

GROUP 1 CREW, JONNY DIAZ | IN REVIEW: UNSPOKEN, ALL SONS & DAUGHTERS

CCM



SKILLET

THEIR WAY & THE HIGH WAY

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AUG 15, 2016

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From the Editor

Out & About

The latest industry sightings & events in images.



Skillet

John Cooper admits that Skillet is just beginning to experience true creative freedom, resulting in their most diverse release to date.



(photo: David Blizian)

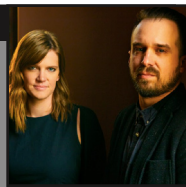
Group 1 Crew

When Manwell Reyes was unable to speak, God's voice came in loud and clear—read about his journey from Group 1 Crew to phase two.



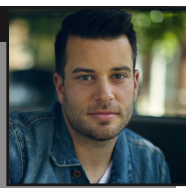
All Sons & Daughters

Part II: featuring a song-by-song commentary from Leslie Ann Jordan and David Alan Leonard from their forthcoming album *Poets & Saints*.



Johnny Diaz

One of this year's biggest hits, "Breathe," came as a complete surprise to everyone involved—Jonny, perhaps most stunned, reacts to it all.



Reviews

New music from Unspoken, All Sons & Daughters, Housefires, Aledo + more!



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Pious talk is only talk | In this edition of *CCM Magazine*, we get into discussions with **Jon Cooper** of **Skillet**, and **Manwell Reyes** of **Group 1 Crew** about what may make music distinctly “Christian.” Today, the lines seem a little more blurred as to what is considered by both the mainstream conscious and the contemporary Christian world as either, or potentially both.

Then, of course, you can bring in to the discussion artists of the modern worship movement, traditional hymn writers, heck, you can even throw southern gospel and country into the mix if you really want to muddy the waters... Or, how about artists like **Alice Cooper**, who now claim Christ, but continue to work their “day job?”

Inevitably, this is when someone from the back corner of the room will speak up and say, “Well, I’m a plumber. And I’m a Christian. So, does that make me a Christian plumber?” Ultimately, the conversation continues to circle around the “why,” eventually losing sight of the “Who” (and, no, not the English rock band).

2 Timothy 2:15 (NKJV) says, *Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.* Right now, there are a lot of amazingly gifted musicians in Christian music making art that’s appealing to the masses—ahead, you will read about Skillet and Group 1 Crew. The same is true on the “other side,” as there are followers of Jesus fulfilling their calling in musical professions outside of the deemed Christian market.

Christians, when it comes to talking about this in public forums, I would encourage us to not take to outlets like social media—where “discussion” is really an excuse to vent, drop one-sided opinion bombs, place labels, lay blame and bounce—instead, focus on 2 Timothy 2:15. Personally, I would hedge my bets on any artist calling themselves a “Christian band,” or any singer or musician claiming Jesus as Lord, to have tested their craft appropriately. You may think differently, but if you do, have you done the same?

But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness.
(2 Tim. 2:16 NKJV)

Blessings,



Kevin Sparkman

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OUT & ABOUT

aug 15, 2016



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SKILLET

Skillet — Their Way & The High Way

Adopting new methods that are already panning out for the juggernaut group, John Cooper and family abandon “procedure” and discover brand new levels of creative freedom

By Kevin Sparkman

Taking in an all-out, in-your-face rock star giant like **Skillet** lead singer-bassist **John Cooper** at first glance, one might assume that after millions of albums sold, numerous Dove, GRAMMY, and *Billboard* Award nominations (and wins), and getting to front one of the most successful touring bands in recent history alongside your beloved wife, that he might enjoy basking in the pyro glow of so many flash pots.

Take a little time to talk with him one-on-one, and you quickly realize that he’s probably most comfortable being more of a John Doe. The refreshingly unassuming Cooper, however, is very comfortable in his own skin, and this is reflected in the music...and his attitude toward making it. “These are the songs that I want to write, and the songs that I really believe in,” said Cooper, whose devout faith and lifelong love of Christian music provides the backbone of his work.

Amid Skillet’s ongoing torrent of domestic and international touring, we had the honor of sitting down with Cooper to catch up with the front man. With the rise of their popularity now crossing multiple formats, including an ever-increasing following of fans considered to be outside of the church, we dig a little deeper with him into the process and mindset of making a Skillet album these days, and the risk-reward of following your heart—not a formula—from the studio to the stage.

CCM Magazine: *Your last record, **Rise**, was another legacy in a long line of career-defining albums—but you guys began writing for **Unleashed** even as that was being released, correct?*

John Cooper: Yes, **Korey [Cooper]** and I started writing right away after *Rise* came out. I don't really remember exactly why. I was just feeling inspired by listening to music and enjoying writing. It's nice whenever a record comes out because if you're writing, you're not turning songs in—that's when things get stressful. When you turn in songs to the label, people begin listening, and then everyone starts saying, "Hey try this, or try that—no, I don't like this. I like this, but not that..." Korey and I were just writing what was in our hearts, even if it was silly, in fact, even if it didn't feel like a "Skillet song."

It was fun and I think for me, was the excitement that this record turned into and why we called it "Unleashed." It just felt that we were making a record that we really wanted to make and we didn't have as many people telling us what to do and getting their hands involved in it—it's just a really fun record to listen to.

I'm always messing with ideas—even now that this record is out. I always have a few ideas that are going on in my head, but as a rule, I don't do anything with them before a record comes out. You need to take a break. But when we hit the road, we'll start writing right away.

CCM: *Where was the band's head-space going from **Rise** to **Unleashed**?*

JC: The things I liked the most AND the least about *Rise* was that it was lyrically very heavy. It wasn't dark, but it was definitely somber. There were a lot of terrible things happening in the world—still are, and getting worse—and as I was writing that

record, I really felt like I wanted to have a voice into what was going on in the world. But what I started noticing as the record was coming out, was that it wasn't an album that I could listen to all the time because it did make me feel heavy. I couldn't put it on and go for a run because it was too much to think about.

When I started writing for *Unleashed* I thought, "I don't always have to write songs like that—I can write songs that are fun." "Feel Invincible" is a song like that, a really simple way to say what I wanted to say—it felt like a song that would be played at the Super Bowl or Olympics. It was just a really simple song for me to like.

CCM: You've mentioned that you enjoy getting into albums that are, in your words, "party albums." Can you give some examples?

JC: When I say, "a party to listen to," what I mean are records that guys want to work out to. Like, gosh... **P.O.D.**'s *Satellite*. That was just a great record. Turn it on—it isn't something you have to think a lot about. Trying to think of other records that are like that...you know, "work out albums"...**Metallica**'s "black" album is like that, too.

CCM: I've got a few tunes on my workout playlist from that album, so I definitely agree...

JC: Yeah, great album to work out to, for sure.

CCM: You recently mentioned that music is what "brings people together." In your opinion, how can your most recent work help to accomplish this?

JC: The world is in a very shaky time—and not just because of ISIS and some of those violent things—even here in America with all of the cop shootings, Black Lives Matter movement, the unsettledness of the election and the economy...there's so many scary things right now that are vying for our attention. There's two ways that we could have gone about it: calling out the problems that you see and making people aware of it, or—the way we went on *Unleashed*—which was making a record that's more of an escape from what is happening. We all know it's happening. I don't really know if I'm bringing it to people's attention by talking about it. So, we made an album that hopefully people can have a good time listening to.



A Skillet crowd is not just made up of Christian people who want to worship God more, or want to find out more about Jesus... It's made up of a lot of Christians, yes, but also lots of atheists—all sorts of religions, and all sorts of ages. You go to a Skillet show, it's ages five to sixty-five! It's really strange, because we've been around for so long. [Our music] brings people together because of the nature of the songs—they're fun to sing and they're fun to rock-out to. A great thing about music is sometimes the songs are open to different interpretations, and I really like that.

We've been playing and talking about "Feel Invincible" a lot on the radio lately, and general market stations will ask, "Hey, so what's that song about?" It's cool because I get a chance to say, "It's a song about finding that one thing in your life that gives you hope and gives you a reason to wake up tomorrow morning—for lots of people, that's a lot of different things. For me, it's my faith in Jesus and that is the reason that I can face what's happening in the world." But it's okay if people listen to it, and interpret it to be about their girlfriend, husband, or what ever.

CCM: So, bringing up that age-old question since we started calling all of this music "contemporary Christian"—does carrying the label "Christian band" give you an unfair disadvantage, and does that really matter one way, or another?

JC: When I go into a rock station and they ask, "Now, we hear that you guys are a 'Christian band,' is that really true?" Or, sometimes they even ask, "Hey, people always say that 'Christian music is really bad,' do you agree with that?" What I want to say is, "Hey, hey, hey, we're a rock band—don't judge us wrongly because there's a particular label." Everyone is expecting you to come out and say some type of trigger-word on a particular topic, so I'm always very up front about [calling Skillet] a "Christian band." I am proud of Christian music, I grew up listening to

it, and I love it. Of course, I'm very proud of my faith, in general, so there's no denying it. I always answer, "Absolutely. Yes, we are a 'Christian band.'"

There's a group of people out there who think that Christian music is "no good." It's not fair, and people ask me that in interviews a lot. I always defend Christian music because the truth is there are so many awesome Christian musicians—even in the world of mainstream music there are a lot of musicians that were in Christian bands, or are Christian bands, like **Switchfoot**. So, it's a little bit of that tightrope you have to walk, but most of our Christian fans like to see us remember where we came from, and I could never forget that anyway.

CCM: Is Unleashed is a body of work that can help to break down those stereotypes?

JC: As I already said, yes, we're a "Christian band." I don't mind being called that because...I like that! Hopefully, everything I do belongs to the Lord and is redeemed, but I don't think what makes a "Christian act" is necessarily judged by every single song they [record or perform]. These days, we are judged by YouTube, what we say in interviews and on stage, what I say on my website, what I tweet... It's *who we are*, rather than every song we sing.

Ultimately, yes, I do hope that *Unleashed* could be a bridge between those worlds. Our record *Awake* was that way. We had some songs on there that some Christians didn't really like, but to tell you the truth, I liked the message of them. For us, if *every* song is overtly "Christian," "worship," too "Jesus," or always about Jesus, I think by that point we're only singing to Christians—there's nothing wrong that, and I'm glad that some people do that—it's just not what I want to do.

CCM: *Staying on that theme, do you consider it risky to record songs like “I Want To Live” with lyrics such as, I want to live my life / The way I want to live, which, from a contemporary Christian perspective, could leave things too open for interpretation?*

JC: I will say, sometimes people think some of my songs aren’t overlaying with what the Bible says, which is absolutely not the case—it’s just a matter of point of view. “I Want To Live” is a really good example. It can have lots of different meanings when it says, *I’m free to start again / The way I want to live*. Now, you can get into a pretty circular theological discussion around, “Maybe that’s the reason I want to [*live my life the way I want to live*] because the Holy Spirit has drawn me to do that, because God chose me...” and that’s fine, because the Bible does say that.

So, to me, [as a Bible-believing Christian, that song contains] a very spiritual message—but the inspiration for it actually came from a different place. After talking with some fans from Russia, one of them had written us a note that said, “I don’t have anything to live for, but your music gives me hope and helps me want to live.” I thought, “You know what, that’s a really cool message, even if it’s not specifically talking about Jesus.”

Sometimes there are just situations in life when people don’t know if they want to keep on living or want to fight for another day, and they just have to make a decision to go for it. Even if—literally—that’s all that it is, I still think that’s a message worth singing about, regardless if it’s not considered “religious.” Is it risky? I think it’s more about asking, “What do I feel like God is saying to me?” I don’t necessarily think of it as a matter of risk.



CCM: *Going back to what you said earlier, about being judged for who you really are versus lyrical content alone... At the end of the day—and after so many people have been observing and interacting with you on social media, etc.—isn't it the Christ in you what it's really supposed to all be about, anyway?*

JC: I do think that we're in different times. I think for years, Christian music wanted to "be in the mainstream"—and I think most people that grew up with Christian music always wished that their friends would listen to it, or at least give it a chance. Any time anyone ever came over to my house, I was always like, "You've got to hear **Petra!**" because I desperately wanted them to believe that Christian music was cool, and I believed that [eventually] their message would get to my friends.

Not to point fingers, but some people in the "Christian world"... they want that, but they think that we can just make it happen without having to sing about real life issues. Not to say that worshipping God isn't real life, it is, but it's not [a way of life] for a lot of people. So, I think, "Hey, there's nothing wrong with singing about love or even singing about being angry"...that was one of my songs on *Awake* that people were upset about, a song called, "It's Not Me." It was kind-of an angry song, but I was like, "What's wrong with that, you know, a lot of people feel that way..." This song could be to the devil, if you really wanted it to be...it could be about drugs or an abusive situation at home...there's nothing wrong with [singing about] that—it's real life stories, here. So, yeah, we're in a little bit of a different time now.

Some people have said, "Skillet doesn't sing about spiritual things anymore," and...I mean, I don't really care what they say all that much... "Stars" [from *Unleashed*] is a straight up worship song. It's the most overtly "worship" song we've done in like, twelve or thirteen years. [Conversely] we could get flack from

the mainstream side saying, “What is this ‘worship’ stuff...it’s so obviously talking about God...” But, again, that’s also part of what I want to do is say, “Hey, I don’t care if the ‘mainstream world’ thinks it’s ‘cheesy’ or ‘too Christian,’ or whatever.” It doesn’t really matter what they think. This is my album, and I’m “unleashed!”

CCM: *What was it about Seth Mosley that allowed you two to click, and what was the recording process like with him?*

JC: We had a great time. I think everyone that works with Mosley pretty much says the same thing, which is, “He’s just really easy to work with—one of the easiest people out there.” He just flows with stuff, and he’s got great ideas. I found myself being at my best when we worked together. It was a really great experience, and I would assume that [our] stuff is probably some of the heaviest he’s worked on... Heavy guitars, but the songs turned out to be very catchy and fun.

Brian Howes produced the bulk of the record. He’s not produced anything since our *Comatose* album. Long story short... After *Comatose*, Brian had gotten signed to a label deal and he was disqualified from producing outside tracks, so we couldn’t work with him and that’s why we went to **Howard Benson** on *Awake* and *Rise*. Then, Brian’s deal came up, he was open, and I was really happy to join up with him again. I have a real soft spot for our *Comatose* record, and it was just really exciting to be able to do another project again. This is actually the first record we’ve ever done where we’ve had multiple producers.

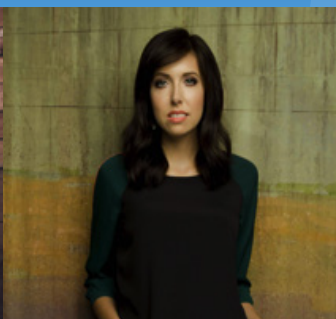


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CCM: Would you do that again?

JC: Absolutely. The industry has changed so much because music is just so niched out. Everybody does a “thing.” We also worked with a producer named **Kevin Churko** that did two songs on this record. Kevin is most known for **Ozzy Osbourne, Five Finger Death Punch**—modern metal—and I’m a huge fan. I got his number from a friend in **Papa Roach**, so I just called him and introduced myself. I think he was a little surprised because he was like, “Man, I’m really happy to do something that’s not just metal...” He was happy, I was happy, and I just loved working with him.

I think these days it’s good to get some other influences with people that specialize in different kinds of sounds, especially with having Seth Mosley in the mix, that was a big deal because, truthfully, Christian music is very different than mainstream music and the way that the lyrics are crafted is a different process. I don’t know how many lines I wrote when Seth would say, “Oh, you can’t use that word on Christian radio.” What do you mean I can’t use that word?! It wasn’t like it was a bad word, but he would just be like, “They just don’t like that word,” and I’m like, “This is so specific...and the way you [have to] say it is so specific!” So, it’s good to have people around you that know that kind of thing, because I don’t. **CCM**



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GROUP 1 CREW

Group 1 Crew—Plugging In To Purpose

After surgery temporarily silenced him, music now has more meaning for Manwell Reyes

By Justin Sarachik

Group 1 Crew has been wowing crowds with their furious blend of hip hop, pop, rock, and R&B since their debut in 2007. Now, and nearly ten years later—an eternity in the scope of musical landscapes—the sound has changed, but the message has not. Keeping Christ's themes front and center, their latest offering, ***Power***, does just that, while also serving to explain what was on front man **Manwell Reyes'** heart.

The last year and-a-half has been trying for the lone surviving original member. In addition to taking two-plus years to complete *Power*, the group was still dealing with personnel changes. And after a bout with laryngitis, Reyes' had serious questions about even wanting to be involved in music...period.

Amid this time, however, the one thing Reyes didn't lose sight of was a yearning for people.

"If this record helps somebody...awesome. That's really all I care about it," Reyes said. "I used to be somebody who cared all about the music, so if it can simply help someone I would be grateful and so honored," Reyes reinforced. "I'm not necessarily saying I don't care about the music itself, I'm just saying it's no longer as important as genuinely connecting with people and hoping that this little medium God gave me will actually help somebody's life."

His realization that purely being a music maker was the revelation that Reyes needed to understand that music wasn't the answer for his own life. "The answer is an accurate depiction of my relationship with God. That's the new goal—not hit records, not, 'My music is so cool.' This record is another step for me in understanding just who Jesus is."

The revelation began brewing when Reyes was faced with the reality that he may have lost his voice indefinitely. This forced him to reconsider what was truly real in his life.

"I've done tours. I've played in front of as little as four, to as many as 40,000 people. I've seen the world. I've received awards. I live in Los Angeles in a big 'ol house with a big 'ol pool...nice cars in the driveway...and at the end of the day, none of that puts a smile on my face," Reyes revealed. "These are all just things. The only thing that makes me feel like I'm doing things right is when I'm in step with the Lord. Everything that I'm doing is after Him. I only care about God right now...I appreciate the stuff, but what He's doing in my life is the thing that I want to chase after. I want to know Him more."

Prior to losing his voice, the original Group 1 Crew members began touring with other artists due to the band's inactivity. The group went from non-stop touring to virtually doing nothing. Shows would line up, only to be cancelled for both unfortunate and seemingly random reasons. "I went from having a full fall schedule at one point, to having no shows at all—that has never happened in our history," recalled Reyes. "My booking agent would hit me up and say, 'Another one cancelled...and another...'

"This was way too many cancellations to not see that it was the Lord telling me something," said Reyes. "Then, I get laryngitis

and my voice goes out. I think to myself, ‘Even if those shows weren’t cancelled, I wouldn’t have been able to do them, anyway—I would have been the one canceling on them...’ Then came surgery, and after that, three months of no talking.”

The singer said this scenario was God’s way of telling him to clear out his schedule. Since then, Reyes has been slowly understanding what God has been unveiling to him. He has experienced many emotions from feeling “useless,” to thinking God was “mad” at him.

“I’ve never done sitting around well—I work hard, and I don’t stop. But since I’ve been resting, I’ve been more healthy in every aspect—mentally, spiritually, physically...and I began to realize that I was a little imbalanced in my life.”

This new balance in Reyes’ life eventually helped to inspire *Power*, but attests to just how he was able to personally step in the Lord’s power. “I’ve done touring on my own capabilities—and then I’ve done touring in His power, and the latter looks so much better.”

Despite having virtually nothing in common musically, Reyes cites a recent tour with **Big Daddy Weave** as a time where he learned to be constantly tapping into the strength available from the Lord.

“All we wanted to do was to seek the power of God,” said Reyes. I learned to trust that God was going to take care of me. “The shows, they seemed, actually almost got in the way...like they were more of an inconvenience. We all just wanted to minister to people, and I didn’t want to do anything else unless God’s power was involved.”

Reyes' willingness to tour and minister with musicians from different walks is reflective of his own musical tastes. The vocalist admits that he doesn't necessarily "fit in" when it comes to relating to similar artists. In fact, despite his love for rap, he actually doesn't listen to it.

"It's genre of music that I listen to the least," he said. "All I listen to is the '90s, R&B, and rock. If I'm not listening to '90s music, I'm listening to **Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Billy Holiday, Diana Ross**...there's nothing more fun for me. My ring tone is "Ain't No Mountain" by **Marvin Gaye** because anytime it rings it puts a smile on my face. That's the [musical] world I live in."

These various influences do pop up sparsely throughout Group 1 Crew's music, but not necessarily on a solo effort, which Reyes says in the works. "I have so much to say, but I can't get all of it out by just singing. I need all the words of rap to get out what I want to say." While *Power* represents Group 1 Crew's current body of work, Reyes himself is sitting on around three album's worth of hip hop material.

As the lone original, critics have questioned Reyes on his "new" role with Group 1 Crew and any differences in now considering it, essentially, a solo effort. Although he understands, Reyes explained, "Group 1 Crew has a distinct sound people know, so it's more about honoring that fan base.

"But my solo material is a lot more raw, so the things that I'd talk about if I did an album and how I'd present it...I don't know if it would go over as well," said Reyes, doubting a format or fan base closer to the Christian radio spectrum would easily embrace the style.

Reyes continued, seemingly somewhat frustrated with stereo-

types associated with Christian music from both sides of the discussion—not excluding reaction to how some fans recoil when tagged “Christian” acts release material that may not be overtly considered “Christian” in nature. “Heart and motive make the song—in my opinion, it’s the attitude behind everything you do that determines whether something is ‘Christian’ or not,” he said.

Whether or not his solo material, and its imminent personal message, is more representative of Reyes himself, *Power* is serving to exemplify an artist’s growth with his creator, and that’s something that can be a blessing to anyone. For that reason, according to Reyes, is why Group 1 Crew is here again...and why he sings again. [CCM](#)



ALL SONS & DAUGHTERS

All Sons & Daughters

Stories Behind The Songs (Part 2 of 2)

The finale of an exclusive song-by-song summary of All Sons & Daughters' anticipated upcoming release, Poets & Saints (Sep. 2, 2016, Integrity Music) as provided by lead members Leslie Ann Jordan and David Alan Leonard
"I Surrender"

By All Sons & Daughters

Named **Francesco**, perhaps for his mother's birthplace of France, **Francis of Assisi** was known as a trouble maker before he was known as a peace maker. The son of a prosperous silk merchant, Francis had the same wealth and notoriety as the knights and noblemen around town. His radical transformation came over time as he had multiple encounters with God during which Francis heard God ask him to "rebuild his church." Against his father's wishes, Francis gave most of his money to a local church and over time, he surrendered all of his belongings and wealth to embrace "Lady Poverty." Francis is the father of the movement of Catholic Franciscans who devote their lives to God by caring for all creatures.

"I Surrender" is written as a response to the life that Francis was willing to relinquish in order to embrace God's calling. *The riches of this world will fade; the treasures of our God remain. Here I empty myself to owe this world nothing and find everything in You.*

“This My Inheritance”

Rome, Italy

Peter. Rock. Disciple. Water-walker. Defender and betrayer of Jesus. Apostle.

The first Archbishop of Rome and the first Saint to be canonized.

1 Peter 1:3-12. In his letter to the persecuted church, Peter brings light to an inheritance that is ours in Jesus Christ. No success or failure, suffering or loss, can take away the hope we have in Him. Heirs to the throne, participants in the restoration of earth, purveyors of the Kingdom of God; it should be our greatest joy to celebrate and worship God for this great inheritance.

“This My Inheritance” marries scripture with doxology (liturgical praise) as the natural response to the glory that is ours in Christ Jesus.

*As It was in the beginning
Is now and ever shall be
World without end
Amen*

“I Wait”

Burned by the church and his future in-laws, **George MacDonald** could have easily decided to choose a different path in life. But he desired to find the good in all things. And so he found it in the laughter and imagination of his children and in the joy of writing and bringing stories to life. MacDonald’s work, which was largely unknown until after his death, became a guiding influence for beloved novelist, poet and theologian **Clive Staples Lewis** (C.S. Lewis).

Significance is something we all desire. But patience and trust in a God who can make all things beautiful is something George MacDonald valued more than personal success. He allowed God to shape and reshape his understanding of the Kingdom while loving his children and creating great art for us all to one day enjoy.

“I Wait” is inspired by the life of George MacDonald and his quote, “the principle part of faith is patience.”

Even through my imperfections His light is shining through.
Though dim, I am still a reflection of mercy and of truth.

“You Hold It All Together”

Kidnapped as a teenager and forced into a life of slavery, **Patrick of Scotland** found himself surrounded by sheep on a hilltop in Ireland, a channel away from his family. Full of sorrow and alone, Patrick leaned heavily on prayer and scripture. Patrick could have easily found himself reciting the Psalms, perhaps Psalm 118, which was most likely penned by another familiar Shepherd, **David**. Verse 14 says, “The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.”

After a harrowing escape back to Scotland followed by years of theological training and spiritual discovery, Patrick returned to Ireland to bring the hope of Jesus to a barbaric and wayward nation.

“You Hold It All Together” is an account of the life of **Saint Patrick**. Sorrow and anticipation give way to strength and purpose. Slave turned missionary. Shepherd turned Saint.

...that before I was humbled I was like a stone lying in deep mire,

and he that is mighty came and in his mercy raised me up and, indeed, lifted me high up and placed me on top of the wall. And from there I ought to shout out in gratitude to the Lord for his great favors in this world and for ever, that the mind of man cannot measure. —Confessions of Saint Patrick



Editor's note: Log on to CCMmagazine.com for Part 1 of the Poets & Saints song-by-song synopsis in the August 1, 2016 edition of CCM Magazine! CCM



A close-up portrait of actor Jonny Diaz. He has dark hair styled back, a light beard, and is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He is wearing a blue denim jacket over a white shirt. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be the interior of a vehicle or a similar structure with a window.

JONNY DIAZ

Jonny Diaz — Opposites Attract

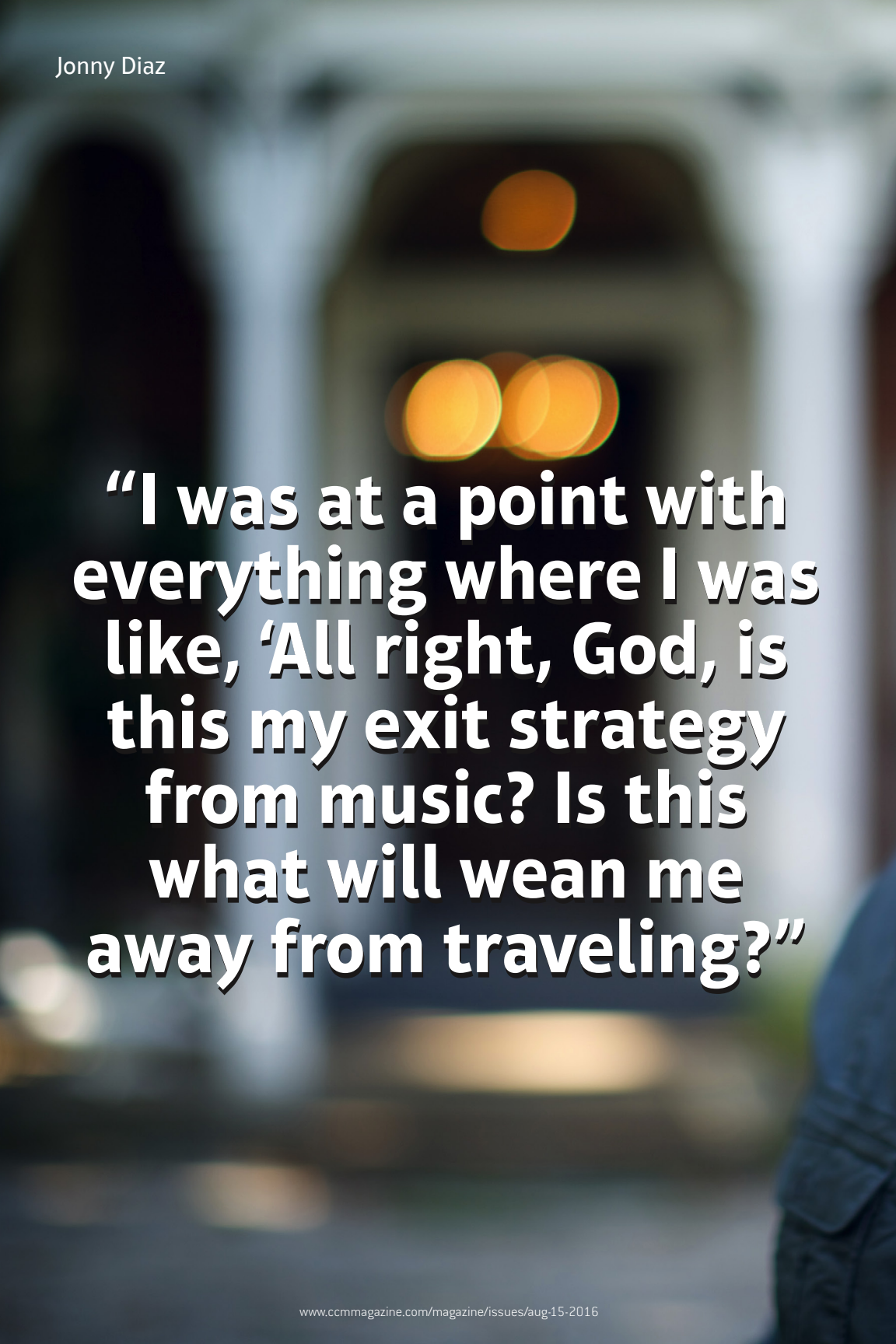
Turns out, “Breathe,” one of this year’s biggest “surprise” hits, wasn’t an exercise in futility for Diaz or fans of Christian radio

By Matt Conner

The ability for God to do the unexpected is a consistent theme woven through the stories and songs of Christians over the centuries. Sometimes it’s even the story of an actual song. One of this year’s biggest hits, **Jonny Diaz’s** “Breathe,” came as a complete surprise to everyone involved—from the label to the artist himself. It’s just the way God works at times.

“Breathe” is one of five songs on Diaz’s (pronounced DIE-az) most recent release, ***Everything Is Changing* (Centricity Music)**. The EP came out nearly a year ago, and in the time since its release, Diaz has turned his attention to other things. Not only is music not his primary focus, but also Diaz explains that, in recent months, he’d had doubts about his future as a professional musician.

“There’s a lot keeping me busy these days, but only a portion of that is music,” says Diaz. “My wife and I have a 13-month-old daughter, so that keeps us busier than you can imagine even though it’s only child. We also own and operate **Fit Factory Nashville**, a group training gym. We run about seven fitness classes a day out of that gym, and we have a staff of six coaches and 300 members. We’ve been really blessed by how the community has really grown and flourished there, but it’s also a lot of work as well.



“I was at a point with everything where I was like, ‘All right, God, is this my exit strategy from music? Is this what will wean me away from traveling?’”



“I was at a point with everything where I was like, ‘All right, God, is this my exit strategy from music? Is this what will wean me away from traveling?’ I now have an income source at home. I have a baby at home. So absolutely unintentionally, I released a song called “Breathe” and it’s sitting close to the top of the charts right now. It’s a very cool surprise that’s opened all these doors for music for a career that I wouldn’t say was dead, but I would have said was on the way out.”

What makes the story of the song’s success even more interesting is that the song itself defies convention. Not only was Diaz not expecting “Breathe” to be a radio success, he’d agreed with his record label that it wasn’t even worth sending to radio.

“The song doesn’t sound like it belongs on Christian radio,” says Diaz. “When they tell you they need a song that works on Christian radio, typically what they mean is something that has this really catchy, soaring chorus that everyone wants to sing along with. It’s then, in the song, that the vocals will go up and the guitars will come in. “Breathe” is the exact opposite of that. The chorus is when everything falls away.”

Diaz says he loves the song and was thrilled with the way it turned out, but he never thought it would be anything more than a track from his most recent EP.

“When I first wrote the song, I was really proud of it because it fulfilled the vision I had for it—the busy-ness during all of the verses and then having literally this breath during the chorus that creates some space,” he says. “I was proud of how it turned out and the label, not surprising to me, replied, ‘We really like this, but it could never be a radio single.’ I said, ‘Yeah, you’re probably right.’

“So when we actually got some good advice to try it as a radio song, to put it through some testing to see if people enjoyed it in that way, we were surprised at the way it tested. It doesn’t sound like Christian radio. It’s literally the exact opposite structurally.”

The story of “Breathe” was birthed out of Diaz’s own busy schedule and his soul’s cry for some room to reflect, consider and pray. Not only were Diaz and his wife tending to new challenges and joys at home, but also the burgeoning gym was taking more time and attention than ever.

“I was so busy trying to write songs for a new record while having this gym and my one-year-old and also traveling and playing music. I just felt swamped by life,” he says. “Writing a song is not a quick or easy process for me. I’d blocked off this entire day to write a song thinking, as I was going into this writing session, that I didn’t have anything.

“Then the story of **Mary** and **Martha** came to mind, and I realized how much mine looked like Martha. She was running around doing good things, trying her best to serve God, and that’s how I felt. But she was missing what was most important. She was letting the good fill her life and missing out on the great. Mary is the hero of that story and she did nothing. She just rested at God’s feet and breathed him in. For me, it was a song written to challenge myself, to express my desire to do that myself.”

Diaz believes the reason “Breathe” resonates is due to so many others feeling the way he felt—stuck inside a culture that values efficiency and noise and devalues solitude and space. “I’ve been pleasantly surprised that I’m not the only one who needs to hear that message,” he says.

“I think it’s an epidemic, at least in our country and I’m guessing in many others,” says Diaz. “We’re a busy culture. It’s not necessarily that we need to cut things out of our lives, but I think a lot of times we need to change our perspective. These things in my life—the baby, the gym, the music—can be life giving with the right perspective. They can be things that allow me to experience God and spend time with Him. They can also be a drain and keep me missing out. I think our culture is so full of people who are so busy and need to shift perspective on the things that we’re doing.” CCM



REVIEWS

aug 15, 2016



Unspoken
Follow Through
(Centricity)

FOR FANS OF:

*OneRepublic, Jimmy Needham,
Andy Grammer*

WE LIKE: "Higher"

★★★★☆



On its second full-length offering for **Centricity Music**, **Unspoken** team with a slew of powerhouse producers such as **Seth Mosley** (Newsboys, Citizen Way), **Tedd T** (for King & Country, Mutemath), **Christopher Stevens** (TobyMac, Michael W. Smith) and **Mitch Dane** (Jars of Clay, Bebo Norman). The results find the fellas expanding their sonic repertoire to include horns, electronics and vibrant harmonies galore, while hopping between pop, soul, folk and hip-hop.

Though it might sound all over the map, it actually comes across as delightfully diverse, which coupled with the guys' joyful proclamations of faith and encouraging reminders to cling tightly to their beliefs no matter how severe the storm make for a worthwhile follow-up to 2014's already strong self-titled start.

—Andy Argyrakis

All Sons & Daughters

Poets & Saints

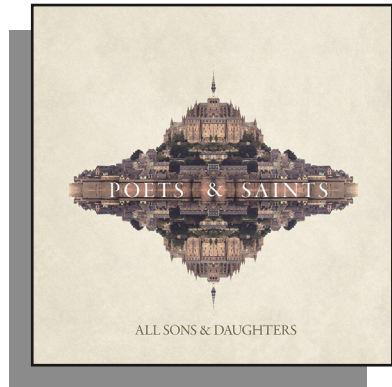
(Integrity)

FOR FANS OF:

Rend Collective, Audrey Assad

WE LIKE: “I Surrender”

★★★★☆



The beautiful new album from **All Sons & Daughters** finds its inspirational wellspring from a European trip that followed the lives of historical heroes from **C.S. Lewis** and **William Cowper** to **Saint Patrick** and **John Newton**. *Poets & Saints* feels familiar within the duo’s catalog, marked by intimate warmth, but never tired.

It’s a tender gift with lovely tracks that guide the listener into the presence of God with a focus on the heart and character of God. “I Surrender” and “This My Inheritance” are two gems, but this entire album warrants your attention. The beauty is made even clearer if you grab the companion book of the same name by author/pastor **Jamie George**.

–Matt Conner

Housefires

iii

(Fuel Music)

FOR FANS OF:

Steffany Gretzinger, Chris Tomlin

WE LIKE: "Great is the Lord"

★★★★☆



The blazing single "Good, Good Father" has likely placed **Housefires** on your radar, but if you're not already privy to the real songwriters behind the popular worship song made famous by **Chris Tomlin**, then consider yourself informed. Housefires is a worship collective birthed out of Grace Midtown in Atlanta, a group of dozens of house churches.

Their new album, *iii*, features the aforementioned mega-hit, but there's plenty more authenticity where that came from. Meaningful, resonant songs like "Build My Life" and "On And On" hold nearly as much potential for widespread congregational use, which means Housefires are set to become a familiar, welcome name for albums to come.

—Matt Conner

Aledo

Gypsy Heart

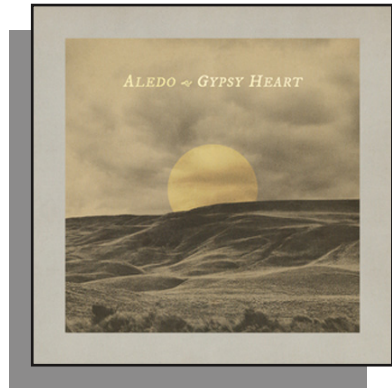
(Self-released)

FOR FANS OF:

Gungor, Jon Foreman

WE LIKE: "Don't Let Go"

★★★★☆



Finally admitting Christian music stardom and big church leadership wasn't filling a void, former **By The Tree** front man-turned-pastor **Chuck Dennie** searched his soul—deeply, going all the way back to his childhood—eventually producing his solo debut *Gypsy Heart* as a response to this journey.

The 5-song EP is seeded with an outpouring of personal discovery and musical reflection, so much so, it's no wonder **Aledo**—Dennie's Texas hometown—was the moniker of choice for this foray. A line from "Don't Let Go," a song written to his wife, beautifully sums up the mood and purpose of the project, *If that's not rain coming through the ceiling / That's the sound of my heart healing*.

—Kevin Sparkman

Michael Sweet

One Sided War

(Rat Pak)

FOR FANS OF:

*Stryper, Whitesnake,
The Union of Sinners & Saints*

WE LIKE: “One Sided War”

★★★★★



Seven solo studio albums into his remarkably prolific career, veteran **Stryper** singer and one time Boston co-singer/guitar slinger sounds just as hungry as ever to evolve and uplift. *One Sided War* is most definitely his heaviest individual offering thus far, thanks in part to a roaring band comprised of guitarist **Joel Hoekstra** (Whitesnake), drummer **Will Hunt** (Evanescence), plus equally aggressive bassist **John O'Boyle** and “East Coast shred-master” **Ethan Brosh**, though it thankfully never loses sight of strong melodies.

Along the way, **Michael Sweet** is incredibly bold with his beliefs without ever coming across as preachy, a factor likely to expand one of the widest-reaching audiences throughout hard rock and metal's last three decades.

–Andy Argyrakis

Gaither Vocal Band

Better Together

(Gaither Music Group)

FOR FANS OF:

Bill Gaither, The Martins

WE LIKE: “Better Together”

★★★★☆



The faces within the **Gaither Vocal Band** may change, but the group’s spiritual center and vocal power remain firmly rooted on each and every album.

Better Together presents the group’s strong harmonies on an inspirational batch of songs that includes a surprising take on **James Taylor**’s “You’ve Got A Friend” along with other notable songs like the title track, “When He Set Me Free,” **Dallas Holm**’s “Heart O’ Mine” and the stirring old spiritual “Didn’t It Rain”. Many of these are familiar favorites, and the same can be said of the Gaither Vocal Band, a timeless release from a storied group.

–Matt Conner

Andrew Marcus

Constant

(BEC)

FOR FANS OF:

*Lincoln Brewster, Paul Baloche,
Phil Wickham*

WE LIKE: “Good To Me”

(featuring Paul Baloche)

★★★★☆



Canadian worship pastor **Andrew Marcus** releases the much anticipated full length *Constant*, which plays more like an EP with added live tracks. With clear and commanding vocals reminiscent of **Paul Baloche**, Marcus' latest offering floats like a beacon in the crowded seas of recent worship releases with well rounded writing and stellar arrangements.

The instantly sing-able “Good To Me” forces the worshipper to gaze upward (just sing aloud and try not to...it's a dare), and with collaborations featuring the aforementioned Baloche and **Leeland**, it will be no surprise this collection will become a classic.

–Kevin Sparkman

Brandon Marin

Rise & Go

(Self-released)

FOR FANS OF:

Phil Wickham, Phillip Phillips

WE LIKE: "Keep Moving On"

★★★★☆☆



Brandon Marin is another unique artist that proves there is a place for everyone at the vast table of worship offerings. The budding artist incorporates country, pop, and southern tones into an experience that is inviting for all on his EP *Rise & Go*.

Marin takes the spirit of the clap-your-hands, stomp-your-feet feel and truly makes it his own, especially heard on the opener "Giving It All Away" and stand-out track, "Keep Moving On." Additionally, Marin includes a song-by-song spoken commentary, giving special insight into each piece, which is certainly a refreshing bonus to the totality of this work.

—Staff

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