

Running From Fame

Members of Casting Crowns really don't care that the band is at the top of the Christian music world. Their priority is ministry.

If you sat next to Mark Hall on an airplane and asked him about his job, he would tell you that he is a pastor to students. Even his business card says as much: "Mark Hall, Student Pastor, Eagle's Landing First Baptist Church, McDonough, GA."

But that description might come as a surprise to millions of fans of the wildly popular Christian band Casting Crowns. They know Mark Hall as both the leader of this group—whose releases are topping the Christian music charts—and the composer of much of its music.

No need for confusion, though. Hall just sees himself as a youth pastor first and, despite the band's growing success, leader of Casting Crowns second.

"Student ministry is definitely our priority," Hall says. "That's the constant."

It's what he and the other members of the band—Andy Williams, Hector Cervantes, Megan Garrett, Juan DeVevo, Melodee DeVevo and Chris Huffman—are really all about. "It's what we do," Hall says casually, as if underplaying the other side of this musical phenomenon—their overnight rise to national prominence. Their remarkable track record of selling CDs began accidentally—or providentially—depending on how you look at it.

"Our first CD was meant as a tract for our youth group in Daytona Beach [Florida]," explains Juan DeVevo, the group's guitarist, who also works with students at Eagle's Landing. "When we got a band together we had three students in our band. We came to a studio here [in Atlanta] and put a CD

together to use as a tool for the youth to give to their friends.”

The CD packaging contained information about church services, directions to the church and an evangelistic message.

“We didn’t send the CD out to anybody,” DeVevo says. Instead, students gave them to friends, and the word spread from there.

“We weren’t chasing after anything,” Hall recalls about the CD release. “In our heads we knew that youth ministry was where we were supposed to be.”

In fact, Hall’s first reaction to recording professionally was a concern about whether continuing in ministry while promoting recordings would prove to be a successful mix. “We hadn’t seen anybody do both before,” he says. “There wasn’t anybody to call up and ask how to do it.”

When Martin Miller, the group’s producer, suggested that Casting Crowns become part of new record label Provident, they immediately went to Eagle’s Landing pastor Tim Dowdy to explore his reaction.

“We met at the church with the producer, Pastor Tim, and our wives and talked about how it could work,” Hall remembers. “We told the pastor from the start the church was our priority and that [the ministry of the church] is what we were going to hang our hat on.”

Today much of Casting Crowns’ ministry is taking place nationwide, but the band is also an extension of the ministry of Eagle’s Landing. “Our CDs are released at the church,” DeVevo explains. “Our latest album [The Altar and the Door] was commissioned here in the middle of a concert. The pastor stood up and prayed and others prayed. It was cool.”

That album has been a history-maker. It debuted at No. 2 on the Billboard albums chart when it released last September and

sold 129,000 copies in six days. The ranking gave the group the highest-ever debut for an artist marketed solely through Christian channels without crossover support from radio stations that play mainstream rock, pop or country.

The only Christian music albums to sell more copies the first week, since Nielsen SoundScan began tracking Christian retail sales, were productions by LeAnn Rimes, Switchfoot and ., all performers with significant established audiences.

Though Casting Crowns recognize the significance of the ranking, they downplay its meaning in the context of their ministries within the church and through the band.

"I never read anything that has to do with the music industry," says Melodee DeVevo, Juan's wife, who plays the violin and is one of the group's vocalists. "I never cared about the Grammys."

"We have heard that [the CD] is played on secular stations every once in a while, but it's never been something that the record label went after," Hall says. "However, we have to understand how crucial it is for bands to get on secular radio."

What is it that draws fans and music buyers to Casting Crowns?

"They present the name and gospel of Jesus Christ in a musical manner that is center-line," says Ray Thomas Brown, 15, of Villa Rica, Georgia, and a member of Covenant Life Church of God in nearby Bremen. "That means that it is not too fast and hard, but not too slow and dull. It is just right."

And then, there is the message. "Their message is lifting Jesus' name above all others and not letting go of your faith," Brown explains. "It can certainly bring you from feeling sad, tired and depressed to a state of joy and praise of Jesus' name."

Hall thinks the reason the band's music connects is because it tackles hard issues transparently—that is, from the point of view of a fellow struggler rather than a teacher or similar authority figure. It reveals that the band deals with the tough aspects of Christian living just as their fans do.

This relevancy is crucial for successful communication to occur between parents and youth and the church and young people.

“On an adult-student level, the problem is that we have two different lenses we are looking through,” Hall says. “We look at [youth and] see [ourselves] when we were young ... and the fact that they are blowing it. We are seeing them at our age in the future, and we think we need to get them right before they reach our age and are in big trouble.

“The challenge is to look at a student and remember what it was like to be a teenager,” he explains. “Our questions should be: ‘How is school going? What are you dealing with now? How can I pray for you today?’

“They are listening to how you are responding to them,” he adds.

Parents and youth leaders should teach and lead through relationship, not through lecture, Hall believes. “[Kids] aren’t going to listen to you because you are 30 or 60. They are going to listen to you because you know them and you are aware of what they are dealing with, and you love them.”

One reason the band is popular is that the performers don’t present themselves as perfect in thought or deed. Hall explains: “[The apostle] Paul says, ‘Not that I have already attained this.’ He is saying that you need to stop doing this and start doing that, but he is also saying, ‘I haven’t attained [a perfect life].’

“Paul had a relationship with those churches, so he could talk

to them. I think we earn the right to talk to an audience through transparency.”

An emphasis of the ministry and music of Casting Crowns is to help young people have their own relationship with Jesus, not a relationship borrowed from their parents and leaders.

Says Hall: “While I’m at church I’m enjoying my pastor’s walk with Jesus, I’m soaking up my worship leader’s intimacy with God, I’m reading psalms on the screen and out of hymnbooks about people who have had a moment with Jesus and wrote a song about it. I’m also experiencing living with the energy that comes from Jesus while we are together. All of that is great stuff, it’s in the Bible and it’s something I need to have in my life.

“But when I get home or to school or to work, none of those people are with me. They didn’t come home with me. When I get home it’s just me and my walk with Jesus and how close I am personally to Him.”

The band tries to help kids see the difference between leaning on the Jesus their friends or family members know and having a relationship with Jesus of their own.

Hall notes: “If we are not careful ... we will think: I’ve got the youth group’s Jesus. I’ve got my pastor’s Jesus. I’ve got my worship team’s Jesus—and as long as I am with them I feel great.”

He explains to kids that they have to start developing their own “everyday, walking-around friendship with God.”

“As good as devotions are, as good as Christian music is, you need some time just for you and God and what God says, not what somebody tells you He says,” Hall explains.

Another reason the music of Casting Crowns speaks to people is that it’s based on Scripture.

“In the songs you can point to a line and you know it’s straight from God’s Word,” Melodee DeVevo says. “That’s why people connect with us. They’re out there ... and they may not be able to go to church where they can be around God every day, so they are based more in the world than we are. When they come to a concert or listen to a CD they are actually getting something of God that they’re not getting anywhere else.”

Before concerts, Casting Crowns take prayer walks through the arenas in each city where they play and ask God to show up in their performances and touch lives. “We can sense He is free to move before us as we prepare for our concerts,” Hall says.

The members acknowledge that there are times when they have had to mute or modify their message. “We offer an invitation for people to come forward if the venue is conducive to that,” Hall explains. “But when we were recently in North Korea we knew that we could not openly proclaim Christ. If we had, some people would have possibly been hurt and we would never have been invited back again.”

He says, however, that the group played their regular music during their unusual visit—music that contained the message of the gospel. Hall says they hope to return trip to the closed, communist nation.

Their tours are scheduled around their churches’ ministries. Tour dates are scheduled on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays so group members can be at church Sunday through Wednesday.

Balancing the two ministries isn’t easy. The journey begins around 10 p.m. each Wednesday, after midweek activities are done, and ends back at home late Saturday evening, just in time for everyone to grab a few hours of sleep before leading Sunday morning worship services.

“We have been ministering with youth for 16 years,” Melodee DeVevo says. “When you surrender your life to the Lord, you

check your plans at the door and you do what God wants you to do.”

Reflecting on the physical and emotional exhaustion that can come with such a busy life, DeVevo adds: “God gives you what you need to do your ministry. The first year [of the tours] I was exhausted. But now I’m used to it. We have learned how to sleep on the bus.”

Despite the pressure of a concert tour, some of the band members see the travel days almost as “days off” from their regular work. Spouses are involved in the music ministry, and those with children take them along so families can be together.

“Home is where the family is,” explains Juan DeVevo. He and Melodee have one child. “We try to keep the family with us, so we bring them along on the tours.”

None of the band members, who all are in their 30s, are willing to talk about how long they can hold up under the time and energy demands of being in church ministry, writing and recording music and touring, and raising children. They are clear, however, about God’s call to what they are doing now and the importance of keeping their priorities straight.

“The day when my wife and the kids aren’t at the top of my list is the day when I know I need to quit all this,” Hall says. The couple has three children. “And the day when I can’t minister in a church, I’ll know it’s wrong because that’s my first ministry.”

Family and ministry priorities are often reflected in the group members’ concert roles. Each performance includes a time of sharing the gospel and praying for the needs of the audience.

Melodee DeVevo prays for marriages, Chris Huffman for those who are in ministry, Megan Garrett for mothers, Andy Williams

for those who battle addictions, Juan DeVevo for fathers and families, Hector Cervantes for men to walk with God, and Mark Hall for those who are “still on the outside looking in.”

Being a prominent Christian band can be an exhilarating experience, but Casting Crowns say the popularity is not important. “Fame is more an illusion,” Hall says. “At every concert we help people realize we are ordinary people. If they think you are extraordinary, they will discount everything you say.”

The band tells their audience there are no rock stars on the stage. “God is calling on [us], and it is the exact same thing in [their] life. If it is going to eternally matter, they have to connect with Jesus, not with a band.”

That kind of genuineness, along with planting their feet firmly in the local church, enables Casting Crowns to keep ministry as their first priority.

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