

The ‘Journey’ of Jars of Clay

“Can you hear me?”

Somewhere in the back corner of your typical U.S. arena, they took turns talking on a crud-filled pay phone.

They used pagers, shared a production phone, dialed up on AOL accounts.

Eighteen years ago this month when Jars of Clay was officially born, technology was, as one member puts it, “a screeching toddler.”

The Christian band from Greenville College (Ill.)—known to their friends as Dan Haseltine, Stephen Mason, Charlie Lowell and Matt Odmark—doesn’t mind dating themselves by talking about the days of scrounging up enough quarters to call home.

“We remember on a Smitty tour,” said lead guitarist Mason of a 1997 concert with Michael W. Smith. “You’re on a pay phone and you can’t hear, wiping off the gunk, and you still can’t hear.”

But we are *still* listening.

Nearly two decades later, the sound of Jars of Clay has evolved and meandered since its crossover hit, “Flood,” launched a career and double-platinum album. It’s a feat nearly unthinkable in today’s digitized music world—yet the band’s lyrical depth, filled with Scripture-laced truths, is still touching our souls.

It may be through iPods, MP3s and Pandora now, but how many of us remember cracking open that first cassette tape with the small black-and-white, slightly-out-of-focus band photo in the middle of that shadowy blue cover?

Wait ... was that a violin solo?

"We started this as kids, still trying to figure out what it meant to be a man," Mason said. "We've really initiated each other into manhood.

"At one level or another, we've all been on a journey to become adults."

That journey, in many ways, has far exceeded the destination. Although they're not quick to recommend the route.

Jars of Clay has grown up before our eyes, or more aptly, before our ears.

From "Boy on a String" and "Love Song for a Savior" to "Boys" and "Love Will Find Us," the band has stretched itself to a place where the old Toad the Wet Sprocket T-shirts are worn in the neck.

And like it or not, they're still impacting lives.

"It's been 18 years of desperately wanting to give up and stop this at different points," Mason said. "Because it felt like it was more than we could bear."

'Can You Make It Purposeful?'

These days, they finish each other's sentences like that cute older couple, married 50-plus years. They will answer your questions thoughtfully, with a complexity not normally seen from four guys in their mid-to-late 30's.

Yet somewhere along the way, almost like clockwork, the seriousness of a moment will be defused with a well-timed joke. Usually it's Mason.

"Our wives have said if you're going to be on the road, can you make it purposeful?" said lead singer Haseltine. "Can you not just be playing video games on the bus?

"I think we've taken that seriously."

Mason interrupts: "We still play video games."

Haseltine, with a deadpan grin, doesn't miss a beat: "Some of the video games are how we change the world."

But they are changing the world—one lyric and one African well at a time.

The band's nonprofit organization, blood: water mission, has built 1,036 wells in 11 sub-Saharan African countries, which serve over 630,000 people. Three HIV/AIDS clinics have benefited more than 11,000 Africans.

Back in the U.S., Jars continues to do what they've always done well—make meaningful music and perform it live.

"We're doing about 80 shows a year now," Haseltine said.

And with each member having at least two children now, spending nearly one-third of their lives on the road adds complications to their ability to parent well.

"I will say there's a depth of field in the time that we're home," Mason said. "Sometimes we'll be home for long periods of time. I can't even imagine what that would have felt like to have my dad in my life with that kind of consistency."

For every music recital and little league game they're missing out on, there's a stronger push to be present and engaged when they finish a tour. "We have to be creative," Haseltine said.

And internally, all the time away from home adds weight to their witness and personal impact. It's also one of the reasons Jars started playing intimate pre-concert shows, with Q-and-A sessions, autographs, pictures and most importantly, spending time talking with their most devoted fans.

"Even recently, our wives got together and talked about that kind of stuff again. It's an ongoing conversation," Mason said. "They recognize again, still, that God is using what

we're doing to change people's lives."

Just then, a fan interjected about how many times the band's deep, God-drenched lyrics, have personally ministered, citing "God Will Lift Up Your Head," from the *Redemption* album, as an example.

Mason was humbled: "That means a lot to hear from you."

Introducing Billy Graham

Surely, Haseltine thought, there's someone more qualified to introduce the Rev. Billy Graham.

This was, after all, the last night of his last Crusade – June 26, 2005, in Flushing Meadows, N.Y.

And there were other worthy candidates in attendance.

"I was on stage with (former President) Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary," Haseltine recalls. "Bill, who is an incredible speaker, certainly should have been the one introducing him, but they said 'Why don't you?' so I stood up. It was amazing."

The Greater New York Billy Graham Crusade may be the event that sticks out most, but it certainly wasn't the band's only experience with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

The Cow Palace near San Francisco, to the best of their collective recollection, was the site of Jars' first Crusade in October 1997, followed by Tampa, Fla. in 1998 and many others around the U.S., including some events with Graham's son, Franklin Graham.

Haseltine still remembers the shock of seeing so many people come to Christ as Billy Graham gave the invitation.

"It's fascinating," he said. "There's a part of me that's always amazed that it happens that way. I didn't grow up in an evangelical frame of church.

"But at the same time you can't discredit what God is capable of doing. It was sort of my own learning curve to realize God works this way."

"He certainly doesn't always work one way," said Lowell, the pianist/keyboardist. "If there's anything we've learned over the years, it's that."

Odmark is grateful on at least two accounts that God still calls people by name through mass evangelism events.

"My dad and my wife were both saved at Billy Graham Crusades," the guitarist said.

'Has God Not Been Faithful?'

Before Jars of Clay was actually Jars of Clay, the band was searching for a name, when Lowell brought one of his favorite verses, 2 Corinthians 4:7, to the table.

The apostle Paul says in this passage: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

If ever, the band surmised, success started going to its head, having this constant reminder from 2 Corinthians would hopefully keep Jars grounded and humble.

Jars would quickly be tested.

The self-titled debut album went double-platinum and "Flood" landed on five mainstream Top 40 charts in 1996. Their sophomore offering, *Much Afraid*, was no slouch either, going platinum itself.

Jars' next three albums, *If I Left the Zoo*, *The Eleventh Hour* and *Furthermore: From the Studio/From the Stage*, were all certified gold and by 2003, the band had garnered four Grammy nominations, winning three times.

In all, the band has released 30-plus albums (digital,

compilation and otherwise), including its' 11th studio album *Shelter* in 2011. One of the longest-tenured Christian bands has also had more than its share of mainstream appeal, showing up in movies like *Walk to Remember* ("Flood") and *Chronicles of Narnia* ("Waiting for the World to Change").

Other Jars' songs have also been featured on TV shows like *Grey's Anatomy* ("Little Drummer Boy") and *Eli Stone* ("Good Monsters"), and on trailers like the movie *Spanglish* ("Show Your Love") and NBC 's *Kings* ("Hero").

But through it all, they've managed to stay grounded, avoiding the long fall.

"We've had people come along at the right moment, at the right time," Mason said. "Mentors and other people who decided to invest their hearts and wisdom and offer us encouragement and firm words sometimes when we needed it."

So as they look to the future and the digital age of music, wondering where it might be safe to land, Jars is encouraged by the perspective of others.

"The challenge they've laid down to us is, 'Has God not been faithful to you guys up until now?' " Lowell said. " 'Is this really all it was for?' And as you step back, even a little bit, you go, 'Whoa, we don't want to touch any of that.'"

Eighteen years later. Still together. Still ministering.

Something's at work.

"They've kept us coming back to, 'we're doing something good here. We're doing some good work,' " Mason said. "And God's not done with this story as of yet."

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