

Precious.

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It was a Sunday morning back in the mid-1960s when Benton Marland made his first public performance in his local choir at the Church Of Christ, located in some back street suburban area of Los Angeles. To the hush of the crowd, the slightly shy and naturally effeminate Benton dressed from head to toe in white launched into a gospel rendition of *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*. The lyrics to the song would become Benton's epitaph for life.

'Precious Lord, take my hand
Lead me on, let me stand
I'm tired, I'm weak, I'm lone
Through the storm, through the night
Lead me on to the light, take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.'

As the song reached its crashing finale, Benton stole a look at his stone cold silent mother who was perched like a peacock as always in the front row dressed also in white with matching gold shoes and accessories. He threw his arms up into the air, his vocals warbling the final notes. Her face gave no reaction. The eyes were still, staring forward. Her hands neatly crossed in her lap. As the music finished playing, Benton's arms remained in the air while the audience leapt to their feet clapping and cheering widely with notably shouts of 'Amen to that child.' Mrs Marland remained seated. As the church service finished, many people clapped Benton on his back offering more congratulations. Benton just grinned endlessly. He loved to sing and despite being the shy one in the choir he also basked in attention.

'That child is pure heaven,' one mother said to another.

'What a child, what a voice,' others would say.

Mrs M still remained seated.

'Mama, did you like me singing?' Benton would ask as he walked home. The answer was short and swift.

'I think you need to be more of a man.'

There would be no congratulatory response. That would never happen.