

Matthew West's Heartbeat for Christmas

Even for a prolific songwriter like Matthew West, penning fresh-sounding Christmas music presented a bit of a test, albeit one he thoroughly enjoyed. "Christmas songs have been written millions of times, so I took it as a challenge to approach an age-old story with fresh eyes and with a unique perspective," said West in a recent interview.

His freshly minted *The Heart of Christmas* succeeds admirably, garnering rave reviews from the likes of *The New York Times*: "This album, one of the year's most inventive holiday releases, is made up mainly of Mr. West's originals, and is far better for it. He's a vivid and compelling songwriter, with refreshing approaches to the familiar."

Underneath each original song and a handful of familiar carols lies a heart that beats in time with that of the Savior rather than Santa. "The true heart of Christmas is realizing that we can celebrate the birth of a Savior and that there's hope every single day of the year," said West.

The Christmas project caps off a busy year that included co-authoring his first book, *The Story of Your Life: Inspiring Stories of God at Work in People Just like You* with Angela Thomas; a Grammy nomination for the song "Strong Enough," and three nights of ministry alongside Will Graham at the Jersey Shore Celebration in May.

West takes time—when possible—to give back to the ministry that changed his life. "When I was 13 years old," he explained, "I came across a Billy Graham Crusade on television. Being a preacher's son, I had my share of church services and typically would change the channel. But something was different this time."

As Graham began to give the invitation, West felt God knocking at the door of his heart: "That was the day I accepted Christ as my personal Savior."

West relishes telling the story: "I will never forget Billy Graham and the impact his ministry has had in my life."

That is why you will find West working alongside Franklin Graham and Will Graham, and traveling to places like Colombia in support of Operation Christmas Child and *The Greatest Journey*.

In fact, one of the songs on *The Heart of Christmas* stems from West's ministry connection: "After reading the script for a *Veggie Tales* Christmas movie," he explained, "I wrote a song called 'Give This Christmas Away.' At the same time, I was spokesman for Operation Christmas Child so I had the chance to give that song to the ministry."

Another of the heart-tugging songs on *The Heart of Christmas* was inspired by a little boy whose story found its way onto West's 2010 release, *The Story of Your Life*, for which he solicited testimonies from people around the world.

"As I was reading the 10,000 stories that came in, on one particular day, I read three different stories from three different people who were telling me I needed to write a song about the same little boy," said West.

Two-year-old Dax had a rare form of leukemia and was receiving care at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. After doctors informed the family there was nothing more they could do for their son, they went back home and decided to cherish every last moment they had with him.

West continued the story: "Dax loved Christmas lights and not knowing how much longer they had with him, his parents decided not to wait until Christmas to put up their decorations. When everyone else was putting up their Halloween and fall

decorations, this family put Christmas lights everywhere.”

The people in Dax’s neighborhood began noticing the unusually early display and inquired about it. “Pretty soon lights started popping up all over the neighborhood,” West said. “As the song says, the whole town basically stepped in and, in a show of support for this little boy, the whole town was lit up in October with Christmas lights.”

West first released the song last year to raise money for St. Jude’s Hospital. The video for “One Last Christmas” featured home footage of the family spending their last days with their son.

“I still can’t watch the video because it messes me up,” West admitted. “It had over a million views last year and it was a pretty awesome thing, so that really is how *The Heart of Christmas* album came to be. It kind of grew out of that song and the phenomenon that became an online movement.”

Sprinkled among the original songs on the album are a few of West’s personal favorites: “‘Jingle Bells’ is for my daughters because they like that one. Then, to me, one of the most beautiful Christmas songs ever written was ‘O Holy Night.’ You talk about the heart of Christmas—to me those lyrics really capture it in a powerful and emotional way.”

On “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” West channels his inner Michael Bublé. “It wasn’t about taking Christmas songs and trying to make them hip and modern,” he laughed. “It was more about letting them stay the classics that they are and trying to do them justice as a singer. It was fun for me because I don’t always get to show that side of my vocals.”

Joking aside, West focused in on the bottom line for the album: “My hope is to point to some of the main themes of Christmas—the joy and the emotion and cherishing times with our family. But, ultimately, I wanted every song to point back to the hope that we have in Christ to save us.”

Used with permission of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.