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Spring Street, USA Schedules Top Christian Entertainers

By Sandy Simmons

NASHVILLE (BP)--Minnie Pearl's famous "How-w-dee" echoed through the Nashville television studio. She went into a song about her old chug-chugging washing machine, accompanied by animated sounds by comedian Jimmy Riddle.

The two country music performers were not filming for their regular syndicated show, Hee Haw, but for Southern Baptists' weekly syndicated television show, Spring Street, USA.

Minnie Pearl talked with the show's host, Houston pastor Ken Chafin, about her personal life and Christian faith.

"I grew up in a Christian home," she said. "All through my show business career, my Christian upbringing has given me the strength I needed. There are a lot of temptations in this business, and a strong Christian faith is needed to resist them."

Part of the ministry of Spring Street, USA, which will air on 34 television stations from Seattle to Panama City, Fla., by September 16, is to present well-known personalities who portray their Christian faith through personal testimony, singing or acting performances.

Many, such as Minnie Pearl, grew up in Christian homes. Others, such as singer Wanda Jackson, have just recently discovered the Christian lifestyle. Still others, such as last season's guest stars, former astronaut James Irwin and singer Pat Boone, have committed their careers to religious service.

Dark-haired Wanda Jackson, a country music singer and Oklahoma native, expressed how much her new found Christian faith has meant to her.

She and her husband, long-time members of South Lindsey Baptist Church in Oklahoma City, were not very active.

A new pastor came to the church, recognized Miss Jackson's name and asked why he had never seen her in church.

The entire church began praying for Wanda and her husband Wendell Goodman. In June of 1971 both made professions of faith. Their new decision meant sacrificing the night club circuit, which represented 70 to 80 per cent of their income.

However, she has become more and more popular as guest singer in churches and at civic functions.

"I find everybody's eager to hear good things that have happened in someone's life. It's a real thrill to me to share my testimony," she said.

As she goes on tour throughout the United States and sometimes to foreign countries, she says it's different "I'll take Jesus with me this time."

An award-winning country music singer, Miss Jackson has recorded such songs as Right or Wrong, In the Middle of a Heartache, Little Bitty Tear, and Fancy Satin Pillows.

Spring Street, USA, includes not only country music singers such as Minnie Pearl, Miss Jackson and Grammy award winner Charlie McCoy, but also Lawrence Welk Show veteran Jim Roberts, former Miss America Vonda Van Dyke and others.

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Rhythm and blues singer Freddie North, another Spring Street, USA guest, and a Baptist himself, said that any time someone in a religious production thinks "enough of me to ask me to be in it, I will. What really clicked with me was that it was a Baptist program."

North, who recorded such popular hits as Don't Take Her (She's All I've Got) and Rainy Night in Georgia, comes from a long line of gospel singers.

"My father and his group, called Deacon Freddie B. Carpenter and the LK Gospel Singers, were one of the top black gospel groups in the Nashville area then," North said.

"The first time I ever sang in public, I remember, was at church with my father. I was so small they put me up on a platform so I would be nearly as tall as my father."

Miss Van Dyke gained overnight stardom through her talents as a ventriloquist and her beauty. Just before she was crowned Miss America several years ago, she had explained to an audience of millions of Americans why she carried her Bible with her.

"I don't consider my Bible a good luck charm. It's the most important book I own," the Arizona beauty told the audience. "I would not describe my companionship with God as religion. I would call it faith."

Since her Miss America reign, she has authored several books for teenagers, appeared in a religious film, Teenage Diary, and made thousands of personal appearances at film premieres and crusades. She also records for the Word label.

Other upcoming guest stars for the 26 segments already "in the can" and for the 10 shows to be filmed next January, include country music singer Leroy Van Dyke, actor Harve Presnell and actress Joanie Sommers.

Like all Spring Street guests and regulars, they have something to be excited about--their Christian faith.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Sandy Simmons, a former editorial staffer for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, now reports for the Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer.

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BP PHOTO mailed to state Baptist paper editors