

The Rebirth of Kirk Franklin

The popular gospel recording star endured a painful season that included lawsuits and a struggle with pornography. Now he's enjoying a spiritual transformation.

He has sold more than 10 million albums in less than a decade. He's a three-time Grammy Award winner, a seven-time Dove Award winner and a 20-time Stellar Award winner. His smash hit "Stomp" from the triple-platinum album *God's Property* (1997) landed him in heavy rotation on MTV—at the time, a feat practically unheard of in Christian music circles.

Kirk Franklin, the self-described "church boy"—as he titled his 1998 autobiography—has taken his zeal for God and coupled it with R&B and hip-hop musical styles and caused a revolution. One by one his hit songs helped erode discriminatory walls of religion and tradition in the church, and it all happened by the time he was 30.

Now 33, Franklin is just as busy praising God as he was when he first showed talent in Christian music at the age of 4. Whether or not that was when he first started pointing people to God, he's certainly been doing it ever since.

With mostly platinum and multiplatinum albums under his belt, every project this songwriter has put his hands to has turned either gold or platinum. "Stomp" skyrocketed to an impressive No. 4 on *Billboard* magazine's R&B/Hip-Hop singles chart. "Why We Sing," from his first album, remained on the magazine's Gospel charts for 100 weeks.

And Franklin's strong crossover draw with mainstream listeners also has landed him on the cover of secular publications such

as Vibe and Jet magazines. Though the Fort Worth, Texas, native admits he's not the world's best singer, many consider him a songwriter par excellence.

But at the height of his career, in the 1990s, Franklin's Midas-touch success had to endure the Refiner's fire. Internal struggles led to the breakup of his group and other problems.

"God was blessing our projects. The response to the albums was big—I mean extremely big. But privately, I couldn't enjoy it because of what was happening," Franklin told Charisma.

"What was happening" were two lawsuits that plagued his ministry, and a private struggle with pornography. Now that his problems are behind him, he refers to that time in his life as the "wilderness," from which he says he has emerged.

The Birth of a Ministry

Long before there were any multimillion-dollar recording contracts and throngs of admirers scurrying to concerts to watch him perform, Franklin was known simply as "Gertrude's boy." His elderly aunt, Gertrude Franklin, whom he calls Mamma, adopted him when his biological mother abandoned him. Although Gertrude was up in age, she took young Kirk to Mount Rose Baptist Church religiously during his early years.

He was only around 4 years old when he told Mamma he wanted to be a preacher.

"I was watching television with Mamma when a rerun of Martin Luther King Jr. reciting his 'I Have a Dream' speech came on.

I told her then that I wanted to preach,” Franklin recalls with a big smile. He can remember his pastor calling him to the pulpit to give a closing prayer.

By the time he was 7, Kirk was offered his first recording contract, but Mamma declined the offer. And when money was tight and Mamma couldn’t pay for his music lessons, she collected cans and sold them to cover the cost. Her efforts paid off when he, at age 11, was appointed choir director at his church.

When he was a teenager, Franklin says, he considered Mamma’s Baptist teachings to be strict and overbearing. Today, with four children of his own, he admits that the Scripture verses she rattled off and the biblical truths and lessons of holiness she instilled in him years ago have sustained him during the turbulent times of his life and keep him grounded today.

Mamma, however, did not see the fruit of her labor. She died when he was 17.

By the time he’d reached his early 20s, Franklin was well-known in Dallas music circles. Still, it wasn’t until a deacon in his church suggested he cut an album that he started his own group, The Family. In 1992, he sought out 17 musically gifted singers, some of whom were longtime friends of his, to be part of the group.

The deacon who suggested the album also financed the project, and in 1993 Franklin released his self-titled debut album, Kirk Franklin and The Family. The freshman project produced the blockbuster single “Why We Sing,” and the record went

platinum, putting the group on the map.

"I'll never forget it," Franklin recalls. "I added all of my bills including my child support for my son, and then I told the Lord that if He would just bless me to make \$24,000 a year, I would be happy." After the album hit music stands, Franklin was shocked by the sales and concert attendance. Instead of \$24,000 a year, he made \$24,000 a month.

Two years later, Franklin released two more albums with The Family, Whatcha Lookin' 4 and Christmas. Whatcha Lookin' 4 went platinum, and Christmas was a gold album.

In 1996, Franklin married Tammy Collins, a 26-year-old Fort Worth native who worked as a makeup artist. The same year, he joined forces with the Dallas-based group God's Property, a move that added a whole new dimension to his music. When their joint single, "Stomp," later sold 3 million copies, Franklin, in particular, was catapulted into mainstream music circles.

"God's Property and Kirk Franklin was the answer to the Christian music dilemma," says Dahlia Jones, a member of the Florida A&M University Gospel Choir. "There are a huge number of people who like either urban, hip-hop or contemporary Christian music, but just several years ago the church was dragging its feet on embracing anything that had a beat."

Jones says "Stomp" was the answer to a younger generation's prayers.

Franklin is the first to admit that he wasn't prepared for the backlash of criticism leveled at him by traditional churches because of his music's upbeat, makes-you-wanna-dance style.

Nor was he ready for the avalanche of attention he received from people who didn't profess Christ at all.

When he traveled he was invited to stay in nice hotel suites and ride in limousines. Arsenio Hall, Jay Leno and David Letterman all invited him on their TV programs. When he fell off a stage once in Memphis, Tennessee, Jesse Jackson visited him. Get-well cards and flowers poured in from well-known people including former heavyweight boxing champion Mike Tyson.

Things were flourishing for the little boy who had high hopes of being a preacher like Martin Luther King Jr. It wouldn't be long, though, before his dream would seem more like a nightmare.

Transformed by God

One sign of disappointment came in 1998 when Franklin lost the fellowship of someone he considered a spiritual father. It was during this low point in his life that God led him to a church that did not cater to the "Christian celebrity."

When he arrived at Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship in Dallas, he was stunned by the lesson God had in store for him—which began right away in the church's overflow parking lot.

"I was heated because I couldn't find a place to park. Mind you, I'd become Kirk Franklin, and I had reserved parking wherever I went, or I had someone to park my car for me," he recalls.

Not only did he have to park in a distant lot, but he also was forced to sit in the church balcony after he was unable to find seating in the lower level of the sanctuary. That was the first time he started to see attitudes in himself that he didn't know were there.

Yet something about pastor Tony Evans' message prompted Franklin to return Sunday after Sunday. Though he considered the music too "Anglo," he joined the church because it met a deep spiritual need. Evans, who had founded the church 26 years before, treats all members with genuine love and respect.

"One of the great tragedies is when we give people the impression that a certain status in society gives them kingdom privileges," Evans, 53, told Charisma. "The only thing that gives you privileges is your humility and servanthood to the Lord Jesus."

Evans says although he believes in giving "honor to whom honor is due," as the Bible says (see Rom. 13:7), he says pastors commit a disservice to their congregations and send the wrong message to members if they believe certain people should be accepted on the basis of performance.

"Celebrityism decimates Christian ministry and the church," Evans says.

Franklin was grateful to God for Evans' solid Bible teaching, and he knew that Evans would be the right person to help him with another personal problem. Sexual thoughts beginning at age 10 had eventually led Franklin into pornography. Again, Evans helped Franklin gain a spiritually healthy approach to

his struggle.

“I shared with him how to live under grace,” Evans says. “He was living under the law or a performance-based approach to living for God, which is always defeating. I helped him understand walking in the Spirit, intimacy with God and how to draw near to Him.”

After learning the principles of life under grace, Franklin gained total victory over pornography.

Franklin insists that churches should foster open discussion on the issue—which he himself did when he appeared on Bishop T.D. Jakes’ The Potter’s Touch TV program and talked candidly about his own struggle.

He also cautions parents to beware of what he calls a “Lucifer spirit” that can captivate children who have artistic gifts or leanings. He believes the devil wants to pervert creativity in children gifted with artistic expression.

“Lucifer was very beautiful and talented and wanted to be like God. Sexuality for creative people is a time bomb because creative people don’t program things the way other people do,” he says.

Franklin points out that when he was a child growing up, sexuality was always a part of his life.

But just as Franklin started getting the victory in one area of his life, he found himself struggling in other areas. While working on The Kirk Franklin Show for Universal/ABC, the

sitcom was dropped suddenly from the network's lineup.

"That took a chunk out of me because everything I had done professionally up until that time was successful," Franklin explains. Then there was the talk of a lawsuit by the founder of the group God's Property.

"That album came out, and because I was so involved in it creatively, and she had her own vision for it, we started to clash," Franklin told Charisma.

He started working with a group of African American and Hispanic youth called One Nation Crew, which he nicknamed "1NC." But the purpose of his newly formed group was not just to sing. 1NC was created to attract young people to events that ministered to them through song and the Word.

In 1998, Franklin and 1NC came out with the blockbuster hit "Revolution," from the Nu Nation Project.

Suddenly, Christians and unbelievers alike were singing the song's lyrics that addressed the spiritual and moral decline of society: "Sick and tired of my brothas/Killing each other/Sick and tired of daddies leaving/Babies with their mothers/To every man that wants to lay around and play around/Listen potnah you should be man enough to stay around."

"Revolution" also addressed the religiosity of many churches today.

"Sick and tired of the church talkin religion/But yet they talk about each other makin decisions/No more racism/Two

facism/No pollution/The solution/A revolution/Do you want a revolution?/Do you want a revolution?"

But when the album did not do as well as the others—though it sold 2 million copies—Franklin was extremely disappointed. In fact, any time one of his projects did not sell as well as the previous one had, he saw it as a failure. It didn't matter if the record had been a huge success by industry standards.

As if to make things worse, the first lawsuit hit on the same day "Revolution" released. As word traveled about that suit, Franklin was notified of a second one. Other people were being named in the suits, but it was his name that kept surfacing with the public.

Today he does not like to discuss the particulars of the multimillion-dollar legal cases, other than to say: "Both lawsuits ended up being destructive for everyone, and nobody won anything. That's the truth."

Looking back, Franklin says legal woes and battles over failed albums were certainly difficult but that his own identity problem was the true enemy of his success. He had no way of knowing how much attention he would receive just for being a platinum-selling music artist. As a child he had longed for recognition, so the ultralavish affirmation he received from musical success devastated him because he had to have more of it.

"Selling a lot of albums and crossing over made me famous, and it gave me an audience. It gave me validation. It was almost like I was the worst person God could have ever chosen for it because it's like sending a crack addict to be a missionary in

a crack house,” he explains.

After going through several seasons of being angry with God and asking Him, “Why did You cross me over if You knew You were going to pull it from me?” Franklin is grateful that God used his triple-platinum albums, TV appearances, gold albums and more to break him and get his attention.

“God used He knew that would be the tool to break me,” Franklin says. “He was right.”

Teresa Hairston, the Nashville, Tennessee-based publisher of Gospel Today and Gospel Industry Today magazines—the leading consumer and trade magazines covering gospel music—says Franklin’s success is rooted in his uniqueness. She points out that he almost single-handedly helped to bridge gospel music and secular listeners, and she echoes his belief that only God could have authored his success.

“Kirk took urban gospel and fused it with mainstream audiences,” Hairston says. “This wasn’t something he was able to manufacture. God did it, and then He opened a door for Kirk to be used.”

Nowadays Franklin crisscrosses the country offering hope and a timely word about God’s love in his concerts. His current album, *The Rebirth of Kirk Franklin*, already is raking in nominations, including the NAACP’s Image Award for Outstanding Album.

Franklin’s wary of the attention he knows will come from another successful album. But he’s willing to let God use his music. He knows it’s one more way for him to tell everyone he

knows, firsthand, that God can and will deliver His people in the toughest of times.

Yours, Mine and Ours

Kirk and Tammy Franklin say their blended family is a testimony.

If you ask Kirk Franklin what gives him joy in life, he won't respond with a laundry list of TV shows he's appeared on. Neither will he give you a rundown of the many accolades he's received—including his being selected as People magazine's "sexiest" gospel artist of 2002.

What really matters to both Kirk and his wife, Tammy, is their family. They consider Kerrion, 14; Carrington, 13; Kennedy, 5; and Caziah, 2, their greatest accomplishment of all. Living the life of a gospel artist is hectic and stressful at times, but the couple say they decided early in their marriage to do two things: put each other first, and provide a normal, healthy and loving environment for their kids.

"When I return home from a long road trip, I have a decision to make, Should I not be bothered with my kids because I'm too tired, or should I take time out to play with them? I choose to be with my children," Kirk says.

Maybe that's why toddler "ZiZi" ran to the front door sounding like a broken record when Kirk returned from his interview with Charisma. "Hi, Daddy! Hi, Daddy! Hi, Daddy!" Caziah

blurted, as his father scooped him into his arms.

Tammy, who is a stay-at-home mother, is committed to rearing godly, responsible children. That's why the two teenagers in the family have limited telephone time and have to earn their modest allowance, which is given to them as a check in an effort to help them learn financial-management skills.

Because her children have the opportunity to attend such events as the nationally televised Grammy Awards and BET Awards programs, Tammy says it's very important that they have a realistic view of life. "My daughter has autographed pictures from basketball players and from others such as Lil' Bow Wow, but that's not realistic," she says.

Referring to her family as "ready-made" because the couple both have had children outside of marriage, Tammy knows that God has given the two of them a platform from which to share their testimonies with others.

"For Kirk to stand up and say: 'I had a baby before I got married. Don't do it,' or for me to share my experience because I know a lot of girls have babies before they get married—only the Lord could do that," she stresses.

The challenges of being a blended family have strengthened the couple's resolve to seek God for His wisdom as parents.

Having gone through the highs and lows of being a minister's wife, Tammy is comfortable with being herself.

"When we first got married, I was overwhelmed with who I was

and what I was supposed to be,” the former makeup artist said. She went from wearing big-brimmed hats and gloves and feeling like she was dressed up for Halloween to realizing who she was created to be.

“God started reminding me that I was uniquely made by Him and that girls needed to see that a person could be in love with the Lord and sold out for Him and still wear blue jeans,” she explains.

For now, the 33-year-old mother says her primary ministry is twofold: being at home with her kids and being available to her husband when he needs her help in his ministry. She plans one day to reach out in ministry to single mothers.

As for Kirk, the test of his calling is doing what God wants him to do in the field as a gospel artist and a minister while being the husband and father God wants him to be at home.

“The more I learn about dying to myself, the more I learn about being successful in life,” he says.

Time to Come Clean

Kirk Franklin says his porn addiction was linked to a craving for acceptance.

Kirk and Tammy Franklin spoke candidly with Charisma about the dangers of pornography and how it destroys lives. They hope

that by sharing their story marriages will be saved and families will be strengthened or restored.

Charisma: How did you get hooked on pornography?

Kirk Franklin: With magazines. We have to understand something about pornography. Porn is perceived as not being a dirty thing anymore. It's looked at like you're not cheating, which is a trick of the enemy, of course. But you are cheating. The Bible says whatever a man thinks, so is he. Porn gets written off as not being dangerous, but it is.

Being young and being around other kids, things happen that shouldn't. There are seemingly innocent little games that kids play, like "hide and go get it." Some of those experiences never leave the mind. They become habitual.

People get hooked on porn in a number of ways. A drunken man will give a child some money to go to the corner store to buy a dirty magazine for him. Or someone's older brother has a dirty magazine in his bedroom and his younger brother finds it and takes it to the park for other kids to see.

Charisma: Is it addictive?

Kirk Franklin: It is very addictive. But when God started giving me the victory over it, it was not as addictive as the [need for acceptance] I struggled with. When I shared my problem with my wife, I told her that it was going to be harder to break my addiction to people than my addiction to porn.

For God to have called me to public ministry like He has is nothing short of His love for me. I am the most ill-equipped person on the planet because of my struggle with the acceptance of people.

Charisma: Explain how this need for acceptance affected you.

Kirk Franklin: I wanted to be liked and popular. I wanted to be known and validated.

Wanting to be approved of is a thorn that I struggle with even now. Being popular in music just fed that. When my pastor told me I needed to be discipled, something screamed out in me, Yes! Discipleship fills up the holes in a person's life.

Charisma: How did you react when Kirk confessed that he had a problem with pornography?

Tammy Franklin: It was a challenge, but for some reason God has gifted me with the ability to communicate with people, and that's what I did. I'm able to listen to people and put myself in their shoes.

I did not judge him. If he was transparent enough—or, I should say, fearless enough—to tell me, I knew the least I could do was listen and try to understand. What blessed me is this: He looked at pornography as something wrong. There are a lot of guys who don't look at it that way. They don't think it's wrong.

Charisma: What advice would you offer other women whose husbands are battling pornography?

Tammy Franklin: Be understanding, but hold him accountable. My husband wanted to change, which made it possible to deal with the problem. He said to me: "I'm not happy about this."

If he had responded differently, I would not have overlooked his behavior. Plus, I wasn't willing to just sit back and let the enemy attack my husband like that, so I covered him in prayer. Don't ever stop praying.

Charisma: How do you suggest protecting children from pornography?

Tammy Franklin: We watch our children. We look for the telltale signs. Do they feel loved? Do they feel accepted? I think talking with kids is the best defense. Be available to them.

One thing we do is watch secular videos with our oldest son, and we use it as a ministry tool. We want him to have a proper view of women, and he's learning that those videos give boys a warped view of women.

These support groups offer help for those who struggle with pornography:

Heart to Heart Counseling Centers
Doug Weiss, director
(719) 278-3708

Overcomers Outreach

(800) 310-3001

For Men Only / For Women Only
A ministry of East Hill Church
(503) 661 -4444

Sexaholics Anonymous
(615) 331-6230

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