

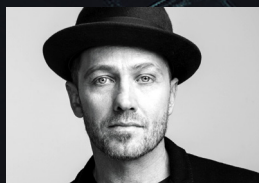
2015's ULTIMATE CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE! | PLUS: KUTLESS, CASTING CROWNS, MUTEMATH

# CCM

A FEW OF OUR  
*Favorite THINGS*  
2015 GIFT GUIDE

# CHRISTMAS & COMMUNION

MAKING NEW CONNECTIONS WITH  
EACH OTHER & WITH GOD



**TOBYMAC**  
LIVE IN NYC

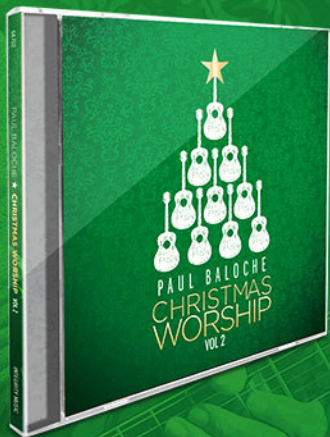


**KIRK FRANKLIN**  
WILLING TO LOSE?

DEC 15, 2015

PAUL BALOCHE  
CHRISTMAS  
WORSHIP

VOL 2



AVAILABLE WORLDWIDE

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## FEATURES

## CHRISTMAS &amp; COMMUNION

Andrew Greer talks with Chris Tomlin, Keith Getty, and Jon and Valerie Guerra on making new connections with each other, and with God at Christmastime.



## Q&amp;A: KIRK FRANKLIN

Kirk Franklin always plays to win—like he's got everything to lose. These days, he's actually thinking a little more about losing, but not in the way you might think.



## CONCERT REVIEW: TOBYMAC

CCM travels to New York City to experience TobyMac and his DiverseCity Band, along with friends Britt Nicole, Colton Dixon, and Hollyn.



## DEPARTMENTS

## FROM THE EDITOR

## PHOTOS

## OUT AND ABOUT

Pics of your favorite Christian artists on the road, off the road and everywhere in between



## REVIEWS

KUTLESS, CASTING CROWNS, MUTEMATH + MANY MORE!



## CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE

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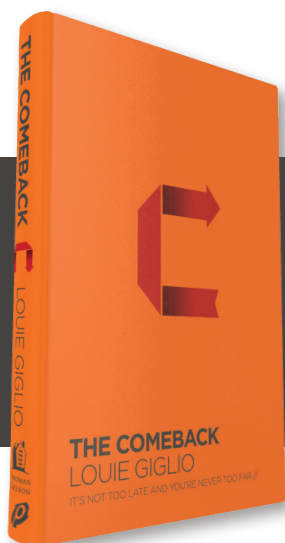
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We have come to our final edition of *CCM Magazine* for the month December, and for the year 2015. In our previous issue, singer-songwriter and author, **Andrew Greer**, brought us three conversations surrounding the idea of **Christmas & Communion**—making new connections with each other, and with God.

**Nathan Cochran** beautifully expressed how he and his **MercyMe** band mates find Christmas to be a time of celebration, and how they choose to focus on family as a response to God “entering into the human story.” **Laura Story**, moved by “the greatest gift to all of humanity,” recorded her first Christmas album, *God With Us*, this year, and **Point Of Grace’s Leigh Cappillino** shared some of her family’s rich Christmastime traditions (and a scrumptious mac-n-cheese recipe!).

In this issue, Greer sits down with leading worshippers and songwriters **Chris Tomlin**, **Keith Getty**, and **Jon and Valerie Guerra**, and dives a little more into the very thing that “sets the table” for this time of communion—music.

No matter how you slice it, you can’t refute Greer’s emphatic opening statement, “Christmastime simply would not be Christmastime without music.” It’s true! Think about it, everything would be wrong if we found ourselves at our local mall in the middle of December—surrounded by the visual fanfare of trees, garland, reindeer and Santa Clauses—while a **Muzak** version of **Bruce Hornsby’s** “The Way It Is” was sheepishly playing over the intercom speakers.

All of the artists mentioned above (excluding Hornsby), has responded to the meaning of Christ’s birth in their lives with music. How will you respond this year? Will you casually glaze over the singing of hymns and carols, or will you return a heartfelt praise to Him? Jesus isn’t expecting an eloquent vibrato, or a slickly produced Christmas CD—He desires a renewed connection. There’s an open seat for you at His table.

Merry Christmas,



**Kevin Sparkman**  
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**Andy Argyrakis** is a Chicago-based entertainment writer/photographer who appears in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Illinois Entertainer*, *Hear/Say Magazine*, *Concert Livewire* and more.



**Andrew Greer** is a Dove-nominated singer-songwriter and writer. The Texas native and Nashville, TN resident recently released his first book, co-authored with Ginny Owens, titled *Transcending Mysteries* (Thomas Nelson). More info at [Andrew-Greer.com](http://Andrew-Greer.com).



**Matt Conner** is a music writer for the *Indianapolis Star*, *Relevant* and *Metromix* and the founding editor of *StereoSubversion.com*.

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1



COMPILED BY ANDY ARGYRAKIS

**1** Throughout the holiday season, **Andrew Greer Presents An Angel Band Christmas** is slated to air on multiple networks, including Parables TV, Cornerstone TeleVision Network and CTN affiliates. And for those unable to catch its broadcast, there's always the DVD and digital album of the same name from LightWorx Entertainment/Lucid Artist, also featuring the Dove Award-nominated singer/songwriter and his famous friends. Pictured from left to right: **Point of Grace's Denise Jones, Shelley Breen and Leigh Cappillino; Greer; Cindy Morgan; Jaci Velasquez and Nic Gonzales.**

**2** **Fireflight's Dawn Michele** visited the **Ashby House** with her son, Johnny, while in Salina, KS on the **Small Town America Tour**. The Ashby House helps women recover from addiction, provides safety for impoverished families, and many other services worth supporting. Check them out at [ashbyhouse.org](http://ashbyhouse.org).

2



3



4



**3** Dove Award-winning **Difference Media** group **Canton Junction** just finished the **Every Hallelujah Tour**, performing before enthusiastic audiences around the Southeast. Pictured from left to right at the Evangel Temple Assembly of God in Jacksonville, FL are **Matthew Hagee, Casey Rivers, Ryan Seaton** and **Tim Duncan**.

**4** Prior to hitting the road again to support her fourth studio recording **Everything I Need**, Artist Garden Entertainment artist **Holly Starr** tied the knot with former band mate **Chris Rumbles** near her hometown in Washington.

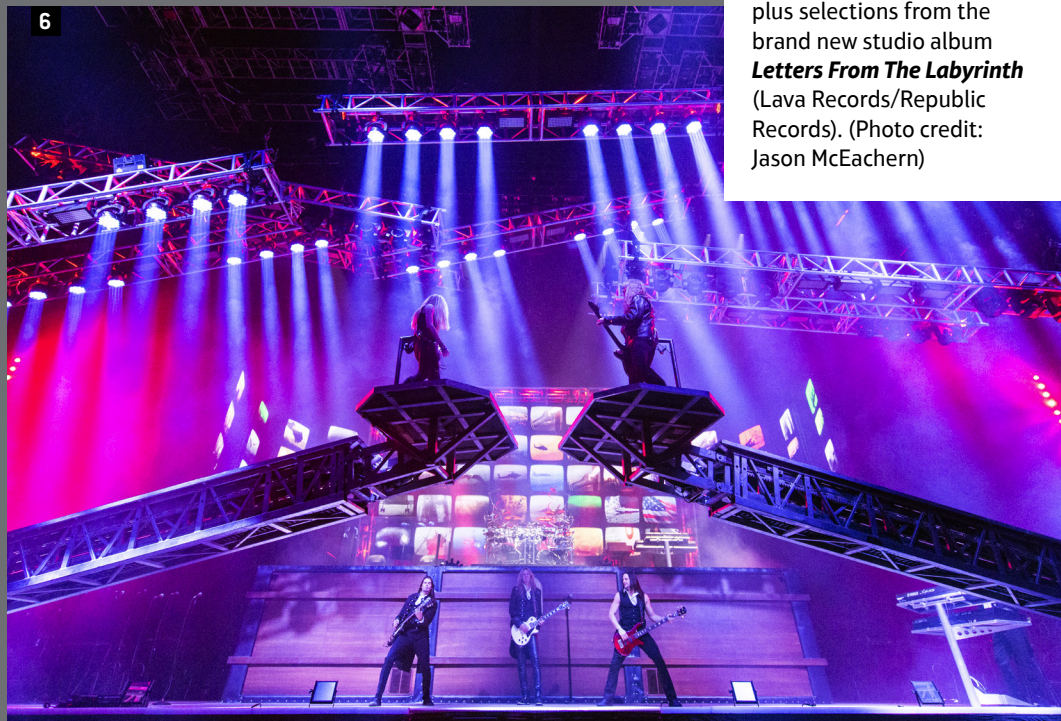


5



**5** Vocal powerhouse **Natalie Grant** launches the debut of this season's "Sam's Place—Music For The Spirit" with **Steven Curtis Chapman** at the **Ryman Auditorium** where the pair performed his classic hit "His Strength Is Perfect." (Photo credit: Rick Diamond/Getty Images)

6



**6** Spiritually-leaning progressive rockers **Trans-Siberian Orchestra** are hitting the road once again this winter, performing all the tunes from **The Ghosts Of Christmas Eve**, plus selections from the brand new studio album **Letters From The Labyrinth** (Lava Records/Republic Records). (Photo credit: Jason McEachern)



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CHRISTMAS 2015

\* CCM MAGAZINE'S \*

# CHRISTMAS & COMMUNION

WITH ANDREW GREER



# CHRISTMASTIME SIMPLY WOULD NOT BE CHRISTMASTIME WITHOUT MUSIC.

Songs are a part of our collective conscious each December. Everywhere we go—school, church, the movies, the mall, even **Walmart**—yuletide tunes playlist over public speakers, chorusing strains of peace on earth and good will toward men.

Yes, the seasonal shuffle is inevitable. Choir concerts. Basketball games. Family reunions. Service to our neighbors, the needy, our churches. The most anticipated month on our calendars is often one of the most anxiety-ridden as well. But even in our panic-inducing, communal craziness, music gifts us with a moment to pause, to reflect, and in our minds and hearts, take communion.

The cry of, “Clean up on Aisle 10,” heard over the grocery store intercom turns into a exquisite chorus of “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” “Joy to the World” sounds out over the **Starbucks’** speaker, reminding a line of over-worked, under-caffeinated patrons that the next shot of espresso—though spiritual—is not imperative to life. Even a backseat of arguing children quiets to a hush as **Ella Fitzgerald** songbirds “Silent Night, Holy Night” over the radio waves.

It’s as if our entire culture is readying itself for communion, and music sets the table.

As three of the modern church’s most distinctive artists, worship leaders and songwriters, **Chris Tomlin**, **Keith** and **Kristyn Getty** and **Jon** and **Valerie Guerra** have spent much of their creative efforts writing and administering music that helps set the table for communion. So though I would otherwise discourage it, silence the CD player, turn down Spotify, shut down your smart phone, and take a minute to join the rhythm of our conversation in an effort to prepare our hearts and minds for Christmas, and communion. You might just find yourself humming along. **CCM**

***O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him. O come let us adore him. Christ the Lord.***



# CHRIS TOMLIN

## PRAYING FOR AN AWAKENING

In the modern church, **Chris Tomlin's** name has become synonymous with "worship music." For nearly two decades, the Texas native has recorded, written and performed songs designed to lead the spiritual masses in musical communion. Perennial favorites like "How Great is Our God," "Indescribable" and this year's already number one-selling single, "Good, Good Father" have cemented Tomlin in the hymnals of the twenty-first century church while propelling him to the top of the Christian music charts.

And Christmastime, Tomlin says, presents congregations with an especially poignant opportunity to reflect through song and verse—a unique season where music especially offers our spirits a "chance to connect again." Gifting the corporate-singing church with his second order of Advent worship on **ADORE: Christmas Songs of Worship** (sixsteps), the carefully articulated worship leader sits down to discourse on worship at Christmastime in a fireside lesson on carols and communion.

**CCM:** There is a lot of collaboration on this record. All Sons & Daughters, Lauren Daigle and Kristyn Getty. Why were guests

important on this record? And how does the collaborative effort aid you in your aim of leading worship—of facilitating communion—through music?

**Chris Tomlin:** I am honored to have each of these guests on the album. And Crowder is even featured on a deluxe edition [which is available at Target] with a pretty fun and different take on "We Three Kings."

There is so much strength to be gained with the right collaborations. All of these happened very naturally and nothing was forced. I was just looking for what was a good fit for each song. Was there something or someone that would bring an added touch that I never could on my own?

**CCM:** Where some live worship records still sound largely like in-studio efforts, the natural texture of live voices is very prominent and poignant on *Adore*. I especially find this true in the tenderness of "Silent Night," transporting our senses to the sights and sounds of candlelit Christmas Eve services. Recording purists would hesitate to leave "live" voices so exposed when polishing the final effort. What was the design and meaning behind keeping the corporate singing so prominent on the final recording?

**CT:** Yes, everything you mention here was very intentional. You definitely get the feel





that you are in midst of a gathering of people singing these songs of worship to God. I love that the record, for the most part, doesn't focus on a "singer," but the point is to find yourself joining in with everyone else.

**CCM:** Your last Christmas record, 2012's *Glory in the Highest*, was recorded live at Nashville's historic Ocean Way studios—the same location for *Adore*. Why "live," and why Ocean Way again?

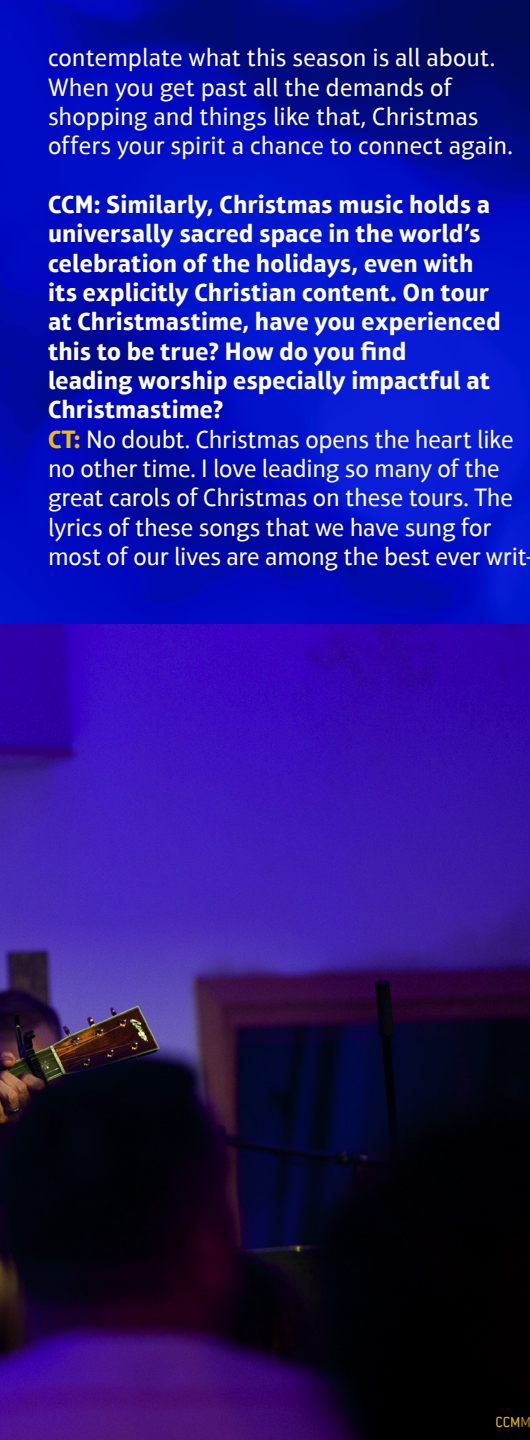
**CT:** Like *Glory In The Highest*, I wanted this record to capture the church singing these songs in worship. Ocean Way is a legendary studio in Nashville that was once a church. So it was so beautiful to fill what is now a studio room with hundreds of voices singing praise to God.

Above all, that's what I wanted this record to sound like—to capture the people, voices singing these songs written around the birth of Jesus.

**CCM:** Christmas is a poignant season. Culturally, we seem to be more open to spiritual matters, sensitive to our neighbors needs and transparent in our humanity. Why do you think Christmastime promotes this connectedness and unity?

**CT:** To me, one of the main reasons Christmas seems to be so poignant is that it causes the world to slow down for a moment. It is so much harder to be connected and have your heart open to what really matters when you are running all the time. Christmas manages to slow us down for a moment, to





contemplate what this season is all about. When you get past all the demands of shopping and things like that, Christmas offers your spirit a chance to connect again.

**CCM:** Similarly, Christmas music holds a universally sacred space in the world's celebration of the holidays, even with its explicitly Christian content. On tour at Christmastime, have you experienced this to be true? How do you find leading worship especially impactful at Christmastime?

**CT:** No doubt. Christmas opens the heart like no other time. I love leading so many of the great carols of Christmas on these tours. The lyrics of these songs that we have sung for most of our lives are among the best ever writ-

ten in any time or genre of music. There is such a simplicity and purity about leading worship during Christmas that is undeniable as well.

**CCM:** When we congregate to worship, we gather in the midst of experiencing many hardships, many issues. In a recent *Called Magazine* cover story featuring you and your wife, Lauren, the two of you talk about wading through difficult seasons in your own marriages.

The advent of the holidays does not eliminate our pain. In fact, it can often exacerbate it. So for you, how does Christmas and Christmas music play an important role in shaping your perspectives in the midst of real and present heartache? And how do you think it transforms and opens up the perspective of the church as you lead corporate worship around the country and at home at Christmastime?

**CT:** The story of Christmas is God coming to earth in the form of a man, Jesus. This may be the greatest power and grace that Christmas holds. There was no palace or parade, but a stable. The invitation first went to the lowly, the shepherds. Jesus was born into a world filled with pain and heartache. This was God's tangible way of saying that He understood and saw the suffering and pain of the world, and would choose to take it all upon Himself.

The announcement of Christmas by the angels was "peace of earth." Jesus would make a way for every heart to find peace with God once again. This is what we sing about on the record *Adore*. There is a lyric in the song, "Noel," that says, "Come and see what God has done." For every night of the tour and every time this music is heard, I pray it awakens the wonder of what God has truly done for the world.



**READ CCM MAGAZINE'S REVIEW OF  
"ADORE: CHRISTMAS SONGS OF WORSHIP"  
ON [CCMAGAZINE.COM](http://CCMAGAZINE.COM).**



# KEITH GETTY

## HYMNS—GIFTS OF GRACE

**CCM:** This year, you guys follow up your popular Christmas recording, *Joy*, with a live take. Christmas music must be meaningful for you and Kristyn to put it on tape twice! Why a second go-round? And what is Christmas music's impact on you personally?

**Keith Getty:** The reason for our live recording is because of this exciting new partnership with PBS. Last Christmas, we recorded the show, and as we began discussions with PBS, they were excited about making it a Christmas fundraiser for the 2015 year. And so, they wanted to release a new version.

We were particularly excited about this, because as the tour has grown, so each member of the band has added their own sense of life and identity to the show. Our Christmas show this year is new from top to bottom, and the process of putting it together has continue to inspire us to make more recordings and create new shows.

**CCM:** Christmastime is the one season when hymns are sung throughout popular

culture without protest. Rather, they are often promoted. As a hymn writer, does this impact/move you? How so?

**KG:** Yes, I think it's wonderful because the reason that they are sung is because hymns are such a wonderful art. They are gifts of grace that have been given to the church by some of the finest poets, theologians, and composers in the history of music and, are something we should treasure.

As church musicians, we recognize that the challenge for all of us, is to utilize the opportunity to effectively use this gift to reach the broader community; whether it means innovative concerts, opportunities to make music amongst our own communities/neighborhoods in innovative ways, or simply ensuring our churches

singing with a greater sense of passion and witness.

The deeper challenge for our communities is that we don't expect outsiders to celebrate our 'good news', but rather, our energy, talent and imaginations, would so inspire the people around us. Christmas, then, naturally becomes the subject of everyone's conversation in the way the great carols of old are able to do.







**CCM:** In this set of features we are talking about “Christmas and Communion.” I think the live experience is quite communal. How do you think sharing music together in the live context promotes communion—with each other, and with God?

**KG:** It promotes communion at different levels: when God’s people sing together, the sense of public congregational singing, becomes a holy act, which is a foretaste of heaven. At a broader level, the music, dance and spirit of the Christmas show is meant to bring communities together. Each concert has a inter-generational choir, as well as a lobby jam after the show, encouraging kids and adults to join and dance, which gives a chance to share music with each of these communities, allowing for a fun and joyful Christmas experience.

**CCM:** What first inspired you to write music—and to pen modern hymns? And how is songwriting, recording, performing

and producing music an effort to connect with God, and others?

**KG:** Primarily, I think as I became more and more convinced about the truth of Christianity, I also became aware of how God’s people have learned their faith through what they sing, all throughout history: Old Testament, New Testament and through all the phases of Christian history as well.

As we are the first generation of a new millennium, where there are more Christians in the world than ever before, where global communication is possible for the first time in history, and when most Christians have a very shallow understanding of their faith, the challenge for us is to write a new generation of hymns to help plant the deep truths of Christ, his gospel and words into people’s hearts, minds and imaginations.



**READ CCM’S REVIEW OF “KEITH & KRISTYN GETTY’S JOY-AN IRISH CHRISTMAS LIVE” ON CCMAGAZINE.COM**

# JON & VALERIE GUERRA

## FROM THE LIVING ROOM TO 'JOHN & JUNE'S ROOM'

**CCM:** The songs from *It's Almost Christmas* were originally born from a Guerra-family Kickstarter of sorts. What is the story behind the origins of these recordings? Have you always loved Christmas music?

**Jon & Valerie Guerra:** The pre-Kickstarter! The entire project was birthed four years ago when we were poor newlyweds with Christmas quickly approaching, wondering how on earth we could afford Christmas presents. We needed Christmas gift cash and we knew, a) our friends and family would buy a little homemade album (to fund their own gifts), and b) if we played at the custard shop around the corner from our apartment, we could get some free custard and sell a couple more copies of the little album.

We found ourselves stuck inside for a week due to a nasty Chicago cold going around, and we ended up saying to ourselves, "Hey, what if we write one little Christmas song about Chicago that our friends and family

would like, and we could make a couple bucks off them to buy gifts for them, for Christmas?"

Lots of our friends had moved out of Chicago, so the whole project was birthed from the song, "It's Almost Christmas," reminiscing about the merriment of Chicago at Christmas. Then, we threw a couple of our favorite Christmas songs on there, and the tradition was born.

The project kind of took on a life of its own when we sold more than we were expecting,

then the next year we were asked, "Where's this year's original Christmas song?" We started writing an original song every year, adding some of our favorites and our friends' favorites too (and, of course, still playing for custard!).

**Sony Descendant [The Lone Bellow, Colony House]**

heard the project and approached us about recording it—they asked us to produce it ourselves, which was a huge vote of confidence, as they wanted it to still maintain that homespun feel.

*It's Almost Christmas* was recorded in the living room of our apartment, with no outside producers or session players (a couple of our friends and family joined in and added





some parts). You can hear creaks, pops, and you may hear an occasional neighbor's dog barking—mainly because we didn't know how to mix those out! I taught Valerie how to use ProTools, and we literally engineered the whole thing by ourselves. One day, I came home from a gig, and Valerie played me the entire string track for "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas" that she composed, engineered, and produced in a couple hours.

**CCM:** I like what you said about the music on this EP, "We're not trying to make new Christmas music...we're trying to make something that makes Christmas music feel new." How did this idea of making Christmas music "feel new" play out in the recording process to differentiate this collection of songs from those already out there?

**Guerra's:** Let's be clear: you can never replace **Bing Crosby & Rosemary Clooney**, **Mariah Carey**, **Michael Buble**, or **Amy Grant**.

We never thought we needed new Christmas music. Like we mentioned earlier, we never set out to try our hand at new Christmas music, it was birthed out of necessity.

In a sense, the "newness" isn't new recording techniques or gear or the latest trends, it's almost the opposite. It was just us, holed up in our tiny one-bedroom Chicago apartment, recording the songs in which we hoped our families and friends would find warmth, cheer, and a sense of "home."

**CCM:** Speaking of classic Christmas artistry, you are opening Amy Grant's annual Nashville Christmas shows at the Ryman Auditorium this month. How do you feel about this honored spot?

**Guerra's:** We are still pinching ourselves. When we first walked into the Ryman, we were escorted to our dressing room, the "Johnny and June" room—we just stood there, mouths agape. Not only is the Ryman



filled with music history, but Amy Grant is an artist both of us so greatly admire—she's been able to successfully toe the line of Christian and pop music seamlessly, and the fact that she invited us as the first ever opener to share her stage is an unbelievable honor.

**CCM:** In these holiday conversations we are talking about “Christmas and Communion.” How Christmastime encourages connections with each other, with God, anew each time the season rolls around. How is this true for you?

**Jon Guerra:** In the deepest sense, the manger is the first communion table. In the manger, God communes with us, with humanity, irrevocably and inseparably by actually becoming us. The underlying premise of communion as instituted by Jesus (“Remember my body and blood...”) is that He actually was a person, with a body and with blood. When we remember, we first remember the material-ness of God.

Then we remember the suffering of God. This is the piece that has had the most impact on my life personally. God was born into suffering. He was born in a barn with animals. His parents couldn't even get a room at a cheap motel. He grew up in the only part of town his parents could afford, which by the way, was clearly not the most well-to-do part of town (people questioned, “Does anything good come out of Nazareth?”). God had every right to be born at the top of the top. Instead, he was born at the bottom. He died at the bottom, too. This is so moving to me, sometimes I can hardly bear it. The one we hail as King of Kings and Lord of Lords chose to dwell with the lowly.

**CCM:** Before releasing your singer-songwriter debut, *Little Songs*, this spring, you were primarily known as a member of the Vertical Church Band at Chicago's Harvest Bible Church. To me, leading worship is facilitating musical communion. How has

**your role as worship leader—of unifying people spiritually through music—impact your singer-songwriter artistry? Did “worship” impact the recording of this Christmas record? If so, how?**

**JG:** “Musical communion”—I really like that. This is precisely how I see my role as a worship leader. Beauty is indiscriminate in its welcome. It draws and connects people on a visceral, emotional level. I believe that's why we sing. As a worship leader, I don't lead the voices of the people—I lead their affections. If the hearts of people are enraptured with God, everything else follows (singing, attention to the sermon, tithing, charity, etc.). If you lead their hearts, their lives will follow.

With *Little Songs*, I tried to write from the heart, to the heart. They are songs intended to be digestible. At my concerts, I try to be lighthearted in my storytelling as a way of disarming people. I want our hearts to connect so that when I sing, the affections I feel are also being felt by the people. There is communion in that.

As for the Christmas record, there are a couple moments of direct worship (“Little Drummer Boy,” “Lord Remind Me”), but mainly it's a welcome—to any and all. . A welcome to family, friend, and stranger. Christmas is a celebration of God's welcoming us into communion with Himself. We made it in our living room for goodness sake, so it's quite a personal one, at that! **CCM**





Share your love of *The Upper Room*.

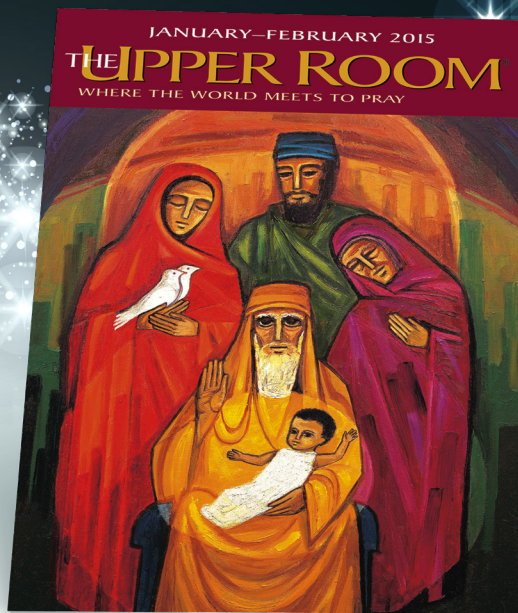
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# Q&A WITH KIRK FRANKLIN

BY ANDREW GREER

**O**n the heels of releasing his seventh original solo album, ***Losing My Religion*** (RCA, Nov. 13, 2015), and eighth overall (including 2012's compilation *The Essential Kirk Franklin*)—plus an additional seven more, previously recorded alongside companion choirs **The Family**, **Nu Nation**, and **1 Nation Crew**—singer-songwriter (obviously excluding an ongoing host of other worthy titles) **Kirk Franklin** really doesn't have anything left to prove.

For a man who has eclipsed one pinnacle after another, and collected countless accolades along the way (well, we can count seven GRAMMY Awards, to name a few), the musical prodigy is still approaching his work as if he has everything to lose. And don't let the new album title fool you—Franklin is ever laser-focused on his life's accomplishments completely representing the One who has given him true life, Jesus Christ. Losing a little, to gain a lot (**Philippians 1:21**).

Enjoy this brief conversation between author, and fellow singer-songwriter **Andrew Greer**, with platinum-selling recording artist Kirk Franklin.

**CCM: *Losing My Religion*. Explain the motivation behind this provocative title.**

**Kirk Franklin:** The motivation was to use an album full of Christian content and the love God has for mankind, and to combine it with a title that would open people's eyes and start

the conversation about who God really is.

Since humanity is driven by so many rules, and the mindset that who we are is based on what we do—this album has become the soundtrack to our inability to ever do enough to match what has already been done through Jesus Christ.

**CCM: *I fell in love with the first single when you performed it at the Dove Awards this year. The groove is incredible, but the lyric, It's so easy to complain / Addicted to the pain ... Jesus knows just how you feel / Just let him take the wheel, is what hits home. Many folks could get into a debate over semantics—happiness being temporal, versus joy being eternal—do you perceive a difference? What inspired this lyric?***

**KF:** I see happiness as a segue into joy. Happiness gives birth to joy. A person senses a feeling, but they have to do the work to find out what that really is. In that process, as they mature in their walk and in their faith, they are introduced to joy, which has more of an eternal implication. Basically, happiness and joy can co-exist. One is for here, and one encompasses it all.

**CCM: *You are one of the best-selling artist-producer-arranger-choir directors in the world. When you were a kid growing up in Fort Worth, TX, first growing in your experience of music and choirs, did you ever***



**anticipate the breadth of your career?**

**KF:** No, I really didn't. I didn't really have an idea of what I would be. Dreaming was a luxury that I really couldn't afford.

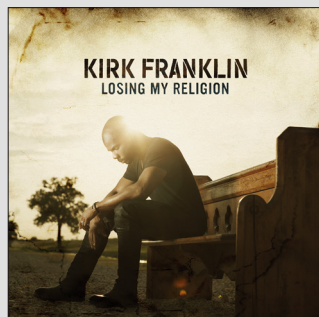
**CCM:** *Your catalog through the years has permeated with overcoming anthems—"Smile," "Do You Wanna' Be Happy," "Brighter Day," "He Reigns." Are these themes born from your own personal spiritual experiences? Do any relate to the spiritual wanderings of your early years?*

**KF:** Yes, those themes are the narrative of my entire life—from my early years until now, as you mentioned.

**CCM:** *Today, 2015, if you could only communicate one thing to listeners, what would that one thing be?*

**KF:** Christ is alive and relevant. CCM

**+** FOR MORE ON "LOSING MY RELIGION," READ CCM'S DEC. 15, 2015 ALBUM REVIEW ON [CCMAGAZINE.COM](http://CCMAGAZINE.COM)



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## TOBYMAC Continues To Set The Standard For Christian Music's Live Show—Performs Poignant NYC Tour Date Hours After Paris Attacks

BY JUSTIN SARACHIK PHOTOS BY JIMMY DAVIS



There's a certain aura when seeing an event at the "world's most famous arena," **Madison Square Garden**, in **New York City**. The venue's storied past is rich with monumental memories of game-winning baskets, Stanley Cup victories, and the crowd pleasing singing of "Piano Man" forever etched throughout its hallowed corridors.

Upon our arrival to the "Garden" for this evening, a crowd of a few thousand were already lined up—some to see the **NBA's New York Knicks**, while others were anticipating **TobyMac**, **Colton Dixon**, **Britt Nicole**, and **Hollyn** for the **\*\*\*THIS IS NOT A TEST\*\*\* Tour**, and a triumphant night of worship.

Just a few hours removed from the attacks on **Paris, France**, the city was noticeably on edge. As believers, we understand that biblically, where ever two or three are gathered—He is also there (**Matthew 18:20**), as the close-to-capacity **Garden Theater** stood in solidarity and praise. That New York feeling of, "We've been through this before," seemed to fill the air this night, as thoughts and prayers were offered throughout the evening.

Hollyn jolted us with her fierce energy and voice, as she opened up the night. Her brief set would only serve as an introduction, as she became a frequent collaborator with TobyMac throughout his set later into the concert.





Following Hollyn, was former **American Idol** finalist, **Colton Dixon**. Keeping the energy going, Dixon masterfully orchestrated behind his grand piano—displaying his versatility as the raucous rocker and the delicate balladeer—as his powerful voice filled the room.

Highlighting Dixon's performance was his immaculate stage production. The lighting design was particularly on point, as color contrasts and movements changed perfectly, capturing the mood of the songs and brining the environment to life.

His most memorable performance came during the final song, "In and Out of Time," as he leaped onto the piano and jumped around while the band ripped through their instruments.

**Britt Nicole** took the stage next, and kept us on our feet with her brand of high-octane dance/pop performances. Speaking of dance, the girl has game, but to our surprise, Nicole showed off an equally impressive flow on the mic as she busted out **Lecrae's** rap verse on the song "Ready Or Not."

Always a crowd-pleasing move, Nicole became one of us by immersing herself into the audience. Exiting stage left while still performing, she hugged, high fived, and took selfies with willing participants (we noticed no objections). Nicole then led a special prayer for Paris, and closed the set with her new song "Be The Change."

We experienced a low hum in the atmosphere, as those gathered in the Theatre anticipated the final act. Among the many reasons for TobyMac's longevity is a reputation for putting on one of the most entertaining and inspiring performances in the business. This show would not disappoint, as McKeehan would soon begin the first of his twenty songs performed alongside his **DiverseCity Band**.





The set mostly featured cuts from his latest album, **\*\*\*THIS IS NOT A TEST\*\*\***, with the first performance being “Til The Day I Die.” TobyMac literally pulls back the curtain as he and the band show up as silhouettes on a screen before popping out into real life.

Skipping ahead to “Unstoppable,” **DJ Maj** selected some tasty old school break-beats for McKeehan to rap on throughout the song. This was a crucial part of the experience, as the “former” emcee dusted off his rap mic and proved it’s an innate skill set.

On “Back Seat Driver,” Hollyn fulfilled her role as she had on the **\*\*\*THIS IS NOT A TEST\*\*\*** recording, but in a twist, she, McKeehan, and hype man **GabeReal** collaborated on stage in place of McKeehan’s son, **TRU** (Truett McKeehan, who is featured on the album).

“Made To Love” showcased the versatility, as three of the members traded in their principal instruments for horns. McKeehan jetted down the ramp, which led to center stage, and engaged the audience as worship ensued. The horns were prominently featured, and added another dimension to the unique timbre of the night.

The horn section continued, as Hollyn joined them on “Funky Jesus Music,” as the already amped-up crowd embraced the swing, soul and funk of this performance.

If we were compiling an official list, “Eye On It” would be in contention for “Performance Of The Night.” The energy seemed upgraded, as McKeehan sang his vocals with the ferocity of a rock ‘n roll front man. Backup singer **Nirva** sang as if she were on top of a mountain, and two of the DiverseCity band members once again jumped off their instruments—this time wielding marching band drums. On top of all of this, the song led into a sequenced gang dance number.

As it has become a staple in most big

touring shows, the *\*\*\*THIS IS NOT A TEST\*\*\* Tour* also included a more acoustic, stripped-down set. In this movement, songs “Steal My Show,” the old school “Catchafire (Whoopsi Daisy),” and “Hey Now” were featured. A sincere moment of intimate worship occurred during the almost quiet-like performance of “Lose My Soul.”

Hitting the Garden Theatre with a healthy dose of nostalgia, the lights dimmed and a video tribute to McKeehan’s father proceeded. This was a touching segue into the single “Love Feels Like,” which features former **DC Talk** band mates **Michael Tait** (now fronting **Newsboys**), and **Kevin Max Smith**.

The stage faded to black, with the exception of subtle red and blue floor lighting, as a video screen revealed a recorded Tait and Smith to either side. The portrayal emulated a DC Talk show, the likes of which Christian concert fans haven’t experienced for the better part of fifteen years—it was a magical moment. It was apparent that it also had an affect on McKeehan, as he dramatically collapsed to both knees, following the most heart-felt performance of the night.

In addition to Hollyn’s reappearances throughout the night, Dixon and Britt Nicole joined McKeehan both vocally and instrumentally on performances of “Undeniable,” and “Lights Shine Bright.” For the concert’s finale, the entire crew—Hollyn, Dixon, Nicole, TobyMac and DiverseCity—shared the stage on “Feel It,” complete with a confetti celebration.

House lights “up,” show complete. *\*\*\*THIS IS NOT A TEST\*\*\** proves that TobyMac continues to improve his game, while never compromising the heart of what he feels called to do. Of the many takeaways from this memorable night, was the sense of genuine unity among the body in worshipping the Lord. Not to be lost or forgotten, are the







thoughts and prayers for the people halfway across the world simply attempting to enjoy the same kind-of evening—a night out among friends and community, while enjoying good, live music. **CCM**



**Full Set List:** Til the Day I Die / This Is Not A Test / Unstoppable / Back Seat Driver / Beyond Me / Made To Love / Speak Life / Funky Jesus Music / Eye On It / Steal My Show / Catchafire (Whoopsie Daisy) / Hey Now / Lose My Soul / Move (Keep Walkin') / DJ Maj Interlude / Love Feels Like / Undeniable / Me Without You / Light's Shine Bright / Tonight / Feel It







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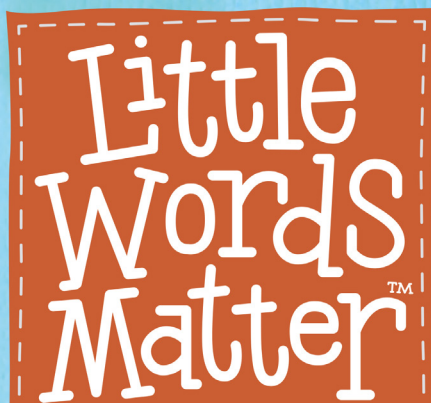
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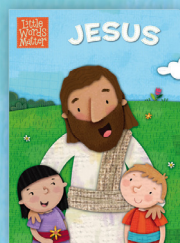
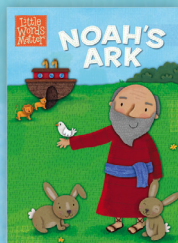
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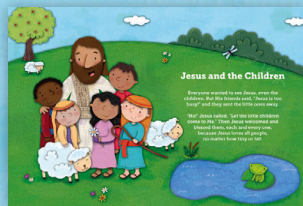
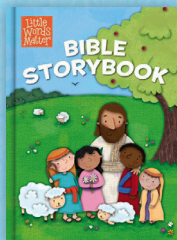
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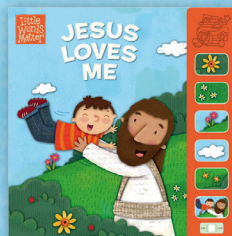
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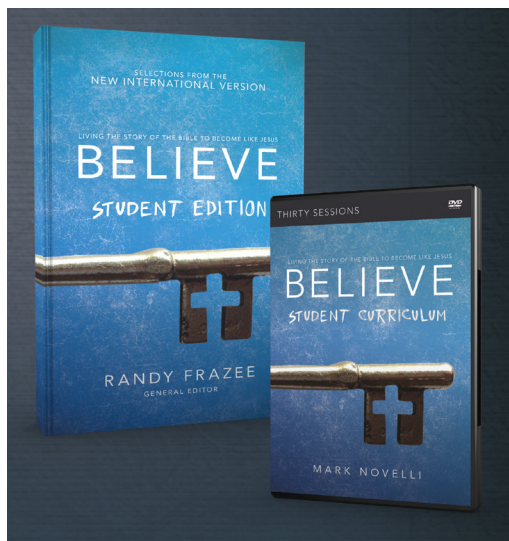
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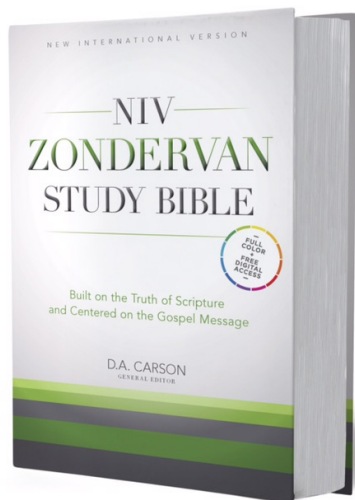


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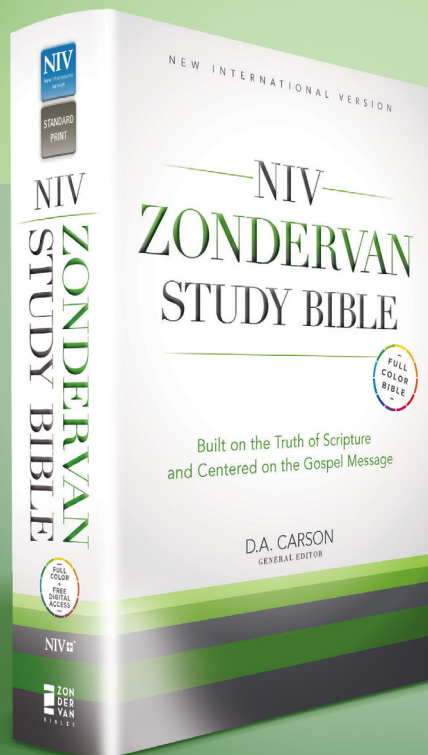
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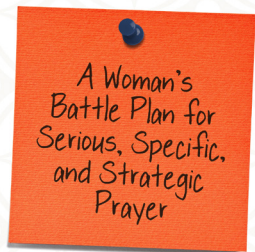
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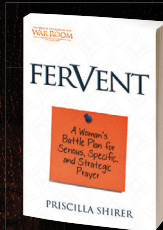
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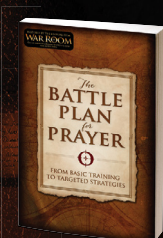
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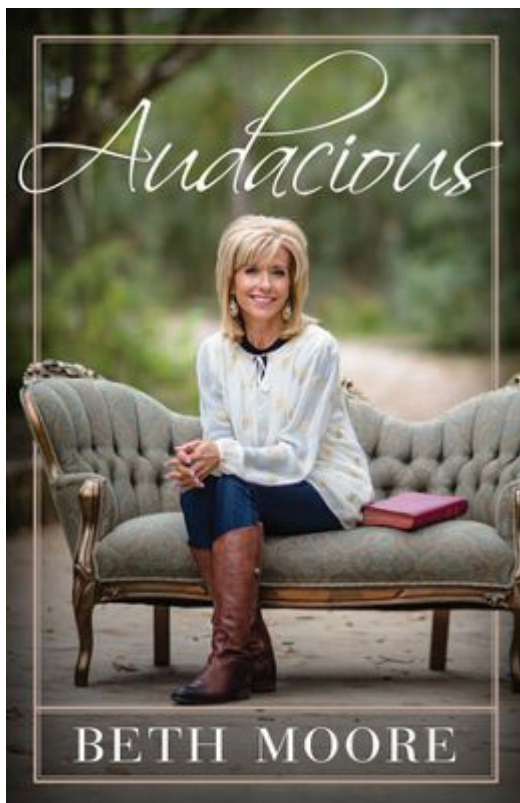
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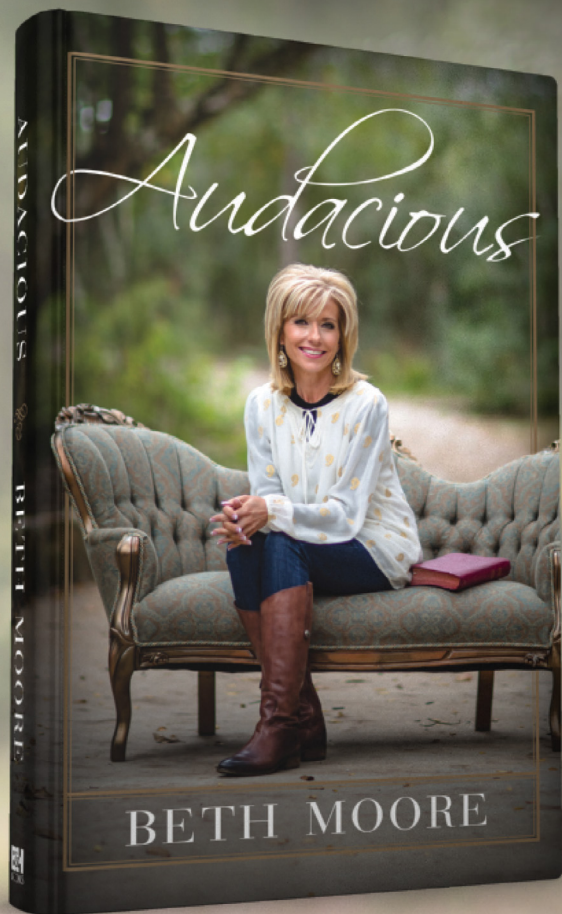


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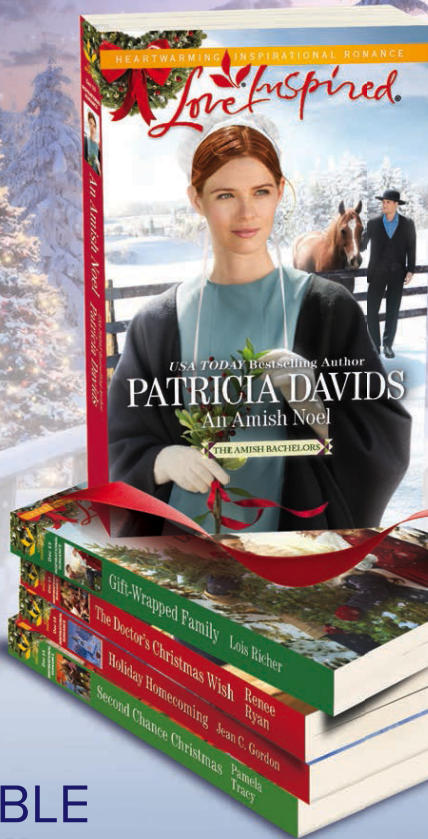




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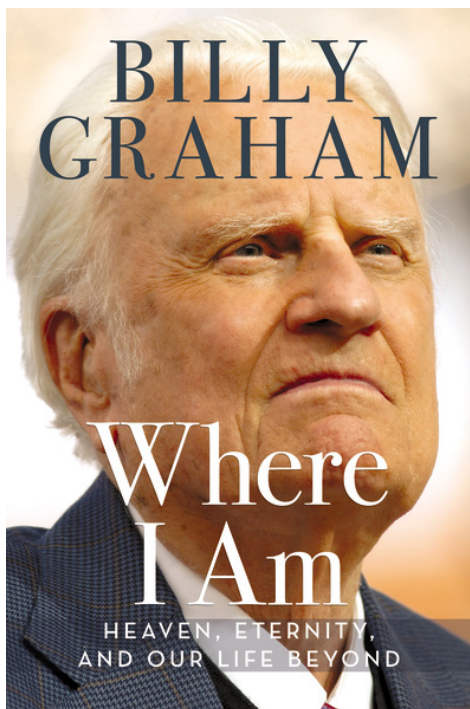
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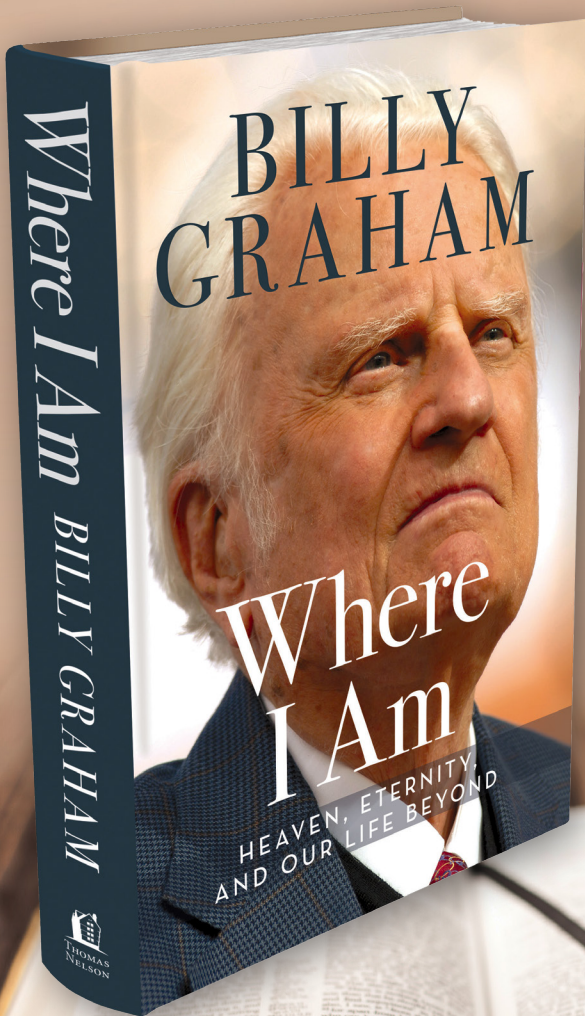
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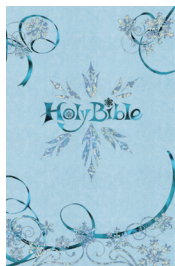
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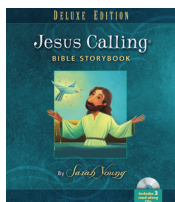
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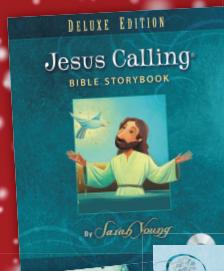
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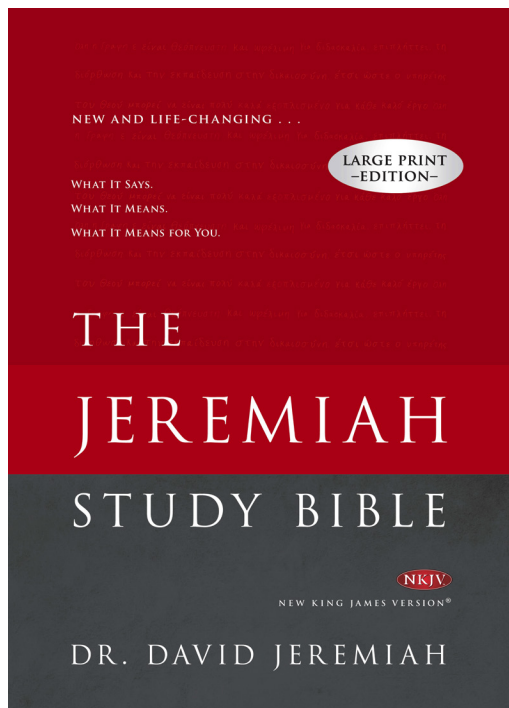
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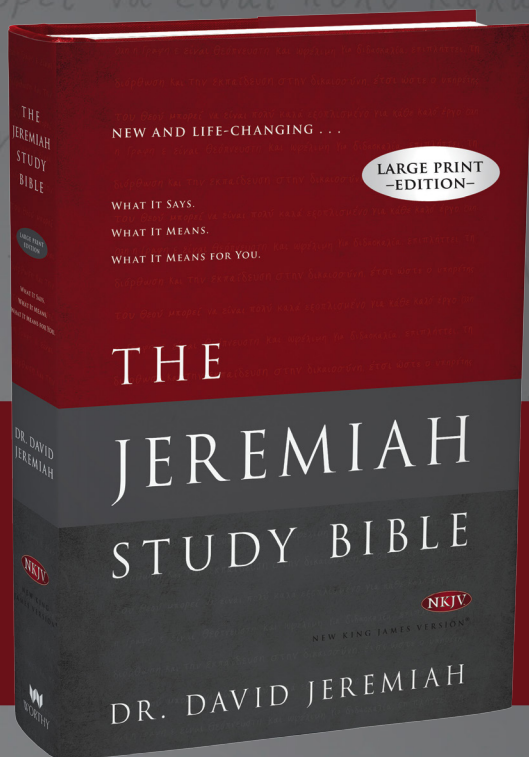
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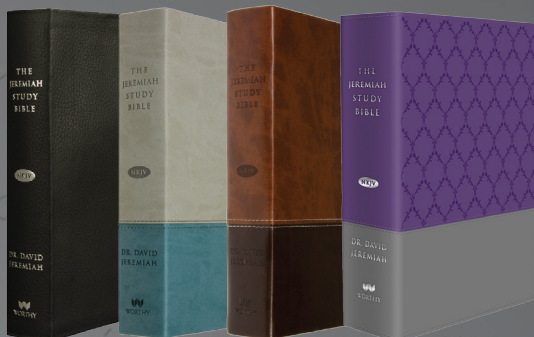
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**KIRK FRANKLIN**  
***Losing My Religion***  
 (RCA)

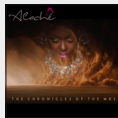
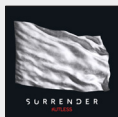


**Kirk Franklin** states his thesis for his new album from the outset: "I'm losing my religion, thank God / Helping you lose yours is my job." ***Losing My Religion*** is every bit the spirited, charismatic and powerful album you'd expect (and hope for) from the seven-time GRAMMY winner. It's also not the manifesto you might expect with such a title (nor is it related to **R.E.M.**).

If Franklin seems to undermine religion in some way, it's not with scathing missives or cultural critique. Instead, the songs are largely focused on the redemptive and unifying power of God's love on multiple levels, whether the approach is narrative ("True Story") or thematic ("Over," "Miracles"). It's a strategic approach on Franklin's part to put forward a true story ("here's who God really is") in the hopes that a false one fades ("this is how you might have heard God presented").

—Matt Conner

**IN THIS ISSUE**



**WE LIKE:** "No Sleep Tonight"

**KUTLESS*****Surrender*** (BEC Recordings)FOR FANS OF: *Seventh Day Slumber, Sanctus Real*

★★★★☆

Nine album in, **Kutless** would likely stand in the Christian rock pantheon, were someone to create such a structure. Chart-topping singles, a gold album and numerous national tours make any Kutless release worth checking out, and the band stays true to form on ***Surrender***, their latest modern rock release.

"Tear It Up" opens the album with a stadium-ready anthem, while "Bring It On" settles in with a solid pop radio single. Both songs should serve radio well. The band's version of "One Thing Remains" brings a worshipful refrain to a mix that's already steeped in core biblical truths. "My Heart is a Ghost" ends the album with the most interesting tune, with a slight **Alice In Chains** leaning ("Would?") that hints at what a darker turn by the band could sound like in the future.

—Matt Conner

WE LIKE: "My Heart is a Ghost"

**CASTING CROWNS*****A Live Worship Experience*** (BEC Recordings)FOR FANS OF: *Mercy Me, Third Day*

★★★★☆

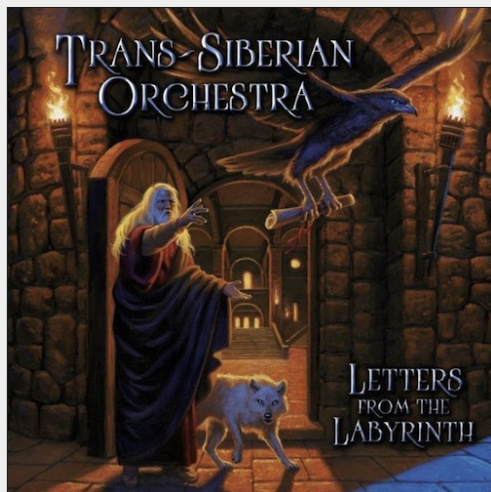
From the outset, **Casting Crowns** have been firmly rooted in the life of the faith community. It makes sense, then, for them to return to **Eagle's Landing First Baptist Church**, the band's home church, for their fifth live album, ***A Live Worship Experience***.

"At Calvary" kicks off the album as a recent entrant from Casting Crowns' *Glorious Day* release. "A Good Good Father," "Here's My Heart" and "No Not One" are just a few of the popular worship songs found thereafter. "The Well" and "Thrive" are among the notable originals found, and front man **Mark Hall** reflects on the biblical background of the track "Jesus, Friend of Sinners." Taken together, it's a well-packaged set that will animate the faith of the listener.

—Matt Conner

WE LIKE: "A Good Good Father"



**TRANS-SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA*****Letters From The Labyrinth***

(Lava Records/Republic Records)

FOR FANS OF: *Stryper, Dream Theater*

★★★★☆

Progressive rockers **Trans-Siberian Orchestra** may be best known for staging some of the most gargantuan Christmas tours of all time, but the spiritually-minded group's non-seasonal catalogue is steadily expanding. ***Letters From The Labyrinth*** marks the group's first LP since 2009's *Night Castle* and the **Paul O'Neill**-led cast doesn't disappoint on its first ever album not to revolve around a completed story. With melodic vocals, crunching guitars and towering crescendos, the troupe chronicles everything from the fall of the Berlin Wall ("Prometheus"), calling out the world's banking controversies ("Not Dead Yet") and urging for anti-bullying ("Not The Same"). Indeed, it's a tall order to educate, enlighten and entertain all at the same time, but TSO effortlessly passes the test, and in the process, turns in one of its most ambitious and gratifying works to date.

—Andy Argyrakis

WE LIKE: "Time &amp; Distance (The Dance)"

**MUTEMATH*****Vitals*** (Wojtek Records)FOR FANS OF: *CHVRCHES, Miike Snow,*

★★★★☆

It's not like they *needed* to make a more heavily electronic-infused album to "play along" with a host of emerging 80s-like synth-pop bands and established acts influenced by the same upgraded retrospective, as **Mutemath** has long been lauded for merging cutting edge musical precision while nodding to classic style. With ***Vitals***, it seems like they're just playing with us (we imagined a few **Paul Meaney** mic-drops during these recording sessions). The band that calls New Orleans home seems to have perfected their unique blend of keytar and synth-bass in your-faceness, slapping you there like that pot of jambalaya from Mardi Gras '89. Meaney's melody lines are traditional Mutemath, however we enjoy hearing him stretch a little further this time around, especially on the disco'esque "Best Of Intentions."

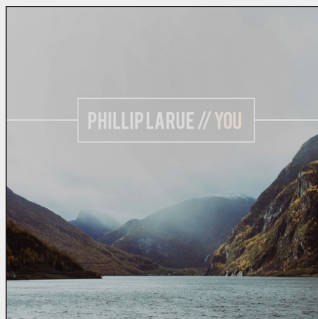
—Kevin Sparkman

WE LIKE: "Stratosphere"

AC

URBAN

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PHILLIP LARUE // YOU



ALACHÉ

**The Chronicles of the Mrs.**

(MADE, Inc./Elevate Entertainment)

FOR FANS OF: Michelle Williams, Rachael Lampa, Monica

★★★★☆



MARK LOWRY

**How We Love**

(Spring Hill Music Group)

FOR FANS OF: Gaither Vocal Band, Guy Penrod, The Martins

★★★★☆

PHILLIP LARUE

**You** (Razor & Tie)

FOR FANS OF:

Matthew Perryman Jones, Emerson Hart

★★★★☆

**Phillip LaRue** is a man spread thin. The popular Nashville songwriter is often busy co-writing for artists of all genres in Music City, that is, when he's not busy with any of his three bands. But the time invested to record his first solo album in six years, **You**, was well worth it, with a solid pop set that sets the mood and draws you in with shades of **Matthew Perryman Jones**, **David Gray** and **Emerson Hart**.

–Matt Conner

WE LIKE: "Memories"

Nigerian dance/pop/R&B diva **Alaché** returns after five years armed with an arsenal of stories stemming from her new life as a wife and mother. Her growth as a person and an artist are both instantly apparent on this cutting edge collection, filled with some pretty sick beats courtesy of **Dave "DaveyBoy" Lindsey** (**Monica**, **Traci Braxton**) and the UK's **Eminik** (who remixed **One Direction**), plus a joyful glimpse into her spiritually grounded soul.

–Andy Argyrakis

WE LIKE: "Awaken Me"

Only someone the caliber of Gospel Music Hall of Famer **Mark Lowry** could cover the likes of country queen **Loretta Lynn** and "Happy" hip-hopper **Pharrell Williams** on the same album and actually sound cohesive. That's because the master song stylist puts his signature southern gospel/bluegrass/traditional pop stamp on both of the above, alongside several less familiar but equally engaging selections that are just as abundant on harmonies (thanks to guest spots by **The Martins**, amongst others) as they are on hope.

–Andy Argyrakis

WE LIKE: "How We Love"  
(with The Martins)



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