

Israel Houghton Reveals True Motives for Worship

Talent. Skill. Excellence. Perfectionism. Israel Houghton balances it all. And he constantly checks his heart. In Part 3 of this exclusive interview, we talked with Israel about how talent and skill factor into worship, perfectionism and motives. You can also go back and read Part 1 and Part 2.

CHARISMA: What about talent and skill—how do they factor into worship, if we're looking at it from beyond a purely musical expression?

Houghton: There's a way to produce excellent music based on whatever your current feeling might be. The biggest part of excellence is not skill. At the same time, if you've got a big skill set, make sure you use it. Use all the tools in the toolbox.

But it does come back to having the right expression, the right purity of motivation. We say "heart," but I don't want "heart" to be misconstrued as "not that good." I just think when the heart is added to that skill set in the right way, it's going to be amazing.

CHARISMA: Are you a perfectionist when you lead others (especially musicians)? How do you think that perfectionism can be a good thing for leading worship?

Houghton: I'm a bit of a hybrid in that although I want good execution, I also really like living on the edge of that moment where this thing could fall apart like a big Chipotle burrito. There's something about being right on the edge of that, like this is going to be an amazing moment or a complete disaster. I feel like I lean in differently, like my band leans in differently.

I do this to my team all the time. I say, "OK guys, this is rehearsal—make sure you pay attention to the charts this week. Everything's on there, but then I've got stuff up my sleeve on Saturday night. And on purpose I haven't shown them the change I'm about to show them because I want them to be alert. My band can tell you—either the Lakewood Band or the New Breed band—that oftentimes I'll turn around and point to my eye (saying, "Watch me"). I'm sure there's a wink or a gleam in my eye, like we're going to try something, and it's funny because you watch them lean in differently.

So there's the element of what I spent time on that week, sitting down with my guitar or sitting at the piano messing with. But I'm also always looking for that moment where I can hand God the microphone and say, "We did our best with this—what do You want to say?" I want to walk in that kind of relationship. I want to execute what we discussed well, but I also don't mind the human moments. I don't mind going, "Oh man, I totally forgot the next verse to 'How Great Thou Art.'" And I've had that happen where you almost feel the whole building take a collective sigh, like, "OK, we're good. This was never about the performance pounding off the stage. This is about us being summoned by the King of kings, and we're in His presence now. It's about Him. He's the host."

For me, I've had to change my vocabulary a lot of times. We say things like, "God, You're welcome here," yet I imagine it's funny because He's like, "I brought you here. I'm the host; you're the guest. Let's not get this thing upside-down."

CHARISMA: How do you personally avoid turning what you do in leading people in worship into a performance?

Houghton: A number of years back I saw this TBS special where they were interviewing David Letterman, Jerry Seinfeld, Jay Leno and a few other guys and talking about the first time they went on *The Tonight Show*. They described it like this: You're standing in front of this studio audience. You've got

to make the people laugh, of course. You know the cameras are on and there's another 30 million people watching, but the only laugh you're listening for is Johnny's. The only laugh you hope you get is Johnny's.

Do you know how when you hear certain things, they almost come with their own reverb? You know when they say it that they're talking about something completely different, but you hear it and it echoes in your spirit, it reverberates in your heart. That happened to me.

I remember drawing a quick analogy that when I'm brought in on a Sunday morning at church, it's not, "Let me move these people. OK, we've got some old people in the front row so I better do a hymn; or so-and-so's a big minister in town so let me perform a little bit harder." Anybody on the stage with a microphone has had to work through that in their own mind, often in real-time. For me, it's like I've been summoned to entertain the King, not to entertain these people. So I don't mind the element of performance because I've been asked by the King to entertain Him. And if I do it with the right heart, focused on Him, what He can do in that moment I could never do in a million years, no matter how good I sang or how good I played.

Again, I have to check my motive all the time. Am I singing this, am I in this moment for the front row or am I in this moment because God is smiling when He hears me sing this song? And honestly, that's why I love being a worship leader. I love being able to write songs and sing songs that are so vertical in their nature that there's no question about who they're for.

Be sure to go back and read Part 1 and Part 2. And stay tuned for Part 4.