

Skillet's Heart: Reaching the Unreachables

It was an epic battle between John Cooper and his mother.

Cooper, the frontman of *Skillet*, was only a fifth-grader, but his friend kept talking up this new edgy band that he really should listen to. "You'll love it," he kept hearing.

But his mom wasn't having it. Or his dad, for that matter.

"I couldn't understand why they didn't want me listening to Metallica," says Cooper, a believer in Christ since the age of 5. "They wanted to do what was right. They believed rock and roll was evil. Drums were evil. Wearing black was evil. I was really bummed."

Cooper was a music junky. He blames his mother, who taught him to play piano at an early age, but raised in a ultra-conservative Christian home, there was no room for Metallica or even Michael Jackson.

Until Cooper found what he thought was a heavy-metal loophole.

"My friend said there's this Christian band called Petra; your parents will love it," Cooper told the BGEA. "Turns out, they didn't love it."

And turns out, it was a defining moment in the relationship with his mother.

"I fought and fought and fought," Cooper says. "Finally, my mom said 'OK, I'll take you to the show myself. And when they start praying to the devil, we're leaving.'"

"We went to the show and she became a big Petra fan. The presence of God was there. And she got it."

“That was kind of my first breakthrough in the hope that I could do Christian music someday.”

“Always Talking About Jesus”

It’s been more than two decades since Cooper, at age 14, lost his mother to cancer. But he’ll be the first to tell you those early formidable years played a huge role in being able to use his musical talents for the Lord.

“I had a huge hatred against legalism,” Cooper says. “That is why I am who I am today.”

And in many ways it’s why Skillet is the band it is today. No, it’s not your father’s Christian band. Or in Cooper’s case, not your mother’s either.

But underneath the hard guitar riffs, eye makeup and massive pyro show, there’s a heart that loves Jesus and is certainly not ashamed of the gospel.

“We’re always talking about Jesus at our shows,” Cooper says. “It doesn’t matter who we’re playing with.”

And Skillet’s songs have reached nonbelievers in some of the most bizarre ways.

One in particular comes to mind—a husband and wife who were filmmakers in the pornography industry and who heard Skillet’s song “Hero” on an NFL promo. The husband liked it so much he did a little research.

After finding Skillet’s website and other interviews about what the band is all about, they took in a show to see if Skillet was for real. There, they both heard about Jesus and accepted Christ.

“So they were saved and they got out of that industry and have gotten into church,” Cooper says. “It’s something only God can do. And we are so honored He is using our music to do it.”

“There’s Nothing Like It”

When they talk about crossover bands—those who have strong fan bases in both the secular and Christian worlds—none may be more popular than Skillet and its dedicated “Panheads.”

In fact, only three bands hit the prestigious platinum mark in 2012 (selling more than 1 million albums): Mumford & Sons, the Black Keys and Skillet for *Awake*.

“Are we a Christian band?” Cooper repeats the question. “Well, yes, but not in a classic sense. We sing songs outside of Christian issues. We sing about love, about life. And because of that, we’re hard to define. But, yes, we are a Christian band.”

Skillet’s summer tour lineup is about as diverse as the band itself. They’ll play secular events like SummerFest in Milwaukee and MusikFest in Philly, but in between they’ll hit Christian cornerstone events like Creation East and SoulFest.

Cooper is amazed at how God has opened doors to open for some of the world’s heaviest bands—where many will get pelted with beer bottles—yet they continue to “proclaim Jesus.”

The reaction from the secular music world has borderline shocked Cooper. Many have asked for prayer after shows; some have even accepted Christ, eventually changing lifestyles and even removing swear words from their lyrics.

“Skillet has been very serious about not just playing our music and saying no to alcohol and drugs, but we’re very serious about proclaiming Jesus from the stage,” Cooper says. “It’s definitely leading to fruit.”

A personal highlight for Cooper has been playing at the Franklin Graham “Rock the River” events the past several years.

“There’s nothing really comparable,” he says about playing the

BGEA outreach events. “I was shocked when they asked us. But I love it and I’m proud to be a part of it.”

His voice pauses for a second, as he recounts standing on stage after his set is over, supporting Franklin Graham, who gives thousands an invitation to surrender their lives to the Lord.

“To see those young kids with Skillet shirts on raise their hands and give their lives to Christ,” Cooper says, “there’s nothing like it.”

Reaching the Unreachables

Officially, Skillet is comprised mainly of John Cooper, his wife, Korey (guitar, keyboard), Jen Ledger (drums) and Seth Morrison (guitar).

But name recognition isn’t what this band is about.

Skillet is on a mission to reach the lost—“the unreachable of the world.”

“It has been thrilling because I love evangelism,” Cooper says. “I think Skillet has begun to write songs we can all relate to, not just Christian people.

“I kind of look at it the way Jesus wrote the parables. I’ve been a Christian since I was 5, and still when I read Jesus’ words I sometimes wonder why He wasn’t more clear about what he was talking about. Sometimes you have to dig in and watch it rise.”

And *Rise* happens to be the title of Skillet’s ninth album, which drops on June 25. It’s their first full-length “concept” album.

“It’s basically about your typical American teenager coming into adulthood and being faced with how terrible the world is,” Cooper says. “The gigantic world problems—school

shootings and bombings and flooding and depression.”

One of the early tracks, “Sick of It,” is the lead single, but as the album progresses, songs like “Salvation” and “My Religion” and “What I Believe” complete the gospel message.

“‘My Religion’ is kind of boiling down what your faith is,” says Cooper, who wrote 72 songs for the 12-song album. “Your faith in Christ is not about dressing nice and smelling nice, the pews and the stained glass at church.

“It’s about a relationship with Christ.”

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