

Worship Leader Draws Unlikely Audience

Her songs are based on Scripture, and she even sings in tongues, but Mary-Kathryn is a hit among New Agers.

✖ **March 30, 2009** – A charismatic worship leader who draws her songs from Scripture and even sings in tongues has tapped an unlikely audience—New Age music lovers.

Mary-Kathryn, whose latest DVD was recorded at her charismatic church in suburban Nashville, Tenn., has appeared at the New Age International Trade Show and dialogues with rockers, bikers and Wiccans on her MySpace page.

“I’m reaching a whole new and broader audience that I’ve never reached before,” said the singer, who is married and has two children, ages 20 and 16. “It’s a way of reaching people who are not believers in Christ.”

Jeff Dollar, pastor of Grace Center in Franklin, Tenn.—where her *Live at Grace Center* DVD was recorded—said Mary-Kathryn is a member of the worship team but has a bigger impact outside the church. “She seems to have a huge impact on these New Agers seeking the truth,” Dollar said. “But it’s not your typical gospel message.”

After college, Mary-Kathryn started working at her husband’s advertising agency, originally based in San Antonio. One of several volunteer worship leaders at their church, she sensed the Holy Spirit calling her to be a psalmist five years later. She says God told her the songs He would give her would be designed to bring healing.

She then started hearing musical arrangements in her head, though it would take seven more years to step into a full-time career. Three years after forming their own record label in

1997, Mary-Kathryn and her husband, Elliott Cunningham, moved to Nashville.

Although her first three albums earned her recognition in the Christian music world, August 2007's *Dreams & Visions* catapulted her into the New Age realm. Although it didn't make the final list, the album earned a first-round Grammy Award nomination.

Mary-Kathryn had finished the recording in 2005, but sensed God telling her to wait to release it. When she asked God why, He told her she had been tending sheep, and it was time to take healing and deliverance to people in the New Age movement.

Her sound is categorized as ambient-Celtic-fusion, but her lyrics are Bible-based. "Psalm 91" includes such lines as: "He is my refuge/ He will cover me with His feathers/ And under His wings I will hide/ He will give His angels charge over me." On another track, she sings in tongues.

"It's the Father's love that comes through," Mary-Kathryn said. "[New Agers] are looking for that love. It's not so much what you say as what you show."

Although she has been accused of blending Christianity with the New Age and has been criticized for using icons on her Web site that resemble New Age symbols, Mary-Kathryn said she is not ambiguous about her faith. She said the icons are adapted from classic Christianity and relate to Jesus, the Holy Spirit or the Trinity.

"I would never have entered into ministry in this market without making it clear as to who I was," she said. "[God has] given me the ability to have favor with the people group, and they accept me, but I'm also able to speak [truth to them]."

Among her fans is Suzanne Doucet, a former pop and rock star in Europe. Now operator of a music store in Los Angeles,

Doucet is a longtime member of the Grammy Awards screening committee for the New Age category. Although she hasn't changed her mind about Christianity, Doucet said Mary-Kathryn's music is rich and multilayered. "It has a universal appeal and is inclusive, [embracing] many cultures and belief systems, versus exclusive," she said. "This is what makes it New Age."

Christians, too, have migrated to Mary-Kathryn's music. Bill Merchut, a vice president at Mel Trotter Ministries, a homeless shelter in Grand Rapids, Mich., ordered three of Mary-Kathryn's CDs after hearing her music on a Celtic Internet radio program.

"'My Father's World' and 'Glory Forever' take me to a place of worship," said Merchut, who credits her music with helping him survive some personal challenges. "The song that really speaks to me from a ministry perspective is 'Unto the Least of These.' That's where we're at, trying to minister to hurting people."

Mary-Kathryn said people have received the gift of tongues or healing at some concerts. But she's more concerned about communicating the truth of Christ's love. "What God has shown me is I'm just to love people," she said. "As I love them, it builds trust, and I'm able to share [my faith]."