Solo Act

Toby McKeehan isn’t content to stay within the rigid confines of the Christian music scene. His passion is to influence culture with a sound all his own.

It’s been a long day for Toby McKeehan. A promotional road trip has led him to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where he spent his afternoon mingling with local youth pastors and his evening signing autographs for several hundred fans at a Christian music store. The music artist now more commonly called “TobyMac” is visibly tired and just plain hungry.

“Make me sound coherent,” McKeehan requests as he deliberates over dinner. He’s concerned that his lack of energy might result in a string of inexplicable ramblings.

So far, he’s holding up quite nicely.

Coherency has rarely been a problem for McKeehan. As the primary lyricist for dc talk, one of the biggest acts in all of Christian music, his words have inspired the masses for more than 15 years. Words are, in fact, the vehicle for McKeehan’s inherent need to have a meaningful impact on people.

His efforts usually take place from a stage, a radio, a TV set or some kid’s CD player. But on this night, his desire to connect is being accomplished on a more personal level, with a young waitress named Rachel.

After several visits from the chipper 19-year-old server, it is revealed that she has left her hometown of Cincinnati to attend a well-known Christian university. She recognizes

McKeehan but can’t put a name with the face.

“What band are you in?” she asks.

“I’m in dc talk.”

“OK, yeah. I’ve seen you in concert. I got your first CD, Jesus Freak. Was that your first CD?”

“Basically.” (McKeehan refrains from saying it was their fourth.)

Rachel mentions she had seen the group perform at a crusade back home just a few months earlier. The event was not as much a concert as a speaking engagement for a living legend—an icon, if you will, of 20th century Christianity.

“What’s the guy’s name?” she asks.

“Billy Graham,” McKeehan’s road manager, Tobin, replies.

As Rachel walks away to retrieve more refreshments, McKeehan is stunned.

“She said a mouthful,” he notes.

McKeehan was less amazed that the girl did not recognize him as one-third of dc talk than he was intrigued by her failure to produce the name of the world’s most famous evangelist. The girl’s lack of basic knowledge of the bigger picture

underscored much of what McKeehan himself experienced growing up in a Christian home.

Different Strokes

McKeehan grew up just outside Washington, D.C., in nearby Arlington, Virginia. The urban setting gave the white kid with blonde hair and blue eyes a healthy respect for multiculturalism. In particular, it was mainstream rap pioneers such as ., Grandmaster Flash and Whodini who played a sizable role in the shaping of McKeehan's musical future.

By his early teens, McKeehan had started writing rhymes and toying with a pair of turntables he set up in a spare bedroom of his house. His choice of hobbies wasn't too popular within the confines of his strict Baptist upbringing. Anything other than traditional church music was frowned upon.

Unaware of the burgeoning Christian music industry, McKeehan decided to take it upon himself to fill the void. "When I wrote my first song that talked about my faith, I thought I had made up Christian hip-hop," he says jokingly.

After graduating from a Christian high school, McKeehan landed at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, on a golf scholarship. Music was still priority No. 1, and he pursued it with a passion.

His path crossed with Michael Tait, a soulful vocalist with a hidden proclivity for rock 'n' roll. McKeehan would later befriend an eclectic artist-to-be, named Kevin Max Smith (today known as Kevin Max). They formed a vocal group, DC Talk, that merged elements of R&B, hip-hop and pop.

The group’s progressive style went against the grain of conservative
Christianity. Using “worldly” music to share the gospel was not widely accepted. McKeehan now looks back at those years and is thankful for the experience.

“We actually got a chance to help that university, and probably some more conservative people, open their minds,” he says.

McKeehan, Max and Tait left Liberty early for Nashville, Tennessee. It wasn’t long after that they signed with Forefront Records. McKeehan forces a smile when referring to the group’s first two albums, the self-titled DC Talk released in 1989 and the following year’s Nu Thang. He cringes at the thought of their early works still being widely available in the marketplace. (“It shouldn’t have been for public consumption,” he admits.)

Any hint of embarrassment melts at the sound of their 1992 release, Free At Last. It was dc talk’s first breakthrough record and showed signs of the artistry that was lurking around the corner. Their artistic growth was validated with a Grammy award for Best Rock Gospel Album.

Free At Last may have changed the path of three musicians, but what was to come would change the path of an entire industry. In 1995, dc talk was preparing to record its fourth album. After months of writing, producing and mixing, the group offered up Jesus Freak, which emerged as one of Christian music’s all-time defining moments. Elements of hard rock, melodic pop, hip-hop and soul were blended into one commercial-sounding package.

“It was one of those moments where intent and art and passion and three men’s lives just all connected,” McKeehan reflects. “Sparks shot out and a record was made.”

Jesus Freak marked the beginning of a Christian rock revolution. In one stroke of musical genius, the squeaky-clean image of dc talk (subtly underscored by the removal of capital letters from their group name) suddenly helped validate a subculture within the industry.

McKeehan admits the prevailing belief that the three musicians kicked off this new era “might be too big of a thing to think about.” However, he has no reticence about the fact that the spiritual soil Jesus Freak emerged from was uniquely fertile.

“It was one of the best spiritual times of my life,” he explains. “I was learning more then than I’ve learned in years—between getting taught by my church and Michael Guido our road pastor and [author] Brennan Manning. Some of the outpouring from us artistically was because we were being poured into.”

For McKeehan, that time of “being poured into” also overflowed into his personal life and his daily walk with God. He credits even more of his spiritual growth to his relationship with pastor Ray McCollum of McKeehan’s home church, Bethel World Outreach in Brentwood, Tennessee. While McCollum was pastor, McKeehan began to understand more about the work of the Holy Spirit. It was a far cry from his childhood memories of church.

“In my growing up, sure the Holy Spirit was mentioned

occasionally, but to really learn about the Holy Spirit has come later in life for me," McKeehan says.

"I didn't grasp the intimate side of knowing Jesus Christ. Maybe because it wasn't taught. Maybe because it was more of a regiment where I grew up. This Jesus that loves me and shows me mercy time and again, I didn't feel like I knew that Jesus. But I do now."

McCollum founded Bethel World Outreach, a nondenominational charismatic church, in 1988. He has since stepped down as senior pastor to assume the role of senior teaching pastor. Rice Broocks, president of the Morning Star International ministry, now leads the congregation, and Bethel is part of the Morning Star church network that has a presence in 35 countries.

From its humble beginnings as a home Bible-study group, Bethel has come a long way. There now are five services a week with more than 3,500 people attending. The multiethnic, Spirit-filled church focuses on world missions, discipleship, church planting, campus ministry and leadership training. Many leading voices in the Nashville music scene attend the church, including the the Katinas and Out of Eden.

Solo, But Not 'So Long'

In contrast to the free-flowing process that was Jesus Freak, the making of Supernatural was a struggle. Before Jesus Freak, Tait and Max sometimes appeared to be background vocalists for McKeehan's raps instead of two-thirds of a three-member partnership. As the primary songwriter and producer, McKeehan felt obliged to change that perception.

As much as McKeehan attempted to accommodate his dc talk band mates, there still was a void in each of their creative hearts. Much controversy would surround the group until a May 2001 article in CCM magazine helped clarify that the trio had not called it quits. (“We’ve broken up 20 times now,” McKeehan jokes.)

Since then, he has had time to better intimate his feelings for why three dc talk solo records ultimately emerged.

“I think people think either two things about dc talk doing solo records. … I’ve never really gotten to say this in a magazine like this,” McKeehan explains. “I think people think division first of all, which isn’t true. It really isn’t.

“Do we have discrepancies and arguments and fights? Of course, but division didn’t cause solo records. They came out of a pure heart. We prayed about it together. So it wasn’t division.

“And I think people think ego. And it wasn’t ego either. I think we were very real, very honest. We met at the cross. We felt like there were some things in us that we could better express ourselves in solo form.”

Immediately, Tait and Max were off and running with their own musical projects. By choice McKeehan stood idle. As much as the artist loved to express himself, this time it wasn’t that simple. Instead, he refocused his energy on Gotee Records, the label he co-founded in 1995. He also enjoyed time at home with his wife, Amanda, and their 4-year-old son, Truitt. But it wasn’t long before the artist-producer-writer started to feel a slight creative itch.

“What I had to figure out was if I wanted to do a record or not,” McKeehan explains. “The desire in me was not that strong. I went to the studio and started messing around.”

His restlessness did not go unnoticed. Amanda recognized her husband’s condition and after two days of nonfocused activity, she challenged him.

“You shouldn’t do this without vision,” she said. “You need to pray and ask God to give you vision for a record and give you songs. That will be the answer to whether or not you’re supposed to do a solo record.”

Heeding the advice together, the couple sat on their bed and prayed that very prayer. McKeehan left for the studio still uncertain about a solo record, much less a solo career. Before he knew what had hit him, he had his answer, which overwhelmed him in a tidal wave of creative flow. McKeehan relied exclusively on divine inspiration, just as he had for previous dc talk albums.

“No exaggeration—30 days later I probably had 40 songs,” he recalls. “And I didn’t think I had that much to say. Then I started to realize once I got into the studio: ‘Man, do I miss hip-hop.'”

The result was Momentum, a chance for McKeehan to be his unabashed self. The record proudly cheered on all of his past influences.

Songs such as “What’s Goin’ Down,” “Extreme Days” and “Yours” allowed McKeehan to rock, while “Irene,” “Somebody’s Watching” and “Do You Know” celebrated his pop and hip-hop

sensibilities. Lyrically he was able
to share more personal thoughts inspired by a range of topics, from his family to social issues.

“The theme of the record is life,” McKeehan says. “It’s everything I’m living. It’s what I’m seeing in society and my perspective of that, which is a Christlike perspective. It’s what I pray for. That’s what I want. I try to see things through those eyes.”

Leaving a Legacy

McKeehan is always quick to deflect any sort of inclination that he is a pioneer. His humility is what makes him one of the most approachable figures in music.

He does, however, recognize the long-lasting impact his music has made on a generation and a music industry trying to meet that generation’s needs. For instance, the song “Jesus Freak” laid down hard-rock guitar and drum riffs laced with hip-hop rhymes long before Limp Bizkit, Korn and Linkin Park blazed a trail up the mainstream charts.

“That’s why I do have a problem with when the solo record came out and people are like: ‘”Extreme Days!” That’s like TobyMac is doing a Limp Bizkit thing!’ Come on, dude—I was rhyming with guitars when [Limp Bizkit frontman] Fred Durst was 12!” McKeehan says.

Even more important to McKeehan than his status as an artist, producer, writer or record mogul is his standing as a husband and father. The importance of that role increased last fall when he and Amanda adopted twins Moses and Marlee, a biracial

brother and sister.

“We were praying that we’d have twins,” McKeehan says. “Four days later, after we decided to tell God what we really wanted, a lady walked up to us at church and says, ‘I don’t know if you guys have ever considered adopting, but there’s these twins that need a home.’ We were open to it, but then we went on the fast track.”

Though his life might seem like it is settling down somewhat, it isn’t. McKeehan is already working on a sophomore solo project. He continues to play numerous solo concert dates, and Gotee Records is in the middle of its busiest year since launching eight years ago. Still, the nagging question remains: When will dc talk get back together again?

“Dc talk will do another record when we’re dying to do one,” McKeehan states frankly. “Not because we can. Not because the label’s asking for it. We’re going to do a record when we’re dying to do it. That’s when you’ll get a good record. That’s when you’ll get our passion.”

If you want McKeehan’s passion, look no further than the present. Two hours into his dinner interview he is diving into a curiously named dessert (“Chocolate Thunder From Down Under”). Between bites, he shares a profoundly simple mission statement that sums up what he would like for his legacy to one day reflect.

“I want to be a guy who impacted the industry and moved it to the next level with integrity,” McKeehan says. “I want to make art that moves people toward God.”

Reforming the Church

No More Plain Vanilla Music

Toby McKeehan has helped the Christian music industry embrace racial and cultural diversity.

In 1994, the Christian music industry had reached a crossroads. Album sales and radio play reflected a conspicuously homogenous sampling of artists. It would be two more years before dc talk's Jesus Freak (1995) would spark a new era of acceptance for rock and alternative artists. Bands such as MxPx, . and even Jars of Clay were barely on the map.

The state of urban and hip-hop music was even more dismal. Outside of occasional appearances on the charts by gospel artists such as Kirk Franklin and John P. Kee, or the adult-contemporary leanings of Anointed and BeBe and CeCe Winans, Christian music was literally pale in comparison to its mainstream Top 40 counterparts.

For three young men, the outlook for the industry was bleak. Toby McKeehan (of dc talk), his cousin Joey Elwood and close friend Todd Collins had just formed Gotee Productions and quickly became known around Nashville as "the Gotee Brothers."

They set out to find a label for their protégés, three young sisters called Out of Eden. The search yielded little success, despite the timeliness of Out of Eden's sound, which was

comparable to the mainstream's top female urban groups—TLC, SWV, Jade and others.

"Gotee originally came out of a frustration for people not understanding Out of Eden," McKeehan says. "Labels wanted to give it to their gospel division, or they didn't know what to do with it. But it was pop-R&B. It didn't register with people. It blew our minds, so we decided to start a label."

From the onset, Gotee Records was intended to be a diverse record label. The first four artists signed were deliberately chosen to reflect such a mission statement: Out of Eden (pop-R&B), Johnny Q. Public (modern rock), Christafari (reggae) and GRITS (hip-hop). Its purpose hasn't changed, though some consider it an urban and hip-hop label.

"It looks like Gotee specializes in urban music because … it's just getting to a point right now where I actually have to compete with some other labels when an R&B or hip-hop group comes up," McKeehan explains. "It's a good thing. It will move everything forward."

In just its eighth year, the label has fronted three million-selling artists—Out of Eden, Jennifer Knapp and the original Jeff Deyo-led Sonicflood. It has garnered seven Dove awards, 45 Dove nominations, two Billboard Music Video awards, two Grammy nominations and more than $40 million in sales.

The label has also made its mark on mainstream pop culture. TV programs such as Felicity, Party of Five, The Real World and Boston Public all have used its music. Gotee artists have appeared on stage with the likes of Monica, Sarah McLachlan, Sheryl Crow and LL Cool J. Gotee remains one of the few

independent labels in the Christian music industry.

Jeff Jackson, who has been with Gotee Records since October 1995 and today oversees the A&R department—the creative procurement side of a record label—says that “you can mark the day when our company started making headway. It was about four years ago when [president] Joey [Elwood] started insisting that we pray together.”

Another key emphasis is relationships, which Jackson admits can slow the signing process. “We played basketball with the Katinas for years. We signed [hip-hop artist] Verbs because of GRITS and being on the road with him. It took two years to sign Jennifer Knapp. We get to know people.”

This coming year looks to be Gotee’s biggest yet. The label plans to launch 13 CD projects and three DVDs, compared with its usual seven to 10 albums a year.

McKeehan is happy to say he’s been a part of this new revolution in Christian music. Since Gotee formed, more urban and hip-hop artists—Mary Mary, Trin-i-tee 5:7, KJ-52, Ill Harmonics and SouljahzI, to name a few—have found receptive ears. He says there’s a long way to go, but the road has shortened considerably.

“We don’t want to cry and whine too much,” McKeehan says. “Out of Eden sells 250,000 units and GRITS sells 125,000 units. That’s a good amount of record sales. We need to be proud of that. But we also want to forge ahead. … We need … to realize God has used us to open minds and to open the mind of the industry.”

Chad Bonham is a freelance writer, TV producer and the author of Wrestling With God (RiverOak 2001). He and his wife, Amy, live in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma.