

ONES TO WATCH: CCM MAGAZINE INTRODUCES HANNAH KERR & GREG SYKES

CCM

# JACI VELASQUEZ

## MOUNTAINS INTO MOLEHILLS

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WHAT SURPRISE  
THE LEGENDARY  
SINGER FINDS  
IN THE MIDST  
OF SEEKING  
SURRENDER

APR 15, 2017



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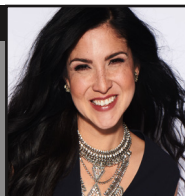
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**Publisher**  
Michael Miller

**General Manager | Associate Publisher**  
Smitty Wheeler

**Associate Publisher | Mixed Media Production**  
Ross Cluver

**Editor**  
Kevin Sparkman

**Design**  
Joshua Jamison (cover & graphics)  
Ross Cluver (content)

**Contributing Editors**  
Andy Argyrakis

**Contributors**  
Matt Conner  
Andrew Greer

**Fulfillment & Customer Service Manager**  
Suzanne Solinger

**Customer Service Reps**  
Janice Collier Arsenault  
Dave Campbell

**Executive Dir. of Advertising**  
DeDe Donatelli-Tarrant  
805.987.5072  
dede@salempublishing.com

**Web Ad Traffic Coordinator  
Web & Social Media Support**  
Brandon Woolum

**It's all so clear** | In my last editor's note I wrote about distractions. Distractions can muddy-up situations...at times, our lives. That's what makes the stories behind two of our featured artists for the Apr. 15, 2017 edition of *CCM Magazine* so refreshing.

For new **Integrity Music** artist **Greg Sykes**, distractions have been a huge part of his life. Debilitating distractions that could have led him and his family, several times over, into total destruction. Instead, time and again, he was somehow able to cling to examples provided in scripture to be his guide. When his marriage was falling apart, it was a simple one-degree shift in refocusing his mind off of the distractions and on to the good things that God has done—want to guess how long they have now been married? (Hint: Read the article inside for the answer!)

*And even what the enemy has tried to use against me / God will use it for my good and for His Glory* –from “Reverse” by Greg Sykes (on new EP, **Reverse**)

Imagine leading worship for the first time and from the first note that is sung, you know that God Himself is calling you into a vocation of leading thousands upon thousands in worship and song? You almost instantly begin to co-bill tours with your musical heroes...practically, you've “made it!” Newly-signed artist and current college student **Hannah Kerr**'s story goes a little something like this. But the potential distraction of the spotlight is deflected by her simple dedication to just heeding the call—read for yourself, as she articulates her desire to only serve God through her music.



From the Editor

*Now and always / I'll let my lips be only for Your name / Lord, let my story be a glimpse of Your glory* –from “Radiate” by Hannah Kerr (on **Overflow, Black River Christian**)

As believers, distractions will continue to come our way—Sykes and Kerr aren't immune, either, their fair-share are eminent—but I love the way their stories help to paint a picture for us all if we're currently feeling distracted. And as “Radiate” and “Reverse” reminds us, dark distractions can not only become a thing of the past, when channeled correctly... *to God, clearly be the Glory!*

*Made a future out of my past / You meet me right where I am / It's all part of Your plan* –“Radiate”



Blessings,

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

**Kevin Sparkman**

Editor, CCM Magazine

KSparq@CCMMagazine.com



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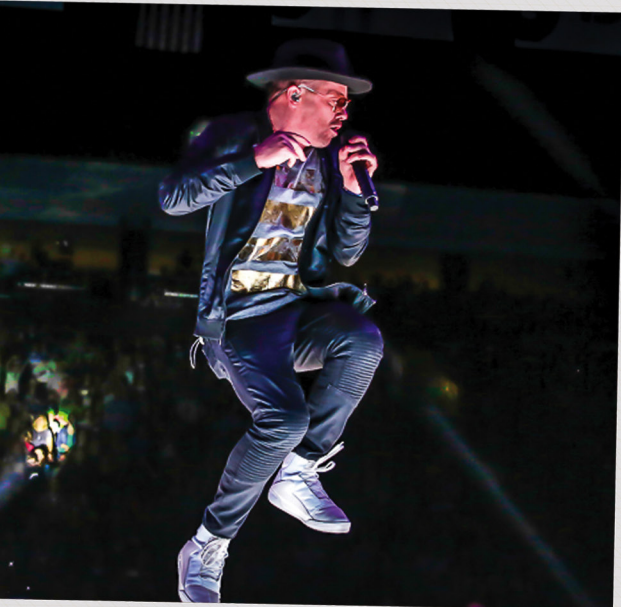
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# OUT & ABOUT

April 15, 2017



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A full-page portrait of Jaci Velasquez. She is sitting on a light-colored floor, leaning back on her hands with her legs crossed. She has long, dark, wavy hair and is wearing a black blazer over a white t-shirt with a black graphic, black leather pants, and blue high-heeled shoes. She is wearing several gold bangles on her right wrist and a thin silver bracelet on her left. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

*Jaci Velasquez*

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# Jaci Velasquez — Mountains Into Molehills

What surprise did the legendary singer find in the midst of seeking surrender?

By Andrew Greer

Whether you grew up bee-bopping to her tunes with your youth group, or fell in love with her flair for the nations through her string of GRAMMY-nominated Latin recordings, or spent the past several years tuning in to her national **Family Friendly Morning Show** during drive time radio, at 37, **Jaci Velasquez** is much more than a music veteran, she is, quite simply ... a legend.

Taking a five-year hiatus from recording music to focus in on her growing family—a brood of boys that includes singer-songwriter husband, **Nic Gonzales** (from the award-winning band **Salvador**), and her two sons, **Zealand** (9) and **Soren** (8)—the young pro is celebrating two decades in the business with a brand new studio release, **Trust (Integrity Music)**. Twenty years after making history with her wildly successful first record—the first time a solo artist in Christian music has achieved Gold status (much less, Platinum) on a debut release—Trust initiates another series of “firsts” for Velasquez, marking her first-ever worship recording, as well as her first simultaneous English and Spanish release.

In this exclusive *CCM Magazine* cover conversation, Velasquez plumbs the heart of a life lived through the lens of faith to uncover the challenges her family faces, including her oldest son’s struggle with Autism, and the unsuspecting partnership of worship music to prod her into a new space of surrender – in her music, and at home.

**CCM Magazine: I think it's natural to ask, what prompted your return to recording music after focusing on radio for several years?**

**Jaci Velasquez:** I always pray, "God open the doors you want me to walk through, and close the ones you don't." I had been doing radio for six years. Getting up at 4:20 a.m. every morning, a lot of people said, "She'll never last a month." Well, I did. [Laughing] Did I enjoy getting up that early? You get used to it. But I got to be home for the milestone years of my kids' lives, and I loved that.

But, when that door closed, I prayed again: "God open the doors you want me to walk through, and close the ones you don't." That door opened with Integrity Music. They asked my manager, **Greg [Lucid]**, "Would Jaci want to record a record for Integrity?" I was delighted they would want me to make music, but I also thought, *I've never made a worship record*. I'm a Pastor's Kid, so I've been in church my whole life but I've never made a record based on that genre of music. I've always done pop [music]. So initially I was unsure.

**CCM: What convinced you that this was a door you should walk through?**

**JV:** Greg sent me a batch of songs to listen to. One song in particular, called "God Who Moves The Mountains," stuck with me. I listened to it all day. Around 2:30 a.m. that night, my youngest son, Soren, started yelling, "Mommy! Mommy!"

Because I had to wake up so early for radio for six years, usually my boys called for "Daddy" in the middle of the night. So I started being able to sleep when they called for us in the middle of the night because I trusted Nic would get up. But randomly that night, my son started screaming, "Mommy,



mommy!”—I get goosebumps thinking about it—and even though for six years I’ve been able to sleep through it, I woke up. I went up the stairs to see what he needed, and Soren said, “Mom, I had two bad dreams. In the first one two cars were speeding really fast and they hit each other.” I said, “Oh, baby boy, I’m so sorry. But that didn’t happen so don’t worry. What was your other dream?” He said, “That Satan was trying to take over the world.” I thought, *Wow, that’s pretty intense for a seven-year-old*. But I looked at him and said, “Let me tell you a little secret. Satan is trying to take over the world. But do you love Jesus?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Does Jesus live in your heart?” He said, “Yes.” And I said, “Then you never have to be scared, because you know the God who moves mountains.”

My mind went back to that song. I ran to my room, brought my phone to my son, and started playing the song for him in his room. Nobody was looking. It wasn’t weird. It was just the two of us, and I couldn’t help but close my eyes and raise my hands. After the first chorus, I opened my eyes and looked at my son—his eyes were closed, tears were coming down his face, and I kid you not, you could feel the presence of God in his room. I wasn’t raising my hands for a show, or because my son was crying, it was just the sheer presence of God in the room. I asked Soren, “Do you believe that God can move this mountain?” He said, “Yes.” And I said, “Yes. He can. He will. *He has.*” For a little boy, a bad dream is a mountain. Our mountains seem so much bigger, but a mountain is a mountain. Since that night, my son hasn’t woken up with another nightmare.

For six years, I haven’t woken up when my sons yell in the middle of the night. But this time I woke up, because God wanted to tell me what He wanted me to do. Even though I prayed that prayer, I was still unsure as to whether I *could* do it. But God spoke to me through my son who truly believes that God moves mountains.



***CCM: It's interesting that He used a prompt of personal worship to prompt you to make a corporate worship record.***

**JV:** Of course, only God. It's incredible. The first night I sang these songs live, tears kept welling up in my eyes and the hair on my arms was standing up, and I thought, *Okay, God*. I don't like to over-spiritualize stuff, but I can't help but think He's doing something incredibly big and I get to go along for the ride.

***CCM: How has this very personal experience transformed the entire experience of how you listen to these songs, how you perform them, how others receive them?***

**JV:** I'm more vulnerable to the presence of God now. The challenges we face as a family make you cry out, but all I can think is, *Okay, God, where do You want me? How can I be in Your will? How can I love You bigger and better?* It's a constant journey. I'm still human. I don't have everything figured out and never will—thank God for that. But God works the way He wants to work.

***CCM: You talk about the challenges in your family, and I know some of those challenges, like any family, revolves around your children.***

**JV:** Zealand is autistic. When he was born, I got my prayer: ten fingers and ten toes. He's incredible. He is unique, he is funny—he can't even help himself, he laughs so big, from his gut. I love that. After he was born, we started noticing that he wasn't meeting the milestones that other kids were hitting. I would be happy to bury my head in the sand, but my husband likes to be realistic so we got him tested.

From the time he was nineteen months old until he was in the second grade, doctors diagnosed Zealand as “developmentally





delayed.” There were times peppered in those years ...  
“It could be autism.” I was hoping for the best, planning for the worst, and thinking, *It’s gonna be fine*. I remember being in a conference room at my kids’ school when the note from the doctor with the official diagnosis came in, and everybody was saying, “It’s autism. He has autism.” I bawled my eyes out. I went through a mourning period, mourning the dreams that I had for my little boy. *I don’t know if he’ll get married. I don’t know if he’ll have kids*. I don’t know. And then I had to dream new dreams for him.

I’m still trying to figure out what Zealand’s future looks like. It’s gonna be something big. God doesn’t do anything small. He does it all big.

### **CCM: How has your story changed because of Zealand?**

**JV:** Trusting in God in a way that never in my life have I ever been prompted to have to do.

So many people have told me, “God only gives special children to special people.” What I believe that means is God trusted me. For some reason, God looked at my heart, looked at my soul, and said, “If anybody can do it, Jaci can. I’m gonna’ give her Zealand.” Now I have to trust God, that He loves my son more than I do. “Trust,” it’s a little five-letter word we throw around all the time. But to actually *trust*, that’s difficult. God gave me this little boy, and he trusted me, and now I trust Him.

I love being a mom. I love my kids. I like to hang out with them. I don’t wanna’ just send them off to school. I like to be with them. God knew that about me, so He gave me this boy because I was gonna be willing to fight and willing to go to the ends of the earth [for him], and help other families as they walk

through Autism—that I would be willing to hear their hearts, to be there when their hearts break.

**CCM:** *I would think, when you really like your kids, not just love them, perhaps it deepens your trust that God really likes you, not simply loves you. He's not just putting up with us because we're related.*

**JV:** Yeah. Cause we're called to love, but we're not called to like. The Bible doesn't say we have to like everybody, it just says we have to love everybody. But liking is a different thing.

**CCM:** *Speaking of love, you're very inclusive of your international audience. You always have been. What keeps you embracing international audiences?*

**JV:** When I sing in English, it's my first language, so it's my heart. But when I get to sing in Spanish, it's my soul. The passion. The intensity. I don't know what it is about the language—it just makes you ... (ROARS) ... love big, love thick, love all. Love. It's just a different thing. Something changes in your brain, even in your voice, when you sing in Spanish.

I was born in the United States. My husband is second generation Mexican American. His grandparents were from Mexico. But I speak more Spanish than my husband.

**CCM:** *Come on, Nic!*

**JV:** *[Laughing]* I know. My kids, poor guys, talk with a country twang. But I could never lose my roots. That Latin spice makes everything nice.



**CCM:** *So, twenty years in. You've lived a lot of life for a young woman. At this juncture of life, on the road with your audiences, or at home with your family, what is it that you want your life and lyrics to say now?*

**JV:** I can't think of anything clever. I think it's real simple ... inspiring. Who doesn't want to inspire? CCM



A close-up portrait of a young woman with long, wavy brown hair and bright blue eyes. She is smiling slightly and looking directly at the camera. She is wearing a dark top with a colorful, patterned neckline. A semi-transparent green banner is overlaid across the middle of the image.

*Hannah Kerr*

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# Hannah Kerr — This Little Light

With family roots in the entertainment world, even a move to the Music City didn't distract this budding singer-songwriter from answering a higher call

By Kevin Sparkman

Parents beware. Taking your children to Christian concerts just might change the course of their lives forever. We're not just talking spiritually, here—which is a wonderful thing (yes, mom's and dad's, please continue to encourage your kids to go to concerts!)—we're just saying that there's also the very real possibility that the money you've been saving for their college tuition might become repurposed for a degree in the creative arts.

Like **Hollyn** receiving divine inspiration from witnessing **TobyMac** live on stage, Hannah Kerr doesn't shy away from telling you that her first live show was experiencing **Casting Crowns** in concert. Already growing up in a musical family, it's not too much of a stretch that Kerr has now ended up sharing the stage with Crowns and some of the best that Christian music has to offer today, but don't tell her that. The humble-Hannah will emphatically state that she is just simply answering a call.

Not seeking any spotlights, the Source of the call is what is poured into every lyric written and every note that is sung by Kerr. The lead single from her debut album **Overflow** (**Black River Christian**) might as well be a "radiating" beacon for her life in general, *No matter what comes my way / I'll live my life, Radiate Your light / Now and always, I'll let my lips be only for Your name / No darkness gonna stand in my way, If my way is Your*

way then *You'll make me / Radiate*. From her **Belmont University** dorm room, we attempt to shine a little light on Hannah for the purpose of this interview—but we already know what she is going to do with it, so Lord, may Your light shine big and bright.

**CCM Magazine:** *When you first began singing, you weren't setting out to plan a career in music, but you also moved from the Buffalo area to Nashville as a young teen—how much of your current track is a product of your environment, if any at all?*

**Hannah Kerr:** I think it was moving to Nashville and also maturing into who God had me to be. When we lived in Buffalo, there's really not a "music scene." I really just thought I would go to college and be a teacher—which I think would have still been amazing—but when we moved to Nashville, it just seemed like God kept opening doors for me to do music. At first I was resistant to it just because that's not what I had planned. I'm, by nature, an introvert, so I was like, "I don't know if I really want to be in the spotlight?"

What I realized is that it doesn't really mean you're in the spotlight. It just means that God can use you in a unique way. I do have my parents to thank for taking a step of faith and moving my whole family from Buffalo, New York—700 miles away—to Nashville, Tennessee. It really has made all the difference for me in my life.

**CCM:** *Other than avoiding really bad winters, what was the reason behind the move?*

**HK:** My dad actually moved [to Nashville] for his job. He works in the country music industry, so we moved here for that. It was a complete life change. We moved from upstate New York where we're basically living in Canada and we moved down to The



South. I had no idea what to expect. At first, I had a hard time here, just because I was like, “How do I make friends? This is so different.” In that time, I think God taught me so much about me and taught me a lot about who I am and who He says I am. It was a really special time in my life where I wouldn’t have had that if I still lived a comfortable life in Buffalo.

When He brought me outside my comfort zone in Nashville, that’s when I really started to grow with Him. I can see now how this is part of His plan all along.

**CCM:** *For you, saying, “Who He says I am” carries a lot of weight, as it should, but you seem to be very in tune with the heart behind what you’ve been called to do.*

**HK:** People ask me a lot, “Why are you in Christian music? Why aren’t you wanting to be a country or pop artist?” The answer is always that this is the only path that I could ever see myself going—Christian music gives people a hope for a lifetime. It doesn’t just give them happiness for three minutes. We’re not writing truths that we’ve pulled out of nowhere. Every time I go to write a song, I first start by just reading the Word and asking God what He has to say about it. I’ve never written a song that I didn’t feel like God completely inspired. I think that sets Christian music apart from any other style of music. It’s God-inspired. I love being a Christian music artist for the fact that we are ministering to people. What a blessing and an honor it is for us to have the opportunity to speak into someone’s life that we may never even meet.

That’s really blown my mind this journey—that God can use something small that I can offer Him, and then He can make it into something so much bigger and something that can impact someone’s life. I’ve been blessed so much these past



three years by just hearing stories of how God has used me. That's my prayer—that I would be able to minister to people because God is using me, not because of anything that I've done, but only that I'm standing before Him and saying, "God I know You've told me that You don't have to have perfect people, You just need people who are willing to be used." Christian music has spoken to my heart my whole life, so it's just cool to be a part of it now.

***CCM: Can you tell us more about the album title and some of the themes we can expect to hear?***

**HK:** I called my album *Overflow* because every time I sit down to write or record a song, I always pray that whatever God has poured into me He would be able to pour that out through the music. That's what we are as Christians. We're people who are just waiting to be filled up by God. He doesn't just fill us up until we're full, but He always will help us overflow with His love and His truth.

As I was writing the songs for this album, I found myself in many different seasons. For better or for worse, God is with us through all times. There are songs about joy. There are songs about how God just sends us out. There are songs about how God will never leave us or forsake us. It all ends on a sentiment of being still and knowing that God is God, and we are not, and that is a good thing.

When I was on tour with Casting Crowns and playing these particular songs, it was so cool to have people come up to me and say, "This song really touched me. I really felt like God was speaking to me through it..." That's the best thing that I can ever hear as an artist because that's God's voice speaking through that song He's given me.

***CCM: You mentioned that Christian music was a huge part of***







***your life before it was an occupation, so what has it been like to work with the likes of Casting Crowns, Matt Maher, Mark Miller...?***

**HK:** Casting Crowns especially, they are my heroes. My whole life I grew up loving [their music]. They were the first concert that I ever went to as a fan—straight-up fan girl, this is me! [Laughs] To meet them was amazing, but to tour with them and see their heart in person...they are exactly what you hoped for them to be and more. I learned so much from them and Matt Maher. I also toured with **Building 429** and learned so much from them as well.

Specifically, **Mark Hall** has been a big mentor in my life for the past three years. I feel like if I had to learn from somebody about ministry and music, it would be him. His heart is completely for God's work in the people that he gets to impact. It's so cool. Something really big that he has shown me is you never pass up an opportunity to share the gospel with someone, no matter who it is. If you see a security guard at the venue, or someone who's working at the snack shop, or just anybody that's around, God has put you there for a reason. You should treat them as such. You don't just overlook people as you're going about your busy life. God has a plan for each person that you meet. It was really cool to see him minister to people. It wasn't just fans. It wasn't just his family, but he ministers to everyone that he comes into contact with. That was something that I'll never forget as an artist.

***CCM: Where do you go from here? Has God revealed more to His calling for you and your work?***

**HK:** When I first started leading worship, I really just joined the worship team because, like I said, I had moved to Nashville. I was like, "Okay, God, I have no idea what You have for me, so I'm just going to try everything and try leading worship." As soon as I

stepped onto the platform at my church, I just felt like God was saying, “This is who you are. This is what I have for you. This is what I’ve called you to do.” Just over and over in my life I’ve experienced Him confirm that in so many ways. My “dream” for this is obviously whatever God has, but I would love to keep leading worship in my church for as long as I can.



It's been cool to see how God has put that passion in my heart to write music and to share with others what He has done in my life. You can say all day long, "God is so great, and He'll show you," but when you can tell someone that God saved your life, that's powerful. It's just really cool to see how God can use that. I think that this opportunity could lead wherever, but I'm just grateful for what He's doing with it now. It's cool to see how this plan that God had was so much bigger than the plan that I was forming in my mind. I guess I've just learned to surrender our plans to God because His ways are higher than our ways, and His thoughts are higher than our thoughts. [CCM](#)







*Greg Sykes*

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# Greg Sykes — Flipped

After experiencing setback after setback, how does one keep turning it around? For this embattled singer-songwriter, it took a look back to move ahead.

By Kevin Sparkman

We've all heard stories of triumph—people rising above themselves to move past an obstacle. For Canadian singer-songwriter **Greg Sykes**, the struggles have been as real as they can get. Suffering from an age-old battle with anxiety brought on by a fear of being in front of crowds, to suicidal contemplation, to—as a performing singer—completely losing his voice, and consequently barely holding on to a failed marriage on the brink... Well, frankly, we've also heard those stories before, if not even personally have or had experienced them for ourselves.

But for the seemingly common issues Sykes and his family have had to endure, God has led him on quite a unique journey, best described through his debut **Integrity Music** EP, **Reverse**. In fact, the one story that directly led to Sykes' salvation in Christ is so unbelievable, it can only be passed as the gospel truth. So now his life has flipped—which doesn't mean that hard times are a thing of the past—quite the contrary. But there's a peculiar thing about the past when God is placed in control of, well, the controls...that going in reverse has a funny way of showing us how to move forward in the right direction.

**CCM Magazine: *Let's start with the album title, Reverse. Derived from Mark 10 which says, The last shall be first... Why does this message particularly resonate with you in this season?***

**Greg Sykes:** You know, for my whole life I've felt like I just don't measure up. Ever since I was a little kid I struggled with terrible fears, insecurities, worries, and anxieties. I just have in every season—every hockey team tryout, even auditioning for the school play—every time I always felt like, "I'm not even going to do this...there's somebody better..." Yet, time after time I see God go, "Yeah, I can still use you."

But then I would still struggle to actually believe that. Then, of course, when tragedy comes into our lives, there's been moments along the way where as a kid and even now—having my own family—when we faced tragedy I thought, "Well, this is where I come to an end..." I've screwed it up, or I've missed my mark so bad that this is the end for me here, in my marriage or in my home life. Yet God has somehow taken circumstances and flipped them around and used that very thing that I thought was going to take me out, somehow, for good.

One example was when my wife was pregnant with my son and she and my daughter were out for a walk, a drunk driver came whipping around the corner and hit the stroller, tossing my daughter out of the stroller. Miraculously he didn't run her over and hit just my wife's right side. I get a call from the ambulance driver saying, "Hey, your wife and daughter have been hit by a car but we *think* they're okay..." "You think they're okay? Are you kidding me?!"

At the time of that accident I had actually lost my voice completely and our marriage was on the rocks. So, I wasn't able to sing or could hardly speak and I was like, "God, what else can

go wrong?" In the end He used every one of those scenarios for good. At the scene of that accident, there were a couple of nurses walking by from our church who saw it happen. There was a lawyer at the stoplight in his BMW who saw it happen and then chased the guy down. The nurses were able to take care of my wife and daughter and they ended up being fine in the end, apart from some injuries that they got over. My voice eventually came back. My wife and I just celebrated 11 years of marriage, which is amazing. Now, there was a whole bunch in there that we had to do and change, but at the same time a lot of it is just the sovereign kindness of God through it all...taking what we thought was going to wreck us, but now we can use it in our story to explain how God can actually work the things that look like "the end" in our lives for good.

***CCM: Unfortunately, there a lot of people dealing with marriage struggles—even many who may be reading this right now. How has faith stepped in to be the catalyst, the guide that you both needed through those trying times?***

**GS:** I had gotten busy and focused on my own selfish dreams and plans. I had been running a real estate company while working at my church full-time and singing iteratively and had basically put my wife in a very distant second-place. I was an idiot. Narcissistic. And she would have been, I believe, within her rights to say, "I'm done." That was the exact season when I lost my voice. That was the exact season where the accident happened with the drunk driver.

Then my pastor sent me a text that said, "You know, sometimes God makes us lie down in green pastures and he restores our soul (**Psalm 23**)." I was like, "Huh, interesting. I'm gonna try to look at this as God saying, "Sykes, sit down...lay down. Something's gotta change." Although it was painful, when I really





stepped back [I realized] it was my fault. I was the one who was running ragged, trying to prove that I was cool or building wealth through a successful real estate business...[I even] became the worship leader in my church—I was winning on the outside. But where it counted—at home—my wife was alone, she was hurting and actually starving for my attention and affection.

It wasn't until we got really honest with our lead pastor and the best counselor we could find that we knew that our marriage was on the edge of disaster. Basically, it was almost over, like, it was hanging on by its last string. I stopped pretending everything was "okay." I had to put my pride aside and we had to admit to the people we didn't want to admit to that our marriage [stunk]. We got serious about seeing a doctor about my voice. We both agreed in going to God in desperation saying, "Lord, we just need You..."

During that season, I couldn't shake that my pastor's wife was telling me that I should be writing songs through all of this difficulty. I thought, "You're crazy," but as I did that, despite all of the bad that had been going on, I began to make a list of all of the good things in my life. This list became unbelievably long...God *had* been faithful and He never let me down, never let me alone, and I ended up writing this song called "Faithful." As I was going through the rigors of seeing an ear, nose, and throat specialist and a speech therapist to recover my voice, God simultaneously brought healing to our marriage. I ended up getting invited by my pastor to share our marriage story, and "Faithful" became a very special song in our church. It ended up winning a **Canadian GMA Award**, which was, like, my first award, but it's such a testimony to how God can use some of the lowest parts of our lives.

My voice isn't perfect, and our marriage isn't perfect—I want to stress that—but we have experienced so much healing.

***CCM: Another common struggle for many is overcoming fear, especially as it relates to getting up in front of crowds and public speaking, etc. You've admitted that this has been a life-long issue for you, as well...***

**GS:** I think I had to read it about 100 times before it really set in, but the story of **David** and **Goliath**... As a kid, you hear that story and go, "Yeah, that's cool." I mean, God helped him throw that rock and hit the giant just right, you know? But there's so much more to that story, and that's been a scriptural basis for [finding] confidence, and then just trying to live like David.

He worked hard when he was guarding the sheep from prey. He had to keep fighting off the animals that would want to attack and take the sheep, so he had to get real good with his accuracy in defending the flock. I pictured him for many years practicing in the woods and in his fields, so that when actually he got up to face the giant, he could either look at his circumstances and go, "Man, this giant is way bigger than me," or he could confidently step up to the occasion. He said, "No, no. I come in the name of the Lord," who is his strength, but he also had the practical years invested into his skill so he could actually, with confidence, pull back, prepare, and launch that rock with accuracy because he had been there before. That's a practical example of working hard behind the scenes when no one is looking—working on my spiritual muscle, yes, but also the practical, musical things so when I stand up in front of a thousand strangers, I don't need to be afraid.

Because I've done everything I can in my own strength to prepare, and even if I fall short, "I come in the name of the Lord,"

you know? I have the strength of God. I'm going to teach in my daughter's class next week on songwriting with, like, 17 kids. I think I'm more scared of that than performing for 5,000 at **Kingdom Bound**. But in either situation, I have to believe that God has equipped us to do whatever He's called us to do. I'm answering your question in more of the strategic versus the spiritual, but I do still struggle with fear. However, I'm learning that fear is a lie. The trust is, I have what it takes to do what God has called me to do, now matter how I *feel* because I have Christ in me.

I love how David was faithful in just being a shepherd. He was faithful to do one thing at a time, yet he screwed up all the time. He made mistakes. But God said that he was a man after His own heart. I feel like anyone can apply that in their life.

**CCM: *Getting back to the music, what was it like working with Seth Mosley and Bryan Fowler—how did they take to your affinity for your pop music?***

**GS:** *[Laughs]* Bryan only produced the first song and Seth did the other four. Bryan was more like, "Hey, let's reign this in," with regards to going in a more pop direction. I appreciated his wisdom. But Seth was like, "Yeah, yeah, let's throw it in the mix. Let's try it!"

**CCM: *What was it like to be able to collaborate with a guy like Paul Baloche, who actually wrote some of the very songs that were integral to your salvation?***

**GS:** To have him just call me up one night while driving to my church and say, "Hey, this is **Paul Baloche**. I see on Facebook that you're recording some worship songs at your church tonight and I'm excited for you. I just want pray for you and see if I can





help you in any way?" I nearly swerved off the road. To then have him investing in me the last four years to being someone who helped me get a deal with Integrity Music, it's like, "Are you kidding me?"

The fact that the night I popped in that Michael W. Smith DVD, a night that I considered committing suicide at 19 years old and had this encounter with God that was unexplainable, yet undeniable. The fact that the songs were "Open The Eyes Of My Heart" and "Above All..." To then, the next day, walking into church and they're singing "Above All" and to later discover that Paul had written those songs, it's just so amazing.

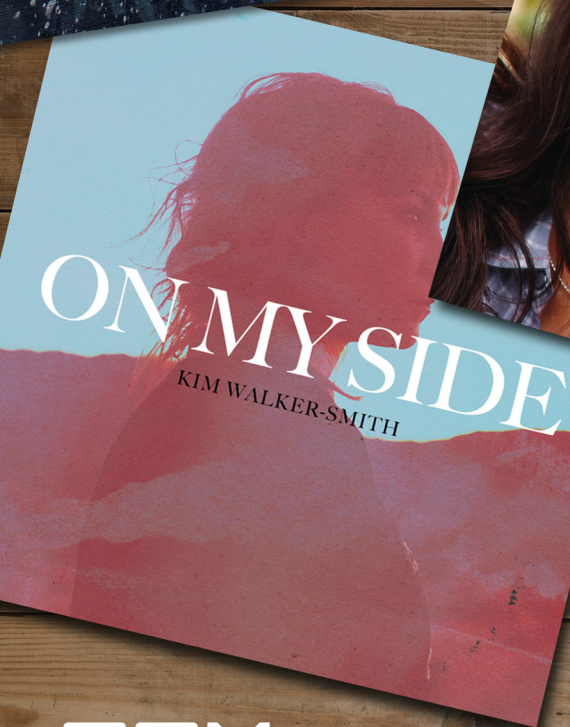
***CCM: Have you had any interesting interactions with Michael W. Smith?***

**GS:** About three years ago when I was in Nashville for the first time at a writer's retreat, on the last day we were told we were going to **Michael W. Smith's** house for the recording of his new DVD, and I was like, "What?!" So there I am at Michael's barn, and they put me in the front row and am weeping through this recording. Later I found out that I had made it into some of the footage.

So, a few weeks after, I get to go to his promo tour at a bookstore near us. I show up late with my wife and he's in the middle of sharing his testimony and he says, "Hey, you're the guy that's all over my new DVD!" He then said, "Why don't you stick around after...actually, we'll just watch it." So he goes to one of the songs and he's showing the room how my face is on, like, every 20-seconds of his DVD! He then said, "You know what, you should come to my church next time your in Franklin and lead worship." So I did. The first church that I ever lead worship at was in Franklin, Tennessee and there's Michael in the front row, at his invitation. You can't make this stuff up. **CCM**

# REVIEWS

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## Various Artists

### **Beatitudes**

(Stugiology Music)

#### **FOR FANS OF:**

*Delirious?*, *City On A Hill*, *Roaring Lambs*

**WE LIKE:** “Holy Troublemakers” by Stu Garrard and Martin Smith”

★★★★☆



Several of today’s most familiar names in contemporary Christian and worship music team up with GRAMMY-nominated, Dove Award-winning musician/producer **Stu Garrard** (formerly of **Delirious?**) for a conceptual trip through the “blessings at the bottom of life.”

Artists such as **Amy Grant**, **Michael W. Smith**, **Matt Maher**, **All Sons & Daughters**, **John Mark McMillian** and **Propaganda** offer a multitude of reflections and praises in their respective styles, serving as a thought-provoking stand-alone project or an immersive companion to other elements of **The Beatitudes Project**, which also include Garrard’s book **Words From The Hill—An Invitation To The Unexpected** and the documentary **View From The Hill**. And strictly from a musical perspective, the stadium-shaking “Holy Troublemakers” may very well be worth the purchase price considering it reunites **Martin Smith** and Garrard for the first time in the studio since their band bid adieu in 2009!

—Andy Argyrakis



**Joey Feek**

***If Not For You***

(GMG/Farmhouse Recordings)

**FOR FANS OF:**

*Joey + Rory, Reba McEntire,  
Hillary Scott & The Scott Family*

**WE LIKE:** "That's Important To Me"

★★★★☆



After bravely battling cancer with her unshakable faith firmly intact, **Joey Feek** (of **Joey + Rory** fame) left the world all too soon in March 2016 at a mere 40-years-old. In addition to her amazing family legacy, she left behind some incredible music that most folks haven't heard outside of an independent release, though thankfully, that's all about to change thanks to the widespread distribution of ***If Not For You***.

Unlike the overtly Christian nature of the duo's last project ***Hymns That Are Important To Us***, this solo recording is straight-up traditional country, but is nonetheless filled with many uplifting messages, values-centered tales and many other staples of the genre. Listeners from any musical background or walk of life should also consider picking up the special edition of the project, which features nearly 50-pages of photos and moving stories surrounding the extraordinary life of an accomplished artist.

—Andy Argyrakis



**Kim Walker-Smith**

***On My Side***

*(Jesus Culture)*

**FOR FANS OF:**

*Misty Edwards, Jason Upton*

**WE LIKE:** "Rise"

★★★★☆



**Kim Walker-Smith's** emergence as a household name for worship music fans over the last 10 years is only the first step, a foundation from which the **Jesus Culture** songwriter and worship leader will minister for the next decade and beyond.

***On My Side*** is Walker-Smith's latest album, another strong release with powerful songs like "Rise," "Throne Room," "Undone" and "Brave Surrender." Each song is given the chance to swell and fade at all the right times, vertical lyrics and emotional melodies that penetrate the heart during both personal and corporate worship gatherings. Walker-Smith knows this territory so well because she helped to establish it.

—Matt Conner

**Bethel Music**

***Starlight***

*(Bethel Music)*

**FOR FANS OF:**

*Jenn Johnson, Francesca Battistelli*

**WE LIKE:** “Extravagant”

★★★★☆



The latest collaborative release from **Bethel Music** shines brightly for several reasons, not the least of which is that it features an all-female line-up of worship leaders. **Francesca Battistelli** joins Bethel faves like **Jenn Johnson**, **Steffany Gretzinger** and more on a live recording filled with vertical songs that point to God’s presence, love and faithfulness.

“Extravagant” is a stirring congregational favorite amid a number of beautiful compositions, as Gretzinger sings, “We’ll never comprehend the way you love us.” The title track, which features **Amanda Cook**, and “God I Look to You,” which Battistelli sings, are two other highlights, but it should be noted that the entire album warrants repeated listens.

–Matt Conner

**Matty Mullins**

***Unstoppable***

(BEC Recordings)

**FOR FANS OF:**

*Memphis May Fire*

**WE LIKE:** “Until I Need You”

★★★★☆



**Memphis May Fire** fans need not be concerned; **Matty Mullins'** solo turn doesn't negate his commitment to the band. The front man's solo debut reveals an interesting musical curveball from the metalcore typically associated with MMF, as ***Unstoppable*** is a pop record through and through. From the repetitive, hopeful refrain on the title track to the “woah-oh-oh” sing-along of “The Great Unknown,” Mullins sounds right at home with this decidedly lighter fare.

“Until I Need You” is the album's closing track and climactic moment, a personal track that shows off Mullins' heart and talent more than others. For MMF fans interested in different hues from their vocalist, *Unstoppable* will be a fun venture to sample and a path to hearing more of Mullins' message.

—Matt Conner



**Hannah Kerr**

***Overflow***

*(Black River)*

**FOR FANS OF:**

*Mia FielDES, Brooke Fraser*

**WE LIKE:** "Radiate"

★★★★☆



There's something very compelling about the melodies and message of **Hannah Kerr**, a draw that feels akin to **Brooke Fraser** mixed with **Laura Story**, command with authenticity. Typically a debut offers hints of the potential yet to be fulfilled, but Kerr, who co-wrote many of the songs on her full-length debut, ***Overflow***, sounds every bit the veteran here.

Her hope-filled lyrics fit perfectly inside radio-ready anthems for an often moving and always interesting final mix. "Radiate" and "Never Leave Your Side" should be instant favorites, but other notable tracks include "I Stand Here" and "Be Still and Know" which features **Casting Crowns'** singer **Mark Hall**.

—Matt Conner



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