*Wok & Roll by Peter Kwong, (Frederic) Inter-County Leader*

**How I became a Northwoods gospel singer**

I never imagined that of all the unusual (or crazy, a proper choice of word) things that I’d be doing, being a gospel singer is one of them. Yes, actually singing gospel songs in a church. What’s next?

My wife works as a part-time pastor in Cochrane, a small town two hours south of where we live. The population of Cochrane is a little over 500. Needless to say, everyone knows everyone. Well, they have their priorities right; there are two churches and five taverns to serve all. If you have sinned in a tavern, just go to the church across the street and beg for forgiveness, then go to the other tavern and start all over again. How convenient!

As a part-time pastor, she is only required to work one short Sunday, and then the following Sunday she would stay for a few extra days to carry other duties and responsibilities. In order to stack up my brownie points, I offered to drive her to church on the short week. It cuts down the monotony, even the journey is quite enjoyable with all the beautiful scenery. Also, it gives her time to put up her feet, take a short nap, or have a nice chat with her daughter on the phone.

Anyway, it became our ritual. I hate driving, as I have no sense of direction and never enjoy driving a long distance. Living in Milwaukee, driving 20 minutes to the mall was a long haul. But here in the Northwoods, driving an hour or two to get anywhere is nothing. Little by little, I am getting used to it. But I still don’t like driving in the dark, as I have bad eyesight, and hitting two deer within three years doesn’t help.

The church had a pianist who had been there for ages. Then one day, she told the congregation that she couldn’t do it anymore due to old age. That’s when my wife looked at me while holding my hands and said, “Honey, you’ve always loved music, why don’t you play for the church until we find someone?” Looking back at all those wonderful things that she has done for me, what could I say? So, I muttered under my breath, “OK, I’ll give it a try.”

I was required to just play three to four songs each time, and I could play some background music on the piano during the offering or Holy Communion. Then one day she called me “Honey” in a voice that I knew right there that she wanted something. “We have a special service this week and it would be great if you can learn how to play these few songs. Can you? Please?” Again, she looked at me with those irresistible eyes and grabbing my hands. What to do? What to do?

After receiving the titles of the requests, I went to work. Somehow, it was a blessing in disguise. I have a tough time reading music … half note, one-third note, half step, key change … doesn’t make any sense at all. But if I listen to the melody just once, I can hum it. Same with musical instruments. I’ve learned how to play guitar, piano, harmonica, clarinet, etc., just by listening and playing with the notes for a while. Come to think of it, I can pretty much do the same with my cooking classes. I taught Chinese, Italian, Thai, Mexican, Caribbean, Cajun/Creole … all with the same cooking principles.

So, first, I turn to YouTube to catch the tune. Then I get the lyrics and the chords. After strumming the chords a few times, I can fool anybody like I have sung this song a thousand times. Then it dawned on me one day. Why just sing gospel songs when there are hundreds and thousands of songs that already have a gospel theme?

A few years ago, I saw a movie featuring Whoopi Goldberg in “Sister Act.” The grand finale was when Whoopi dressed up as a nun, conducting a chorus of nuns singing “I Will Follow Him.” The song was very popular in Hong Kong when I was growing up, and I believe that it is a love song. However, the movie has turned the song out to be a gospel song, performing in a cathedral, in front of the whole congregation. What a joy indeed!

“I will follow him,

Follow him wherever he may go,

There’s isn’t an ocean too deep,

A mountain so high it can keep,

Keep me away, away from his love …”

Then I started to look at my old songbooks and, lo and behold, I found hundreds and hundreds of love songs that are actually gospel songs. Go see for yourselves. I learned about the Platters while growing up. Although we did not own a record player, most of my family did. Being bored, I would learn how to operate the record player (remember the 45 and 33 vinyl records?) and played all the records. If the record had a catchy tune I would play it over and over again until I got the melody, or even the words. I could then sing it, even if I had no idea what the words meant. Remember the song “Only You?” Now, close your eyes for a second and sing the song while thinking of the one above. Do you catch my drift?

Yes, I can still sing the old standards, “I’ll Fly Away,” “Precious Lord,” “Amazing Grace,” etc., but it is more fun to sing gospel songs with a new twist. Try to sing “Have I Told You Lately” and see for yourself.