

How One of the Most Famous Christian Songs of All Time Made It to the Big Screen

If Fandango and sales hold steady, *I Can Only Imagine* is going to have an impressive opening weekend. Both sites report the film in high demand, with the latter reporting it as the site's top purchase.

How did the biopic of MercyMe lead singer and songwriter Bart Millard make it to the big screen? And how did veteran actor Dennis Quaid step into the role of Bart's father, Arthur. Andrew Erwin, who directed the film with his brother Jon, revealed some insight on the story's journey to the screen in an exclusive Q&A with DeWayne Hamby.

How did this project get started?

With Woodlawn, Jon and I really fell in love with the power of a true story. I think it's something that *The Case for Christ* definitely tapped into as well. I was a big fan of that movie. I think there's something powerful about a true testimony that allows you to go at the Christianity in a way that doesn't feel propoganda-ish or self-serving. It's really just a person's experience. It's hard to argue with that. So it really gives you tons of resources to mine rather than having to come up with a fictional story. For us, that's been something that we love, I think maybe from our documentary background.

Bart Millard, I invited him to a screening of *Mom's Night Out*, just on a whim, we didn't know each other. I was doing a music artist screening and I just said, "Hey, we run in similar circles, would you like to come watch my movie tonight?" He said, "I'd love to, I just moved to Nashville from Texas."

After that screening was over, he came down and we talked and

said, "I don't know if you know this, but the movie studio's been developing my life story for the past five years and I'd love for you guys to consider directing." I said, "I don't know if you know this, but they sent us the script this morning to see if we were interested." We went back to the movies and watched *Captain America* that night and struck up a really cool friendship. Bart became one of my dearest friends.

As we looked into the story, we really had a different take on it and looked to see what the story was about. We said, "Bart, doing your life story, we really want to do an accurate portrait of who you are and your life experiences. We want to cram it into two hours but we want it to be accurate." He really let down his guard and let us hear the struggles and the victories of his life. It's really stuff he's only started talking about in the past several years, about the abusive relationship with his father and how God, through saving his father, led to him writing the song that we all love. You hear a lot of this; it makes a lot more sense when you go back and hear songs like "Dear Younger Me" and "Flawless," songs like that. Those were songs that he was writing as he working out how to wrestle with the painful parts of his story and how to share it. As we heard the full story, including this part about Amy Grant, which is just too good to be true, her involvement in his journey, we were shocked that the story hadn't been told and we were extra in awe that God allowed us to be the ones to tell it. I feel like I have to keep pinching myself, like "How did we get in a position like this to tell this story?" Because it's special, it's really special.

John Michael Finley is a great discovery. How did he come to the film?

John Michael is a rare find. He's never been in a feature film before, but we were looking for a needle in a needle stack for a guy who can do his own singing, looks like Bart, has Bart's sense of humor and really had the DNA of Bart Millard, and that was a rare find. So we did an open casting call across

the whole country and did five cities. Out of the hundreds and hundreds of people who auditioned for it, we found one guy, one guy that was right for the role and it was John Michael. He had just started his run on Broadway; he was the understudy for Jean Valjean in *Les Mis*. They had gone younger with the cast, so he was only 25 years old. Fresh kid, fresh face. He reminds you of Seth Rogan-meets-Kevin James. You just fall in love with him on the screen. It turns out his dad is a pastor in Missouri and he grew up going to summer camps and hearing MercyMe play. So it was just one of those things that was a God thing. He just gives a special captivating performance so I'm really proud of him.

To have someone like Dennis Quaid, not to mention Trace Adkins, but he really steps in and makes the movie in a lot of sense. How did that come about?

We really needed a name to legitimize the movie. For Arthur, a rough, blue-collar kind of guy, we only had about five names on that list. Dennis Quaid was near the top of that list. It's definitely a rougher character than he's ever played, rough, growly, hard-nosed blue-collar guy that by the end is this tender, amazingly captivating child-like person. So we needed somebody that could captivate in that role. We were beginning to panic because we were three weeks into filming and still didn't have the right guy to play him. So we put all his scenes at the end to get the name that we needed. I called Stephen Kendrick of the Kendrick Brothers one night and I was just panicked. I was like, "Stephen, we're doing this movie. I don't have a name in this role. I don't even have a person in this role. What do I do?" He said, "Andy, the same way God brought Caleb Castille to you guys with *Woodlawn* is what you want with this one. If you're walking in the center of God's will and want His best, He will not let you miss it. In that case, embrace closed doors as God directing you to the right door." I just really took that to heart and I just said, "Okay, God, it's your problem." We all prayed about it and

said, "Lord, who's your guy?" And God just laid it on Kevin Downes' heart that Dennis Quaid was the guy who's on our list, and we had already been negotiating with his people.

One of our crew members is Noah Hamilton, who is the brother of Bethany Hamilton, who the movie *Soul Surfer* was about. Dennis Quaid played her father in the movie. So Noah reached out privately by text and introduced us to Dennis, and he heard the story, and within an hour he was on the phone, and said, "I'm in. I want to do this movie." God really opened the doors that he showed up on set and there's this one scene, the breakfast scene. When he did that scene, he took it to a level, I've never had that kind of acting on any of our movies. I'm proud of the acting in our movies, but that scene in particular I've never had magic in a bottle happen quite like that. He took it to a level I was in awe of. Then John Michael responded to him and matched the energy. Jon and I were looking at each other, eating popcorn at the monitor, saying "This is a movie. This is an amazing movie to watch." So Dennis gives a powerful performance, one of the best conversions I've ever seen in a film the way he portrayed understanding grace.

How did he respond to the role and the finished film?

When I got done with the movie, I took it over to his house and showed it to him and his two kids. They're both 9 years old. I tried to kind of give him his privacy and not really look to see how he was responding, and I looked at the end of the movie and said, "What did you think?" He was just ugly, crying, just sobbing. Came up and hugged me two or three times and said, "That was powerful." He called Bart that night, and they talked on the phone for about five hours. He said, "After Andy left, my kids started talking to me about heaven and about God, and we've never had those kinds of conversations before. This movie is a movie about how God does His miracles the hard way. I'm totally in." It's been neat to see that journey from beginning to end, and I'm proud to have him in

the cast. I'm proud of the cast top to bottom, Trace Adkins, Madeline Carroll, it's a strong cast and as a director, I felt kind of spoiled.

It all worked out very well and the buzz is very positive.

I don't know what God's going to do, but I feel like something special is going on.

I Can Only Imagine, directed by the Erwin Brothers, releases March 16. {eoa}

DeWayne Hamby is a communications specialist and longtime journalist covering faith-based music, entertainment, books and the retail industry. He is also the editor of the White Wing Messenger, director of communications for the Church of God of Prophecy and author of the book *Gratitude Adjustment*. Connect with him at or on twitter—@dewaynehamby.