

Mark Gersmehl Interview
By: Ken Wiegman



In Christian music, as your faith grows and God writes understandings on your heart, you learn new things to talk about. You want to explore your faith. To me art and life, and faith, should all have a restless quest for the future. A lot can be drawn from the past and I love a lot of what my history has been, and I feel very grateful for the opportunities I've had, but I am very intrigued and excited about the future.
- Mark Gersmehl

Were you a member of the Gaither band?

Yeah, I was. I went to school at Ball State, in Indiana, and I got hired as a horn player to play sessions over [at their studios]. Eventually, a couple of guys that were playing the sessions with me asked me to become part of [the tour band] and I turned them down twice.

The third time, I felt like I wanted to do it—[I was kind of an agnostic at the time]. They are the real deal, they lived the life and they were a wonderful influence on my life. They were a wonderful influence and it was also good from a musical aspect--they were playing all arenas. Five or six members of the original Whiteheart line-up were in the back up band, as well as Sandi Patti and some other talent. I was grateful for the opportunity to learn about that part of the Christian music scene and to see wonderful dedicated musicians and ministry people who took the message to everywhere in the world, just trying to reach people. It was a great training ground for me.

Like a parallel to discipleship, looking at discipleship as a tree branching out, you've come out of the Gaither's, as well as a lot the Whiteheart back up band, and then from Whiteheart we've had more branches.

You're right, I feel grateful for that. I do believe that it's important for us all to mentor and rise up the next generation, to be a positive influence on people. If there is anyway I can help somebody [musically]--I take that seriously. We had a lot of talented people, pass through our ranks [in Whiteheart] and it's a thrill to see people grow and be part of that in some small way. Quite honestly, what they did for us—we were rejuvenated many times by a player or even a lot of people in support positions, i.e. tour managers and stage personnel, that went on to some really good jobs in our industry, because they had a lot of gifts and they were given a chance to work on those gifts with Whiteheart. It was an honor for me to be a part of that.

Was there any time before 1998 that you ever thought of breaking solo?

I've always loved bands, the chemistry of them or the lack there of sometimes. They're big and messy, like families, but they're wonderful when everyone is hitting on the same cylinders and playing off [each other] on stage. The seed was kind of planted for me back in my last few years at Curb records. The A&R person there, who had worked with Geffen records and on Don Henley, Yes, Peter Gabriel singles--she's got all these platinum records on her wall with songs that she worked to radio--she said "A lot of these songs you're turning in I really love, they're wonderful songs, but they don't feel like Whiteheart songs to me," and she was right. There was a part of me that was just, I think, turning in a little bit of a different direction and not that I didn't love what the band was about. She said "Have you ever thought about doing a solo record" and I said NO! I haven't! She just encouraged me at that time.

I thought for a while I was going to do something with my wife, who was a member of Rachel, Rachel and we were pursuing that, but then she decided she wanted to be a full time mom, which I stand behind 110%. So that's when I said, "what am I going to do?" I felt like the Lord was writing things on my heart in a different way and a lot of it came to me as I was sitting on my grand piano looking out our front window in the morning during my devotion time, or on my runs--I run a lot. A lot of these songs were written while I was running. I felt like if it was just about me, I wouldn't want to do a solo thing. But I felt like --if I think about what God is able to say through me, then it's an utterly different thing for me, spiritually and psychologically. I feel it's an enormous privilege to work in Christian music and to work your faith out in a song. To be able to do that in the intimacy of a solo setting has been a wonderful moment for me.

Was there an awakening for you?

It coincided with the journey of what I was going to do with this next stage in my life. Trying to think of how am I going to support my family, but also more than that, "What would God have me do at this time? How would he want me to use my gifts?" It did coincide with the birth of Trevor. When those expectant eyes look up at you, it's that very humbling moment of knowing that you are not anywhere near what you should be and just hoping that God is going to speak to you and change your heart, to give you more character. To give you a better sense of what His love means, and how to care for my wife well, how to love well, how to be someone my son can look up to. Then I realized there was no way, on my own, I can conjure up those things.

So it has been an awakening for me to realize that there is so much more. I feel I'm privileged at this point in my life to be discovering that, and partly through the chance of using this musical tool that He gave us to find out those things for my own life. And I hope that through the process of making this record, somebody else might see in my struggles and joys, and hopefully a little bit of my vulnerability, that they might find a bit of their heart in this process. I think that's the wish of every Christian artist that the experiences we have might provide hope and challenges for other people to search out God in their own hearts and to find a bit of the destiny He wants for them.

Concerning the role of music in worship, how do you see music being used as a tool of worship?

I think music is utterly remarkable and unique in the gifts that God has given us, because I believe that it has the soft hands that unlock the door of a heart unlike anything else that God has given us. I think back to a movie where you've been waiting and waiting for these two people to get together and finally make the magical moment of that first kiss, and as powerful as that is, people remember the music surrounding that and they go out and buy the soundtrack. Because there is something that happens that utterly links us to that moment. It's a powerful, powerful tool, and I think that's why He wants us to worship through it. It's the uncomplicated path to His heart because all you have to do is open up our hands and raises our voices and He'll be there for us.

I do believe that music is an enormous part of how He wants us to worship. That's why, in the history of Israel, the songwriters and the players came first in the procession. It starts the process of reaching Him. I believe that there are wonderful things that are happening in the Christian music world that we have re-acquainted ourselves with worship, but I also believe that there is a place for the high sounds of worship to come down to the daily dust of our lives. The same God that they worship on a Sunday morning, or with their worship CD when their listening to Third Day in the car, it's the same God that's going to be right there for them.

There is a lot of spirit in your music. How do you maintain this high level?

A lot of these songs were written with immediacy to them and were mirroring events in my life. Also, I feel like I was being spoken to and I felt it more intrinsically this time than on any project I've worked on before. I think that's part of what the awakening is, to realize the preciousness of all these days, the 24 coins of every day. I lament the times when I'm not close [to God]--and there are plenty of times--but it does feel like a stage in my life that I am getting more of a glimpse of what He's talking about and it's so satisfying and it makes me not want to miss these days. I love the feathered breath of my son when he's falling to sleep in my neck, I love looking at my wife, and I love holding her hand. I love the tactile sense of that and I think it's spiritual. I believe that God does want us to live our lives passionately and beautifully. There is mystery in life and it's to be explored and so many people feel like they have to go to a move to find that. I hope to be saying in this record, "Yeah, you can find it in the movies, but you can find it in your own life as well." It's there for you if you let that spirit dominate you and I don't want to be dominated by anybody but God.

While on the road singing and sharing these songs, particularly "Breakdown", are you prepared for the possible impact that's going to have? You've said you like to listen to people talk after the concerts and that's going to bring out probably the saddest moments of their lives and they will probably feel relieved to talk about it, but are you prepared for that?

I'm getting that way. Part of it is seeing the tour busses loading up in the Kroger parking lot near home. I didn't miss that part [of being on the road,] but I did miss the chance to be a part of people's lives. To speak music and His word into their lives and after the last song was done--I really missed the listening part. I want to be a listener and I take it very seriously when people tell me their stories. I miss that part of it. I just started playing this record [live] and already the "Breakdown" stories are coming fast and furious.

What's remarkable is that it was originally written about someone going through divorce. But the stories [I'm hearing] are all different. Some are divorce, some are family breakups, some are sickness--it goes on and on. What seems to be happening with that song is that people are able to plug their own story into it. I honestly feel that I've been lucky to be a part of it in some ways, something that God wanted to do and I tagged along a little bit. I feel humbled and honored that people share such intimate details of their lives with me and I pray for strength.

[My wife] Brynn told me that when we were playing in Tulsa recently, she went off stage and prayed for all the people that God wanted to speak to through that song. That they would hear themselves in that story and would find what they need to breakdown about. I love that about her and that she's doing that, because in Tulsa, the line [at the table] filled with people telling their story. I think that it's going to be a very important song in what I do in the future. It always leads to worship--we take that moment and try to surrender what is happening that moment to God and let Him come in a powerful way. I think that is going to be a cornerstone of what I do for a long time.

The song “Shoes” is for your wife?

I still hear her pans clanking; she’s a great cook, which is fabulous because I’m a great eater--that’s my gift. She’s got beautiful eyes, and she’s a very transparent person. It was one of those times when I looked at her and I realized that I was talking too much and doing too little. I went into the other room and was playing my piano and I landed on something that was musically really fast. My running shoes were on the floor and I thought, “Gosh, you know, if this a way and a truth and a life, I need to get some shoes, I need to start walking down that road.” So I strapped those shoes on and went running and a lot of those lyrics came to me at that time. It seems that this record has been a lot of that. God is very good to me during my time running, He speaks to me in the beauty of nature. We have good times pounding the pavement.

What about touring?

We’re just starting that process now; the record released on May 21st, so we’re letting it gather some visibility. I’m doing scattered things through out the summer and starting in the fall, we’re looking at doing something. I’m looking forward to going out and hitting it heavy in all kinds of places. That is when you start to hear people’s stories and be a listener. It’s hard to go on to the next city sometimes, when the very best you can do is listen and then try to refer them to some of the counselors you met earlier in the day, from good churches. There are people [I’ve met after concerts] that I’ve carried on relationships with, [corresponding with them] for 13 years, because their stories were compelling.

This album has been very intimate, personal, and derived from hard times, but what was the most fun about the trek?

It was fun at the studio. We had a great time with what I call the 21st century garage band. Brynn sings the background vocals; Jimmy Lee Sloas also sang some vocals. Other than that it was just Richie Biggs, the engineer, and he and I did a lot of the drum programming. Mark Hill, who has played countless Christian records, was on bass, but he also got to play guitar for the first time [on a recording.] Mark is just an extraordinarily talented guy. Both of those two guys [Mark and Richie] are from southern Illinois and they’ve known each other for a long time. There was just a wonderfully high level of verbal bantering and abuse that was going on between the two of them and we had a lot of fun.

Since we were doing it at Richie’s studio [located in his garage] we didn’t have the pressure of hours or the time clock going. It was fun to be inventive, but I felt the joy of coming to life. I’m so grateful at this point in my life to live another day. I’m really joyful, more than I’ve ever been. At times I’m almost giddy about the Grace that’s been given me and I am so excited for what the future could hold--and I don’t mean that just musically. What came out through this whole project was just the astonishment at the beauty of life and the utter expectation to live it further. I hope in some small way I’m able to communicate that to people. That they can look at their own lives and say, “I can’t believe how great it is to be living and breathing on this planet. To be a child of God and know that He cares for me and that my life can be so rich and it’s going to be so rich because I have faith in the One who loves me, to have created me and placed me here.”