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#### **Remembering Rich Mullins**

20 years after Rich Mullins' untimely death, we sit down with his brother, David, to discuss Rich's life & legacy



#### **Andrew Peterson**

What does this "modern-day Mullins" really have to say about Rich Mullins?



#### Heath, Gray & Cleveland

Brandon Heath, Jason Gray & Ashley Cleveland talk about one of their all-time faves—Rich Mullins



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## DAVID MULLINS



### David Mullins — Remembering Rich

A Rich Mullins-inspired conversation hosted by Andrew Greer

"Rich Mullins introduced me to an experience with God in the context of music that I had never known." – **Amy Grant** 

On September 19, 1997, **Rich Mullins** died in a tragic car crash along Illinois Interstate 39, ending the life of one of the most compelling—and provocative—artists in Christian music history. He was one month shy of his forty-second birthday.

Like many cultural influences whose lives are cut short, seemingly overnight Rich Mullins' life and work became a focal point for a tribe of followers—in even greater numbers than had already gathered during his illustrious decade-plus career—seeking authentic communion within the gracious conversations he perpetuated throughout his life and lyrics.

Growing up in a Baptist congregation in rural Northwest Texas, I knew Rich's music. Songs like "Awesome God," "Sometimes By Step," and "Hold Me Jesus"—unknowing forerunners of our present day modern worship music movement—were staples on our radios and in our worship services. And it was within the musical breadth of his seventh studio record, *A Liturgy*, *A Legacy*, *And A Ragamuffin Band*, that I first learned honest-to-God songwriting was not exclusive to music in the mainstream, but was also available to spiritual seekers inside the church.

In a mid-90's music industry where sales thrived from the slickpop presentation of the gospel, Rich's musical poetry thrived in the realities of the mess and the muck of everyday living. Though his music was resonating with the airwaves across the country, the Ragamuffin troubadour stayed close to the ground by identifying with everyday people in everyday situations in the communities around him. He was unafraid and unashamed to love people, especially those lingering on the outskirts of society. And his generous lifestyle (he gave away the majority of his earnings, which in his lifetime was substantial) and provoking dialogue bolstered the notion of a gospel where God loves us "as we are, not as we should be"—as phrased by his friend and fellow Ragamuffin, author **Brennan Manning**.

Twenty years after his unexpected death, it remains a mystery as to how Rich's down-to-earth songwriting would have fared inside modern worship's trends. Regardless, the inspiration of his lyrics and his life continue to surge through the lives and work of many voices who are influencing spiritual music today, recognized by an ongoing tribute to Rich within the pages of this publication this month.

After his death, Rich's younger brother, David Mullins, a pastor, became a natural spokesperson for the family and a minister of Rich's legacy—attending memorials, hitting the road with Rich's infamous Ragamuffin Band, and accepting a plethora of awards that had alluded Rich during his lifetime, but posthumously, were being administered in abundance. And perhaps, more than anybody on earth, Rich's death profoundly impact David's life. We could think of no more poignant person to help steer our cover conversation in commemorating the indelible influence Rich's has had on ours than his brother. So, with this, we remember Rich.

## CCM Magazine: It has been twenty years since your brother, Rich, made the passage to the other side. Does it feel like two decades since you lost him?

**David Mullins:** It's like it's been forever, and then, in other ways I don't think there's been a day that I haven't thought about it. That event [Rich's death] probably has had, in practical ways, the biggest impact on me of any event in my life. I think that event changed the message of my life and ministry.

## CCM: How has it changed the trajectory of your ministry and message?

**DM:** In the afterword for **An Arrow Pointing To Heaven** (**B&H Books**) I talk about how I used to believe that God works through all things to bring good, but I don't believe it anymore. It's not that I don't believe it because it's not true, it's because I've come to know it more—in something that was really bad, I've been able to watch God work. The trajectory of my ministry and the messages that come out of my life have been about the brokenness of life and the beauty of God, not separated but completely intertwined in an odd way that you can't define. Scars have become the key thing in my life.

## CCM: In the sense of, here's this great tragedy and yet you have experienced beauty and grace?

**DM:** Losing a brother has opened a door for some effective ministry, dealing with people who have lost someone in a tragic way. I was on staff at a church in Wichita and our receptionist's brother was killed in a motorcycle accident. I didn't get to see her before she left to go home for the funeral. On the day she came back, I walked in, thinking, I'm a pastor here. I'm supposed to have answers for this. I'm supposed to have some theology that makes this OK. Everything in me is going, Say something

meaningful, and all that I could get out was, "That sucks." What an awful pastor, right? On every level. But she said, "Thanks for not using, 'We know that God works through all things to bring good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose' as an anesthesia."

When Rich was killed, I went on the funeral tour for a number of memorials. The following year I was out on tour with **The Ragamuffins**, so I was always seeing people. There's something in us that has to make everything OK, so I had people tell me the reason for the accident was God wanted him in his heavenly choir. I was like, "I appreciate the sentiment, but here's my problem—God is everywhere. Rich was already in the choir. The thing is now I can't hear him. And that may be selfish, but that's where I am." God didn't whitewash any of the hurt out of the scriptures. When we shortcut and say, "Don't hurt. You shouldn't hurt. Here let me just take away the pain," we cut out the goodness God develops in us.

#### **CCM:** Grief is a connector, right?

**DM:** Absolutely. If it weren't for the pain and what comes with the Fall, I think most of us wouldn't even want God. I hope as I mature I need less of [the pain], but I also believe that the more mature I've become, the less I avoid it. I actually embrace grief more now. I've learned to say, "Man, that really hurts. Why does that really hurt? And where does real healing come from?"

## CCM: We have witnessed people swallowed up by grief. How do you embrace grief without letting it take over? Where's that line?

**DM:** ... by not taking God out of the equation. It's easy to fall off on either side—avoiding grief because God's good and so it's all got to be good, or life is really hard and it's bitter and it's painful.

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For me, [grief and God] seem like they cannot go together, so I go to God and let Him show me [how they interact]. Through Rich's death, I would probably have been overwhelmed if I had just focused on grief. But if I embraced grief focused on God, there's a way through.

CCM: Your life, like your brothers, is really involved with those who are broken. What has compelled you to be so integrated with the broken and those on the fringes?

**DM:** ... because that's where I am. I honestly don't know how to connect to people who aren't [broken]. People who say, "I have never once felt disappointed with God," I don't know that you need me. I'm not sure that you need the gospel. If life is that wonderful for you—and I really don't mean it flippantly—I hope it continues, but my experience has been that there's a whole lot more that say that than experience that.

I read the scriptures and I come up with a picture of what I believe Jesus is supposed to be. One of the things He's continuously done in my life is destroy those pictures. Every time He breaks my picture [of Him], there's disappointment because He's not what I want Him to be, yet by breaking [my picture], he allows me to come to know Him in a more real way. Unfortunately, it feels like in the church we protect God by creating these pictures of Him and then defending them to the place that we never really come to know Him.

One of the ways Rich really impacted me was in his pursuit of really knowing Christ. He looked at who Christ is and he didn't get rid of the things that didn't seem to fit together. Rich was twelve years older than me, so growing up with somebody that was doing that in my formative years, really impacted me.

## CCM: How do we get through all the ideas of what is told to us about God and about Jesus to actually discover who really is God and Jesus?

**DM:** Live honestly. I think living honestly creates a space for God to come in and say, "This is me honestly." And it's this terrifying thing ...

#### CCM: ... you think it's terrifying—who God is?

**DM:** Yeah, because I don't think He will be what we want. He never has been. He gives grace when I want justice, and He brings justice when I want grace.

I want a God who doesn't let your brother die in a car wreck when he's on his way to do a benefit concert for battered women or something. God, seriously, you're the Almighty and you can't keep one Jeep on the road? It's like, "Could you just get on my plan here, God?" And I love that He won't.

CCM: There's a Nadia Bolz-Weber quote that says, "We want to go to God for answers, but sometimes what we get is His presence." Perhaps He is the fullness of what we actually need.

**DM:** That's the book of **Job**. Job's been asking, "Why did all these things happen to me?" And God speaks, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Where were you when I did this, when I did that?" At the end, Job goes, "My ears had heard of You, but now my eyes have seen You; therefore, I repent in dust and ashes." God does not answer Job's questions. He never tells Job why. We want to know why, but why will never satisfy us. God instead tells him, "I Am." I Am matters.

#### CCM: Have you felt that in the loss of your brother?

**DM:** Absolutely. One of the things I found was that He was not mildly intimidated by my anger, and He never answered why. I still, at times, will wonder, Lord, why? He was 42. There had to be more songs. I would love to have heard the songs that came from his late 40s, from his 50s. God has not answered why, but the thing that He has done is said, "I Am, and I have worked through all things to bring good." Spiritually, I can say I know God today in a way that I would not if September 19 [1997], if twenty years ago had not happened. He has proven himself to be I Am, not I was or will be, but I Am. I Am here. I Am love. I Am good.

## CCM: What is the most meaningful thing you have discovered about God in not having those questions answered?

**DM:** That He loves me enough to let me ask. That He really is not playing hide-and-seek, that He really does want to be known. Those questions stirred me to know Him. He's used them to draw me in.

\*Read more contributions from David about his brother, Rich, in the new book, *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth: Spiritual Conversations Inspired by the Life and Lyrics* of Rich Mullins by Andrew Greer.



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## ANDREW PETERSON



#### **Andrew Peterson**

To Be Loved, Not To Be Loved (Rich Mullins Tribute)

A Rich Mullins-inspired conversation hosted by Andrew Greer

In the world of spiritual music, **Andrew Peterson** is often considered one of its finest poets. His songs give us pause as his reflections on God, and man—and how one relates to another—are enlivened through his careful crafting of words with melodies. Though he would be cautious of the comparison, Peterson's way of writing (and perhaps his way of thinking and feeling) reminisces the spirit-sensitive prose Rich Mullins perpetuated throughout his deep discography of thinking-theology songs.

Throughout this conversation with Peterson, he eloquently remembers the ongoing influence of Mullins' music on his own music, and even more poignantly, the impression Rich's life has made on his own life ... forever.

CCM Magazine: Do you remember the first Rich concert you attended? What kind of impression did it leave you with?

**Andrew Peterson:** The first time I heard Rich in concert was at my little Bible College in Florida. When he talked about God, I got the sense that he was talking about an actual person that he actually knew, not about an idea. I wanted that. I was so hungry for that. I'm hungry for it now.

I remember Rich saying if you want to know God, or [want to] be close to God, obey Him. Go do the things that He's called us to do. Rich wasn't perfect, but I think he tried to live his life as if the gospel were true. That way of living resonated with a lot of people who, like me, were hungry for the gospel and wanted it so badly.

## CCM: What was it that you experienced through Rich's music that you see now influencing your own music?

AP: Rich's music was this combination of Scripture and poetry and humanity. His songs were full of Scripture, and they could be loftily poetic, but they were also very human, using folky vernacular. He brought all these big, beautiful ideas down to earth, and he sang about them with an earthy voice—in a key that I could actually sing in. To feel like you've been given a gift of some kind but you have no paradigm for expressing it was very frustrating. So for a young guy who wasn't a good singer, but felt like he had a song to sing, hearing Rich's music gave me permission to try—I didn't have to be perfect or slick if I wanted to write songs.

CCM: As Christians, it seems we find it natural to view God as our father, but discovering Him as our friend—as this personal God—is much more complicated. Do you feel like helping others put "skin" on God has been a part of why you write songs?

**AP: George MacDonald** wrote, "A poet is someone who is glad about something and wants other people to be glad about it, too." Sometimes a songwriter is someone who feels captured by the wonder of something and wants somebody else to be captured by it, too. An encounter with Jesus is the deepest version of that. I had an encounter with love, and with beauty, and truth, and that person has a name and I want you to know that name, too.

It wasn't until I heard Rich talk about God as a person that I believed that it could be true. I'm so frightened of being known. One of the main things that keeps coming up in my life and music is this fear that once people really know me they won't like me anymore. Or worse, they might despise me. I project that fear on to God, and on to Jesus, so my tendency to hide from Him is a habit that I'm constantly trying to push back. Going to church is a way for me to fight that habit—to go to a place where I'm known, and can go to the table every Sunday and be assured that the One who knows me best loves me most.

I was in college when I heard [Rich's] "The Love of God." When the chorus ends with, "In the reckless raging fury that they call the love of God," I just wept because I couldn't believe it. Is that really who He is? Does He really love me that way? So as a songwriter, one of my highest callings would be to make Jesus known, and one of the ways I do that is by telling my story about who He is in my life.

CCM: We live in a divided culture. We are so strained by social issues, by politics and platforms—is the solution really as simple as love?

**AP:** It's not a question of our love, but of God's love for us. **Brennan Manning** said, "I am now utterly convinced that on Judgment Day Jesus is going to ask each of us one question, and only one question, 'Did you believe that I loved you?'"

If I'm honest with myself, most of every day I don't believe that Jesus loves me. Even though He has provided mountains of evidence to the contrary, I'm so convinced that I'm a screw-up that no matter how much I try to work that out by doing nice things, the effort is all flesh, not spirit. These actions pale in comparison to those moments of transcendence, of real grace,



where I'm stopped in my tracks by something beautiful that actually breaks through the noise in my head and the narrative that I've told myself for my whole life—it shatters that just for a second, and the voice of God breaks through and says, "You're loved." And even if just for a moment, I have the grace to believe it. That's why I'm so bonkers about reading books and watching movies and listening to music—I'm always on the hunt for evidence that there is a God and that He really does love me.

<sup>\*</sup> Derived from the new book, Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth: Spiritual Conversations Inspired by the Life and Lyrics of Rich Mullins by Andrew Greer.



## Brandon Heath, Jason Gray, Ashley Cleveland — Sharing Our Scars (Rich Mullins Tribute)

A Rich Mullins-inspired conversation hosted by Andrew Greer

Jason Gray, Brandon Heath and Ashley Cleveland are three of Christian music's most prolific, and honest, songwriters. Inscribing accessible melodies with authentic life lyrics—ripe with the tension and ache of embodying souls built to live forever while the confines of our skin-and-bone obsess with the here-and-now—songwriting has given them the ability to share their very human stories and the hope for spiritual surrender with a broad audience ... not unlike Rich Mullins.

Having each been directly influenced by Rich—Cleveland, through living alongside Mullins on the road for a season; Gray, through attending his concerts; Heath, growing up hearing him on tape. The three articulate songwriters engage in conversation about how music, and Mullins' example, helps us share our scars.

CCM Magazine: What a privilege it is to commemorate Rich with good conversation, and with such good conversationalists. My first question pertains to your personal experiences with Rich's music. What did you witness in his lyrics that you wanted to embody in your own music?

**Brandon Heath:** Rich's lyrics were more like poetry—sometimes they don't rhyme, you know? He threw a lot of rules out of the window. As a creative person, especially when I was younger and learning what my parameters were in songwriting,

it was good to see someone breaking the rules, who didn't mind being a little verbose at times and threw out meter when he was saying exactly what he wanted to say. My first number one song didn't have a chorus, and I would definitely attribute it to Rich—he gave guys like me permission to say what I wanted to say the way I wanted to say it.

**Ashley Cleveland:** You know, in an industry that had very little genuine first-generation artistry, and by that, I mean, so much of what you heard was a kind of a Christian imitation of something that had already had success and had been created by somebody else in the mainstream, Rich Mullins was a genuine article. He was his own thing—almost militantly so. I mean ... he wouldn't even bathe for concerts. [Laughs]

Because I was somebody who was in the mainstream, and then was offered an opportunity to wade in the water of the Christian industry—I really had always kind of been attracted to writing about my faith—there was an intimacy in his lyrics where God was a lover. And I loved that. I love that, still.

**BH:** I've asked questions of **Terry Hemmings**, who's the head of my label (**Provident Music**), about what it was like to hang out with Rich. He went on for hours talking about him, things that I don't even feel the freedom of sharing in this interview.

#### **CCM:** [Laughs] That's common, yeah?

**BH:** Yeah. I was really intrigued by who he was as a person. I loved his candor and his transparency. It gave me permission to do that, not only in an interview, but also on stage. When I see an artist perform, I don't want to hear them talk unless they have something to say, and Rich always seemed to have something to say.

CCM: Jason, this lyric from your song, "The Wound Is Where The Light Gets In": "You can recognize a saint by the scars they don't disguise / You can pick a real sinner by the kindness in their eyes / So if you're stumbling in the dark and bleeding at the shin / Remember the wound is where the light gets in." In my estimation, that lyric is a real embodiment of this kind of "ragamuffin gospel" that Rich tried to live.

**Jason Gray:** It seems like it's who he was, and it happened in the wake of him— wherever he went there was a thing that kind of happened in his wake ...

CCM: ... his ability to express how our apparent weaknesses become some of our most effective strengths.

JG: Yeah, I recognize that. One of the things that I've found most compelling and attractive about Rich's work was that he had no regard for his reputation—and so the freedom that goes along with that. I was watching this YouTube clip where from the stage, in his introduction of the song, "Hold Me Jesus"—this is the mid-90s at a church somewhere—he's talking about being alone in a hotel and how hard it is not to watch "those" movies in the hotel room. As he's talking, I'm realizing I don't know any artist in contemporary Christian music who would risk revealing ... he's basically saying that after the show he struggles with watching porn. There's just something so healing and attractive about that kind of transparency.

In **James** it says, "Confess your sins one to another that you might be healed." Our tendency is instead to hide our sins from each other, hide our weaknesses, so there's no possibility of healing. And there's something about the way Rich conveyed himself that felt very confessional, and invited that kind of transparency, because he didn't care what people thought about

him. So from the stage he can give an introduction of a song where he talks about struggling with watching porn in a hotel room that's very liberating for those of us in the audience.

CCM: Why is it so important that we're not only aware of our own brokenness, but that we also attempt to share that with others?

**BH:** If I was on stage portraying a perfect, unbroken person, it would not only be inaccurate, but it would be inauthentic. And we have to give people a lot more credit for being able to see through stuff like that. I look up to people that I feel they're telling my story—either through their writing or through the songs that they're releasing—and it makes me feel as though I'm not alone. And I feel like that's what connects on a heart level, when you can go to a place, even if it was the day of, where you really struggled with something that may be controversial and to have an open conversation about that with the audience.

JG: I believe our sin tries to hide itself from us, and sin's most effective hiding place is in our self-righteousness—in our goodness. And a lot of that comes from the story we tell ourselves. The story is about how we are heroic, and our good intentions, and how blameless we are, and how noble we are—it's about us being the hero. Or we tell ourselves we're worthless, we're disgraceful. It's hard to receive grace in either of those stories.

I was watching an interview with Rich recently, and I was so aware that the interviewer was very impressed with him. Rich diffused a lot of that kind of hero worship going on. It made me aware of how when I have a true conversation or when I hear any kind of truth, it clears the room of a lot of smoke. Whenever I encounter and have conversations with people who are very truthful, and truthful to themselves about themselves, it's

always very clarifying. And clarity brings healing. So I think being transparent in the way that Rich so wonderfully modeled brings clarity to every conversation.

AC: I remember I played up in Michigan once, and this guy that promoted the show said, "You don't remember me, but you all played here when you were out with Rich Mullins." He said, "I used to host a really big contemporary Christian radio show, and we would have the artists come in on a regular basis. Once I had Rich come on the show and at the time he had a number one hit." The guy welcomes him on and says, "Oh and by the way, congratulations!" And Rich said, "What for?" The guy says, "Well, you have a number one song. It's huge! Coast to coast!" And Rich goes, "Really? I hate that song." And he, of course, had written it, so... [Laughs]

I think he naturally wrote of his encounters with God in a way that a large group of people could get ahold of it—and that was part of his gift. He lived out this intimacy with God that, for me, I wasn't quite there yet when I met him. I had little tastes of it, or little glimmers that it could be, but I really got that from him. And also, he was kind of a mess, so that gave me so much hope—because I'm a mess.

CCM: What have you experienced—it could be through art, through a song, another medium, or through personal relationships you've had with people—what have you discovered about God through sharing in brokenness?

**BH:** Jesus's life was always about humility, about servanthood, which never was convenient. It required giving of something, so losing something. So as a "wounded healer," obviously Jesus, knowing his fate, that He would be broken, there is something to be said for the touch of a healer that can identify with you. There

is a struggle with us as Christians, as people of faith ... we know our salvation is secure but we also know our daily struggle with sin. So we're literally facing life and death all the time. So I think it's healthy to engage both—certainly not to fall deeper into sin just for the sake of engaging, but not being afraid to say, "I'm imperfect. I sin. And hopefully it tells the bigger story about who we all are."

## CCM: I think there's this acute awareness of pain in Rich's poetry. What is it about brokenness that really binds us together?

JG: Richard Rohr says, "The two most transformational experiences in a human's life are either great love or great suffering." And so I think, man, all of our big songs are either about great love or great suffering because those "me too" moments feel especially meaningful, especially in great loss. And so I think pain is such a connector because we need assurance that we aren't alone over and over again. I also think that we're so averse to pain, and so afraid of pain, and we want to avoid it that it's really hard for us to be present to it, which can make us feel disconnected from ourselves in the midst of our own pain—so we not only feel separated from everyone else but we feel separated from ourselves. So those meaningful, careful songs about pain can help us reconnect to the parts of the story that we are afraid to connect with.

AC: I'm a recovering addict. I know what it's like to be way down in the hole, not delivering any kind of excellence on any level. And I'm keenly aware of people that were kind to me for no good reason. I didn't deserve it. I didn't repay 'em. I was a wreck. And there's a part of me that's still equally broken, so I best not forget that. And I think Rich was very aware ... that broken piece in me, that shattered part of me, that's the best thing I have to give away. That is the seat of anything decent in me. No question. And I need to stay tied to it.

I feel joyful and grateful to be alive, and to have a life. It shouldn't have gone down that way. If I personally stay connected to that broken piece in me, then I am very aware of the brokenness around me. If I start to think I have something going for myself, all is lost. 'Cause even if I do, who cares? Who really cares? [Laughs] Is that gonna' help anybody?

CCM: Your story reminds me of a famous Rich lyric: "Surrender don't come natural to me / I'd rather fight you for something I don't really want, than to take what you give that I need." Does surrender ever become natural, become easy?

**AC:** I just think kind of all sin is original sin. And that whole desire to be God in my own life and in somebody else's life ... me being in charge has really not worked out. When I walked into an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, I used to hear the [phrase], "My best thinking got me here." So, clearly nobody needs to put me in charge on anybody's committee. [Laughs]

Surrender requires me to yield. I go down swinging, especially if it's something I really care about, and yet when I surrender, it's such a relief because I become the right size. I become the child and God becomes the parent. That doesn't mean I'm a child with no responsibilities—recovery is an active program, it's certainly not passive—I do the work. What I surrender is the results. And where my life takes me. And certainly what choices other people make, because I can't do anything about that. I love that lyric, too. I identify with it one hundred-percent.

**BH:** I believe most people think that being a Christian is being good. And being "good" can also translate to being "better than." So it really contradicts the life of Jesus. Being "good" feels like such an unattainable goal.

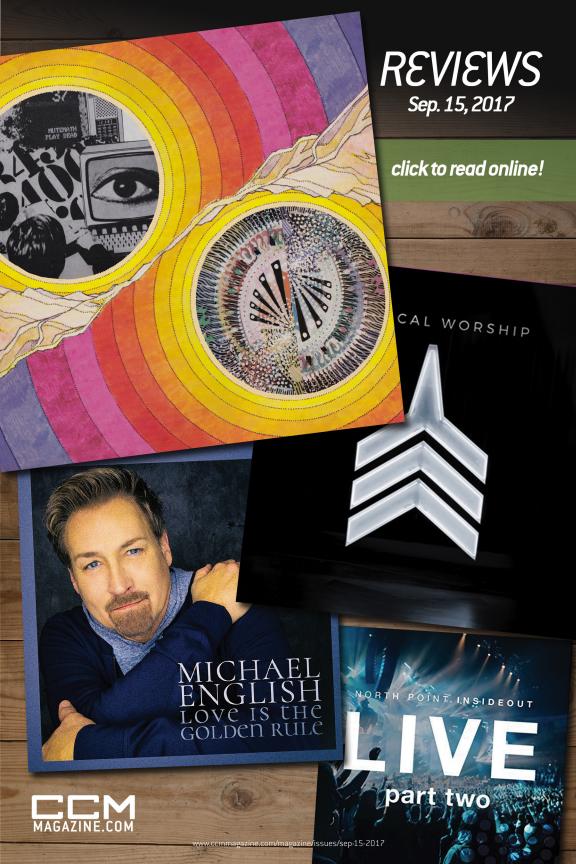
#### CCM: It is, essentially.

BH: Maybe what Rich was doing was retraining—we will never be "good enough," but grace covers that need for goodness, because really redemption is what we need. We don't need to be "good," we just need to be redeemed, and understanding what that is and who that is through. It's only through Jesus that we understand the full love and grace that God extends to us, that will change us from the inside out. It doesn't mean that we'll be perfect. We're still on the road. If I have arrived at wherever I'm going, then I've nothing else to learn, and if I have nothing else to learn, then, frankly, I don't think I have anything else to offer.

#### CCM: Have you learned to receive grace?

BH: I'm learning, yeah. I'm learning. It's not always easy.

\* Derived from conversations around the new book, **Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth: Spiritual Conversations Inspired by the Life and Lyrics** of Rich Mullins by **Andrew Greer**.











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