

SINGING *unto the* LORD

SANTOS
SHARES
GOSPEL
THROUGH
VINTAGE
“DOO-WOP”
MUSIC

Story by Margot Bass
Photos by Tom Price

In 1981, Walter Santos entered the Miami, FL, recording studio a conflicted man. In his early thirties, he was already successful, recently playing percussion for some of the biggest names in the music industry, opening shows for Gloria Estefan and the Miami Sound Machine, Charlie Daniels, and the Allman Brothers. But Walter, known as Santos, was a heroin addict at the end of his rope. Well-known “doo-wop” star Dion Dimucci of “Runaround Sue” fame had asked him to play background for a new gospel album. In one song, “Sweet Surrender,” Dion shared his testimony of beating his own heroin addiction by surrendering to Jesus Christ—and it stopped Santos in his tracks. Surprised, he asked Dion how he was able to quit the drugs. Dion responded, “I had to come to the end of myself and realize my need for Jesus.” Santos carried those words in his heart.



About a month later, Santos attempted suicide and was sent to a Florida state hospital for help. After his release, he reached out to Dion: “I want what you have. What do I have to do?” he asked. Dion took him to a mid-week church service, where Santos responded to an altar call. “I said ‘Yes’ to Jesus,” he declared, adding that the road following that life-changing decision wasn’t easy.



Now 69 years old, he has spent the last 20 years touring the U.S. and the world as a singing evangelist, boldly sharing the Gospel

and his personal testimony through song. He adds Christian lyrics about Jesus to the popular “doo-wop” tunes he loved growing up. After performing with the “Who’s Who” of modern jazz and rock for many years, “Now I sing and play for the only ‘Who’ that matters—Jesus Christ,” Santos exclaimed. “Doo-wop for me, as an evangelist, is fishing bait. I sing it, and people are drawn in. Even kids come in and say, ‘That’s great music!’ The music is fun, but the message is life-changing.”

Long Road to Salvation

“One thing I know: that though I was blind, now I see.”

JOHN 9:25b

Santos grew up in the late 1950s and ‘60s in New York City, a boy who loved music so much that he’d practice songs in the school restroom because of the good acoustics. He gained percussion skills on the streets of the diverse ethnic neighborhoods of New York City. However, at age 12 he began using marijuana, alcohol, and pills. By 15, he was injecting heroin. “That’s when I became a full-blown heroin addict,” he stated. Despite his addiction, he soared in the entertainment world. At 24, he had his first professional performance at Carnegie Hall as a Latin percussionist. “I remember saying, ‘I’ve arrived.’ But the drugs had me. As I was working with top performers, inside I was empty,” he admitted.

In his early thirties, Santos was arrested for dealing drugs to undercover agents in New York and was placed in state hospitals to get help for his addiction. Under then-current drug laws, he was facing 25 years to life in prison. Instead, a judge sentenced him to five years of probation, ordering him, “Do something with your life. Don’t let me see you in



Bottom left: Santos, an accomplished musician who was rescued from addiction, tells his testimony through vintage doo-wop music at churches. He testifies of God’s grace and love around the world.

Top right: Volunteers sing the chorus to “Why Must I Be a Teenager in Love.”

my courtroom again.” After that reprieve, Santos went to Florida, where Dion introduced him to Jesus Christ.

Relapse and Return

“Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful.” JOEL 2:13b

After accepting Christ, Santos remained drug-free for years and began touring with Dion, eventually marrying the star’s sister. As they traveled the world, he was given opportunities to share his testimony and to sing. However, the marriage ended, and he “crashed and burned. When we divorced, I ended up back on heroin. I just picked up where I’d left off 12 years ago. The drugs tore me up, and I was full of shame and guilt,” he related. “I took my eyes off God. Instead of trusting Him, I trusted the drugs.” After overdosing on heroin and being revived by a friend after his heart stopped, he reached out to Calvary Chapel founder Pastor Chuck Smith.

Chuck and others urged him to attend Calvary Ranch, a Christian drug and alcohol recovery program in the San Diego area that closed in 2018. He told Calvary Ranch founder Pastor Tom McAloon, “I’m a Christian, and I’m dying, and I don’t know what to do.” Tom urged him to get right with the Lord. In 1995, Santos recommitted his life to the Lord in the program. He recalled, “Pastor Chuck knew I had fallen apart and was a real support for me there.”

Chuck and Tom believed God was going to do a good work through him. “Chuck told me, ‘The good, the bad, and the ugly are all preparation for something God has called you to,’” Santos remembered. He has remained drug-free and married his wife Andrea in 2000. God has brought him

through several severe illnesses. In his song “Gratitude and Joy,” he writes, “After all I’ve been through, after all I’ve done, I’m so grateful to You and the work of Your Son.”

A New Ministry

Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things ... Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King. PSALM 98:1a, 6b

In 1999, Santos began his doo-wop Gospel ministry, taking his musical message to diverse locations: churches, jails, drug rehab programs, high schools, cruise ships, and even chapels with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. Audiences sway to long-treasured tunes, clap their hands, and snap their fingers as Santos energetically croons his remade hits in his distinctly Bronx accent; he often calls individuals to sing with him on stage. At every event, he offers his cell phone number for people in need to call him personally about addiction programs. He also gives back in the secular world, sharing his faith and testimony as a certified drug and alcohol counselor and a chaplain for several organizations.

Santos believes that, at nearly 70, he’s right where he needs to be. “Whether I’m going to a nursing home to entertain people in wheelchairs or to a state prison talking to lifers and murderers, I have the same goal—to win the lost at any cost and pump hope into their lives.”

Santos Ministries
santosministries.org