



June CJA 2004 Newsletter Featured Interview

Todd Billingsley

(Not only is Todd a keyboard player and arranger extraordinaire but Todd has also produced two of the finest CD's containing Jazz arrangements of Hymns! The group name is Causeway – and they put their contemporary spin of jazz, samba, guajira, and even a little mambo with favorite hymns of yesterday. You can check out Causeway's music [here](#))

1) Todd, when did you start developing a love for Jazz music?

Todd: It all started with “What a Fool Believes” by the Doobie Brothers. Or more specifically, Michael McDonald. While the song itself isn't really considered jazz, it introduced me to Michael McDonald. To this day, I love listening to his voice and keyboard licks.

From there I started listening to artists like Tom Scott, David Sanborn, Earth, Wind, and Fire, Bob James, Spiro-Gyra, Al Jarreau, Earl Klugh, George Benson, and Toto.

2) Did you study Jazz piano formally and if so where and with who?

Todd: Not really. All of my formal training was on the classical side of the fence, where I studied piano at Blair School of Music in Nashville, Tennessee, then studied composition at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

3) Who do you consider some of the main influences on your writing and playing Jazz?

Todd: As mentioned before, Michael McDonald is probably the largest influence. Others

are David Foster, Jay Graydon, George Duke, and Dave Grusin. Even with writing for jazz, Aaron Copland, Gustav Holst, and John Williams have influenced my writing pretty heavily.

4) What are five Jazz recordings you simply couldn't 'live' without?!!!

Todd: I'm taking the easy way out of this one...I'll just take my iPod. But even when I'm listening on my iPod, I find myself migrating toward the Rippingtons, Acoustic Alchemy, Pat Metheny, Larry Carlton, and a good friend of mine, Ed Calle.

5) I really love the two CD's you arranged and recorded with Causeway. Can you tell us about Causeway and how that came about?

Todd: Causeway's forming as a band was a direct result of Hurricane Andrew. In the aftermath of that devastating storm, the organizers of the Miami Easter Sunrise Service were looking to create a "home touch" feel to the 1993 Easter Sunrise Service to accentuate Miami's "We Will Rebuild" campaign to boost the morale of South Florida citizens. The organizers approached me to form a group of local musicians to lead worship for the Easter Sunrise Service. I selected five studio musicians from the South Florida area that I knew to be believers – Rey Sánchez, music director and producer for Sony artists Cheyenne and Braulio; Fofi Lancha, drummer for the international TV show Sabado Gigante; Ken Kosicki, bass player who has toured with Wayne Watson; and Ed Maina, sax player who has toured with Natalie Cole and Frank Sinatra. We led worship and performed "Because He Lives" – which appears on Causeway's 1996 debut CD – for that service. The following Easter, University Baptist Church of Coral Gables unveiled a new Saturday night worship service targeted for young adults. The church staff approached me to form and develop the band to lead worship for this service. I recruited the same members that appeared at the Miami Easter Sunrise Service, with the addition of percussionist, Cookie Lopez. Cookie had just finished touring with Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine.

Word of mouth began to spread quickly, and we began thinking about recording a CD of the arrangements I had written for the group. While we were in pre-production and pulling all the material together, Rey's wife, Cheryl, suggested we take on the name Causeway, which is a bridge connecting an outer island to the mainland. There are a million of them in Miami. Because we were bridging new sounds with old hymns – with a Latin flair – it seemed a perfect fit.

6) Are there any plans for another Causeway CD?

Todd: We keep talking about doing a Christmas CD, largely because so many people—especially churches—have made that request. If we find the time to do it, we'd love to.

7) Where did you get to play and perform with Causeway...churches or what? Did you have a booking agent?

Todd: No, we do all our own booking because we all have day jobs. For example, Rey

Sanchez is Associate Professor of Music Business and Entertainment Industries at the University of Miami. Fofi continues to play for Sabodo Gigante, the international television show on Univision. So it's quite a challenge to find dates where we're all able to get away.

Our very first gig – and the reason Causeway formed – was the Miami Easter Sunrise right after Hurricane Andrew. From there we have played church concerts, conferences, conventions, crusades such as Tony Evans and Luis Palau, and as a part of the festivities surrounding Super Bowl XXXIII.

8) Todd, you write very excellent detailed charts, (including most all the “jazzed-up” Hymn material you recorded with Causeway. It is excellent material for integrating more jazz into the worship service!) Can you tell our readers a little more about what you have available and where they can obtain these?

Todd: Because so many churches requested the charts I had arranged to use with their local music ministries, I created a web site called resources4worship.com. It just launched earlier this year, and we're still getting things in order, but we already have about 75 jazz arrangements available and fully scored. On the charts from Causeway's "Unconditional Love Jazz" CD, all the improvised solos are transcribed and accompaniment MP3s are available for solo instrumentalists. We add new arrangements to the site monthly. Because we want to make the charts accessible to as many people as possible, the cost of membership to the site is only \$9.99 per month (plus a \$99 enrollment fee).

9) Share with us your most memorable experience playing Jazz at a church/concert and why.

Todd: The most memorable experience was definitely our first gig together as Causeway at the Miami Easter Sunrise service. The service takes place each year on Key Biscayne, which is an island just off downtown Miami. Usually, the service is at the Marine Stadium where the boat races take place. The stadium had a neat floating stage. But the Marine Stadium was severely damaged in Hurricane Andrew, and the floating stage sunk. So the organizers of the service decided to move across the road to the Miami Seaquarium (home of Flipper).

The morning was uncharacteristically cold, and the wind had been gusting heavily all through the night. We arrived at 4:00 AM to load in, and noticed that the stage was only large enough to fit us, leaving no room for the rest of the platform personnel. When I asked about the staging, I learned that it had blown off the truck when crossing the Rickenbacker Causeway and was now floating somewhere in Biscayne Bay. We can laugh about it now, but the morning just went downhill from there. We were all freezing...hands frozen to our instruments, the wind was blowing our charts off the music stands and into Biscayne Bay to join the rest of the staging, and when we launched into "Because He Lives," the guest vocal soloist for the service rocketed out of his seat – in the middle of the song, mind you – and ran across the stage to me frantically demanding that we stop playing because that was the song he was going to sing.

With a beginning like that, it makes you wonder how Causeway ever got together to play again! But it's a testament of how God can take anything or any event and turn it into something good.

**10) Do you find a spiritual connection in playing, arranging, and writing music?
What are your thoughts concerning this?**

Todd: Most definitely. You hear people say music is the language of the soul, and I really believe that. After preparing scores or charts for a recording project, then getting into the studio and hearing the projects come to life – whether it's a new Causeway recording or an orchestral recording – there's always a moment where I feel like communication is flying all over the place between God and me, but not a single word is said.

11) What is your favorite church hymn and why?

Todd: "All Hail the Power of Jesus' Name" and "Crown Him with Many Crowns" are always favorites, but I think the one that tops the list right now is "Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart." It's kind of hymnody's version of "Don't Worry, Be Happy."

12) What are your thoughts about the state of worship music today?

Todd: I think the state of worship music is pretty solid...more so than it has been in a while. I think we are successfully fulfilling Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 more than in recent years. It's the controversies surrounding worship music that is sad to see.

13) Share with us a Bible verse that has helped shape your outlook on Music in the church and why?

Todd: 1 Peter 3:15 – But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

Being a musician provides many opportunities to share your faith. Growing up as a music minister's son, music and a relationship with Christ was simply part of life. I thought everyone was a musician and a believer. But as I grew older and realized the number of people asking me why I did what I did, how I got into music, what my source of inspiration was, the realization struck that this was my opportunity to share the love of Christ with them.