soon spill over into the pop and adult contemporary realms as well, thanks to universally accessible songs like “I Wouldn’t Have Missed It for the World” and “Any Day Now.”

And even with 40 #1 chart-toppers under his belt -- not to mention avidly-received live shows across the world, Ronnie Milsap is still growing and surprising long-time fans. *Then Sings My Soul* documents that growth process, but it also proves that even now, the kid from Robbinsville is still firmly in touch with his roots, and capable of creating sonic and spiritual images that will transport listeners back to the little Baptist church where those roots were planted.

“Many of these songs have been around for hundreds of years. My genealogy is Scottish Irish, so I’ll bet you those songs were being sung in Europe, you know, long before everybody came to America, but there are many songs that have stood the test of time because they continue to make people feel something. That’s what it’s all about.”

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