Heart Strings

Gerald Busby’s evangelical composition

April 1, 1997 By Michael Adams

Gerald Busby calls his Tyler, Texas roots “Southern redneck backwater.” The town’s social center was the First Baptist Church, and it was there that Busby -- a musical prodigy from age five -- played piano at eight weekly services. “[Making music] was the best way to avoid boredom,” he says with the unexpected bursts of laughter that often punctuate his easy, lilting cadences.

Even then Busby found an “irresistible” intermingling of music, sex and spirituality in his life: “Those fundamentalist hymns are deeply sexual. Walking with Jesus in the garden! I mean, really! He’s seen as the perfect lover.”

At 15, Busby caught the ear of an itinerant preacher, one of many hired by the Baptist church to hold revival meetings. The wonderfully named Angel Martìnez was a Mexican shoeshine boy -- turned -- Elmer Gantry -- “Handsome, charismatic, hot,” Busby calls him -- who asked the boy to travel with him for the summer.

They toured Southern states, renting football stadiums and gathering crowds of two or three thousand at a time. “If they weren’t giving their hearts to Jesus and throwing money at us, something was wrong,” he says. Busby quickly learned that success meant making the women cry. “If they did, their husbands opened their pockets. Everyone was grateful for the catharsis.”

It was also the time of Busby’s first experiences with men -- including young ministers. “Sin is exciting,” he says. “And covert sex could be thrilling. To have a young evangelist put his hand on your knee...” He finishes the thought with a sigh.

Martìnez ultimately concluded that Busby’s “spirituality was lacking,” and sent him home to a disappointed mother. “She would have liked nothing better than for me to be the organist at the First Baptist Church for the rest of my life.” But his taste of the outside world had spoiled him forever. He soon “left mother and left Jesus.” A year at Baylor University was followed by a stint at Yale, where he studied philosophy: “Kierkegaard and Sartre were heaven-sent for me.”

His musical education had taken a decidedly classical turn by then, and although the years after graduation included a patchwork quilt of jobs, Busby kept gravitating to composition. He slowly made invaluable connections in the music world, including composer and critic Virgil Thomson, a neighbor in New York City’s legendary Chelsea Hotel, where Busby still lives. Over time, he wrote

commissioned work for the Joffrey Ballet and the Paul Taylor dance company, and the score for Robert Altman's 1977 film *Three Women*.

Twelve years ago, Busby and his partner Sam tested HIV positive. "Sam chose to see the diagnosis as a death sentence," Busby says, "and he died three years ago. I saw it as an opportunity to get things done." Busby indeed began biting off huge chunks of life, writing "three times as much music as I had before and writing words for the first time." His avant-garde works have included two collaborations with playwright Craig Lucas (the opera *Orpheus in Love* and a current work-in-progress), as well as experimental concerts, one of which is a madrigal for three singers and a glass eater. "He chews glass in rhythm!" Busby says excitedly.

With a vitality and demeanor that make a mockery of his age -- he's 60 -- Busby has never been happier. "Spirituality is a matter of giving up ego. The more you give, the more you live. My greatest pleasures are food, sex and music, and they all involve sharing with others. And the greatest masters in life are those who serve the greatest number of people."

And, he adds, "I've never had a better sex life, because I've learned how to be satisfied. One of my major goals is to have a sex partner say that that was the most fun he'd ever had."

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