



CHAPTER 1

AL NIENTE

{Fade to Silence}

I arrived home in Cleveland, Tennessee, on Sunday night, September 9, 2001. The last five days had been spent in Washington and Idaho. In Washington, I had concerts in Wenatchee, Moses Lake, Spokane, and Spangle, followed by a concert in Sandpoint, Idaho. One of the most difficult, and important, pieces of a successful music ministry (unless you're signed to a label) is having a booking agent. My friend, Dan Pabón, had helped me in this regard for a while. Linda Hill, who's like a second mom to me, had done it for a few years, and a handful of others had tried their hand at it. But they all had regular jobs. Whether part time or full time, everyone worked. And they worked hard. So they just couldn't schedule my concerts and represent me full time. And I understood; there wasn't enough money in it to make a career out of it.

Several years before, I had met Herman Harp. Herman was an excellent musician who sang as a soloist; as a duo with his wife, Sonnie; and with the group Ponder, Harp, and Jennings. But this guy was a workhorse like few people I'd ever seen! He put on 250–300 concerts a year. And when he decided to schedule my concerts, he used the vast database of the thousands of churches he had sung in to help me. He brought me to another level so that a typical weekend, from Thursday or Friday evening until Sunday evening, would have four concerts or more.

I also had another booking agent, Peggy Buhr, at Adoration Resources in Kansas City, Missouri. My manager, Mark Craig, had suggested Peggy and I work together, since one of the artists she represented was also an instrumentalist whom

Mark managed. So over the course of the next few years, while I had two booking agents, it wouldn't be unusual for Herman to book a couple of concerts in, say, Southern California from Friday night to Saturday night, while Peggy would book me in, say, Houston, Texas, for Sunday. This would happen when both of them would get calls for concerts at about the same time. So I'd do the concerts in Southern California, dash to Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) to catch a midnight flight, and arrive in Houston in time to play special music for the morning church service and/or put on the evening concert. Of course, this made for one tired dude at the end of the weekend! But I thrived on these opportunities to share the talents God has entrusted to me, and I must say, I thrived on the adventure of accomplishing the feat. More than once I came within minutes of missing a flight. As you can imagine, it would have been a disaster to not make it to a concert. Amazingly (more likely, providentially), I never missed a concert.

But the weekend of September 7–9, 2001, was a fairly benign one in terms of getting to all the concerts because I was in one area of the country and had to drive only a relatively short distance from one place to the next. On Sunday, I had to get home instead of taking a Sunday evening concert because the next day I had a concert at the corporate headquarters of Life Care Centers of America (LCCA), which had gathered its directors of nurses from all over the country for a training session. This would turn out to be the first of many concerts for LCCA and the beginning of a relationship with that wonderful organization that continues today.

I arrived at the Chattanooga airport, and my wife, Emily, picked me up. I was exhausted after a long weekend of concerts, but grateful and anxious to come home to Emily and our apartment in Cleveland, Tennessee. I was also excited about the fantastic reception and response the concerts had received.

Monday, September 10, was like any other time I returned home from a concert trip—unpacking, taking inventory of the products sold, going to the bank and the dry cleaners, and spending time with Emily. The facility where the LCCA concert was to take place was about ten minutes from our apartment, so we were able to finish all our errands and still have plenty of time to get ready. Emily had cut back a bit on traveling with me, so it was a bonus to have her there.

We arrived, and the friendly and helpful LCCA staff made sure our sound check and setup was easy and quick. I was introduced to Forrest Preston and his wife, Kathleen, and Beecher Hunter and his wife, Lola. These men were the chairman of the board and chief operating officer, respectively of LCCA, and they welcomed us and made us feel at home. I was impressed with the way every staff member carried himself or herself. The staff was kind, cordial, easy to work with, and there was an atmosphere of joy and peace.

In my concerts, I always have a set of songs and pieces ready to play, and I like to arrive at the venue and observe people, or even interact with some, before putting together the program. This evening was no different. I decided to mix some inspirational songs with classical and patriotic music and then finish with a hymn

and a spiritual emphasis. Life Care Centers of America is an organization with a Christian emphasis and environment, and I had been told that I could share my faith without any issues at all.

For the last song, I chose a medley of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” and “America the Beautiful.” I had attended a concert in 1986 by Sam Ocampo, someone who became a great inspiration, mentor, and friend. Toward the end of that concert on a cold Michigan night, he had performed a medley of these same songs. I was fifteen years old at the time, and as the music rose to a crescendo, I had tears in my eyes and goose bumps on top of goose bumps. I was in awe of what Sam could do with that piano. Without him saying a word, the notes emanating from the keys as his fingers played, spoke to me with clarity and precision. And so when I recorded the album *I Am Not Worthy* in 1994, I included a medley of these three patriotic songs that was very much based on Sam’s version.

Every concert for me is special, different, and exciting. But some concerts stand out for different reasons—some good, some not so good. This LCCA concert stood out. Everything seemed to be going right—the sound was perfect; the lighting was just right; the audience was attentive. Even in a place and setting that wasn’t really to be a gospel-style concert, the Holy Spirit was present. For some reason, as I shared with the audience something of my family’s story and my love for the United States of America, I felt impressed to go a bit further and challenge the audience to be ever thankful for the freedoms, blessings, opportunities, and liberties we enjoy, and to use them wisely to serve God and humanity. People were visibly moved. After the enthusiastic response of those present died down, Beecher Hunter came up on stage, said a few words, and invited me to share one more song. This gave me an excellent opportunity to close with a favorite hymn, “How Great Thou Art,” and end on a very spiritual note.

As Emily and I greeted people after the concert, nobody knew or understood the impact this patriotic medley would leave in the hearts and minds of those present in the light of what happened just twelve hours later in New York, Washington, D.C., Pennsylvania, and, indeed, around the world.

The morning of September 11, 2001, began just like any other morning for millions, perhaps even billions, of people around the world. Emily and I woke up and had our worship and prayer. We were going about routine things when my buddy, Trent DeLong, called me on the phone. It was difficult to keep track of Trent’s whereabouts because he was constantly traveling and doing concerts. If he was at home in California that day, he must have been calling me just after 6:00 A.M. his time. But he was the first person I heard it from. He said to me, “Turn on the television. An airplane has just slammed into the World Trade Center in New York, and there’s chaos all around.” So Emily rushed to turn on the television, and we watched in shock, horror, and despair as the events we all know and remember unfolded.

This country and, indeed, the world would never be the same. At the time, we could not comprehend or imagine how things would change, but we knew they would. We prayed for our country, for the thousands of people whose lives were tragically ended, for the families of those who lost loved ones in the blink of an eye, and for the millions who'd be affected one way or another by all this.

Being a frequent flier, I could imagine the uncertainty and inconvenience so many people experienced as the entire air traffic system in the United States was halted. I could have easily been stranded somewhere, as much as I fly. People were stuck for days and days. I learned later that LCCA chartered buses to drive home those nurse directors I had played for on Monday night. I had a presentation in Missouri on Friday night, September 15, and another one in Georgia the following night. The organizers of the Friday night event canceled the function, but the one in Atlanta proceeded.

In Tennessee, mail delivery was shut down for three days. Perhaps it did so in other areas of the country as well, and most airports were closed. The stock market dropped like an iron ball, and the economy immediately took a dive. It was a time for our nation to reflect and pray. I remember noticing an increase in attendance at churches all around the country; people were looking for answers.

Emily and I were two months away from purchasing our first home, and, of course, with the new economic instability, we were anxious about this huge commitment.

One week later, on September 18, I boarded an American Eagle jet headed to Chicago and then caught a connecting flight to LAX on American Airlines. The Chattanooga airport isn't a busy airport to begin with, but on this day, it felt like a museum at midnight. There were a handful of passengers at all the counters, and the mood was somber and hushed. In the months following September 11, there would be long, winding lines of people waiting for hours to get through security, but that morning it took me less than two minutes. There were six passengers on my flight. When I arrived at Chicago O'Hare International Airport, I thought I was at Chicago Midway International Airport! (That's a facetious comment; those who know Chicago well and the bad blood between the two airports will understand!) There were fourteen passengers on the McDonnell Douglas Super 80 aircraft; normally passengers would have been waitlisted to get on the flight to Los Angeles.

Perhaps the worst part was that everyone everywhere looked at everyone else with suspicion. Everyone was scared and apprehensive. A loud bang or unusual sound would make people jump, and when the airport's security staff suddenly announced a halt in movement to investigate a possible security breach, everyone froze and recoiled in fear. It was painful to see a nation of people who were now stressed and uncertain.

I arrived in Los Angeles and drove to Stockton for my first concert, which would take place the next night. After that, I drove back to the Los Angeles area

for concerts the rest of the weekend in Palm Desert and Los Angeles proper. The last presentation that weekend was a bit impromptu and mostly unplanned. In 1999, I had been booked to do a Christmas concert at the White Memorial Medical Center. This hospital, located on Cesar Chavez Avenue in the heart of East Los Angeles, serves the humble community surrounding it. It carries out its mission faithfully, giving health care and spiritual healing to many who cannot afford the care they receive. When Emily and I arrived there in 1999, we were given a tour of the hospital and met the patients and staff. We fell in love with the people, the place, and the mission. I've returned there many times to do presentations, speak, and play along the hallways of the hospital for the patients and staff.

One of the people Emily and I met that weekend was Mark Newmyer, the hospital's vice president for business development. He and his wife, Helena, entertained us throughout the weekend, and Emily and I were thankful for the time and interest Mark and Helena took in us. I'm honored to say that Mark has become one of my closest friends.

That Sunday evening, September 23, 2001, the hospital was putting on its yearly gala at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. Mark had invited me to attend the gala as his guest. Because of his responsibilities, he had to be there early, and I went with him. As the afternoon progressed, I sensed angst and anxiety on the part of the organizers. Shari Davis of SD Events, producer of the gala and a brilliant lady, was pacing back and forth, on and off her cell phone, and going from one person to the next, talking. I didn't know it, but the band booked to provide the entertainment for the evening had not shown up, and the gala was scheduled to begin in less than two hours. As a violinist, I have a sweet deal—I don't have lots of complicated equipment I have to bring or set up (besides my microphone, iPhone, iPad, or MacBook Pro), and I don't have to spend an hour or more doing a sound check. Of course, I'm at the mercy of the equipment that the local venue has and the audio and video engineers that are provided. I typically show up an hour and a half before a concert, take about twenty or thirty minutes to do a sound check, and then I can go do other things—review last-minute details, signals, order of the program, and so on, with the audio and video engineers, set up, get dressed, pray with the prayer team, and relax until it's time to begin the concert.

Finally, Mark came over to tell me what was going on. Things were getting desperate. The band, even if they showed up now, would need plenty of time to set up, and the starting time for the gala couldn't be delayed. So Mark told Shari he had a friend who played the violin and could pinch-hit. I could only imagine Shari's thoughts (which she confirmed later): *How many times have I heard, "I know someone who's a great musician," and then when it's time to play, the musician isn't great at all?* She was skeptical of Mark's friend. And so in the midst of the chaos, I was asked to play a song on stage. Of course, this was their way of auditioning me. And I'm sure they planned for the worst.

I ran out to the car to get my violin. Returning, I handed them a CD track of

“God Bless the U.S.A.,” the song made famous by Lee Greenwood. They cranked up the music and set up a microphone for me. We adjusted the volume of the monitor speakers, and I began playing. As I played, I noticed, Shari, her assistants, and a couple of others who had been hopping around were slowing down and huddling together. I then drifted into the music and got lost in it, tuning out everything else around me. Suddenly, the accompaniment stopped. I had become so involved in the melody that I was almost jolted when the music stopped, feeling a bit disoriented. At that point, I didn’t know what to think. Then, Shari came over and asked me, “Can you provide about an hour’s worth of music?”

“Yes,” I said. “No problem.”

From that point on, the running around ceased. I was assigned an assistant and a dressing room, and plans continued smoothly.

Later that evening, I learned that not twenty minutes after I was invited to play, the band showed up. Apparently, they thought the event was in another hotel and then got lost. But nobody had heard from them. So when they arrived, they were told that they had not honored the agreement and that they had been replaced. You can imagine how well that went. The next year, both the band *and* I were invited to participate at the gala!