

## COTTON PATCH GOSPEL

### Originator of *Cotton Patch Gospel* Recreates Beginning as Solo Performance

In 1979, Tom Key was wondering what he would do next after a successful national tour of his one-man play *C.S. Lewis On Stage* when he spotted a postcard advertising British Actor, Alec McGowen's presentation of *Saint Mark's Gospel*. "It had been a highly successful solo dramatization on Broadway and in the West End Theater of London" remembers Key, "and it was word for word from the King James Version of The Bible, so I thought, 'Why couldn't I do the same sort of thing, but, since I'm from Alabama, do it from a Down Home perspective—that is, dramatize what would have happened if Jesus had been born about 1936 in the middle of the Bible Belt instead of 2000 years ago in Bethlehem?'"

Key quickly learned that Dr. Clarence Jordan had explored the same idea in his "Cotton Patch" paraphrases of the New Testament. Jordan, equipped with an undergraduate degree in Agriculture from Auburn University and a PhD in New Testament Greek, established Koinonia, an interracial Christian Farming Community near Americus, Georgia years before the Civil Rights movement had begun. In spite of being voted out of fellowship with The Southern Baptist Church for worshipping with people of color, having crops of pecan trees chopped down and his children shot at by The Ku Klux Klan, Jordan persevered. His most famous disciple was Millard Fuller who was inspired by Jordan and the vision of Koinonia Farm to liquidate his fortune and begin Habitat for Humanity.

"As soon as I read Clarence Jordan's 'Cotton Patch Version of Matthew'," Key observed "I knew I had been provided an authentic and fresh way of seeing the story of Christ. The way Jordan respectfully and accurately put the life of Jesus in the context of the American South made what had become safe, familiar, and, most importantly, so of another time and place, suddenly and shockingly relevant with an enormous amount of laughter, moral challenge and wonder."

In January of 1980, Key adapted and performed Jordan's "The Cotton Patch Gospel of Matthew" as a one man show for three universities in three different regions of the country. "In Tennessee, Iowa and California, the reaction was the same—elated standing ovations". After a year of touring Cotton Patch across the United States in more than fifty productions, meeting Drama Desk Award Winning Director, Russell Treyz during a season at The Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and performing for the late singer songwriter Harry Chapin, Key's presentation began to develop into the form in which hundreds of thousands know it today, *Cotton Patch Gospel* the musical, co-authored and originally directed by Treyz with lyrics and music by Chapin.

In over 1000 performances, Key has created the role of Matthew and twenty one others, from Jesus to Judas with an Alabama accent, from off Broadway to Los Angeles with record breaking runs in Atlanta and Dallas. It has been published by Dramatic Publishing Company and twenty years later is still frequently produced by professional, amateur and educational theater companies. A film of the original off Broadway production is regularly broadcast in America and Canada and is still available through Koinonia Farms in Americus, Georgia. Key won two Dramalogue Awards for Outstanding Achievement in Theater, in 1985, was nominated "Best Actor" by The Los Angeles Drama Critics'

Circle, and starred in the NBC Feature “Harry Chapin’s Cotton Patch”. Various productions have raised tens of thousands of dollars for charitable causes, especially for Habitat for Humanity in America and abroad. “Perhaps the most meaningful honors I have received for ‘Cotton Patch’”, reflects Key “were Jimmy and Roslyn Carter attending twice and receiving ‘The Ministry and Service Award’ from Koinonia Partners.” In the fall of 1999, Key was asked to perform by Millard Fuller in Americus as part of a remembrance on the life of Clarence Jordan. “I thought it would be fitting, and also it was practical, to return to the one man show for the celebration of Clarence’s life,” Key said.

The response from Millard Fuller, Jordan’s children, members of Koinonia Partners were so strong to the revival of Key’s one man performance that he decided to make it available for touring again. “After so much experience with the musical,” Key concludes, “I was able to return to that earlier dramatic solo script with a lot of acting tools I didn’t have before. Plus, the one man show is, in ways the musical can’t be, a very powerful, personal and intense performance form. Certainly one form is not better than another, but each version—whether it has one person, one actor and a four person bluegrass band or a cast with a black gospel choir-- has its particular strengths.”