



Bio: Jim McDonough

The youngest of four children, Jim McDonough was born in Monticello, Iowa (population: 3,600). When Jim was seven years old, his mother grew too busy to continue taking piano lessons, so Jim stepped in to fill the spot. And he discovered a talent and love for music that propelled him into a career as a professional musician.

But the road to success wasn't without its detours. In eighth grade, an accident nearly ended his musical career. An upright piano fell and crushed three fingers on his right hand -- and nearly crushed his dreams in the process. Jim emerged from two hours of surgery with pins in his fingers and tiny fractures across his hand. But throughout more than a year of physical therapy, Jim kept playing -- with a cast on his right hand -- and concentrated on improving his performance with his left hand.

Determined to play again, he devoted nearly every spare moment to working to get back the dexterity in his right hand. The rigorous rehearsing paid off, and in ninth grade, instead of a car, Jim bought a Steinway grand piano to celebrate how far he'd come.

The night before Jim left for college, a friend who dabbled in recording asked if Jim would let him record a few songs. Jim pushed aside his suitcases and sat at the piano, plinking out a few favorite tunes.

He didn't think of the impromptu recording session again — until his family visited him at school with the news that his tape was being sold all over his hometown of Monticello. Jim parlayed the success of that first tape into a second, holiday-themed tape.

Jim graduated from Wartburg College in Iowa with a degree in Music Education, and he took a job as band director for the senior high school in Waukon, Iowa. After a year, he was offered a position at a larger school in LaPorte City, Iowa, and found himself directing two concert bands, two jazz bands, and offering private lessons.

Thrilled to be involved with music, but unimpressed with the politics of teaching, Jim decided to pursue a non-musical career -- as long as he could continue playing piano as a hobby. Jim's sister, an air traffic controller, suggested he might want to look into her profession, and Jim's interest was piqued.

After a six-month intensive training program in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, Jim was stationed at the largest air traffic facility in the world, the Chicago facility that controls airspace over seven states. He had traded his piano keyboard for a computer keyboard, monitoring the flight patterns of hundreds of planes a day. But the high-stress world of airplane traffic wasn't filling the creative need that gnawed at Jim. "There was something missing," he says.

Far from home -- and from his beloved Steinway -- Jim found himself spending his off-hours lingering at piano stores, pretending to be considering a purchase and playing as much as he could. "Music was what defined me, and I had given it up," Jim says. "It was who I was, and it had almost entirely vanished from my life."

In the summer of 2000, Jim was contacted about a job playing piano on a cruise ship. He auditioned -- over the phone! -- and was offered a two-week fill-in gig. The only catch: they needed someone immediately. Could he be on a plane at 6:30 the next morning? He decided that it was an opportunity he couldn't pass up, so he used his vacation from the air traffic center to give it a try. He loved every minute of it, and was quickly offered a full-time job on the largest cruise ship in the world.

So, after two years as an air traffic controller, Jim decided to dive headfirst into playing piano professionally. For more than two years, he performed on Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines in piano lounges, during cocktail hours, and in an 1,800-seat dining room. "I went from the most stressful job in the world -- literally -- to the least stressful job in the world," he says.

On break from the cruise line, Jim recorded his first CD, *Requests*, which he sold to passengers when he returned to the ship. Dry land eventually beckoned, and in 2002, he moved back to Monticello to concentrate on producing and distributing his music. In Fall 2003, he released his second album, a collection of holiday favorites called *Home for Christmas*.

Since then, Jim has produced and recorded eight more CDs, including:

- His early-2004 collection of movie music, *Projections: Songs from the Silver Screen*;
- *An Ivory Christmas*, a taste of Jim's live holiday show that features a combination of solo piano pieces and holiday tunes with vocals and full orchestrations;
- *Music of the Night*, a collection of sophisticated, relaxing and romantic evening-inspired melodies;
- *Simple Gifts*, featuring 14 songs of faith and inspiration;
- *With Love*, timeless, most-often-requested love songs;
- *Homeward Bound*, melodies designed to accompany us on the many stages of our journeys through life;
- New in 2008, *Country Dreaming*, featuring 16 classic country melodies;
- And his most recent release, *A Christmas to Remember*, filled with holiday favorites.

Now in its seventh year, Jim's annual "Holiday Grande" concert tour has become a must-attend tradition for thousands of families each Christmas. The spectacular holiday stage production includes Jim at the grand piano, his 15-piece orchestra, a cast of singers and dancers, elaborate sets and costumes and the true spirit of the season.

Today, Jim is touring the country, preparing a new CD, and working to get the word out about his music to fans from coast to coast.