

HOLLYN'S SURPRISE POP SUCCESS | IN REVIEW: COLTON DIXON, MERCYME, AARON SHUST

CCM



Hollyn

**NOTHING'S
A 'SURE THING?'**
LED BY THE HEART,
GOTEE'S GAL DELIVERS
BY WAY OF NEW
DIRECTIONS



KARI JOBE
EVERGREEN



DAVID DUNN
HOPE IN HUE?

MAR 15, 2017

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From the Editor

Out & About

Exclusive pics of your favorite artists!

In this issue: Sidewalk Prophets, Mark Lowry, Andy Mineo, Steven Malcolm + more!



Hollyn

Nothing is really a 'sure thing,' but you can bet on Hollyn to always and only deliver from the heart.

As-is. (photos by Lee Stephen)



(photo: Lee Stephen)

Kari Jobe

In a season surrounded by confusion, darkness and loss, God has literally shown Kari Jobe His resilience, power and goodness in the most unlikely ways



David Dunn

With his latest release, can this singer-songwriter help to paint the bigger picture of hope when tragedy leaves unanswered questions?



Reviews

New music from Colton Dixon, MercyMe, Aaron Shust, Greg Sykes + more!



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Summoned | During one of our dinner conversations, my wife told me about a friend of hers who was recently summoned for jury duty. However, this was no ordinary court case. The powers-at-be instructed her friend to pack a suitcase, and to prepare to be away from friends, family—including any and all types of media and communication—for this murder case could take up to several weeks.

Sometimes, the thought of just “getting away” can be the subject of such wonderful daydreams. Kind-of makes me think about those **Southwest Airlines** commercials and their funny “Wanna get away?” slogan. But unlike hopping on an airplane and jetting to Cancun (yes, they fly there now—and, no, this isn’t an advertorial for Southwest), being forced to hole-up in a hotel room and kept away from the outside world and loved ones doesn’t sound like an ideal vacation (to me, at least). Thinking further, I tried to imagine myself there, and what I would do...and suddenly all of life’s daily distractions became so very crystal clear.

What if there was no television—no access to news? What if there was no computer or smart phone available—no streaming feeds or text messages? I believe God doesn’t call most—or at least those of us who might be reading this (think: internet, electronic media)—to an isolated, unmodernized life of devotion to Him. But for a moment, the thought of having all of the distractions taken away seemed blissful.

Psalm 46:10 (NKJV) says, *Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!* The first four words of this verse could be taken as a command, and when life gets too loud, I suppose they should be. For many of us those action words, “Be still,” are easier read and said than done, but are we really “knowing” God right now? If you’re immediately unsure of the answer to that question, what are some of the distractions that you could take away from your life—how can you participate in exalting Him today?



Blessings,

A stylized, handwritten signature of Kevin Sparkman in black ink.

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OUT & ABOUT

March 15, 2017



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Explore the world of Aethasia™, and join the Resistance in their fight against the tyrannical emperor and his army of mechanical men!

Once a beautiful land, Aethasia is now covered by a sickly pervasive fog that corrupts everything it touches. But all is not lost. Rumors are spreading of a fledgling Resistance, who have the courage and audacity to try and restore Aethasia to its former glory, and to reinstate the The Great Engineer back to the throne of Aethasia.

And that Resistance needs you!





Hollyn

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Hollyn — True

Nothing is a 'sure thing'—well, almost nothing. No matter what you call her music or how many times she may 'cross over,' bet on Hollyn to always and only deliver from her heart. As-is.

By David Daniels

As **Gotee Records** singer-songwriter **Hollyn** worked on her debut album, she felt a tension which Christian artists have experienced longer than she's even been alive.

The twenty year-old was at a crossroads on whether to target the Christian or the pop market. Her mentor and his record label, **TobyMac** and Gotee, are iconic names in Christian music. But considering **Toby McKeethan's** legendary group **dc Talk** crossed over into the mainstream when it signed to **Virgin Records** didn't necessarily make the choice any easier.

With a burden to reach a broad audience, but also a desire to remain authentic about her faith, Hollyn needed way more than one conversation with God to select a lane. When her album, **One-Way Conversations**, began climbing up the iTunes charts on its February 10, 2017 release date, it was noted as one single, simple category: "Pop."

One-Way Conversations, which debuted on the coveted *Billboard* 200, pairs pop production with God-honoring lyrics—which one would expect from an artist who takes their calling as seriously as Hollyn. The Waverly, Ohio native faced sky-high expectations after she earned a Dove Award nomination for New Artist Of

The Year in 2016, but *One-Way Conversations* meets, and aims to exceed them.

Hollyn discusses her stressful, yet inspiring album creation process with us for this *CCM Magazine* cover story.

CCM Magazine: Prior to the release of One-Way Conversations, you said, “The album needed to start with most the important thing to me: An honest confession of the loneliness I feel when I’m not in constant relationship with God or anyone else I care about.” Can you tell the story behind writing that opening song, “Can’t Live Without”?

Hollyn: Of course. If I’m being super honest, I actually wrote the song at probably one of the most confusing times of my life. I was on a tour about six months ago, and during that time, I was really confused about what the Lord was saying to me, and where He was telling me to go. I had a lot of people in my ear telling me to make music “this way,” or being influential in my life. I wanted that advice, but at the end of the day, I didn’t really know what I wanted. It was confusing everyone.

I remember touring on the west coast and being apart from them, along with my community and my family, and I had to be away by myself. I realized, at the end of the day, I have to [write this record], but I can’t live without the love from my community and their support.

I felt so isolated and just had to spend time—one-on-one—with God. I know that sounds super-generic, but it’s so true, and I had to really clear my head and listen to His voice.

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CCM: What were some of the things you were wrestling over that time?

Hollyn: Definitely direction and clarity on what God was calling me to do because, I don't know if you know this, but my album is actually on iTunes as a pop album. We were debating on whether to do this album in the contemporary Christian market, or the mainstream market. Which, I am a believer—and I want to make music about what I believe in—so we were really confused because we didn't want to put off anybody. But I felt like God was calling me to write in this direction, and so I did.

I was kind of afraid to say that I wanted to do that, because I didn't know how people would receive it. It's not any different than the music I've put out before. It's just that now it's open to a broader audience, as well as the one that I already have and the one that I already love. It was hard for me because I was battling that, and I'm a people pleaser...and I'm a control-freak at the same time!

And the music that I had already written wasn't really up to par with what I had in my head and what I wanted it to sound like, so I had to come back and say, "You know what, let's keep digging, and let's keep working." And we were almost done, so it was really hard for me to [go back and change things], but I'm glad that we did it, and I'm glad that we pushed and fought for this project [in this way].

CCM: Wow, so what ultimately made you decide to go this route, and what gave you peace about that in the end?

Hollyn: I believe that music can inspire people in any shape and any form. For me, my calling is to write great music and inspire people with everyday life—to be honest and real about what I'm



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going through. I felt like, “I’m in Christian music. I’m touring with TobyMac right now, I’m on Gotee Records. I have this platform, and I want to use that.”

But I also want to be a light. I feel like music is a gateway for people to see your heart and to see what you’re really about—building relationships with fans and listeners. I felt like that’s what God was calling me to do.

CCM: Just listening to album, we can see how it fits well into either category.

Hollyn: That was the goal. I’m not trying to be polarizing. I don’t know. It’s really hard for me to explain because I feel like Christian music and mainstream have been like, “You either do ‘this,’ or that,” and I don’t know why.

A lot of people believe you have to be either one or the other, but I feel like if you make great music, it’s going to translate. It’s going to resonate with people, and it’s going to be relatable. When you do that, I feel like music has no limit, and I just wanted to make a record that had no limits. I think that’s what we’ve done. We’ll see what happens!

CCM: Tell us more about the meaning of “Lovely” from One-Way Conversations. Was it written with the intentions of encouraging people who struggle with insecurity?

Hollyn: Yeah, and it resonates with me—it is something that I struggle with. Being a twenty year-old artist, on stage with people taking pictures and everything... You feel like you always have to try to look good, be fit, or do “this” or do “that.”



It's so tiring, and I feel like it's a message that the devil tries to get in your head. It's crazy, and it can destroy you and take over your thoughts. I have to remind myself every day when I wake up that God calls me "lovely," and I have to be thankful for what I have, for this life that He's given me, and the body that He's given me to live in. It's His temple before it's even mine.

CCM: How difficult is it to be a young, single girl in the music industry, with a growing platform, and how do you navigate that?

Hollyn: Aw, man—if I find out, I'll let you know! It's really hard. It's a blessing. I am so blessed. I have the most amazing people around me. My team is incredible. The people that pray with me are incredible...my family, my friends. The Lord has just brought everyone at the right time. He's redeemed friendships. He's set me in a place where if I didn't have the community, the church family, and the family that I have, I would just be completely lost.

Just being away from your family, it can be lonely. That's not the main thing that I feel all the time. But I really wanted to address it in the album because a lot of people would ask, "What's it like on the road?" Yeah, it's exciting. And it's great. It's awesome. I love it. But it's also really hard at times.

CCM: A line that sticks out on "In Awe" is, You don't need me at all, but you couldn't love me more. New listeners may have not expected to hear a twenty year-old making music about the self-sufficiency of God. What led you to write that?

Hollyn: I wrote "In Awe" in Portland, Oregon with my friend **Dave Lubben**, and he also produced this track. I literally went into the vocal booth, and I was in a place where I needed to just sing, and sing from my soul. I didn't really know what was going to come

out, but I knew that I had to sing something, and so I just went in the booth and sang.

Honestly, that's how we wrote the song. I didn't pick up a pen. I just went in and sang, and that's what we got. I really felt like, in that moment, "Why do You even need me to do the work that You could do by Yourself?" I am so unworthy to get on stage and sing these songs, or to even write these songs and live the life that I'm living. But He's called me to do this, and He don't need me to do this, but He loves me so much that He's allowed me to.

Each one of us, no matter what our occupation or our job is, we get to serve a God that loves us so much—that He doesn't even need us—He just created us because He wanted to, and He loves us that much. If you think about that for too long, it boggles your mind. But I'm so grateful for that. That's definitely one of my favorite lines in the whole album. I love that song so much. I cry every time I hear it.

CCM: Where in the timeline of creating One-Way Conversations and wrestling with your direction does "In Awe" come into play?

Hollyn: That was long before I went on that tour on the west coast and wrote "Can't Live Without." I wrote "In Awe" in March of 2016, almost a year ago, and I was in a place of...well, kind-of the same place. I think I was in that place for longer than I tell myself and allow myself to believe!

Everyone expects something to come with a Christian album, or if it's pop, they expect it to sound a certain way. And so I thought, "Man...I want to break down a wall, turn a page and do something different with the music that I create. If it makes a difference, great. I want to do something that's new and fresh. I didn't want it to sound cheesy. I didn't want it to sound fabricated or false.

And I remember going in that booth and writing that and I thought, “Oh my gosh, it sounds so raw and so...how I feel! It sounds cool,” and it’s a song that I feel like is going to make a difference, and it’s going to speak for a lot of people and how they feel. I said, “I have to put it on there. That is a God-breathed song.” That’s how we got it, and I’m so thankful that the Lord allowed me to write it. It’s helped me through a lot. [CCM](#)



Kari Jobe

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Kari Jobe — Evergreen

In a season surrounded by confusion, darkness and loss, God has literally shown Kari Jobe His resilience, power and goodness in the most unlikely ways

By Matt Conner

In every way, **Kari Jobe** would say she's never suffered more for her art than the songs that comprise her latest album, ***The Garden***. Shortly after watching her sister give birth to a stillborn daughter, **James Ivy**, Kari celebrated the arrival of her own firstborn. The ensuing season of tragedy and triumph brought a myriad of questions as the family experienced the full spectrum of emotions.

In response to the loss, Kari says she pressed in to her songwriting sessions more than ever, determined to avoid trite phrases or cliché responses. The hard work paid off in a new set of songs that flow as a deeper stream than anything she has previously released. Jobe is proud of her work and grateful for the lessons learned, and she hopes these songs connect with fans that have experienced a traumatic loss of their own.

CCM Magazine: We know you've endured tragedy and triumph during the songwriting season that led to your new album. What made you title this *The Garden*, given that background?

Kari Jobe: It's been such an amazing season to watch God's faithfulness—for me to see things in a way I wouldn't have had I not gone through this experience. I'm amazed at how He is so attentive to details. He is so intentional with things in our lives.

We bought a house that had a garden in the backyard, and I had no idea it was even there. It's full of Ivy, which is my niece's middle name, and it started blooming just right at the season where we were going to start ministering again.

I'd been in such a place of sorrow but celebration because I had a brand new baby. There were so many uncharted waters at that time for me to be able to look out the window into my backyard and see it all, I was blown away by the fact that God knew what I would need just when I would need it.

All of these songs were written in that full spectrum of emotions, that season of walking through and experiencing what God was speaking to me and what I was learning through all of it. I tried to write it all out in songs and a lot of friends helped me with the language of what to say and how to say it poetically. I didn't want it to sound Christianese or trite.

CCM: How hard is that to avoid the formulaic or the trite when you're dealing with such a deep or three-dimensional experience?

KJ: I do believe that God is faithful and God is good and that God is working something out in the middle of tragedy, but those things did not help me or my sister or my family in the midst of the pain we were feeling in that season. My sister would say, "Don't tell me this is part of my journey. Don't tell me this is part of my story. I don't understand that right now. I'm just in pain and can't hear that." And this was her response even though she believed it.

I started realizing how many more people are in those places where they don't need any words. They just need tears or flow-ers or unspoken gestures. I didn't realize that certain cliches just

don't help at certain times. Actions or very intentional words are a lot more helpful. There would be times where I'd say something to my sister in the midst of it. I'd say, "I know this will sound too far fetched, but God will show you some insane things in this. He's going to meet you here." It made me have to be more creative with what I was trying to say.

CCM: What does your sister and her family think of the songs?

KJ: They love it and that's been so important to me, too. I've always ran everything by my sister, because I never wanted her to feel like I ran off with the story. It's initially hers. It affected me, but it happened to her. But she's been incredible. The whole way she has said, "If this will help people and meet them where they are, then I want it to help them." I don't think our family realized how many people had lost children or how many people had walked through such traumatic experiences. She's the most compassionate person I've ever met, so I've been so honored to be a part of writing and making a legacy, in a way, for her daughter with this project.

CCM: How do you take these kinds of deeper lessons learned and then set that into a song that only allows you to say so much?

KJ: It took a lot longer to write these songs, honestly. Everything I wrote in these songs, we combed through them and made sure there wasn't a different way to say something about God's faithfulness. I think that's why The Garden is so poetic. I wanted it to be about actual images and life than just talking about God meeting us or showing us that He's good. I wanted to know what that looked like in actual, physical form.

For example, for that ivy to grow and bloom in our backyard was incredible, because that was her middle name. God gave them



her name before they lost her. Ivy is one of the most resilient plants you can find. It grows through cement walls, and you'll find it growing in the hardest and harshest of places. I feel like God helped me use some of those to find language to sing about and think about and talk about all of this. That helped me realize that God really does go before us. I was blown away by the nearness of God in a physical and tangible way.

CCM: Because you worked so hard on these songs, do you find them connecting with your fans at a different level?

KJ: Yeah, I can totally tell a difference. At first, I was a little bit nervous thinking that people wouldn't understand the depth of this project. The first songs that we released could stand alone outside of The Garden project and be on any kind of project, so I started realizing that I needed to get the deeper stuff on this project out so that people would know what they would hear, that it was different than what you've heard from me before.

The only places I know to look for interactions right now is on social media, and people are posting some of their experiences, telling us what has gone on in their lives and why The Garden means so much. They're posting the coolest pictures, like ivy growing on the side of the building and then posting their story. I love that because I know that I can take a deep breath and that the songs will meet people where they're supposed to meet them.

CCM: Do these songs feel too personal to discuss in the live setting?

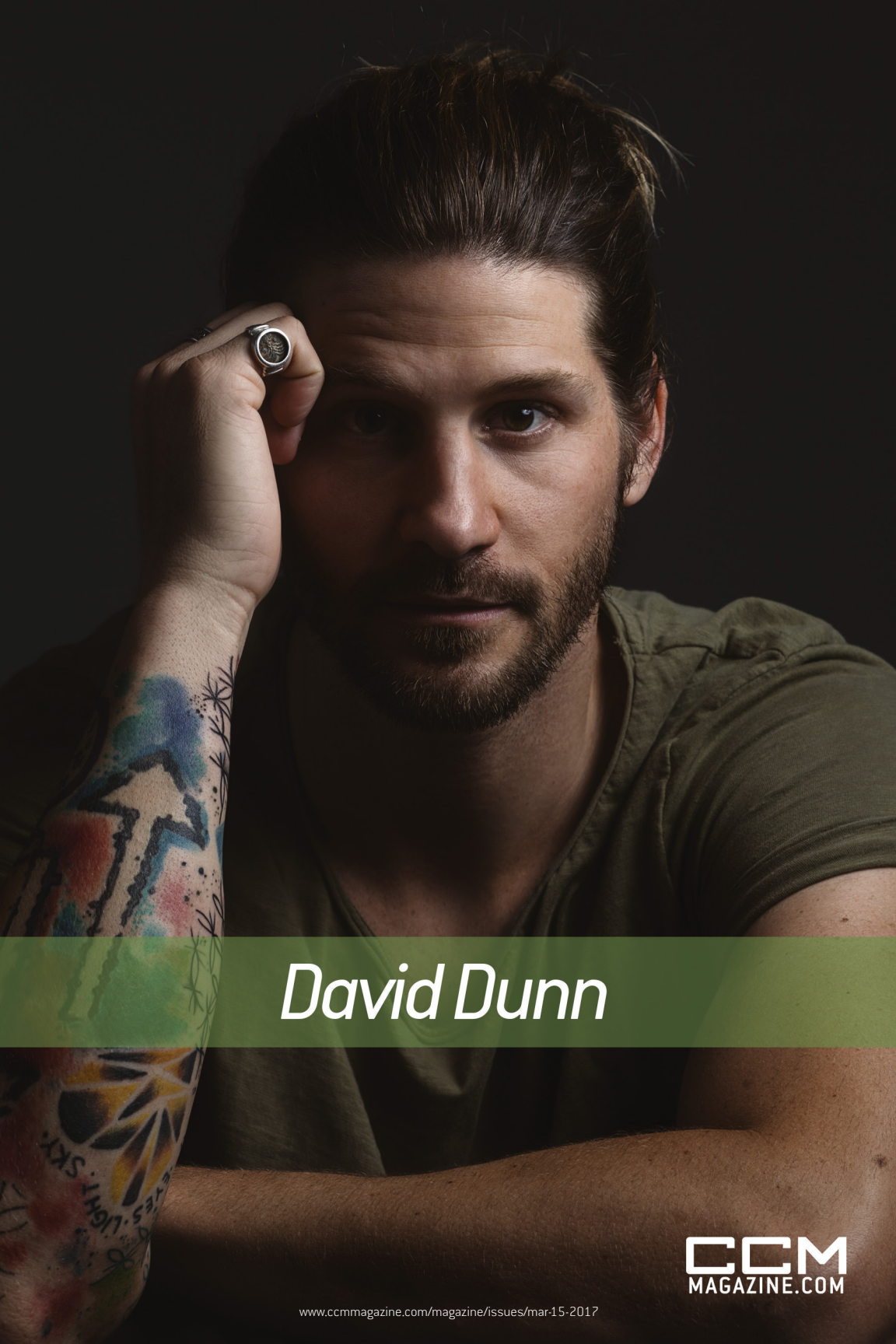
KJ: I think what I'm trying to still navigate in the live setting is not leaving everyone so sad, but saying, "It's okay. Here's the redemptive part of it. God really has brought joy to our lives,



mainly through Canyon, our son.” That’s the hard part, I think, that I’m still trying to figure out.

CCM: Speaking of the live shows, what are the plans there?

KJ: It’s going to be a really cool night. It will be a night of worship, but it will also be more than that. It will be an experience of worship. We’ve also got a few surprises planned, and we’re also really excited about the openers because we’ve got Brian and Katie Torwalt and Leeland and Jonathan and Melissa Helser [Bethel Music]. We’re also doing worship workshops for worship leaders and their teams in some of the cities. [CCM](#)



David Dunn

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David Dunn — The Color Of Hope

Serving as proof of the process, singer-songwriter David Dunn hopes the themes in his new album *Yellow Balloons* can help to paint the bigger picture when tragedy leaves unanswered questions

By Matt Conner

As inspirational as **David Dunn's** music has proven to be, the **BEC Recordings** artist has never written songs like the ones on his latest, ***Yellow Balloons***. The release contains a snapshot of his feelings and experiences from the last two years, a season filled with pain and suffering, fear and questions after the unexpected death of his two-year-old niece. At such a memorial service, yellow balloons are often released to symbolize hope in the midst of such dark times.

Dunn admits he's a bit nervous to release these new songs, uncertain of what fans of his last release, ***Crystal Clear***, might think. They are vulnerable songs, ones that lack a clean, neat ending that he wanted to add. Fortunately the songs that are here resonate with an emotional power that invites others to share the experience. Here's the story of *Yellow Balloons* and the growth of a songwriter who struggled to set such tragedy to song.

CCM Magazine: Yellow Balloons is such an interesting title. Let's start there. Where did that come from?

David: Dunn The way I write both songs and albums are that anytime you're listening to me, you're getting a snapshot of my

life. You're taking in a period of time in what I've learned and experienced or felt in that period. On *Crystal Clear*, you're getting the stories of my life from 2012 to 2013. *Yellow Balloons*, the new album, is about the last year-and-a-half and the thing that has directed my thoughts and heart is something that happened to my family about 20 months ago now.

I went back to my hometown, Midland, Texas, to play a show. I'm not there very often, but I was making the rounds to see my nieces and nephews. There are lots of them since I have five brothers and sisters who've had a lot of babies. I went to visit my sister, who has two little girls—ages 2 and 4, at the time—and they were settling down for a nap. I took off to do my sound check and then out of the blue, she didn't wake up from her nap. She just died and no one has any idea why.

That was the major theme that came through in all of the songs I wrote for this record. In some way, shape or form, every song was about that tragedy. The majority of them ended up breaking down into two categories: songs about children or being a kid, and songs about heaven. Yellow balloons are released at a child's memorial service, so that's why the album is called that.

Normally when I write a song, I take a maximum of six hours to mess with it. I might change it up, but usually it's three hours. "Yellow Balloons" was a song I wanted to write about this specific story, and I think I spent about eight months on that thing, rewriting it over and over again. The reason it was so hard to write was that I wanted it to say, "This is what happened but God is using it for good and she's in a better place." I wanted to put a happy spin on it, the things that I know in my brain that are true. God is in control, and all of that.

However, I just couldn't do it. That's not how I felt about it. The way I feel about it is that this thing sucks and it hurts. It doesn't seem fair. A lot of times when someone dies, you celebrate his or her life. When an 80-year-old dies, you celebrate their 80 years. The same thing with a 50-year-old. Somehow even with a 20-year-old, there is some life to celebrate but for a two-year-old, you're only a year into cognizance. It's all a bitter pill to swallow. So the song ended up being more of a, "This is impossible to stomach without you being with us, God." My sister actually helped me write that song.

CCM: When you have so much emotion, how hard is it, then, to distill all of that down into a three or four minute song?

DD: The thing that comes easily and is relatively simple is getting the musical element down. That's just a feeling-thing and it usually comes naturally. The hard part for me is being succinct with the words—getting the lyrics right. The issue is first being able to grab the correct words and having the right ones together, but it's also about having a vision of where it's supposed to go and sticking to it. That's why "Yellow Balloons" was so hard to write because my vision kept changing for what I wanted the song to be—or it was inauthentic at the beginning. Not because it's not true, but it's not where I was.

The process is almost directly related for where the vision of the song is supposed to be. That determines how easy the song is to write. There are a lot of different working gears and parts in a song, so I would call that a simplified response, but that's how I look at it. You get the bucket and then you start reaching in and pulling different pieces out.



CCM: Are you finding that as you write something so vulnerable that others are responding to it in kind, or is it too early to tell?

DD: We as humans have a really hard time with not having answers, even if the answer is that there is no answer. I don't know if I've ever written a song that was without an answer, to be honest with you. That was another reason this was difficult to write, because I wanted to give it an answer. I wanted to say that "this" happened, but "this" is why it's okay. I know with my head those things are true, but that's not the way things feel. So I have no idea how it will be accepted. I've never put out a song like this and there are a couple on the record that are in this vein.

It could be wildly applauded where people say, "This is how I feel, too." It could also go the other way, where people say, "This is a depressing song with a sad ending." I haven't even really thought about that when making the project. Mostly what I wanted to do was sing about my own life and the life of my family in an honest way.

CCM: When you've worked so hard for a set of songs, does it make it that much more rewarding?

DD: Um, I cannot say yet. I make music, so in general, people who make music are more vulnerable and open with the way they struggle, but I have a hard time doing that in everyday life. I have a hard time being vulnerable with people, which is ironic because that's what I do with music, right? But I have a hard time with that. So I can't tell if this record will be rewarding yet. Right now, it's an ever-present reminder of something I'd rather forget than deal with. Depending on whether or not the Lord uses the record will determine whether or not it ends up being a project that is a continual reminder or a blessing on which I can reflect. **CCM**

REVIEWS

March 15, 2017



Identity

LIFER



MERCYME



CCM
MAGAZINE.COM

Colton Dixon

Identity

(Sparrow)

FOR FANS OF: *Imagine Dragons,*
OneRepublic, Sanctus Real

WE LIKE: "Technicolor"

★★★★☆



For his third proper project, **Colton Dixon** builds upon his alternative rock base with an even greater pop sensibility steeped in electronic elements. The changes are immediately noticeable but welcome and they seamlessly bond together thanks to his versatile, **American Idol**-sized voice.

Lyrically speaking, Dixon also takes a more conceptual turn, urging listeners not to base their self-worth in career, social status, successes or shortcomings, but rather, knowing they are all children of God. Along the way, the collection also includes a handful of spoken word interludes to further convey those points, assuring this contagious batch of ear candy is stocked with plenty of meat in the message.

—Andy Argyrakis

MercyMe

Lifer

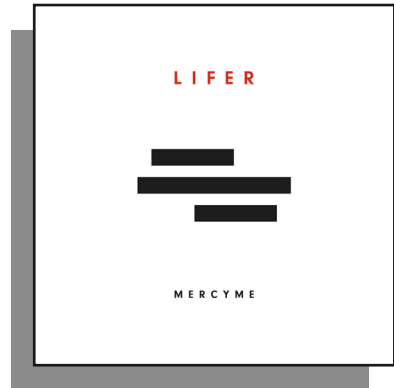
(FairTrade Services)

FOR FANS OF:

Matthew West, Building 429

WE LIKE: “Even If”

★★★★☆



The pop hooks have been there from the start. These pop flavors have not. Ever since MercyMe first hit the radio waves, the GRAMMY-nominated band has been associated with penning strong, hooky content. Their latest album, ***Lifer***, is steeped in current Top 40 sounds, meaning it seems like the band's been cranking up **Bruno Mars**, **Maroon 5** and **Fitz And The Tantrums** in recent months.

From a title track that mirrors “Moves Like Jagger” to the piano groove of “Grace Got You” to the gospel-funk of “Happy Dance,” *Lifer* is a diverse pop album finely tuned to modern favorites with some more traditional MercyMe-like tracks sprinkled throughout (“Even If” and “We Win”). Depending on your musical leanings, you’ll either be pleased with the new sonic turns or turned off, but there’s enough here on either side to stay interested and inspired.

—Matt Conner

Aaron Shust

Love Made A Way

(Centricity Music)

FOR FANS OF:

Lincoln Brewster, Matthew West

WE LIKE: "Heartbeat"

★★★★☆



If you've ever seen **Aaron Shust** in concert, then you'll be pleased to know the Centricity artist's first live release stays true to the real thing. Bringing together imaginative takes on live favorites and worship favorites, including tracks from **Elevation Worship**, **Hillsong UNITED** and **Bethel Music**, ***Love Made A Way*** offers an intimate worshipful set for which Shust's fans have been asking.

"Heartbeat" is a compelling opening track, as is "God Of Brilliant Lights," but it's great to hear worship favorites like "Ever Be" and "Cornerstone" alongside the headliner's biggest hits like "My Hope Is In You" and "My Savior My God." Shust's heart as a worship leader is readily apparent on this new album that brings the listener in close to a meaningful, heartfelt set.

—Matt Conner

Aaron Sprinkle

Real Life

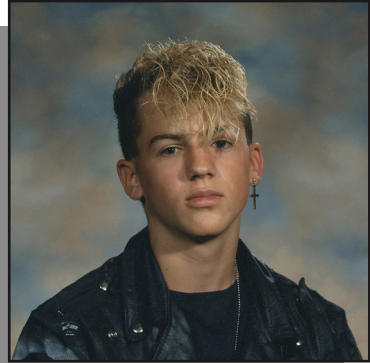
(Tooth & Nail)

FOR FANS OF:

Fair, Starflyer 59, Leagues

WE LIKE: "Washed Up"

★★★★☆



Aaron Sprinkle's notoriety as a producer comes with a dark side, since it typically outshines his incredible work as an artist and songwriter. From outlets like **Fair** to his own solo work, Sprinkle's body of work is every bit as impressive as the artists for whom he has produced. Unfortunately, very few people seem aware of his work. ***Real Life*** picks up where ***Water & Guns*** left off, an album that surprised fans with its electronic turn.

Real Life remains in synthetic territory, musically speaking, even as Sprinkle is confessional on songs like "Washed Up," where he sings *Can I get washed up on the shore? / 'Cause I can't fake this anymore*. Guests like **Copperlily's Stephanie Skipper**, **Poema's Elle Puckett** and **Eisley's Sherry Dupree-Bemis** contribute throughout the album, but Sprinkle has always been the star. It's just that you never realized it.

—Matt Conner

Greg Sykes

Reverse

(Integrity Music)

FOR FANS OF:

Chris August, Chris Sligh

WE LIKE: "Reverse"

★★★★☆



Amid a touted career as a worship leader and co-writer for other artists, including **All Sons & Daughters**, **Paul Baloche**, **Jaci Velasquez** and **Meredith Andrews**, **Greg Sykes** is finally making his solo debut with ***Reverse***, a slick new pop EP with **Integrity Music**. Sykes' new EP speaks to God's ability to work in any situation, a message sent on the inventive title track and the more straightforward "Impossible."

Both songs sound ready for radio, as does the EP's opener "Just The Beginning." Sykes closes the set with a clear picture of his worship background with the stirring "Need You Now." If an EP is supposed to be an intro of sorts, then Sykes does well to show off a smart radio-friendly pop side with a worshipful heart.

—Matt Conner

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