

Newest MercyMe Album Encourages Listeners to Breathe, Leave Anxiety at the Door

Twenty years after the breakthrough hit “I Can Only Imagine,” MercyMe is working harder than ever, continuing to release relevant, inspirational music that entertain and inspire. The band’s newest collection, *inhale (exhale)*, follows the band’s standard of heart-gripping and toe-tapping tracks.

Three years ago, with the release of a film based on lead singer and songwriter Bart Millard’s life, the band experienced an incredible surge of support; suddenly placing them in front of stadiums full of new listeners that kept them on the roads until the recent national shutdown.

“It wouldn’t level out, like the perfect storm with the songs ‘Even If’ and ‘The Best News Ever,” all the songs did really well,” he says. “We’d never seen anything like this. Then the pandemic hit, and we hunkered down with our families.”

As its breakout hit proves, the band can deliver on the emotional goods. Case in point, the new power ballad, “Say I Won’t,” inspired by a dear friend, Gary, who lost his limbs due to illness from septic shock. Singer-songwriter Bart Millard, who had been discussing identity in Christ with him before his sickness, wrestled with telling his friend’s story, but finally decided it would inspire others struggling to press on despite their circumstances every day.

“It’s been a really amazing and humbling experience, and every day he amazes me more just his attitude,” he says. “It’s been so much fun to see people reach out to him and respond to the song. It’s the least we could do with everything he’s gone

through and what he means to us.”

The new album was two years in the making, and “the longest we’ve ever worked on a project,” Millard says, factoring in the pandemic shutdown. The coronavirus crisis also revised the album title and direction. Originally called *Spaceman*, the new project was themed around being strangers from another world before the world stopped and gave everyone a breather, in a manner of speaking.

“When the pandemic hit, we kept saying ‘Man, we just want this forty-something minutes of music to allow people to take a deep breath and just leave whatever they’re going through at the door,’” he continues. “We decided to call it *inhale*, (*exhale*) and the cover is like a set of lungs. What’s funny is when we did that, we didn’t even think about COVID being a respiratory disease initially, but it was like, ‘Wow, you know, it’s like the perfect snapshot for us and what we’ve gone through in this season.’”

The new project features a variety of special appearances, including music legend Gloria Gaynor (*I Will Survive*), who co-wrote the song “Brand New” with Millard during the time they spent together recording her Gospel project. The danceable track certainly fits into Millard’s hope of providing music “that people might get caught dancing at a red light to.”

“Gloria has sang for some other people, but it’s always like this power ballad,” he says. “But I was like, ‘Man, it’s gotta be disco.’ It was so much fun to do, and she kills it.”

Gary LeVox, lead singer of Rascal Flatts and a good friend of Millard’s, makes an appearance on “A Little Love,” an upbeat track that’s “different from what people typically ask him to sing.” A slightly different version will also appear on LeVox’s upcoming Gospel project.

“We kind of swapped the versions,” Millard says. “It’s really cool. It’s a fun track.”

Friendships aside, Millard's favorite guest appearance on the project hits a little more closer to home. The singer's 19 year-old son Sam Wesley sings with the group on a song he wrote, "On Our Way." When Millard was putting together a demo of the song for the group to hear, he couldn't complete the second verse because he got sick. Wesley stepped in to finish and the group decided to solicit his help for the recording.

"I would have never suggested it but I was so proud when they said we need to do this," he said. "And it solved my dilemma of 'I'm not taking your song. You get to be featured on a MercyMe album.' It was a weird and awesome journey to take with my oldest son that I never dreamed would be possible."

Inhale (exhale), produced by Tedd T. Brown Bannister and Jordan Mohilowsk, is now available. {eo}

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