

A Sound from Heaven

Jason Upton has pioneered a refreshing and spontaneous style of prophetic worship that is redefining Christian music today. Sitting at a piano during a live worship event in Alexandria, Louisiana, singer-songwriter Jason Upton rocks back and forth, moaning in tune with the soft melody he's playing, as if desperate to communicate in a language just beyond his reach. "I feel ... like a newborn ... baby ... trying ... to say Your name," he sings in a raspy falsetto before falling back into the aching moan.

Though unorthodox, the spontaneous moment of worship is included on his Remember CD—a set of live recordings that culminates with the eerie sound of what many believe is an angel singing. "The kingdom of heaven—it's just like learning a whole new language," Upton says of the mysterious experience.

For the last decade, the 34-year-old has been teaching Christians worldwide the importance of being like a child and of waiting patiently on God in worship. Having released 10 albums, largely through his independent Key of David Ministries, Upton has cultivated an underground following that has gathered in an array of venues to hear him, from remote churches in the Deep South to big-city arenas that hold tens of thousands.

Upton's songs are often unplanned, both music and lyrics erupting spontaneously from somewhere deep inside the singer. His sound is best described as raw, unpolished and primal. Songs are stretched out, many times improvisationally, doubling in length as the wild piano-pounding poet shouts of a tender God's love. Critics describe him as an artist listeners

either love or avoid.

“When you’re really singing your heart you don’t always sound in perfect pitch,” Upton says. “Maybe in another take of that song you actually sound better. [But] I’m just not trying to put on a show for you.”

Although he doesn’t relish the spotlight, Upton is considered a forerunner in the prophetic worship movement. During TheCall’s first prayer event held in Washington, D.C., in 2000, Upton sang as if “a prophet to the nations,” recalls ministry founder Lou Engle.

“No one will ever forget the moment when Jason began to lead with his song [‘I Will Wait’],” Engle says. “Weeping broke out all over the [National Mall]. It was one of those supernatural moments.”

Melody Green, widow of legendary musician Keith Green, says Upton is a “preacher behind the piano,” a phrase she also has used to describe her late husband.

Engle agrees, saying his heart “exploded [with] divine agreement” when he first heard Upton’s music. “Here was not a singer of shallow, nice Christian words,” Engle says. “Here was a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord.”

Leading people into supernatural encounters with God is what Upton believes he’s called to do, even if his music doesn’t fit traditional molds. He’s more interested in communicating spiritual realities and being honest with God, himself and others than in getting radio airplay and topping music charts.

“Some people come along and say: ‘Man, if you honed that a little bit, made it sound a little bit cooler, hipper, edgier, more modern, it could really do something, it could really go places,’” he says. “But it’s not my calling to sound cooler; it ends up not sounding cooler. Every time I tried to enter into that kind of performance style of doing it I lost what was purely my own—my heart, my soul, the thing about me that I can believe when I listen back to it.”

The Key of David

Although Upton’s uniqueness is part of his appeal, it’s also what has made him something of a curiosity in Christian music circles. In 2003, a tornado heading toward the venue where he was ministering in Tulsa, Oklahoma, reportedly split apart as Upton was leading hundreds in worship. Of the experience, he says it wasn’t just about the sign and the wonder, but about the protection of “the love of the Father.”

Often during concerts Upton invites worshipers to place their hands over both ears and close their eyes. “There is no closed heaven; I’m speaking that over you,” he says. “It is open to you. God is always speaking.”

Many people pray for God to “open up the heavens,” Upton says, but the heavens are already open. He encourages people to instead pray for God to “open up the earth,” which represents their own hearts. The idea of opening up one’s life to God was the focus of Upton’s 2005 release, *Open Up the Earth*.

Mike Bickle, founder of the International House of Prayer in Kansas City, Missouri, says some worship leaders lead people

to themselves. "Jason leads people into encounter," he says. "He wants people to connect with [God], not him."

Engle describes Upton's worship as music that will "mess you up and cause you to fly to the heart of God." But flying to the heart of God wasn't always a priority for Upton.

In the late 1990s, while he and his wife, Rachel, were pursuing their Master of Divinity degrees at Regent University, he says God spoke to him one day at his piano: "'When are you going to start living for Me, Jason?'"

"I gave the Lord my whole list [of religious accomplishments]," Upton says. "My whole life I never did drugs, never had sex before marriage. I always went to church."

He says God told him that some unsaved people have done that: "'That was all for you, Jason. When will you start living for Me?'"

It was a defining moment. Though Upton "technically said the Jesus prayer when I was 4," he felt he was being born again, again. "Of course Keith Green used to say that too," he says, grinning. "He said about every three weeks he got saved."

Believing his songs were to be keys that opened and closed doors in the spirit realm, Upton and his wife founded Key of David Ministries, which is centered on Isaiah 22:22. In that passage it is prophesied that Jesus will receive "the key to the house of David" and that "what He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open." Upton says the vision for the ministry is to see all generations and denominations

uniting in one “dwelling place.”

“We have seen the fulfillment [of that dwelling place] in our music and ministry,” Upton says, adding that he believes a greater expression of it is still to come.

Having had paradigms he’s held about God and others consistently torn down, Upton has come to believe in a Jesus who can unchain locked mind-sets and set people free. Even now, Upton says he’s always learning, constantly discovering something new, and he is wary of Christians who claim to have God all figured out.

“I believe there are things that I believe right now that I will not believe five years from now,” he says. “I believe Christ’s authority is coming over the church in such a way that my own thinking will have to change and submit to the authority of Jesus Christ.”

Upton digs restlessly into conversations about what it means to be a Christian in America; to him, truth and honesty are everything. He’d rather ask difficult questions that could help people discover truth than hand out canned clichés. Too many churches, he says, have styled Christ after the example of an arrogant CEO than that of a humble servant.

“We’re looking for someone who says: ‘I’m the holy guy. I’m up on every moral code,’” he says. “But that’s not what it means to be a Christian; it’s not this thing where I now own it. Only humbly, in my most broken state, am I capable of becoming holy.”

Upton’s self-deprecating examination of American Christianity has been a major draw for youth, who often don’t put much

value on ministers' positions or titles. "The strength of Jason's ministry is found in the fact that he seeks to deeply embrace these truths in his private life," Bickle says. "He yearns for authentic Christianity and for the power of the Holy Spirit [and] is not afraid to be politically incorrect."

Because of his passion for truth and authenticity, Upton is inclined to spotlight his own sins rather than point his finger at others' failings. He says God once told him: "'You've been trained to always show your best side, Jason, to always work it and spin so that evil is on the other side.'

"'I'm just telling you that I will never give you victory without a heart of purity. I will never ever give you victory for fighting pride with pride. Evaluate your own heart.'"

But Upton won't hold his tongue when it comes to exposing hypocrisy in the church. "Someone said the other day that I was known for being critical of mainstream Christianity," he says. "I'm not being critical of the church. What I believe is that the church is the only hope."

He says it's possible to be a "critical thinker," who can ask questions and get to the truth without being "critical." He points out that the church needs to be different from the world, and offer people the love and mercy of God instead of trying to win arguments or stamp out others' viewpoints.

"What is this thing in us that wants to eradicate anyone who doesn't believe like we do?" he asks. "If you read the words of Jesus, I don't think that people who destroy their enemies, including people who call themselves Christians, are going to be very high up in the kingdom to come ... though I'm not the

final judge of that.

“We have to first look at ourselves. We have to say, ‘God, come and eradicate all the stuff in my own thinking, in my own mind, and the things I’ve allowed in my own life.’”

The worship leader’s “pure heart” is what Pennsylvania pastor Charles Stock says moved him to invite Upton to minister several times at his church, Life Center in Harrisburg, where Upton recorded parts of his 2007 release *Between Earth and Sky*. “Jason’s openness and lack of agenda are very refreshing,” Stock says. “We appreciate [his] childlike tenderness.”

A Dying Star

During recent concerts Upton has been including question-and-answer sessions. The house lights come up, and Upton opens the floor to “talk things out” with his “brothers and sisters” in Christ. “We [Christians are] adopted,” he says. “We’re in this thing together.”

The message of spiritual adoption has deep personal meaning for him.

Born in Minneapolis, Upton was conceived out of wedlock two months after the landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision legalized abortion. His birth mother had recently been born again but was young, alone and frightened.

Yet instead of ending her pregnancy, she gave her son up for adoption. When he was just 3 months old, Upton was placed in the home of Bob and Bonnie Upton, who attended a Minneapolis Assemblies of God church. Years later Upton learned that his

birth mother asked that her son be placed with a Spirit-filled family.

Nothing about Upton's upbringing explains why he's come to resemble a brooding 1960s folk artist who resists the status quo. He grew up in a stable Christian home with one older brother, who was also adopted.

He says his father, a bright computer engineer who loved singing old Johnny Cash songs, always made time to play ball or go fishing. He remembers his mother playing with his hair while he slept on her lap during Sunday evening worship services. "I was a good kid growing up," he says. "A lot of the frivolous kinds of things just weren't of interest to me."

It thrilled Upton's parents when their deep-thinking teenage son went to a party. He says they placed bets with each other, wondering how late he might stay out. But he usually strolled back in guilelessly by 9 p.m. or so.

Upton recently discovered that his biological father, who gave him his Cherokee roots, is a deeply philosophical man living in Denver. Also, incredibly, without knowing it was her son, Upton's biological mother had been listening to his worship CDs during prayer meetings at her Minnesota church for years before she met Upton.

Though grateful for those connections, Upton says Bob and Bonnie are his parents. "There's no question that my parents who raised me were absolutely special and picked out by heaven to raise me for my calling," he says.

The idiosyncrasies of being adopted play out in Upton's

outlook on life. "Because I was adopted, I don't have the paradigm of you only trust blood," he says. "I trust those with hearts after the kingdom. My brothers and sisters are those going after the kingdom."

The concept of spiritual adoption also emerges often in his music. "Everything I sing is all about the revelation of the spirit of adoption," he says. "We are sons and daughters of the living God. We don't have to fight or strive for His love for us."

During ministry times, Upton tells his Christian brothers and sisters that God is always near, that He'll never leave. "My biggest goal in worship is for people to know that they're not alone," he says. "That God never left us. ... He'll never leave."

When he sits down at his piano, he wants to speak God's heart over people, and present his songs as prayers to the Lord. He says his music is born out of his relationships with God and others.

"It's really simple for me," says the father of three—Samuel, 7; Emma, 5; and Lucy, 10 months. "Spend time learning how to have relationship with the Lord, spend time learning how to be a husband, spend time learning how to be a father, spend time in relationship with others ... then write out of those experiences."

Upton jokes that, at a musicianship level, he sympathizes with his critics. "I'm with you, brother," he says, laughing. "I know it's too long. I know it's out of the box. I know it doesn't sound like CCM."

In a review of Upton's latest release, Beautiful People, music critic Andree Farias wrote that there's no middle ground when it comes to Jason Upton: "You either love him or you don't." Many have said the same of other enigmatic musicians, such as Bob Dylan, of whom Upton is a big fan. But criticism, even from fans, is often a part of such artists' appeal.

When fans hailed the title track of Upton's 2002 CD Dying Star as a healthy thrashing of celebrity-based Christianity, Upton corrected them at concerts, saying the song wasn't at all aimed at the public. "God was speaking to me," he says.

The soaring anthem exposes the painful consequences of self-righteousness. It's sung from the perspective of a brokenhearted God. "You got your best man on your front side. / You always show your best side. / Evil is always on the other side. / You say this is your strategy. / But son I hope you take it from me. / You look just like your enemy. / You're full of pride."

No matter what others think or say about him, because he's assured of a heavenly Father who loves him, Upton pursues honesty in his music. "Honesty can lead to the truth," he says, "and the truth will make you free.

"Even if it means the destruction of the way I do things," he continues. "From the very beginning my wife was a big push in this, 'Just don't try to make the music sound perfect.' If she hears me with too much jingle-jangle, she'll say, 'I can't even listen to that!'"

So he stays true to what he feels called to do. "Most of my songs really are prayers," he says. "And because I started

this ministry this way, I'll end it this way. This is the way it is. It's always going to be that way. Here I am. I'm learning. I'm growing. I know you're wanting to grow too. Let me share some things. Here we go."

Paul Steven Ghiringhelli is assistant news editor of Charisma magazine.

A New Song

These artists are emerging as leaders in prophetic worship.

Brian and Jenn Johnson

Worship artists Brian and Jenn Johnson believe churchgoers should be as open to hearing from God during worship times as they are when listening to sermons. "For a long time worship has been seen as a warm-up to the message, but God designed music as a gateway to heaven, and it can help people connect to God and bring them into the prophetic as well," says Brian Johnson, who with wife Jenn are worship pastors at Bethel Church in Redding, California.

In addition to serving at the church, which Johnson's father, Bill Johnson, leads, the couple has recorded two live worship CDs, including their newest, *We Believe*, through Brian Johnson Music Inc. (). Their best-known songs include "O Taste and See" and "Where You Go, I'll Go," which was featured at TheCall prayer events in Los Angeles and Nashville, Tennessee.

Brian Johnson says the goal of prophetic worship is to marry worship with what God is saying at that moment. "We're really sensitive to what the Spirit's doing," he says, "and while we

don't force prophetic worship in the service, we make room for it."

He says the songs that work best in worship typically start in worship. And he notes that worship in the church doesn't have to look like it always has. "We've been trained to sing, clap and dance, but God's teaching us that you don't have to do all these things all the time in order to worship," he says. "There are more elements to worship than what we've experienced."

Misty Edwards

Although Misty Edwards was raised in a musical family, she says she never saw herself as a musician until she joined the worship team at the International House of Prayer (IHOP) in Kansas City, Missouri, when it opened in 1999.

Since then the 28-year-old says she has discovered the beauty of looking right into the face of God—adoring Him and listening to Him. "'Presence worship' is a vision we have at IHOP, where the presence of God is so manifest during worship that it is tangible, and people are healed, demons driven out and the lost saved just because of the atmosphere in the room," she says.

Edwards ([mistyedwards .com](http://mistyedwards.com)) says most of the songs recorded on her three CD projects were written during spontaneous times of worship.

Although she believes there will one day be 24/7 houses of prayer in every city worldwide, Edwards says churches can begin to encounter God in a new way right now simply by learning to stay in His presence longer. "I think worship

needs to change so that we linger until we encounter God at a new level," she says. "That is my biggest vision for worship—that God shows up in a degree we've never seen before."

Shekinah Glory Ministries

Shekinah Glory Ministries (SGM) has more than 50 members, but the praise and worship ministry of Chicago-based Valley Kingdom Ministries International has just one goal: to usher people into the manifest presence of God.

Head worship leader Phillip Tarver, 43, says the group doesn't operate as artists, but as ministers. He says people have been healed and delivered after listening to their music.

Since 2001, SGM has released three CDs under the church's recording label, Kingdom Records Inc. (king). Their first, Praise Is What I Do, sold more than a half-million copies, as did their second project, Shekinah Glory Live, released in 2004.

Tarver says the group receives its inspiration during prayer times and through the sermons of their senior pastor, Apostle H. Daniel Wilson. He believes the prophetic realm is opened through music, allowing worship ministers to speak the mind and wisdom of God to listeners.

"There's always a higher calling to strive toward in worship," he says. "There are so many levels, so many depths and heights you can go to. It's something ever changing, ever evolving, ever coming into a newness. And as we seek Him, He will give us the ability to worship Him greater."

Ruth Fazal

When Ruth Fazal leads worship, she says she constantly waits to hear what God is saying. "Worship isn't just something that we do and then we go away," the Toronto-based artist insists. "Worship is like going on a journey in order to hear what God wants to say."

Born in England, Fazal (ruth) studied piano and violin in London and Paris. Since immigrating to Canada in 1975, she has performed with all the major orchestras in Toronto and is concertmaster of four orchestras in the area. She has recorded 20 CDs of both worship and classical violin music.

Her most recent composition, Oratorio Terezin, has won much critical acclaim in the U.S., Europe and Israel. Weaving poetry written by children who lived during the Holocaust with the Hebrew Scriptures, the work explores God's love in the midst of suffering.

Fazal is currently working on a classical piece called "Awakening," which is based on a vision she had of the waking of a sleeping church. "It's the focus of my heart right now," she says. "I don't fully understand it, but I know there is urgency in God's heart."

She believes the church is in a place of transition. "I believe God is trying to break every last bit of religion off the church," she says, "and that God is beginning to show us musicians what we're made for and why He has given us that gift."

Merchant Band

Fans of Merchant Band have described the group's sound as a combination of British pop and American rock. But its leaders, Marcus Meier and Tim

Reimherr, say their goal isn't just to impress people with their musical style; they want to lead listeners into God's presence.

"David was a prophetic musician," Reimherr says. "When he played for King Saul, demons fled. When the anointing of the Holy Spirit rests on a person, and he puts his hand to the harp, the Holy Spirit drives out the darkness and angels come on assignment."

Both Meier, 26, and Reimherr, 31, lead worship at the International House of Prayer (IHOP) and at the ministry's One Thing conferences. Backed by a drummer, bassist and keyboard player, Merchant Band currently has released two CDs, Merchant Band and The World Can Wait () on IHOP's Forerunner Music label.

Meier says most of the band's songs are directed to Christ "because that's what we do with our lives—we give ourselves to prayer, and songs to the Lord come from there."

Sandra K. Chambers