

# The Rebirth of Hip-Hop

☒ You can't tell by looking, but I'm a big fan of hip-hop.

Let me clarify.

I grew up listening to lots of music: southern gospel, rock, country, R&B, pop, black gospel and old school rap. That probably defies logic to most, but that's just the way it was around the Bonham household back in the late '70s through the late '80s. Actually, anything that wasn't Christian was usually smuggled into the house by my oldest sister Rhonda and then secretly enjoyed by me.

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## John Shelby: Salt & Light

☒ Anyone out there heard of John Shelby? Anyone? Anyone?

Perhaps a few folks in Baltimore or Los Angeles might be able to raise their hand, but truthfully, the average American has no idea who I'm talking about.

So here's a quick rundown: John Shelby has spent the past 32 years in Major League Baseball; first as a World Championship player with the Orioles (1983) and Dodgers (1988) and now as a bench coach for multiple teams (currently Baltimore).

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# The Battle for Downtown L.A.

✘ When it comes to God's blessings, there aren't many that top having a job that you absolutely love. I've been fortunate to enjoy such a blessing this year as the producer of a feature-length documentary called *Life Happens*.

Currently in production, this film tells the stories of people who almost weren't. In other words, these people very easily could have been another abortion statistic in our country had it not been for courageous mothers making the right choice—sometimes at the very last moment.

So far, we've interviewed over 70 people for the project in such places as New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Georgia and California. Some of the notables include Alveda King (niece of Martin Luther King Jr.), University of Georgia football coach Mark Richt, Minnesota Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, the Rev. Walter Hoya (who spent 19 days in jail for his sidewalk counselling efforts in Oakland, Calif.), Troy Newman (president of Operation Rescue, an abortion advocacy group), Hall of Fame pitcher Jim Palmer and Star Parker (founder of Urban ., a Christian urban renewal and education coalition.)

But the most compelling stories have come from average people who faced extraordinary circumstances and felt intense pressure to terminate their pregnancies rather than give life to their child. These people are the true heroes; the people who hopefully will inspire others to make the same choice.

One of the most eye-opening moments for me personally came last week in downtown Los Angeles. We heard many amazing stories of expectant mothers who were facing financial, social, cultural, medical and even familial pressures to abort

their unborn children. In some cases, we were blessed to see the fruit of their decision for life-babies and toddlers who are now the joy of their lives.

Those stories came from the only crisis pregnancy center in downtown L.A. It sits quite literally in the middle of an abortion warzone where there are no less than nine abortion providers within a one-mile radius. On one particular block, there are four of these clinics (usually innocuously referred to as “family planning” services or “family health” centers). This area is known as ground zero for those in the pro-life community.

These clinics are known for targeting low-income women with a decided focus on the large Latino population. And how they drum up business is almost as disturbing as the abortion procedure itself:

1. Clinic workers often stand on the street corner with balloon-decorated table full of fliers and, get this, coupons for 50 percent off their services. Read between the lines and we're talking about coupons for abortions.

2. Those same employees have been known to coach women into how to work over the government health care systems for free abortions. One of the crisis pregnancy directors we spoke to told us of an instance where she inquired about the clinic's services and was given detailed information on how she could milk Medi-Cal for prenatal care funding and then ultimately lie about health concerns in order to get a government funded abortion.

3. People not necessarily affiliated with these clinics are often hired to act as solicitors. They are given \$25 for every referral they get to pay for abortion services. Judas sold out

Jesus for a few pieces of silver. Likewise, these death merchants are selling out these unborn babies for the equivalent of dinner at Olive Garden.

I was angered when I heard these stories but also grateful to be made aware of these injustices. How else can we fight for the helpless among us if we don't know what evil plots are being perpetuated against them?

The Bible is pretty clear about what godly justice looks like. The word justice is, in fact, mentioned 134 times in the New International Version. It's about taking care of the poor, the widowed and the orphaned. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 25:40 that we will be judged by the kind of justice we employed while here on Earth.

"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

As I've worked on this film and look forward to its completion (sometime in September) and subsequent release (sometime in October), I've been challenged to become more active in standing up for the unborn children of this world; a group that could easily be labelled "the least of these."

That's why my future plans are to get my church involved in volunteer work at a local crisis pregnancy center, gathering supplies for women facing unplanned pregnancies and being vocal about what I've learned about the atrocity of abortion and the social injustice being waged against the most vulnerable in our nation.

If you're not already involved in this kind of work, please consider taking a stand for life. The future of our nation depends on it.

*Chad Bonham is a freelance author, journalist and television and documentary producer from Broken Arrow, Okla. He has authored several books including a four-book FCA series (Regal Books) and is the coordinating producer on a forthcoming documentary called Life Happens.*

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## **Mourning For Michael**

✘ When Michael Jackson died last week, I have to admit that the news not only jarred me, but deeply saddened me as well. I grew up during the height of his staggering career and, as both a passionate music fan and an aspiring musician, was greatly influenced by him.

Jackson's groundbreaking album *Thriller* released when I was 11 years old and over the next two years produced hit after hit after hit. Songs like "Billie Jean," "Beat It," "Wanna Be Startin' Somethin'," "Human Nature" and the title track were routinely played on my sister's record player.

Those same songs (and many more) have played in my head like a mental jukebox since the day he passed. He impacted the world with music like few others before him or since. Elvis, The Beatles, Sinatra and U2 join him in that rarefied air only occupied by the truest of icons.

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# The Listener

☒ Have you ever wondered what it would be like to read other people's minds? I sure have. Never having to guess motives, attitudes or the depth of truthfulness could really come in handy.

Of course, sometimes I think its best *not* to know what other people are thinking. The access to such brutal honesty probably wouldn't feel too good.

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# Destiny's Manchild

☒ I've been writing about Christian athletes for over a decade now, but it wasn't until this past couple of years when I started to understand the precarious nature of my work.

You see, I found out something interesting about these sports stars that perhaps I didn't fully comprehend –they're human.

It's a simple truth, I know. But when you're as big of a sports fan as I am, it's easy to prop these guys up (the Christians and non-Christians alike) on some seriously tall pedestals. They do what the rest of us only dream about; and they get paid big-time money to do so.

There's no telling how many athletes I've been privileged to interview over the years, but there are several that stand out. One in particular is currently in the spotlight thanks to his unexpected presence in the NBA Finals. The series was supposed to be an iconic showdown between the league's two

biggest names: the Lakers' Kobe Bryant and the Cavaliers' LeBron James.

Unfortunately for "King" James, Dwight Howard and the Orlando Magic crashed the party. Howard entered the league in 2004 straight out of high school and made an immediate impact. He has since elevated his game to All-Star status and is widely considered one of the game's most dominant defensive players.

In October of 2006, I had the opportunity to spend about 20 minutes on the phone with Howard. The interview was for a *New Man* cover story that was published in March of 2007. Howard already had a strong reputation as a young athlete who was living out his faith in a very public manner. Our conversation produced comments to back that up.

"I know my calling on my life," Howard said. "I know that the NBA is just a way for me to tell people about God—you know that He is real. My purpose in life, my goal for the NBA is to preach God's word—not just try to beat everybody over the head with a Bible but just being a good example and always conducting myself in a Christian-like manner."

I don't usually name my articles. That's the editor's job. But in this case, I offered up the suggestion "Destiny's Manchild." It was a play on words that emphasized his nickname at the time "Manchild," and the fact that his mother's struggle to have a second child (she suffered seven miscarriages before giving birth to Howard) was an indication of divine purpose for his life.

A few months later, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes asked me to write a four-book series on its behalf. Each book would feature one of the organization's core values. Dwight Howard was an obvious choice for the book titled *Integrity*. Although

I was unable to secure a fresh interview, Howard (through his agent) gave me permission to use the pre-existing conversation.

I finished the chapter early December of 2007. It was the first chapter that I completed. About three weeks later, I received an e-mail from the project coordinator. He assumed I had already heard the news, but I had not. Howard had fathered a child with a former Orlando Magic dancer.

Needless to say, my chapter about Howard was scrapped from the book. The ironic thing is that the piece used the analogy of Joseph and Potiphar's wife. It was the story of how Joseph was tempted to have sex with a married woman but he resisted and was then thrown into jail thanks to her false accusations.

This quote from Howard was especially prophetic: "The flesh is one of the weakest things, especially in a man," he told me. "That's the biggest temptation that we all face. The only way for me being a Christian, me being a human, to not follow through with temptation, is to run from it and to stay away from those types of situations."

Even though Howard was barely into his 20's at the time of our conversation, he was already fully aware of what evils were lurking around every corner. In his failure, he simply proved that all of us are capable of making bad decisions.

Before I go any further, please know that I am in no way passing judgement on Howard. Even though he has not yet publicly acknowledged his mistake, there's no way of knowing what is going on in his heart and what steps he has taken towards restoration and how he plans to protect himself from making the same mistake in the future. That's ultimately between him and God and the people closest to him.

Still I can't help but wonder how much more powerful his witness would be right now as the massive spotlight is shining on him. Howard is facing one of the world's biggest sports stars in Kobe Bryant and playing against one of the most recognizable sports franchises in the Los Angeles Lakers. It's difficult not to be somewhat saddened by the fact that he could have been glorifying God through his athletic exploits.

Instead, Howard is, at least in the public eye, just another athlete. He's just another talented young man who sports fans can idolize and fantasize about having his life.

I'm not ready to write off Dwight Howard. Even if I was, it wouldn't be my place to do so. I'm still holding out hope that he will eventually allow God to bring him back to a place where he can reach people for the sake of Christ.

There are plenty of biblical and modern day examples of that very thing happening. King David and the Apostle Paul are two amazing stories we can point to in God's Word.

More recently we can look to a couple of baseball players like Baltimore's Brian Roberts and New York Yankees' Andy Pettitte who got caught up in the performance enhancing drugs scandal but have come clean and are using their situations as a way to minister to others.

So when you're watching the NBA Finals this year (or even if you don't care one thing about sports), say a prayer for Dwight Howard and other athletes like him who have stumbled and (like the rest of us often do) have succumbed to their humanity.

"Everybody needs to realize that it doesn't matter how old you are or how young you are, you still can be a Christian and

live for God," Howard said towards the end of our 2006 conversation. "It's not easy but that's why we have God's Word and He forgives us when we do something we shouldn't be doing."

I'm trusting that Howard has remembered and, more importantly, acted on those words. I'm also praying that he will once again rise up and allow God to use him in a mighty way that goes far beyond lane-clearing rebounds and two-handed power dunks.

His dream of reaching the NBA (it's players, coaches and fans) for Christ can still be a reality. It's a dream that we should all desire to see come true.

*Chad Bonham is a freelance author, journalist and television and documentary producer from Broken Arrow, Okla. He has authored several books including a four-book FCA series (Regal Books) and is the coordinating producer on a forthcoming documentary called Choosing Life.*

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## Mr. Clean

☒ My wife Amy is a Boston Red Sox fan. Strangely, she's never been to Boston. In her defense, when you grow up in Oklahoma where there are no Major League teams, I suppose you've got to root for somebody.

So needless to say, she thought it was pretty cool when I had the chance to interview one of Boston's star pitchers Justin Masterson for a Fellowship of Christian Athletes baseball New Testament.

Masterson is one of the more impressive athletes I've been privileged to meet in recent years. He somehow managed to survive growing up as a preacher's kid (I can say that because I was one too) and resisted the temptation to sow his oats as a teenager and young adult.

They call him "Mr. Clean" because of his shaved head, but you could argue the nickname is just as apropos when talking about his rock-solid commitment to a high standard of biblically-based moral living. He doesn't have any gory tales of drug addiction, alcohol abuse or sexual deviance that serve as the basis for his testimony.

Nope. Masterson has simply walked in grace and set an impeccable example for those around him to follow. Is the guy perfect? I seriously doubt it. But it's refreshing, nonetheless, to see a professional athlete who can back up his words (which are actually fairly sparse compared to others) with actions that are dripping with godly integrity.

That's because Masterson has an eternal perspective that so many of us struggle to embrace. I would imagine making millions of dollars and receiving all the perks that comes with playing professional sports might make that difficult for some. Yet here's a guy who truly gets it.

"I could have woke up today, maybe slept on my arm wrong, and never be able to pitch again," Masterson recently told me. "If I'm not okay with that, then for me, I think that would be a problem. Not that I don't want to play anymore, but there are so many more important things to me than the game of baseball. There's my faith and my wife and those types of things. But for me it's just appreciating every day that you're given."

Another indication of Masterson's character shines through one

of his favorite Bible verses found in Matthew 22:37-39 where Jesus says, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.(NIV)”

“I love that verse because Jesus tells us plain and simple I want you to love God with all that you are and to love people,” Masterson explained. “If you do those things your mind and will and actions will be moving in the right direction towards God.”

Those are pretty wise words for a 24-year old baseball superstar playing in one of the league’s biggest markets on one the country’s most popular teams. Thank God for young men like Masterson who are showing sports fans and other athletes alike that it’s still possible to fulfill the calling of 1 Peter 1:15: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do.”

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## **Praise Him in the Storm**

Israel Houghton was facing an identity crisis. He’d known a few of them, growing up bi-racial in a white family. This one wasn’t about race, though. This was about who God wanted him to become.

It was the 1990s, and he was a brand-new worship leader, not yet the nationally recognized music artist and Grammy winner he is today. For six weeks he had repetitiously sung the same handful of songs at every meeting—and his congregation was bored. “Every service ended in a train crash,” he said.

Finally, after one such derailment, an outspoken woman in his church known as “Sister Sandpaper” challenged him to get his ministry on track. She flatly told him that he didn’t know what he was doing. He knew she was right.

“The problem,” she said to him in her familiar blunt manner, “is that you’re working out worship on our time. This is the first time all week you’ve been in worship. You need to figure out who you are.”

She had thrown down a self-identity challenge that Houghton knew he had to pick up. So for several weeks he tried new things.

He moved his piano into his kitchen. “I liked the acoustics in there,” he says. He read Psalms randomly and used his resulting prayers in times of musical improvisation.

“There was a whole lot of tears ... God revealing Himself to me in a way I’d never known,” Houghton says. “It had nothing to do with performance. ... It had to do with the repositioning of my heart. There were a lot of songs that were written that will never be heard.”

As for his songs that *have* been heard since then, they’re the reason Houghton is today one of the most influential voices in modern worship. He figured out who God wanted him to be.

He is now a co-senior worship director on staff at Joel Osteen’s 43,000-member Lakewood Church in Houston. As a music artist, he has a new CD, *The Power of One*—his first solo work since 1997—that showed instant appeal by jumping quickly atop the Christian/Gospel music Christian retail chart after its

March 24 release, indicating it could draw the same critical acclaim that some of his previous works have.

*A Deeper Level*—one of many he's recorded with his group New Breed—won a Grammy in 2007 for Best Pop/Contemporary Gospel Album. His *Live From Another Level* won two Stellar awards in 2005 and had already spawned two Dove Awards in 2004.

With *The Power of One*, Houghton is after more than popular appeal. He is pressing forward into a new season of ministry and creative artistry.

And just as his previous projects contained prophetic messages for that time, he believes the same holds true for this effort. Many of the songs came to him while he was—again—spiritually challenged and restless for more purpose, asking, “What now?”

“I love the local church ... but I feel like we're sort of country-clubbing our ways through this thing called life and Christianity,” he says. “What does a Christian really look like and what are we truly called to do?”

“What is the cause? What are we all getting behind? What did we just come and do for two hours? It really started irritating me,” Houghton explains.

Those provoking questions led him to some fellow worship leaders who had already been down that road and back. A conversation with Hillsong staple Darlene Zschech was especially revealing.

“She just said, ‘Read Amos 5, darling, and call me back.’” Houghton recalls. When he read it in *The Message*, it was “like a shot to the heart.”

Says Houghton: “It basically says, ‘I can't stand your ego music. When was the last time you just sang for Me? ...You know what I'm interested in? It's justice. What I want you to do is

look out for widows and orphans.

“Spend yourself for them. Then you have My attention in worship.”

To that end, Houghton wanted the songs of *The Power of One* to challenge and convict, but equally to empower the church.

“I want to see the American church break down the last of the walls that divide us culturally and racially,” he says. “The color barrier that still exists is just bewildering to me. ... You’re just going, ‘Why?’”

Houghton knows more than a little something about that color barrier. He has hurdled it all his life—beginning in his own family, where he grew up the only biracial kid among white siblings.

In the 1970s, Houghton’s mother, Margaret, was an aspiring concert pianist living in Waterloo, Iowa, and growing up in a white, Midwestern home. At age 17, she turned the family upside with the revelation that she was pregnant by a black man. Houghton would be her first child.

“My biological father also lived in Iowa, and he was a black guy,” Houghton says. “Waterloo was very, very separate [racially]. When she got pregnant, it was highly advised for her to have an abortion. She chose not to, and I’m certainly grateful for that.”

Margaret’s father, especially, was opposed to her pregnancy.

“He basically said [to her], ‘You’re out.’ He couldn’t deal with the shame,” Houghton says.

For the eight months’ pregnant teen, the rejection prompted a cross-country move to California, where Margaret soon became a Christian. Reading her Bible one day, she came across Genesis 32. It resonated with the mother-to-be for its description of a dramatic struggle and subsequent peace between Jacob and God

that led to a new identity for Jacob.

“When Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, she said, ‘OK, that’s my son.’” Houghton relates. “That’s how I got my name. She saw the imagery of that story and how it related to her whole life.”

After Houghton was born, his mother moved to Phoenix with a relative. Margaret soon met a new Christian there, Henry Houghton—the man Israel says gave him his personality and “a lot of the moxie.”

Margaret and Henry married and were eventually called into a pastoral ministry, moving to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where they’ve led the same independent charismatic church for 25 years.

Growing up, Houghton knew he was different but didn’t understand why. “I was one of the only black people I knew,” he quips. His siblings explained their brother’s darker skin tone to friends by saying, “It’s because he’s the oldest.”

His self-awareness took a dramatic turn at age 7, however, when he went to Waterloo for the first time and met his grandfather.

“All my cousins and my little brother were jumping up on his lap,” he recalled. “So I just did that because I figured that’s what you do. I ended up being pushed to the ground [by him] and realizing there was something so wrong with that picture.

“He was so terrified and so racist ... that he couldn’t imagine this black kid on his lap,” Houghton adds. “That sort of began a lot of questions and an identity crisis for me.”

While growing up in Santa Fe, Houghton dove headfirst into the music of artists such as Journey, Chicago, Led Zeppelin, the Beatles, Keith Green, Billy Joel, Andraé Crouch and the L.A.

Mass Choir.

But what really pushed him over the musical edge were funk-driven artists such as Earth, Wind & Fire. He was especially influenced by Stevie Wonder's *Songs in the Key of Life* and Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall*.

"My mom always encouraged and fostered the musical scene in our house and in our church," Houghton explains. "I was the kid that always jumped up on the drums at the end of service and annoyed everybody until I was removed. But I was always around it so when the need arose—the drummer was sick or whatever—I was the guy."

One providential night in Arizona, where he'd returned to attend college, he was "the guy"—the stand-in. It led to a major turning point in Houghton's near-lifelong struggle with his self-identity.

He was visiting a friend's church and was asked to play drums for the worship band. When the pastor met him and heard his name, he told Houghton: "Even in your name, you have favor with God, but you've also struggled with men and God. But ... you have prevailed, and you will prevail."

"He basically spelled out the last six months of my life in pretty strong detail and rocked my world," Houghton says. "It was just this flash of what God had for me ... this world-changing kind of thing."

With Houghton's transformation now in full swing, he was able to believe that God loved him unconditionally, which changed the way he viewed himself.

"That's when I began to celebrate [my background]," he says. "Encouraging words from people, or even prophetic words from people, all had something to do with the message that I was distinctly different by God's intention. When I said yes to that, I really feel like purpose began ... in my life."

Houghton still had some lessons to learn about leading worship, though.

Not long after that life-changing night in Arizona, he accepted his first opportunity to lead worship, which led to his ministry-altering encounter with Sister Sandpaper.

Almost 20 years later, Houghton has become, in addition to a major figure worldwide in worship music, a husband and a father too. He and his wife, Meleasa, have three young children: Mariah, Israel Duncan and Lillie Milan.

He's also gained a clearer view of his purpose, thanks to witnessing God's providence in his life. He believes that, due in part to his upbringing, God allows him to be a strong advocate for what he thinks are highly undervalued biblical principles and commands.

"I want to see an attitude of generosity and graciousness and justice kicking into high gear, especially in the Western church," Houghton says. "I feel like there's so much we can do if we came together and figured out what we agree on and then get on that.

"Jesus called us to take care of the poor. ... Let's do that. Let's find causes to get behind and truly make a difference."

Houghton hopes his latest batch of songs from *The Power of One* will encourage the church to that end. In particular, his title track is a call to action: "What if it all depended on me / To change the world? / What if my only responsibility was / To change the world?"

"I believe it's the church's privilege to be the hands and feet of Jesus and make measurable change in the earth," he says.

Houghton is living those words and setting an example for those who are willing to go beyond just making inspiring

music. With New Breed, he has lent his name to several socially transformative ministries, including World Vision and Lakewood Medical Missions—a ministry of Joel Osteen’s brother, Dr. Paul Osteen.

He recently participated in the ongoing *CompassionArt* project, as well, with other high-profile worship leaders and music artists, such as Michael W. Smith, Martin Smith, Tobymac, Chris Tomlin and Zschech. All proceeds from the effort are being applied to humanitarian-based charities and ministries.

Houghton believes those kinds of opportunities are miraculous for a guy once deemed disposable by societal standards. He’s come a long way since the days when “every service ended in a train crash.” Along the way he found a life that’s headed in the right direction.

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## **Jeremy Camp**

On February 5, 2001, my first wife, Melissa, went to be with the Lord after struggling with ovarian cancer. When she took her last breath, I felt God urging me to raise my hands and worship Him. As God taught me an important lesson about obeying Him, I sang. Somehow, the Holy Spirit carries us through pain and suffering, with such tenderness, when we submit to Him. At the heart of true worship and praise to God, my mind, heart and will must submit before Him. This authentic worship prepares my heart to be molded and used as He sees fit.

## **Marvin Sapp**

Within 90 days, I lost three important men in my life: my musical mentor, my natural father and my spiritual father. For days before my father's funeral I was not emotionally engaged. The day after the funeral, Sunday, I took my place in the pulpit. I stood there ... silent. Everyone was waiting on me. I asked God quietly if anyone out there knew how much pain I was in. From deep inside, the silence was broken with my testimony in song, "Never Would Have Made It Without You." Soon the presence of God was overwhelming; we all experienced heaven on earth. I was in my most vulnerable place but safer than I'd ever felt.

### **Tammy Trent**

My whole world shifted in a moment's time eight years ago in Jamaica. My husband of 11 years, Trent Lenderink, was gone forever, and I didn't even get to say goodbye. I'll never forget the moments that followed. Being all alone in a faraway place, my heart took over. It was like a reflex. I began to worship God with my prayers and songs. At that moment I couldn't praise Him in the same way I had the week before, but I did choose to praise Him for what He meant to me, even in that dark place in my life. I felt His presence as I sang. I thank God for the gift of praise and worship that brings me closer to His heart. It's everything I sing about today.

### **Dorinda Clark Cole**

Once, I was being sued by a fellow believer. Never in my life had I considered suicide, but I had grown distraught. It felt like the devil had me in a headlock. One day I was driving 90 mph in my car, planning to go over a bridge. God spoke to me: "After everything: the many people you've healed, touched and delivered, are you going to let the enemy take you out?" I grabbed the steering wheel, and God saved my life. From that, I wrote "I'm Still Here." It has had great meaning for every person who has an "I'm still here" situation. You can't listen to the enemy—God won't forsake us. But we have to choose

whether we want to live or die.

## **Mandisa**

When I was a final contestant on *American Idol* three years ago, I was judged by my last audition. As I started to sing, my mind went blank. I tried to improvise the lyrics, but Simon Cowell lifted his hand and stopped me. I slumped off stage, knowing I was headed home. Awaiting the judges' final decision, I worshiped God and told Him no matter what happened, He was all I needed. I teared up, but then smiled, knowing God was with me. He taught me how to worship Him even in sorrow and fear, and I felt peace about the outcome. That lesson even inspired a song on my album *Freedom*, titled "Broken Hallelujah." Truly, when God is magnified, our problems are minimized.

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## **One Last Rebound**

✘ My original plan for this week's blog was to write about "American Idol." Wednesday night's shocking victory by Conway, Arkansas native and former worship leader Kris Allen is quite the story. He is yet another Christian who has done quite well on the eight-year old program that has become an international pop culture icon.

But I'll save that for next time.

Instead, I want to tell you about a great man that the city of Tulsa (and the rest of the country for that matter) lost on May 15: Wayman Tisdale.

Tisdale was just 44 years old when he passed away. After losing a leg to amputation last August in an effort to stop the spread of bone cancer, he had announced the disease had been stopped in its tracks. But apparently, the lingering effects were too much for the former All-American athlete and NBA workhorse to overcome.

It's interesting timing since just a few days after his death, the Los Angeles Clippers announced they would select Blake Griffin with the top pick in the 2009 NBA Draft. Griffin started at the University of Oklahoma (OU) where he earned All-American honors and was named by multiple organizations as the college basketball Player of the Year.

But before Griffin was even born, Tisdale was blazing the trail at OU. Many credit him with singlehandedly revitalizing the entire Sooners basketball program. In fact, Griffin himself has listed Tisdale as one of his heroes. When he signed with OU, he personally asked Tisdale for permission to wear his retired #23 jersey. Tisdale gladly complied.

Tisdale, who won a gold medal as part of the 1984 U.S. Olympic basketball team, played 12 years in the NBA with four teams: the Indiana Pacers (who drafted him #2 overall in 1985), Sacramento Kings and Phoenix Suns.

But his real love was music. Tisdale was an extraordinary bass player. He retired from basketball in 1997 to focus on a burgeoning recording and touring career. His self-taught smooth jazz stylings earned praise and attracted collaborations from some of the genre's greats. Jonathan Butler, Dave Koz, George Duke, Jeff Lorber and Kirk Whalum were just a few outstanding musicians who found themselves attracted to Tisdale's unique lead bass compositions.

But more than anything, Tisdale was a man of God and an uncompromising husband and father. I had one opportunity to interview Tisdale. It was for a *Gospel Today* article about the unfortunate history of infidelity in the NBA. I was able to ask Tisdale and NBA legend A.C. Green in a joint conversation about their secrets to sexual purity and marital faithfulness.

And faithful he was-not just to his family, but to his faith. It came out in everything he did-from the way he worked tirelessly on the court to the way he produced brilliant art in the studio and performed it on the stage.

Tisdale's last album was called *Rebound*. It was written, recorded and released after his amputation. It reflected the infectious joy that was also evident on his smiling face. The theme was perfectly crafted and makes even more sense now that Tisdale has collected one last rebound and will no doubt be making music in God's presence for all of eternity.

For the rest of us still hanging around this earth, we are blessed to have Tisdale's music to enjoy. If you've never experienced it, I would encourage you to check out any one of his eight albums. Tisdale's songs will lift your spirits and remind you that there is one true source of creativity (our Heavenly Father) and that there should be one singular focus of our gifts (to glorify His name).

That's what Tisdale was all about.

Thousands gathered in Tulsa today (May 21st) in the BOK Center where, appropriately, basketball and music are both played. They took a moment to remember all the great things Tisdale brought to this world-hope, joy, love and an assurance that we can all rebound from whatever life tosses our way.

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## Christian Idols?

☒ A couple of years ago I had the opportunity to interview “American Idol” season five finalist Mandisa Hundley (more commonly referred to as just “Mandisa”). I asked her about the ironic nature of someone such as herself, a staunchly devout Evangelical Christian, on a show that celebrates the concept of world-driven stardom.

The irony wasn’t lost on the national recording artist. She fully understands how strange it must seem for so many Christians to be popping up all over the smash hit television show “American Idol.” After all, doesn’t one of those Ten Commandments expressly warn against the creation of idols?

But for the outspoken woman of faith, it all made sense once she realized just how powerful the show’s reach really was.

“Every time I think about this, I think its funny-and just like the Lord that I know-that He would actually take a show like ‘American Idol’ and use it as a platform for Him,” Mandisa said. “That’s who He is. And so I don’t think it’s a coincidence and I think He’s up to something in our generation

and He wants to let the world know that it's cool to love Jesus. I think He's using the biggest show in America to do it and I think that's true to His nature."

Take for instance Idol winners Kelly Clarkson, Ruben Studdard, Fantasia Barrino and Carrie Underwood who are just a few contestants who got their starts in church. Studdard actually recorded a gospel album and Underwood's biggest hit to date is the faith-tinged "Jesus Take The Wheel."

Other participants such as Kimberly Locke, Kellie Pickler, Chris Daughtry, Lakisha Jones, Jason Castro and George Huff have also displayed their beliefs through music and personal commentaries. The sixth season of *American Idol* produced perhaps one of the largest Christian contingencies with the likes of winner Jordin Sparks and finalists Melinda Doolittle, Phil Stacey and Chris Sligh.

Sparks has participated in various Christian talent events and has been outspoken about her beliefs on conservative issues such as abortion and abstinence. Doolittle sang backup for Martha Munizzi and Anointed and has since performed with Michael W. Smith. Stacey led worship at a church in Shawnee, Okla., and recently signed a record deal with Reunion Records. Sligh covered songs by dcTalk and Mute Math on the show and has seen great success at Christian radio with songs like "Empty Me" and "Arise."

And this year (season eight) was no different. Finalist Scott MacIntyre, the visually-impaired piano virtuoso, cut his musical teeth in the local church as did fellow finalists Michael Sarver (who led worship at Harvest Church) and Matt Giraud. Top three competitor Danny Gokey was a worship leader for Faith Builders International in Wisconsin. His on-air trip back home highlighted a strong connection to that church body.

And of course the surprise winner and proverbial underdog Kris Allen has been seen on YouTube leading worship songs such as Chris Tomlin's "God of This City."

Mandisa told me that these things are just another sign of how God is using the foolish to confound the wise-and hopefully changing lives in the process.

"Our success on [*American Idol*] isn't just about how we can reach the fans," she said. "This is also about reaching out to the people who are involved with the show. I can't say enough about what I hope the impact is on Paula, Simon and Randy. I think the Lord is using contestants to be his mouthpiece. I just don't think it's a coincidence."

It's a strange dynamic for sure-one that Christians usually either shun or embrace. Personally, I think having a Christian presence smack dab in the middle of a show like *American Idol* is nothing short of amazing.

And as long as the aforementioned believers can handle the fame and maintain their faith in God, they might just do something that Simon Fuller and Simon Cowell never intended-put the spotlight back on the Creator of all things creative.

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