BEATITUDES

BLESSINGS AT THE BOTTOM OF LIFE

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From the Editor

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Beatitudes

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CCM Magazine is
published on the
1st & 15th of each
month by Salem
Publishing, a division of
Salem Media Group

Publisher Michael Mi<u>ller</u>

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Web Ad Traffic Coordinator Web & Social Media Support Brandon Woolum Are you a troublemaker? | For this issue of *CCM Magazine* we take a deeper look into the recent works of former **Delirious?** member **Stu Garrard**'s *The Beatitudes Project*. Of the eighteen original tracks on the musical album *Beatitudes*, one of the many highlights is "Stu G's" collaboration with **Martin Smith** on the song "Holy Troublemakers." Beyond the excitement of seeing these two working together again and the sounds they have created, is this confrontational message...and we *love* it.

I'm a troublemaker / I've come to speak my mind / Born to be a rebel / The rebel of a holy kind / I won't raise my fist in anger / But I lift my hands in praise

What if we sought Christ for the words that we speak to each other—from face-to-face communication to comments and posts online? What if we were to rebel against what the world wants us to say or do to our neighbor, and reach our hand outward...upward?

So, fill me Holy Spirit / So I can walk the streets and see the love of Jesus / Healing every heart that weeps / I won't raise my voice in judgement / But I'll start a song of praise

What if we were to seek Jesus in what we see and experience day in and day out—regardless of the filth and the stench that may be present—will we begin to see Him there? Will He also meet us in those places?

What if something as simple as a song could be the spark we needed to bring God's fire into our lives?

So we'll keep on making trouble for the glory of Your Name,











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The Beatitudes Project

Blessings At The Bottom

What happens when we ask, 'Who is our neighbor?' An upside-down message for a topsy-turvy time, The Beatitudes always forces us to look beyond and higher.

By Kevin Sparkman

It's rare when someone can step back at the end of something and realize the fulfillment of a life-long dream. For **Stu Garrard**, it was just eight short years ago when all of his dreams, it seemed, had all but left him. The **Delirious?** days had ended, and for the all-but founding member ("Stu G" joined the band within just two years of its official formation) of one of the most iconic worship outfits of the modern era, Stu admits, "I kind-of hit my own personal crisis."

But like a polyrhythm on a drum loop, there was always something permeating throughout Garrard's life—and it was found, rediscovered, and brought to new light in the book of **Matthew**. "I don't know what it is," says Stu G about the **Sermon On The Mount**, that, he says, has captivated him since he was a child. But what was once favorite scripture passages to read or write underneath an autograph for fans at shows, showed up in a very real and tangible way when the artist found himself at the bottom of life.

"It's an upside-down message," adds Stu, which describes the crux of **The Beatitudes Project**, a multi-faceted offering that incorporates an album, **Beatitudes**, a book, **Words From The Hill— An Invitation To The Unexpected**, and forthcoming film. With

intentionality, Garrard steps back from any potential limelight, and invites his friends to shine, with the album alone featuring the likes of **Amy Grant**, **Michael W. Smith**, a reunion with **Delirious?** band mate **Martin Smith**, **Propaganda**, **Joel Houston** of **Hillsong UNITED**, **Matt Maher**, **All Sons & Daughters**, **John Mark McMillan**, and **Audrey Assad** among many others. Considering the vast scope of this project, headlined by its all-encompassing and important message, *CCM Magazine* highlights *Beatitudes* for this issue and invited Stu G to provide personal insight into fulfilling a dream he didn't even know he had.

CCM Magazine: Let's start at the beginning. How did your admiration for the Sermon On The Mount inspire some of the first visions for this project?

Stu Garrard: Back in the day when we were playing with Delirious?, we'd meet people before or after the show and a lot of them would ask us what our favorite scriptures were. I was always drawn to the *Sermon On The Mount*. Maybe it is because it's how the gospel works practically? Sometimes we trip over the words of Jesus when He says, "I am the way." But I think if we see "the way" as what He laid out in the *Sermon On The Mount*, and especially the *Beatitudes*, I think that gives us a real practical thing of what the Christian life looks like.

I was drawn to that kind of thing at a young age, actually. That's always been my favorite portion of scripture. In terms of the *Beatitudes*, I thought, "There's eight themes here—from poor in spirit to persecution—that's like, a nice number for a record or some kind of project." I just thought it would be as simple as writing songs about scenes. It's always a good time to talk about peacemaking and mercy and poverty and pure in heart. Now, what does that mean? What does that look like? Who are the

meek? And lifting up the voices of those who are marginalized or suppressed—we can never exhaust those sources. And I thought, "Yeah, okay, this is going to be a Delirious? record, and we'll sing about these things, and we'll make a nice little project."

A few years went by, and then [Delirious? was] finished in 2009. That was a hard time for me. You can read more about that in the book, but I kind-of hit my own personal crisis at that time. I wondered, "Is my best work behind me? What on earth am I gonna do? How do I look after my family?" I had my own moment of—what **Eugene Peterson** meant when he said, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope"—I felt like there was nothing left. In that moment, for me, which was a couple or three years of questioning, it was quite depressing, really. "What am I gonna do?"

Yet in those moments, I was feeling like God was not very far away—I still felt close somehow. Then I started to see the Beatitudes as announcements of presence. When there is failure and brokenness, and when things aren't working out, the announcement is, "You are blessed. I am on your side, I am with you." God is on your side. For me, the *Beatitudes* were something different at that point. Not as something to attain—as if to receive a blessing—but rather the fact that when it's broken, and we aren't actually achieving anything, that God is still on our side. And He is really close to us—like, at the bottom of life. That was the genesis of the project, sort of flesh on the bones, if you like.

CCM: We've always loved how the Beatitudes, these, "blessings from the bottom," were spoken on a high place—on a mountain. Another example of how Jesus works. So, why put so much effort into something like this now—why is this message so timely?

SG: Whenever anything happens on a mountain in scripture, we're to take notice—The Ten Commandments, Abraham and



Isaac... This was like, Jesus' most important moment, if you like, in terms of what He had to say.

Why do it now? I think it could have happened at any time in my career or my life, but I feel like once I've lived through a transition of sorts where my career ended and I was waiting for something else to begin, and I started to understand and have compassion on other people who were in those kind of moments.

I also think that it feels, whether this is true or not, it feels like as a nation or nations in the world right now, we've never been more divided or polarized. And I feel like the *Beatitudes* offer us an antidote to that. They say, "Let's open our eyes to those around us, those we don't agree with, those we see as 'the other,' in a lot of cases. Those whose presence we're not even interested in being present. Let's see who the meek are. Let's see who's grieving and let's be like God and be on their side and be present to them." I feel like something that the *Beatitudes* offer us is presence, and the invitation to be present.

Why now? I feel like, honestly, God opened a door for me and gave me a little green light. Because like I said, it'd been a desire for a long time. I was able to go to the Holy Land in 2013 with some friends, and we went with a group called **The Telos Group** from Washington, DC. It's pilgrimage of holy sites, but also you get to meet people who are engaged in peacemaking in the Palestinian and Israeli conflict. That absolutely blew my mind, and it's something that is very close to my heart. I sat on the hillside overlooking the Galilee—where those words were spoken—twice in two weeks in that first trip and it changed me in some way. When I came back from that, I wrote the first song with **Anthony Skinner**. Then I went on to write with John Mark McMillan and All Sons & Daughters. It just felt like, "Okay, let's record these first three songs and see if we've got a green light on the project."

And that's what we did. That's how it kicked off into this creative phase.

CCM: To briefly touch on the companion book, Words From The Hill, can you speak to the dichotomy of working with the likes of such artists as Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith on the musical side, but to then turn right around and pour into the lives of those that would be considered the "meek"—all in and for the same project?

SG: The great thing about Amy is that she is a complete and legit superstar, and yet she's interested in the lowliest person that you can imagine. Once we were sitting down in the green room on a show we were playing together—also with Michael W. Smith—and she asked, "What's going on in your world? I'm really interested." So I told her about this baby project I was working on and she was intrigued. She was intrigued in a way that surprised her, because she thought the things I was talking about with the *Beatitudes* were for the holy and the spiritual. The way that I explained it was that it was for the broken and the lost and every human on the planet. She was very drawn to that. She said, "Is there anything I can do to help?" And I said, "Well, would you consider writing a song with me?" She said, "Yes," straight away. It surprised me, and it took me a couple of months to pluck-up courage to get back with her on my idea.

The thing that we wrote about for the project was about a woman who had been on death row for 27 years and had her sentence commuted to a life sentence. At the time we spoke to her, she was on parole, so the conversation was, "What does mercy look like to you—when you faced your execution within 72 days and yet, you got your life back... What does that look like?" That's where the song "Morning Light" came from. I'm just really grateful for Amy because she said, "Every human being in the

course of just trying to survive will make decisions within which they don't recognize themselves." I thought that was an amazing insight.

For Michael W. Smith... We were in Japan playing together and he got the call that his father was taken very ill and was basically about to pass. So, Michael had to leave and go home. We wrote the song, "Carry On," which is the "blessed are those who mourn" theme from a very personal kind-of place. And I think that is what marks every single song on this record. It doesn't matter how famous anyone is, or how together it looks like you've got it from the outside. Everyone, including Joel [Houston] from Hill-song UNITED and Martin [Smith] from Delirious?, everyone has written from a place of vulnerability and the fact that God is on the side of you when things are broken and not working out.

Some of those songs are about the invitation that we have in the Beatitudes to get back on the hillside where we live, and to open our eyes and look around us to see the other as our neighbor and to show mercy, to become peacemakers, to be holy troublemakers, and stick up for those who have no voice—to swim against the powers that be in the world. So, a lot of those songs, whether they were from legends like Michael and Amy, or from relative unknowns like **Terrian Bass**—who was 19 years old when we wrote the song "Let My Dreams Fly." Her life has been growing up in North Memphis in a really poor neighborhood full of crime and drug and domestic abuse and gang violence. That's where we wrote the song from. She helped educate me in terms of who the meek are in the poor African American neighborhoods and the struggles for racial reconciliation. For a white English man, it was a complete education for me. I am incredibly grateful for her.

The conversations I've had around Franklin, TN, where I live near Nashville, with people that work in racial reconciliation where most of the population wouldn't even know that this stuff is going on. It's something that has changed me. I think what I've gleaned from the *Beatitudes Project* as I've been creating it is that there are certain things that I'm now walking through with friends that I've made through this project, things like racial reconciliation and interfaith dialogues with our Muslim neighbors, and stuff like that. It's an ongoing "project" for me, for sure.

CCM: Let's address that for a moment... The song "I Will Be Your Home" features a musician you have befriended from the Nashville Islamic Center in addition to someone we already know—the daughter of a Syrian immigrant—Audrey Assad. Tell us more about this collaboration.

SG: As part of this journey, I conducted a lot of researched into refugees. Like, those who are currently displaced by war on the planet—that's something I really ache for. As I was researching for the book, I came across this video from **The Guardian**, who is in the UK. They were interviewing two families in this Zaatari Refugee Camp—Syrian refugees. The women didn't know where their husbands were, and they said, "Our husbands can't look after themselves, let alone look after their families. So we're here, we have our children with us in the refugee camp, and I find myself having to be higher than a mother; stronger than a mother." And that phrase, seeing these people who didn't know where their husbands were, looking after their families—they just want to go home, but they can't. That phrase, "Higher than a mother," completely stuck in my gut.

Knowing that Audrey Assad is a daughter of a first generation Syrian refugee, and also her being one of my favorite songwriters in town here, I reached out to her and said, "On one of the 'meek' themes, I want to look at refugees—would you consider writing a song with me?" And I told her about that video. We wrote that song in a day. Once it got past the second chorus, we wanted to have this Middle Eastern influence on the track through to the end of the song. We had some options, but right up until the last minute, I was always hoping for a real authentic kind-of voice to come into that song.

As it turns out, also in the course of my book research, I had spoken to a religious Muslim man named Riyadh Al Passein from Hendersonville, TN. He works with the Islamic Center of Nashville. I had lots of conversations with him about how being a Muslim, he had real experiences becoming "the other" in America, especially after 9/11. Three days before I was to record with Audrey, I reached out to the Islamic Center along with my friend Riyadh asking if they knew anyone who played drums or that was recently here from the Middle East. They put me in touch with this family, and just two days before we went into the studio, I was sitting in a Syrian refugee's home in Nashville. They had been here for just two months and they didn't speak any English. We played some music together and the father, who is blind, played the lute, and his son Hassan played the drum, the tabla. He is a really gifted musician, and so I invited him to come into the studio with Audrey and I and record on the song. That's how, "I Will Build A Home" got recorded. Hassan came into the studio and it's one of those amazing stories of how God's hand is in there.

The Muslim conversation could be a buzz or hot-topic right now, in terms of immigration and everything that's happening with the government. All kinds-of misunderstandings, the violence and terrorism that's going on around the world... But the question I'm asking is, "Who is my neighbor?" And, "How do we inhabit the same space?" The kind of space I want to inhabit with

this project is encouraging us to see other people as our neighbors—our literal next-door neighbors. So, when they move in, do we say, "I can't agree with you, so I'm not going to hang out." Or, "You're going to hell, so we're not going to be friends." It should be like, "Would you like a cup of tea—is there anything I can do to help?" To want for them what you want for yourself, which is to live in peace and harmony.

CCM: The notion of "the last shall be first" from the Beatitudes—it's kind-of an all-time, common human struggle—so how has this had new meaning for you personally while you've been creating this project?

SG: One of the main things I think about when you say that is that the whole of the *Beatitudes* is upside-down—it's very subversive. Even the fact that I've done this in community, that is an upside-down message in the common-world of things. It would be very easy of me to want and try and make this album all about me. I could try to build a new career as Stu-G, but I've intentionally made it difficult for myself by giving the microphone to other people. I know that we are supposed to live this life out in community. I know that this is about opening our eyes to see the people around us, and I think that rather than it being about building my kingdom, my empire—this is about allegiance to something that is greater than myself.

As much as people might look on the outside and think, "Oh, yeah, he's got all these superstars on it," that doesn't necessarily help because not everyone is going to be available to promote or even get together to do concerts and all of that stuff. It's very difficult to try and work all that out. It's difficult to even get someone to tweet about it!

But I know, without the shadow of a doubt, that I'm better when I'm with other people than when I'm on my own. That is part of the upside-down message. We need each other, and we need each other to live this Christian life, this Jesus upside-down life where you're blessed if you make peace rather than choose a side. That is the opposite. We are constantly badgered to choose a side—to be polarized, and divided. To judge rather than show mercy. And that's in every one of us. It's especially easier to judge in the current climate of social media. What about if we had a bunch of holy troublemakers that started being kind online? That would be amazing, wouldn't it?

What does it mean to be an everyday peacemaker? We might not be in a violent hot spot like some of my friends are in the Middle East. Like my friend Jeremy who lives in Iraq, my friend Sammy, he's a pastor in Bethlehem. They are right in the middle of something, where peacemaking literally is the lack of war and violence. But for us, I think that the "how" for those people are the same for us. We build up these walls, and we stick behind them, and we make decisions about whose side we are going to be on. And actually, to make peace, it's about not taking a side. It's about walking out from behind our walls of safety into the contested space, and being honest and real and working for mutual flourishing, where again, this is the thing about being neighbors. Truly seeking, "I want for you what I also want for myself."



Matthew West — Text Messages

Putting pen to paper is nothing new for this awardwinning songwriter, now, he's come fill-circle and adds "author" to his career identity

By David Daniels

When singer-songwriter **Matthew West** lost his Dove Award-winning voice to vocal chord surgery in 2007, his confidence vanished. "My name was only recognizable, respected, or highly regarded because of the voice and the songs I sang with that voice. Without it, I felt like nothing," West said in his new book, **Hello, My Name Is**, which his 2013 chart-topping single by the same name inspired.

In the silence of prayer, West's devastation became peace. He jotted in his journal that God would heal his voice, and he would use it to give a voice to others. West's voice recovered, and since then, his memorable career has been a product of that journal entry—including his new book, which he discussed in a spotlight interview with *CCM Magazine* days after its April 18, 2017 release.

CCM Magazine: What kind of stories are you hearing so far in reaction to the stories you told in Hello, My Name Is?

Matthew West: For starters, my mom loved the book. She's read it three times. You can't get a better endorsement than a vote of confidence from your own mother [laughs].

But it's been exciting to see people's responses. I've had this dream to extend my writing beyond songs, and now I'm having the chance to see that dream become a reality. I'm really proud



of this book, but more importantly, I'm hopeful that it's really going to impact people and help them discover who they are in Christ on a whole new level.

CCM: It's funny you start by mentioning your mother. You've said she prayed that you would become an author, correct?

MW: Yeah, my mom's always been a prayer warrior in my corner, which we all need. She called me years ago and said she'd been praying for me. She felt the Lord put it on her heart that, someday, I was going to not only be writing songs to tell the world about Jesus, but that I'd also be writing books to encourage the world.

At the time, I didn't really believe her because I was a bit of a doubter. I didn't think I was a very good student in school. I thought I was unqualified. Who am I to write a book?

But over the years, that dream has become something very real for me. I feel like the Lord's gifted me with the written word. Now, I'm just trying to make my mom proud. And I'm learning that mom's are never wrong, so I'm not going to doubt her again when she tells me that the Lord has put something on her heart.

CCM: Obviously one man's story inspired your single "Hello, My Name Is", what inspired you to turn these stories into this book?

MW: Every now and then, I'll have a song that just seems to resonate with the audience on a deeper level. "Hello, My Name Is" was one such song. It's inspired by the true story of a guy named **Jordan**. I tell his story in greater detail in the book, but Jordan was a young guy who had the whole world at his fingertips and ... he began to wrestle with the identity of being a drug addict. God radically restored his life, and he shared with me

"As a songwriter, my job is to be really good at packing an entire message into a three-minute song and making it rhyme.."

how he doesn't see himself as an addict any longer, but now he knows that he's a child of the one true King.

Many people have shared with me how that song has helped them to remember who they are in Christ. I began to realize that while we all have different lives and different stories, the search for identity is very much a part of every single one of our lives. The devil wants us to believe a lie about who we are. He wants our search to be a misguided one that leads us to all the wrong places, believing all the wrong voices. I really wanted to write this book to help anybody out there to push away Satan's lies once and for all, and take hold of their God-given identity.

CCM: You've written a lot of hit singles over the years on a variety of topics, so why for your very first book did you feel burdened to address the subject identity in particular?

MW: It was looking out at the crowd every night and seeing a kid out there singing that song at the top of their lungs, "I'm a child of the one true King." It hit me even with my own children that... from a young age, we get attacked. Everybody's trying to slap a different nametag on us. This is a message that I needed to dive deeper into.

As a songwriter, my job is to be really good at packing an entire message into a three-minute song and making it rhyme. With books, I have the chance to go deeper. This was a message that I felt like, chapter by chapter, I could explore a different nametag that many of us are tempted to take ownership of and, with that nametag, expose it for the lie that it is—and in doing so exposing others to truth in Scripture of who God is, and who God says we are.

Really, a lot of it was me thinking about my own kids and thinking about how the world's going to go out of it's way to get my kids to lose sight of who they are in Christ. These days, a lot of my motivation is my own daughters, whether it's my songs or my book. I write messages that I would want them to hear, and chances are there's somebody else out there who needs to hear it or wants their kids to hear it as well.

CCM: Have your daughters read the book?

MW: [Laughs] I asked them the same question. I gave each of them a copy. But it might be slightly beyond their reading level at this point. Maybe it is something they could look back on and get a kick out of saying, "Wow, my dad actually wrote a book—

and he didn't have a ghost writer [laughs]."

CCM: You have said your start as a writer outside of music was your CCM Magazine column about a decade ago.

Do you remember what your first CCM article was about?

MW: That's a great question. I was invited by *CCM Magazine* to write an article. They basically told me it could be whatever I wanted it to be, and so I thought about writing an article on the topic of songwriting. I called it *The Writer's Block*, which had a double-meaning, as you might imagine.

But when I wrote that column for *CCM Magazine*, I was amazed at how many parallel paths there were between the journey of a songwriter and the person trying to write the song of their life, and so it wound up becoming a really cool opportunity to write in a devotional-style. It was really during that CCM column that God began to reveal to me that my mom's encouragement to write books someday was actually something that could become a reality.

I really have to officially thank *CCM Magazine* for not only shining a light on my music over the years, but for also giving me a platform to write that column. I actually saved every single copy of *CCM* that year, and I still have them in my possession as a reminder of some of those early literary works.



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!







Kierra Sheard — Loving Every Minute

On the go every minute of every day—and the some the full-fledged faith-centric fashionista, family girl, and friend finds a firm foundation in her first love

By Matt Conner

Kierra Sheard admits she needs a break. It's exhausting to even list and look through all of her creative endeavors—from television appearances and concert dates, to a fashion line and a host of speaking opportunities. Yet the gospel star is finding God as her strength as she walks through the doors that have been opened for her. The good news is that as busy as she's been, she's also having plenty of fun connecting with fans and sharing her faith.

CCM: You've had seven album releases, a fashion line, a brand new personal app, speaking opportunities and even television appearances. Do you ever take a step back from it all?

Kierra Sheard: I do need a break. I haven't taken a vacation in two or three years. I wake up sleepy from just using my brain everyday—it's almost like [I'm working] even in my sleep! I was just thinking last night that I need to sit back and chill, to just be thankful for all that God has allowed me to successfully hold down. I am still growing each part of my brand, and I hope that it's touching someone and actually inspiring the next person. I work hard, and I pray that it pays off and that I am actually working towards the initial vision that I've seen for it all.

I am busy, but productive. I have grown to say "no" to what I can't afford, and making better decisions. At this point in my life,



and for every part of my life, decisions have to make sense. I enjoy having work to do because it keeps me out of trouble. I am grateful.

CCM: You were recently featured on the television series Being. How was that experience for you?

KS: The experience was so much fun, and I couldn't believe that this show was about me. Having had twenty years of work brush by me so fast is simply mind-blowing. There are so many lessons, awards, accomplishments, and more that I am simply grateful for. I was so glad to have been able to tell my story.

To hear so many great reviews about the show was so heart-warming. It's a part of my purpose. So many young women were so inspired by my story and that is all that matters to me. Being gave me the platform to say what I wanted to say. So many people develop their own ideas of people that they have never met. On Being, I was able to share with them that, yes, "I hear the talking," but here is the truth.

CCM: Despite all of the creative ventures, is it safe to say that music is your first love, or do you actually enjoy other opportunities as much or more?

KS: Besides the Lord, my first loves are my parents and my brother. I am obsessed with them. Music is everything to me, but my parents are how I first learned love. My brother was my first friend. My parents were my first and biggest inspirations, and they still are. They introduced me to God and showed me that it's possible to be imperfect but integrally loving people.

I went to see a therapist some time ago and they said that I have an unhealthy attachment to my parents. I find that hilarious. So, I guess I could say that my first love is...love. To love is a part of my purpose. I love loving and it is what keeps me fulfilling my purpose, because the love that I am always so ready to give causes me think about the people I've never met. This love causes me to always think about what is next. My first love causes me to want to have a plan to give them encouragement through song, or clothes that will help them to be more confident.

CCM: What about a significant other for you?

KS: I will admit, sometimes the journey can be lonely when it's time to close my computer and not send another email. I am like, "Where is my lifetime partner?" Sometimes you just want someone to pour back into you besides your parents, family, or your close friends. But I am good. God is definitely holding me up and I'm whole without a "him."

CCM: After seven albums, what is now speaking to you musically versus when you were first starting out?

KS: One truth is that the mountain is not the only thing that God can bring you over. It seemed like so many songs were about "getting through." I have been in the studio and I have been having blast writing about the joy and freedom that comes with this relationship with the Father. That joy, freedom, truth, and real understanding of who He is causes me to want to do right by Him.

I am now singing about the wisdom that was once shared with me by the Father. Yet, I ignored it and bumped my head in life. I was very careful to talk about relationships and the lessons of why doing it God's way is actually the best way. I no longer sing about Him as if He is this guy that sits in a cloud and constantly corrects us. I used to sing about Him as if He only had rules and no true love languages. I am excited to share this love that actually runs through the soul, revealing to us the parts that can be better.

CCM: Beyond all of this, what else is coming up for you in 2017?

KS: New music is coming very soon. We were just in the studio and raving over the new music and how it must come out now. **Eleven60** is still growing but doing exceptionally well. I am currently YouTube-ing and blogging on my website and working to give my fans more faith, fun, truth and transparency. I travel singing and speaking every weekend, so there is pretty much never a dull moment with me. I am very grateful for that.

REVIEWS May 15, 2017 OUT OF THE DARK THE WAR IS OVER W E A R E L E O

Mandisa
Out Of The Dark
(Capitol CMG)

FOR FANS OF:

Blanca, Jamie Grace, Natalie Grant

WE LIKE: "Bleed The Same"

featuring TobyMac and Kirk Franklin



On her fifth overall album, **Mandisa** opens up somewhat unconventionally with a string of voicemail messages from loved ones sending prayers and insisting that they'll refuse to let her go during a season of struggle. That's because in the four years since her last project, the powerhouse vocalist who first found fame on **American Idol** battled a bout with depression after one of her dearest friends' succumbed to cancer.

She focused on food, took a break from church and basically became isolated at home, but as this emotional album that bursts with vibrant pop and R&B-infused beats so boldly affirms, she's shaping up to be the ultimate "Comeback Kid." While not all of her previous prayers were answered, she's clearly overjoyed with her brother finding the Lord ("Dear John Praise Report," "Good News"), which coupled with support from so many family members and friends, helped Mandisa get back on track with her faith, health and music ministry that's most certainly "Back To Life" as the closing track so gorgeously proclaims.

-Andy Argyrakis

Iron Bell Music God That Saves (Essential)

FOR FANS OF:

Foy Vance, Rend Collective
WE LIKE: "God That Saves"



What began as an organic worship gathering in a renovated horse barn in Louisville, Kentucky has turned into a burgeoning ministry with a national presence. Thanks to the stellar vocal work of **Stephen McWhirter** and the strong melodies on **God That Saves**, **Iron Bell Music** gives worship music fans an exciting new collective to watch.

The title track is the obvious highlight, but the all-in feel of **Rend Collective**'s recordings permeate this entire set as well along with a **Foy Vance** flavor found in McWhirter's charisma. The sing-along "Burn For You" and heartfelt "Fall Away" are bound to be other favorites as well.

-Matt Conner

The Letter Black Pain

(EMP)

FOR FANS OF:

Flyleaf, Evanescence, Skillet

WE LIKE: "Last Day That I Cared"



No "Pain," no gain. If loud guitars and extensive drum fills are more your style, you won't want to miss **The Letter Black**'s third album *Pain*. Funded on Kickstarter, the band has declared it their no-boundaries, "heaviest record yet," freed from label conventions to make a hard rock album for their longtime fans.

No noticeable drop-off's in production value, and the band really sounds as if they've rejuvenated their efforts just for you. Additionally, front woman **Sarah Anthony** puts on a clinic for leading chick-rockers. If you love bands like **Red** and **Skillet**, you'll definitely want to add this to your summer rock playlist.

-Staff

We Are Leo
The Rush & The Roar
(DREAM Records)

FOR FANS OF: Capital Kings,

Jonathan Thulin, Two Door Cinema Club

WE LIKE: "Dimensions"



To coin a phrase from *The Rush & The Roar*'s debut single "Dimensions," this one-liner pretty much sums-up the experience felt on this album: "A rock 'n roll, blue sky feeling." Deriving similar vocal phrasings akin to **Dan + Shay**, a more keytar style of energy—think **Family Force 5**—fills the sounds on **We Are Leo**'s third long player. To put it into two more words, you could say its, "crazy awesome" (or, "CRZY AWSM," as the third track indicates).

The Rush & The Roar is all about fun, and it comes forth right on time to derail any possible hint of upcoming summertime blues. This collection of songs is best served poolside or by the beach bonfire at sunset—at least that's where we imagine ourselves as we listen full-blast.

-Kevin Sparkman

Josh Baldwin The War Is Over (Bethel Music)

FOR FANS OF: Bryan Torwalt, Elevation Worship, Derek Johnson **WE LIKE:** "Get Your Hopes Up"



Bringing forth a collection of new worship songs with his debut **Bethel Music** album, the theme, "new," has peculiarly been surrounding singer-songwriter-worship leader **Josh Baldwin** and his family as of late. In fact, it was a recent east-to-west coast move for the Baldwin's that inspired the elements found in **The War Is Over**.

With songs like "You're My Home" and "Found In You" speaking to this theme in particular, title track "The War Is Over" and "Endlessly" are sure-fire anthems we will all be singing for years to come. Providing for a slight tilt on the Bethel Music sound, Baldwin brings a bit of his own unique southern flair into the mix, especially heard on tracks "Fountains" and "Abraham"—but the blend feels organic, and the album expectedly swells with the rich textures of electric guitars and strings we've come to love.

-Kevin Sparkman

Abigail Duhon
Abigail Duhon EP
(DREAM Records)

FOR FANS OF: Fifth Harmony, Julianna Zobrist, Carmen Justice

WE LIKE: "Give Me More"



When it comes to talent, teenager **Abigail Duhon** has plenty to go around. Good thing, as since she was ten years old Duhon has been recording and releasing award-winning music, sharing the stage with the likes of **Newsboys**, **for King & Country**, and is a regular at major music festivals.

When it comes to her latest EP, Duhon sticks to her strongsuit of dance-infused feel-good power-pop, which, along with her lyrical content, is always a good thing. This enjoyable batch of songs grooves nicely, and will have listeners tapping their feet and dancers moving theirs. Power-ballad "I'm Not Ashamed" nods to her role as **Chloe** in the 2016 film of the same name, that was a **Pure Flix** production of **Rachel Scott**'s life surrounding the Columbine High School tragedy. Proving her versatility, Duhon wraps the EP with another medium-tempo number, "More Than Gold," showcasing her vocal abilities.

-Kevin Sparkman





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