

A Q&A With Israel Houghton

Israel Houghton, the multitalented worship pioneer, explains how creativity, talent and, yes, a little bit of perfectionism can be a good thing when yielded to the King. Read *Charisma's* exclusive interview with him.

CHARISMA: The Bible says God searches for those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth. How did you learn to worship like that before ever picking up an instrument?

Israel Houghton: I had my first real presence-of-God-experience when I was 5 years old. My parents had just moved to a little mining community in Arizona, we went to an evangelistic event one night. I remember seeing these guys with heavy stories, these incredible pasts, come and give their lives to God and watching this moment of surrender. And at 5, I didn't know what was happening, but I just started weeping—not necessarily about their story; it was bigger than that. My mother had the good sense to tell me that was the presence of God—that I should always go after when God is in the room and make sure I'm sensitized to that.

When somebody does a drug and it's a particular high, they say they spend the rest of their lives trying to match that first high and it never sort of happens. But in the presence of God, if anything, it's greater and more beautiful every time if your heart's in the right place. So as I grew up in the church and saw the power and the presence of God, it became a deep part of my foundation—a deep part of my DNA.

CHARISMA: Your music embodies the idea that worship is a universal expression—that it crosses and blends styles, ideas, cultures, etc. How did that multidynamic element come about for you in worship?

Houghton: Very naturally, because I was a black kid in a white family in a Hispanic neighborhood. Our church was probably 80

percent Hispanic, so my cultural expressions came from a bunch of different places—and it keeps growing. I'm 42 years old, but I'm still childlike in the sense that there's still a sense of wonder. Some of the places we go in worship, I'll think, *Wow, look at that!* and *Wow, did you hear that?*

I'm always open to new expressions, certainly as it relates to worship and cultures all over the world, and that tends to play into the musical part of it. For me, it's a journey, as is the idea of trying to be as effective as possible as a worship leader.

I remember early on facing some walls and divisions that were skin-tone oriented, where people said you should just do it this way or just do it that way. White people would say, "Don't do black music," and black people would say, "Don't do white music." And it got so frustrating.

One night I was getting ready to lead worship at a church and the pastor came in. He was one of those alpha-male, dominant kind of guys, and he came in and said, "Hey, man, make sure you do your hot black music tonight." I get pseudo-sarcastic when I'm uncomfortable, so I said, "Hey, pastor, before we go out there, I was just wondering: When we get to heaven, what section are you planning on being in for eternity?"

It was a very uncomfortable moment, and he sort of chuckled. But I think he got it. When somebody says, "We don't like a lot of worship here. We want it really hot and loud and fast and up," what they're telling me is they have a worship deficit. Likewise, if they say, "We just like to soak and chill and hang. We only want to worship and we don't really need anything up-tempo," what they're really telling me is they're starving for a different type of expression.

I've told pastors like the one I mentioned before, "I can either be the guy who comes and does it exactly like you say you want it done— which, of course, anybody can do that—or I

can bring this sense of diversity and this sense of connection here, and hopefully it will work and God will really bless it.”

I’ve tried to keep the right heart with it and not make it like I’ve got a cultural ax to grind. I’ve seen the hand of God on this kind of worship. And I think the more we’ve flown this flag of diversity, the more people have realized that we’re probably not going to let up on this idea.

CHARISMA: Have you always been uber-creative?

Houghton: Yeah, I think so. I was always drawn to music and tremendously influenced by a myriad of different types of music. Nobody ever told me that you couldn’t merge things, that you couldn’t blend things. I just said, “Hey, this would be really cool with that.” I’ve always been fascinated by sights and sounds and video elements and lighting elements and musical elements.

CHARISMA: Has God ever asked you lay down music so you could learn new facets of what it means to worship Him?

Houghton: Yeah. I don’t know if it was music altogether, but it was definitely the chase toward significance. It’s funny, in those early years you say, “God bless me. I want to have impact and I want to be used by You”—and He says OK. Then, after a while, you have to compete with the very thing that He gave you.

I remember having that moment when I felt like if I pressed the gas pedal a certain way, I would probably see something happen—but I also had the feeling that I wouldn’t enjoy or appreciate the results because it was something that I was pushing for. I ended up helping to start a church from scratch literally two blocks from where I started leading worship at 19. And my prayer this time around was, “Lord, I’m done. I’m done with helping people know my name, with trying to pursue some sort of career path. I just want to worship. I just want

to be used by You.”

That was a return for me, of going back to my first love. I remembered those first times of leading worship, with my legs shaking and with the good kind of nervousness that comes with being completely dependent on God. I think the more you learn, the more you can slip into saying, “Yeah, I got this”—and the less time you spend with God. As long as people are saying, “Wow, that was great. You’re really anointed,” it’s easy to start believing that must be an indicator that you’re doing it right. And you gradually get further and further away from where you were supposed to go. It doesn’t make you a bad person or anything like that, but you’re not on target anymore.

For me, it was an intense realization of that. When I went back and took the knife to my Isaac, so to speak, I said, “OK, I’m going to be content to be used in whatever capacity.” The ironic part is that’s when God began to open doors that were so obviously Him. My responsibility at that point was to walk through them and to be a good steward of those moments.

CHARISMA: If God is more concerned with the positioning of our heart, what role does excellence play in worship?

Houghton: It’s important to define *heart*. Often that word is synonymous with “Hey, that was a good effort; it wasn’t very good, but it had a lot of heart.” On the flip side, I’m created in God’s image. If His breath is in me, if the way He thinks and creates is also in me, then it is possible to create with a good heart, with a pure motivation and purity of expression, *and* do something excellently.

If you look at David or Solomon, those guys were incredible, and they did what they did to honor the Lord. If you look at early music history, all those great composers were commissioned by the church and created music with such excellence and passion that to this day, hundreds of years

later, we're still affected by the excellence and the historic timeless nature of what they put out.

To me, I feel like when David said, "I'm not going to give to the Lord something that doesn't cost me." That's how I look at it from the standpoint of music and production and creativity. I want to make sure that whatever I've been given, I maximize in giving it back.

In regard to doing something with excellence, my motivation changed a long time ago. It used to be that I wanted people to *ooh* and *aah*, so to speak, but that's different now. I want to honor God. I want to make a statement that says the church is a powerful force in the earth, and I get to be a part of the accompanying sound of that force. It's an exciting thing.

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.

CHARISMA: What do you think the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today in the area of worship?

Houghton: That you love Me. I feel like there's a new question. In *The Fiddler on the Roof*, the husband asks his wife, "Do you love me?" And she's like, "What are you talking about? All these years I've cooked your food, I've cleaned your clothes, I've raised your kids, I've ..." And he's like, "Yeah, but do you love me?"

"God, we did outreaches and cast demons out in Your name and it was awesome!"

Yeah, but did you love Me?

I feel like we are in such a return to the simplicity of just falling in love with Jesus. I love that you posed the question: What is the Holy Spirit saying? I've got to be honest, in the last four weeks, I've heard the term *the Holy Spirit* more than I've heard it in the last four years. What comes with that term is people's perspective of it, people's misconception of it, people's abuse of it in days past. Yet there's this heart of God that comes back through that says, "Hey, let's get back to what it's all about." And the church is saying, "We love you, Jesus. We love you, Holy Spirit." The Holy Spirit is a person, and I think that's the return right now that we're all pursuing.

CHARISMA: You're big on bringing the sounds of heaven to earth. How would you assess the church's ability to hear those sounds today?

Houghton: Let me caveat everything I say with this: I believe that, for the most part, everyone's doing the best they can with what they know. But I think culturally, especially in the Westernized culture, we have such a tendency to say, "Oh, I found something that resonates with me so let me lock all the doors and let me just do this." After a while it becomes so homogenized and sterilized and programmed that there's no room

for any fresh water. So I find myself often attempting to pour fresh water into whatever scenario I go into.

For all the icing that we put on the cake—all the video, all the advances in lighting and sound and those sorts of thing—if the cake is the presence of God, then we must realize that the power is still in the cake. It's not in all the outward stuff. We still have to have the presence of God. You can only have so many meetings and so many services where everything is on point, everything has creatively hit its mark, but you leave going, "What just happened? We sing some songs and it was kind of a cool moment, but did anything really transpire? Did we take the time to soak in the presence of God?"

It goes back to the "Do you love Me?" question. People are hearing that question and they're saying, "OK, what's it going to take?"

Certainly you have the element of diversity, of different expressions all over the world—taking on sounds and styles and that sort of thing. I believe with all my heart that the more we combine our efforts, the more we share our information and our experiences, the more effective we'll be and the more fun we're going to have in the presence of God—and the more enjoyable it's going to be to add these global expressions from everywhere else. I think those all contribute to the icing of this cake, but they're not the cake itself. The cake is just the pure presence of God.

CHARISMA: Has the rise of today's worship movement helped or hurt the understanding of true worship?

Houghton: I think it's helped because I'm seeing 80-member churches be super-effective in understanding true worship. Sometimes it's coming to grips with the "less is more" approach, the simplicity of the gospel, the simplicity of the presence of God—just opening up our hearts to what He can do. I've seen that same power at our church in Houston, where

there's 16,000 people at one place four times in a week. And I've seen it in much smaller settings.

But again, it comes back to the GPS for us—the Godly Positioning System of our heart. What is our heart really focused on? What is it really tethered to? How you answer that can determine what kind of experience you're going to have, what kind of encounter you're going to have with God.