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MANDISA DOES GOD QUIT?

HARD QUESTIONS, DARK ROOMS,
11TH HOUR—HOW MANDISA
FOUND HER PATH TO LIGHT.

JUN 1, 2017



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Mandisa

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Iron Bell Music

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Reviews

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Summers = Mission tourism? | Somehow, it's already June. If the whirlwind of time hasn't passed you by, and if you're in this particular field, you have more than likely already planned your summer vacations, youth and/or mission trips.

That's okay! But as you turn the pages of this edition of *CCM Magazine*, pay special attention to our conversation starter with **The Hands And Feet Project** and our introduction to their new initiative, *Ikondo*. Before singing the dotted line on your Summer 2018 trips (we know you have to do that soon!), please be encouraged to think differently, as you think ahead.

What we're saying, here, is that we strongly urge you, your family, youth groups, etc., to think about mission tourism as a viable option for future excursions, and specifically, experiencing this concept in the country of Haiti at *Ikondo* (pronounced: e-kon-doe). "Why Haiti? What's an *Ikondo*, and what does it do?"

For a closer look and to answer those questions, again, please read the June 1, 2017 main feature, "Hands & Feet: Ikondo – The Step Between." As you read, we also encourage you to hold tightly to those questions—and, it's likely that you'll have many more—but to use them as items to pack in your bags to take with you, rather than anchors weighing you down and keeping you from going...



Blessings,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'Kevin Sparkman'.

Kevin Sparkman

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Mandisa

Flipping The Switch

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Mandisa

Flipping The Switch

When the choice is darkness, but God's love just won't quit: The journey of Mandisa's walk toward the light.

By David Daniels

Mandisa released her comeback album ***Out Of The Dark*** on May 19, 2017 (**Sparrow Records**) nearly four whole years after her previous project, ***Overcomer***, dropped to critical praise. Since then, the GRAMMY Award-winning artist faced such deep and personal adversity, it threatened to choke the very life from her.

In June 2014, close friend **Lakisha Mitchell** lost her battle with breast cancer—the very subject that had inspired Mandisa's *Overcomer* album. The tragedy produced such a cloud over the talented singer that it created doubts about God to the swinging points of the highest outrage to the deepest depression.

On the other hand, God was showing up for Mandisa in the very midst of her depths—physically appearing in the form of love from her closest of friends. Relentlessly caring for and pursuing her—amid Mandisa's *choosing* isolation—with God's strength, their persistence paid off, and Mandisa can attribute her proclamation of "I'm Still Here" (lead track on *Out Of The Dark*) to these selfless acts of love.

In this cover interview with the popular ***American Idol*** alum, *CCM Magazine* allows Mandisa to share her vulnerable story in the hopes that if you're choosing to live in the darkness, you too will consider flipping on the light.

CCM Magazine: On the opening lines of your lead single “Unfinished,” you transparently said, “That world I painted, where things just all worked out, it started changing, and I started having doubts.” What caused those doubts, and what were you doubting?

Mandisa: Kisha was pregnant with her second child when she was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I prayed for her. I believed God was going to heal her. When her son **Brendan** was born—who is beautiful, healthy and will turn four in June—I really thought that was just the first answer to my prayer. So, when she had one year with him before she went home to be with Jesus, those are the doubts that I’m talking about.

I’ve had people in my life die before, but because I really believed God was going to heal her, that is what was such a crushing blow to me. I questioned everything. I questioned whether or not I could hear from God. I questioned why He allows things like this to happen to His people who are called by His name.

Why would He allow a mother of two young sons to die, leaving a husband behind to take care of them by himself? If I’m being honest, I questioned His existence. I started to think, “Am I praying to someone who’s not hearing me at all? Am I even praying to anybody up there whatsoever?”

CCM: Overcomer inspired thousands of people. Did you reference those works as a way to overcome those doubts?

Mandisa: No, I didn’t want to listen to anything that had to do with Jesus. I didn’t listen to Christian radio. That’s a big deal for me, because I’m the biggest Christian music fan.

I didn't pray. I didn't open my Bible. I didn't go to church. I didn't want to be around people who I knew carried the light of Jesus, because I wanted to stay in the dark. I was mad at God.

When you're in a dark place, light is uncomfortable. It hurts your eyes. Even though I was miserable, I was content in that dark place. I just wanted to stay there, and I stayed there for about three and a half years.

CCM: Out Of The Dark begins on a triumphant note with "I'm Still Here." How did you get from where you were to where you are now?

Mandisa: The album actually starts out with something called "Voicemail (Intro)," and that is a snapshot of some of the messages I received from my loved ones who were calling me. A few of them were even banging on my front door at one point in time.

Probably the biggest thing that helped lift me out of the dark were loved ones who loved me just as I was—but loved me too much to leave me there. They were concerned for me, and they really had every reason to. I would not be here today if I had not gotten off of that really dangerous path.

I ignored everybody. Like I said, I didn't want anything to do with anyone who was walking in the light. I didn't answer a text. I didn't answer phone calls. I put in earplugs and shut out the world. I started hearing that little lying voice in my head, telling me that God didn't want me to live in such pain, and so if I just take my life, I can be in heaven with Jesus—right now.

It was just a very dangerous path. I hardly left my house for three-and-a-half years. I did nothing but order food to be delivered to my house. If I did leave, it was to go to pick up fast food.



One day, I left my house to go to a movie theater by myself. I saw two movies that day, and so after four hours, I came outside and noticed that my car had a bunch of sticky notes on it. They said things like, “We love you,” “We miss you,” and “Come back to us.”

As I walked around to the driver’s side door, I realized about eight or nine of my loved ones were there. They had been sitting outside of that movie theater for four hours waiting for me. They found me. They essentially had an intervention and said, “We’re concerned for you, and we need you to get some help.” They pretty much forced me to go to counseling.

That began my ascent out of the pit. It was my loved ones who fought for me, it was the power of community and it was dealing with the emotions I had been stuffing down with food. I had gained all the 120 pounds back that I had lost over the years, plus 75 more. I was miserable. I felt helpless. But through my loved ones fighting for me, and through dealing with all of that grief, God finally started lifting me out of the dark.

CCM: What were the messages instilled to you that opposed that little lie in your head that once was tricking you by saying, “I don’t need to live?”

Mandisa: Essentially, I needed to let the light back in. I was only listening to dark influences—nothing but media, movies and television. I wasn’t listening to anything of the Lord, and so I think it was just a matter of my friends and council speaking life back into me—speaking hope.

I remember one of the things my counselor shared was, “Don’t focus on the mistakes that have happened in the past.” It’s so hard for me to not beat myself up when I looked in the mirror, especially seeing that 200-pound weight gain over three and a

half years. It's so easy to give up and just think, "I can't do this again."

But the encouragement to just focus on today was helpful. "What can do you today to walk in the light? Let's just live in the moment. Let's make healthy choices right now."

CCM: On "I'm Still Here," you said, "Everything for my good..." Today, how do you look back on the suffering you endured as "good?"

Mandisa: I feel like I'm living **2 Corinthians 1**, that with the comfort I've received from God, I'm able to comfort others.

I can see how God is using the dark period I was in to give hope to somebody else in similar situations. That's why I know the best is yet to come. What the enemy intended to harm me, I'm seeing how God is now using it for good.

CCM: Also during your difficult three-and-a-half years, racial tension in America rose amid numerous tragic deaths. Did they, and the division you address on "Bleed The Same," also contribute to your depression?

Mandisa: They didn't contribute to it, but they didn't help. My depression was all very much self-imposed.

I would say this... It was Fourth Of July week 2016. On the fifth of July, there was a shooting of a black man by police. On the sixth of July, there was another shooting of a black man by police. And on the seventh of July, there was a shooting in Dallas of policemen by a black man. I just remember feeling like the world was falling apart.

I'm just going to put it out there... I am one of very few black women in contemporary Christian music, and I have black nephews and I have black brothers. One of my brothers is a police officer. Honestly, I didn't know what to say in those moments. I knew I would offend somebody, no matter what I would say.

I did a lot of talking to God that week. I was scared to say something, and at the same time, I was concerned about my nephews and brothers. If they had gotten pulled-over by police, I wanted to make sure they said and did the right things so nothing would happen to them. And at the same time, I was concerned about my brother who's a police officer—about his protection and safety.

I remember writing "Bleed The Same" that week because I really wanted a song that would help us to realize we look different on the outside, and that's pretty much it. As believers in Christ, we should look different than the rest of the world when it comes to how we talk about things like this.

In my opinion, our differences are what make us so beautiful. When I look at how God created me and how God created **TobyMac**, for example, I think, "How awesome of God to make us so intricately and look so different?" All these different cultures in every tribe and every language and every nation will come together, and it's Jesus who unites us.

That's something to be celebrated and not something we should be scared of—not something that should make us color blind. I don't want to be color blind—I actually want to celebrate it and rejoice about it.

So, TobyMac got a hold of it somehow and said, "Hey, I need to be on this song." Then I heard Kirk Franklin speak about this when he was at the Dove Awards, so then I was like, "Okay, Toby,



we need to get Kirk on this, too.” It pretty much culminated into this song that is at the very core of what Toby, Kirk and I feel so strongly about, and that is unity in the body of Christ. We need to be the ones who are sending the message. We need to be the ones that let our love point people to Jesus. It’s a song I feel very strongly about, and our prayer is that God would use it to help us be a united body of Christ.

CCM: Most of your new album seems to be about your story to overcome. How do you see “Bleed The Same” within the grand storyline of Out Of The Dark?

Mandisa: If there’s anything I can say about a dark blot on our country, it’s where we are racially divided. There’s so much darkness. I feel like it fits within the theme of coming out of that darkness and shining our light. That’s the way the Bible says people will know we are followers of Jesus—it’s by the shining light of our love.

I love **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s** quote, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness—only light can do that” (paraphrased). How are we shining our light in such a way that it will drive out the darknesses in our society? [CCM](#)

Hands & Feet Project: Ikondo

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Hands & Feet: *Ikondo* — The Step Between

Haiti, the go-to vacation and resort destination? Audio Adrenaline's Mark Stuart says so, and he's begging you to believe him.

By Kevin Sparkman

Long before the days of rocking stages while fronting one of the most popular Christian bands of all time, **Audio Adrenaline**, a fourteen-ish year old **Mark Stuart** wanted to do something great—and, like so many good Christians that had gone before him, he, too embarked on a mission trip to Haiti. One of the first items on the trip's checklist? Of course, "helping" to erect a new church building.

"I had worked on this rock with a sledgehammer for an hour... hour-and-a-half," recalls Stuart. "I chipped away at it, and eventually this Haitian guy was like, 'Okay, good job.' (He wanted me to feel important.) Then he broke it apart—this boulder—in like, three swings. It cracked in half, and then, they picked the boulder up! I was like, 'What just happened, here?'" Stuart, probably scratching his sweaty, teenaged, wanna-be rock star hair-do, had to be wondering about this "great thing" he was doing (and no-doubt wishing he was lying the backseat of his dad's Chevette).

"Then, I resorted to just shoveling stuff out as [the Haitian man] broke it, because he was obviously more skilled at sledging and picking. Next, he got bitten by a scorpion, cut himself with a machete, sucked the poison out, and wrapped his arm in a shirt... Again, I was like, 'What?! I'm way over my head, here.'"

Stuart goes on to recount that this Haitian man wasn't some super-human, overworked construction worker after all, but

actually the pastor of the church! “And then that night I realized that I was sun poisoned and I wasn’t allowed to get out of the tent for the rest of the week.”

He may not have known it in those early, sunburned days in this island-nation, but this was God’s way of beginning those transformative conversations with Stuart that has paved the way for ministries like **The Hands And Feet Project**, and more recently, *Ikondo*.

So, what is *Ikondo*—some gimmicky nomenclature set to banner a marketing campaign targeted to youth group teens, sell trendy t-shirts and a host of “mission” trips to third-world countries to “help those in need?”

Nope. (You were excited about the t-shirt, weren’t you?)

Built and overseen by The Hands And Feet Project, employing native Haitians, *Ikondo* is, “An upscale hosting facility nestled in the mountains above Grand Goave, Haiti—[it] is a job-creation, mission-tourism initiative...” as described on HandsAndFeetProject.org.

Simply put, it’s a resort...and the likes of Stuart, **Will McGinniss**, the **Audio A** family, and those involved in Hands And Feet want you to just simply, “come along with us,” as Stuart, still battling a voice disorder that ultimately sidelined him from full-time singing a little over ten years ago, eloquently delivered multiple times while *CCM Magazine* met with he and Managing Director **Joel Griffith** recently in a Franklin, TN coffee house.

You might be asking yourself, “*Resort*—doesn’t that mean vacation...in...Haiti? Isn’t Haiti impoverished, starving, needy...broken?” Yes. But Stuart, adding to what is assuredly now beginning to fly in the face of your conventional Christian culture thought

processes says, “We’ve been taught that because we’ve been at churches and on mission trips...you’re [supposed to] bring home pictures of the dump, or of us holding a starving baby, or of us working in an orphanage...

“Rarely do you see, ‘Hey, here’s me on a jet ski in Haiti,’ or, ‘Look at me, I’m snorkeling in Haiti...’ But Haiti is gorgeous, it’s beautiful, and there’s a lot to offer. We feel like the church is uniquely positioned to be the step between where our thinking is based now—which is, ‘You only go to Haiti for mission trips’—to where Haiti could be: A destination.”

Griffith adds, “Initially, our minds are conditioned to feel bad. You do. ‘How can I go down there and stay in an air-conditioned room and eat nice food?’ Obviously, we’re not the first ones saying this—even from within the church. **Steve Corbett** released a book a few years ago titled, *When Helping Hurts: How To Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting **The Poor...And Yourself***, and it has made ripples on how we think about engaging, serving the poor, and walking with them.

“This can be a tricky conversation because this is not a very easy message for some people to ‘get.’ Just yesterday one of our staff received a call from a lady who asked, ‘I get the whole creating jobs and mission tours thing, but what, where and how are we going to really serve? Like, how are we...when are my kids going to really get dirty and dig holes.’ We try our best to explain, ‘If we do that, we’re actually taking a job away from a Haitian. So, we’re going to give you some opportunities to see the work and to see what’s happening in kid’s lives by doing some sort of service, but not in the traditional way that you’re used to...’ So, in a lot of ways, we kind-of just have to put it out there and let it sit for a little bit. Trusting, and allowing for people to really chew on it.” And like Stuart after his first rock-chipping experience, it’s now

decades later—even after years of leading and participating in “traditional” mission trips in these areas—that he and the team are truly beginning to realize what God has intended. Furthermore, Stuart even challenged me, personally, to consider taking a visit to Ikondo—with no other intentions than to just relax, unwind, and enjoy. Admittedly, I had an immediate, subconsciously “huh” moment.

So, since bringing up the subject of *Ikondo* leaves us with more questions than answers—after all, even I’m learning that’s part of the deprogramming process—we fielded a few questions for Stuart and Griffith to answer, in the hopes that some of you might also attempt to answer them for yourself by actually going there (and if you do, please don’t forget to buy a real Haitian-made t-shirt, or two).

CCM Magazine: Say we actually went down to Ikondo today. Not to belabor that earlier caller’s questioning—but, seriously—can you give us an idea of what that looks like?

Mark Stuart: So, we realize we can’t just run a resort with some jet ski’s. We have to provide a full, kind-of smorgasbord of experiences, if you will—serving in a way that really opens up more questions. We’re not abandoning service projects. Coming to Haiti isn’t about your week-long service project, and at the end of it you get to “check-off the box,” that you built a wall for an orphanage. That doesn’t do anything for Haiti. We can hire Haitians to do that better, faster, and cheaper than you coming in and doing the same work.

You will have opportunities to plug in and serve. But coupled with that is the strong message of why that isn’t the crux of your visit here. In fact, this is one of the broken pieces of engagement. So, yes, we’re going to try to steward great opportunities

for you to engage in service, but it will be married with the fact that it's not particularly moving the needle. It's just a way that allows you to work with our Haitians, to give you an experience and a perspective on what's going on here.

Additionally, with all that is a hope to build relationships with the people that are serving on our staff. Our kids that have grown up in our children's village are potentially going to be your leaders while you're here. Which, in turn, creates more jobs for them. But through that, we want to build Christ-centered, healthy relationships where it's an equitable exchange—where, when you leave Haiti you're not taking the dignity of the Haitian people with you.

We want your visit to be an opportunity for you to prop them up, to say, "Hey, Haiti's a really cool place to visit. I can go there and be inspired. I can go there and be ministered to by the Haitians. I can go there and actually be served by Haitians." And then, all of a sudden, we've created a place and a space that's safe for Haitians to be employed and with a dignified job.

CCM: *So, why is this such a difficult idea for people to grasp?*

MS: It's not super complicated. But it is different than what you are expecting. The problems have encircled things like, "I'm going to go to Haiti and visit an orphanage for the week and love-on kids that need to be loved-on." The problem with that is you're leaving in a week. You're not going to build a long-term relationship with a child. We've actually learned that's a harmful thing, because at the end of the week you're gone and that child is looking for you to be in a relationship with... But you've checked-off your box of, "I feel good. I've hugged-on a kid for a week." But, now the kid's left wondering, "Where did they go?" or, "Where do we go from here?"

It's disruptive to the life cycle of these kids. It's emotionally charged. And unfortunately, that's strategic to the people that are bringing you on these trips. They know, "If I can get you to feel good about this week with this child, you're going to be a life-long supporter." I get that, I've played that game, and we've gotten people to come. But I've also realized that it's not appropriate and it's really harmful to the kids.

CCM: *So, what is the main message of Ikondo?*

MS: We need you to come to be an advocate for Haiti, to help it thrive again. Not to just love-on babies for a week, but to end the orphan crisis through job creation. We need you here to create jobs and create economy, so that we can keep families together.

It's hard for people to hear that because they've kind-of immersed in this "mission trip culture" for 30-40 years—since the '70's—that says, "What you're going to do for that week is actually going to be impactful. And on some small levels it can be, but for the most part it's created a lot of issues. Mainly for Haiti, it's really killed the tourism industry. Resorts have shut down due to our perception of, "You don't go to Haiti unless you're going there to be 'heroic' or trying to save it." Again, it's not complicated, but we know there's a risk involved—we're going to step on some toes.

CCM: *In a lot of ways, Ikondo serves as a symbol...*

MS: It's a flag in the ground. Yeah...

CCM: *...almost like it's begging us to want to come and see for ourselves, saying, 'Here's this beautiful resort—in Haiti, of all places—come down here and have some fun.'*

MS: Yeah. And you're conflicted, too. Most people are. When we

first started doing orphan care, it was hard for us to realize that our business should actually be to put ourselves out of business as orphan care providers. The goal isn't to keep building orphanages. We shouldn't celebrate when a kid comes to our orphanage or our children's village, but that's our American mentality. For instance, we will applaud when, to put a name on it, our new orphan Jean Marc is welcomed—we gather around him, take pictures, and celebrate him as another new orphan.

No. The beauty of the *Ikondo* vision is to celebrate Jean Marc's ability to stay with his family, never needing to be abandoned because they have a job and extreme poverty has ended. That's the goal. The "band aids" are emotional, feel good moments, but it doesn't bring long-term change. Our hope is that the church can come along with us, because it's more difficult than just applying a band aid.

The inclination is, "I want to get out of the tension, so, I'll just go build a wall, dig a hole, or paint a fence so that I can feel good. So I can relieve the guilt." We almost need Haiti to be broken so that we have something to fix. Cyclically, that has compounded even more dependency and brokenness in Haiti. What if we can re-think it, and get Haiti to not be broken?

I was just there last week and caught myself watching this guy hoe his garden from across the fence of *Ikondo*. I thought, "I know the people I'm with are looking at him thinking, 'I want to go help him—I'll just take that tool and hoe his garden for him.' That does nothing.

But if we can buy his vegetables and then make his business grow so that he can support his family, then we've instilled him with pride and dignity. We're on an equitable exchange with him rather than, "Oh, let me be your savior." It should be, "Jesus is the savior, I just want to walk with you and help you thrive." CCM



Iron Bell Music

Setting The Table



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Iron Bell Music

Setting The Table

Much like front man Stephen McWhirter's real and transformative encounter with God, the fledgling ministry simply centers on God's presence—whether it be a room, or a barn

By Matt Conner

For **Stephen McWhirter**, the worship songs he sings as a front man and songwriter for **Iron Bell Music** are simply a musical retelling of the powerful testimony God has given him after recovering completely from a life of addiction. From cocaine at fifteen to crystal meth at seventeen, McWhirter's life was heading for an early death before God met him, the son of an evangelist, on a bed at 3:00 a.m. surrounded by the drugs and paraphernalia that had consumed him.

Fortunately, years later, McWhirter is faithful to share God's redemptive story with anyone who will listen (and even gets emotional when telling it sixteen years later). The band's hit single "God Who Saves" was born from McWhirter's powerful story, one that testifies that God's salvation is at work now as much as ever.

CCM Magazine: Were you and the other guys you're playing music with at Iron Bell raised in musical households?

Stephen McWhirter: Personally, I took to music early, and I think all of us did. For me, I spent a lot of time singing in church camps growing up because my dad was an evangelist. When I became



a teen, I rebelled against all of that and bought a bass guitar because I thought it would be the easiest—only four strings! [Laughs] The first song I ever learned to play on the bass was “Am I Evil?” by **Metallica**.

CCM: *You laugh about the teen rebellion thing, but your story is really centered on that, right?*

SW: Yeah, I mentioned my dad was an evangelist. The short story is that the guy I saw in public was different than the one I saw in private. They weren't the same. I just didn't want anything to do with it. In my early teens, maybe around twelve or thirteen, I started rebelling by drinking, cigarettes and smoking pot. By the time I was fifteen, I was doing cocaine, large amounts of crack, all of that stuff. By the time I was seventeen until my early twenties, for about five years, I was a crystal meth addict. I was doing lots of meth every day, not just every now and then. I weighed just one-hundred pounds...all of that.

All through that time, I was strongly and viciously against Christianity. I was the guy who would cuss you out if you mentioned Jesus around me. It got so bad where I'd been up for four days straight. I had this thought that I would die from this, but I was okay with that. I couldn't even imagine quitting drugs, so I just thought that any day, it all could take my life. During this time, someone gave me a book about Jesus called **The Case For Christ**. I was reading it in the middle of the night after having been up, and it's a miracle I was even reading it. I can't remember why I was even okay with it.

So there I am lying on a bed surrounded by drugs in this house full of musicians, the opposite sort-of place that you think someone would come to Jesus. The only way I know to describe it is that I encountered the presence of God while reading this book.

No one was playing music in the corner. There's no pastor. The Lord just knew it wouldn't happen for me in a pew on a Sunday morning, so He met me in a room at 3:00 a.m.

It's hard to explain because the presence of God is everywhere at all times, but there's also this manifest presence of God like Moses on the mountain. I don't know if I'd put it next to that, but I just knew He was in the room. I started having this non-verbal conversation with the Lord where He was just telling me that He was real, that everything in this book I'm reading is true, that He is good. I remember thinking to myself, "God, I want to quit all of this but I don't know how to do it." I felt like the Lord said, "You don't have to do this alone. I'll do it."

I literally just believed God; this thought that He could do it all because He was bigger than me. I fell to my knees, with tears in my eyes; I accepted Christ and gave everything up overnight. I know it sounds crazy, and I've had people legitimately get mad at me for saying all of this, because they have loved ones battling addiction and it takes time. I know that. What can I do? My story is my story. It's what happened. It's what the Lord did. So I went from addict to worship leader one year later. Some very hard-up church hired me to be their worship leader. *[Laughs]*

CCM: *That's such a great background for a song like "God That Saves," I'm assuming?*

SW: Yeah, when I wrote "God That Saves," I wasn't even trying to write a radio song. None of this was even on the table. We were just a community and I was thinking of what God had brought me from, which led to that song, not because I thought, "People will play this song on the radio." Actually, if I thought that, I'd have probably screwed it up. *[Laughs]*

CCM: *So Iron Bell is more than just a worship band. There's a whole ministry here, right?*

SW: Yeah, Iron Bell is part of a ministry in Louisville called **Iron Bell Ministries**. We have a renovated horse barn in Louisville, which is cool, and the owner of this space used to be president of **Kentucky Fried Chicken** for five years and was an executive pastor. He felt the Lord telling him to open up his home for some prayer and worship gatherings. It started out with about twenty people and grew to the point where he bought this horse barn and started renovating it. Now it's packed with people and we're doing what we're doing now.

What we do is open the barn every Wednesday for people to come and be with the Lord. One of us will play a guitar or something, or hang out in the corner, and we let people just pray. We have multiple prayer teams and they just pray over people. That's literally all we do at those meetings. Then we have worship gatherings monthly where we just pack it out and we worship and pray. We love the idea of no fluff. If the Lord doesn't show up, we look really stupid. [Laughs]

We've been at this for five or six years now, in this space. Iron Bell Music came out of us having these worship nights. We've been praying and spending time with the Lord and these songs come out of that. Most of the songs are about God's character. They're not just worship songs, but we're thinking of different attributes of the Lord that we've spent time with. These songs started getting birthed and here we are today.

CCM: *What does Iron Bell symbolize?*

SW: Well, the barn itself is called The Iron Bell, but the reason behind that is a picture of the old iron bells being these dinner



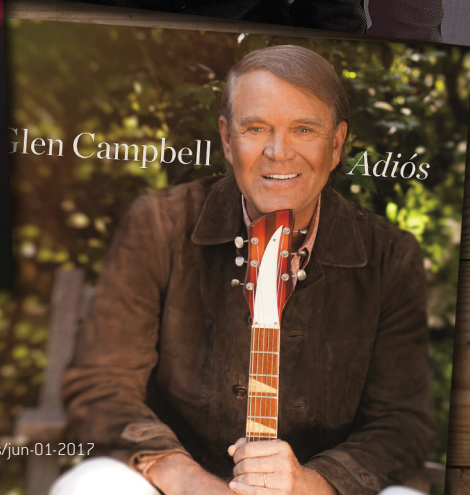
bells in the 1800s. The people working in the field would come to set the table and have lunch. We had this picture that the Lord was an iron bell calling people in to have intimacy with the Lord. It sounds like we're a death metal band. [Laughs]

CCM: *Especially if you lead with the Metallica reference.*

SW: Yeah, I'm not helping my own cause. [Laughs] CCM

REVIEWS

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Hillsong UNITED

Wonder

(Capitol CMG)

FOR FANS OF:

Planetshakers, Kari Jobe, Coldplay

WE LIKE: “Shape Of Your Heart”

★★★★★



Anointed. If given only one word to describe the machine that is **Hillsong UNITED**, this has to be it. From the initial downbeat of title track “Wonder,” listeners will feel a renewed effervescence—a welcoming sonic zest—coming out in bursts of full and instantly recognizable melodies and messages. For a collection of brand new tunes, you see, that’s anointing. If ***Empires*** was a black-and-white ball of potential energy waiting in the wings—underneath layer upon layer of digital loops and keyboard padding—***Wonder*** boldly explodes with blinding color and light, proclaiming the “Jesus way” and the awe of God’s love for each and every one of us.

The album drips with upward gazes while Hillsong UNITED beautifully marries lyric with music to create an unforgettable experience from song one to thirteen. And speaking of the music, there are a ton of hidden gems and perfections, but overall, the sounds that spin from *Wonder* could be a likely representative on the Mt. Rushmore of the modern worship age. What’s unlikely? That many will put this album down any time soon.

–Kevin Sparkman

Jordan Feliz

The River - Deluxe Edition

(Centricity Music)

FOR FANS OF: NEEDTOBREATHE,
for KING & COUNTRY, OneRepublic

WE LIKE: “Best Of Me”

(Live from The Roadshow)

★★★★☆



Those who previously picked up the standard edition of **Jordan Feliz’s** 2016 long player ***The River*** already know what all the buzz is about. But for those who’ve yet to come in contact with the troubadour’s soulful dance-pop smorgasbord, this expanded edition of the compelling collection is an absolute must.

In addition to all the key tracks from the original collection (including the chart-topping title track, plus other #1’s “Beloved” and “Never Too Far Gone”), the relative newcomer adds five bonus tracks (mainly in remix format). An EDM facelift on the latter and a gritty live recording of “Best Of Me” are standouts from this eclectic batch, which is once again centered around Feliz’s relatable, faith-affirming songwriting and instantly contagious sounds.

–Andy Argyrakis

Glen Campbell

Adiós

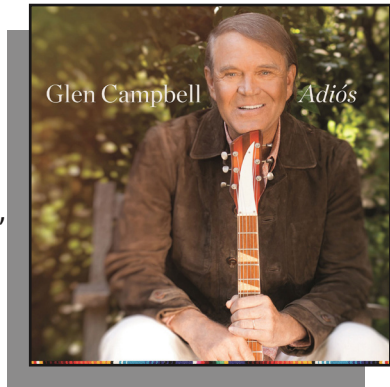
(Virgin/EMI)

FOR FANS OF:

Charlie Rich, Tom T. Hall

WE LIKE: "Funny How Time Slips Away"

★★★★☆



After a career marked by over 50 million albums sold spanning an incredible five decades, six-time GRAMMY-winner **Glen Campbell** is releasing his final album, ***Adiós***. Though Campbell hasn't performed since 2012 and is battling Alzheimer's, Campbell recorded these songs with the help of talented friends like **Willie Nelson, Carl Jackson, Jimmy Webb, Vince Gill** and many more.

The Rhinestone Cowboy himself uses *Adiós* to put his own spin on classic songs he's wanted to record for some time. The two-CD set is a beautiful bookend that pays tribute to his musical vision surrounded by the friends and family he's earned over a half century of making music. Don't miss specific highlights like "Funny How Time Slips Away," "Galveston" and "Arkansas Farmboy."

—Matt Conner

Gretchen Keskeys

Pure Hope

(Creative Soul Records)

FOR FANS OF:

Sandi Patty, Twila Paris, Reba McEntire

WE LIKE: "Running On Pure Hope"

★★★★☆



In the tradition of a timeless inspirational vocalist, coupled with shades of contemporary country and straight up contemporary Christian music, **Gretchen Keskeys** may be giving **Sandi Patty** a run for her retirement money with this impressive sophomore release. In addition to the gorgeous and often times comforting sounds produced by Eric **Copeland** and mixed by GRAMMY winner **Ronnie Brookshire (Patty, CeCe Winans, Michael W. Smith)**, ***Pure Hope*** may very well be a perfect title.

Not only does that message permeate the entire project, potentially encouraging listeners going through practically any personal storm, but it also continues to chronicle the growth surrounding this actress turned news writer, wife, mother and now singer/songwriter's ability to overcome the clutches of anxiety and depression on the strength of a steadfast faith.

–Andy Argyrakis

Out Of The Dust

Out Of The Dust – Deluxe Edition

(Discovery House)

FOR FANS OF:

Jenny & Tyler, The Gray Havens

WE LIKE: “All That I Am Made For”

★★★★☆



Chris and **Stephanie Teague** comprise the newest husband-wife duo, **Out Of The Dust**, and their own marital journey—one that includes separation, divorce, redemption and remarriage—is what grounded the songs on their self-titled debut.

From the anthemic prayer for God to help him/her be “All That I Am Made For” or the slow yearning asking Jesus to teach them “How To Love,” the album documents an honest and hopeful story of God’s love bridging the gap when the artists couldn’t patch things in their own strength. Their willingness to share that story, plus their obvious melodic talents, made this not only an impressive but important release. The additional five acoustic tracks on this *Deluxe Edition* reinforce the timeless messages of their music, all presented in a new and reflective way.

—Matt Conner

Various
Safe House

(Renaissance Movement Music)

FOR FANS OF:

Da' T.R.U.T.H., FLAME, Eshon Burgundy

WE LIKE: "Better Days"

(feat. Laquan Green, Sinai & Legin)

★★★★☆



Featured artists **Legin**, **Sinai**, and **Focus** may not yet be household names in the world of Christian rap, but with the release of this album, they are at least assured to be key figures in a Pretoria, South Africa home where orphaned children caught up in the ever-increasing dangers of human trafficking will find a safe haven. If you like hip hop there is no question that you should get your hands on this project—for doing so, you will aid in equipping the very hands that will help make the dream of this project a reality.

One-hundred percent of the profits of *Safe Haven* will go toward building a safe house in one of the planet's most-riddled areas for sex trafficking. On the musical side of this release, your good-vibes for helping people halfway across the world will accompany a mix of quality rhymes and top-notch production. In other words, you're *safe* and *sound* by bumpin' this batch of beatnik beats.

—Kevin Sparkman

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