

He Hears Heaven's Music

Chris Tomlin writes worship songs that resonate with a global audience.

Chris Tomlin has a secret that may surprise many people: He doesn't listen to music in his spare time, even though he is a Grammy-nominated, Dove Award-winning writer of global chart-topping songs such as "How Great Is Our God," "Holy Is the Lord" and "Indescribable."

"I'm a pretty normal guy. I listen to talk radio and ESPN," Tomlin says.

In 2006, Tomlin won five Dove Awards, the most for the year, including Song of the Year and Worship Song awards for "How Great Is Our God," which he co-wrote with some friends. In 2007, he won another six Doves and for a second consecutive year was the most honored artist at the annual Dove Awards ceremony. His music was also part of the *Passion: Everything Glorious* album, which won an award for Special Event Album of the Year.

In spite of the awards and accolades Tomlin remains the down-to-earth guy who likes to watch sports telecasts and listen to terrestrial radio in his free time.

"You know, it's really nice to be recognized by people. I'm thankful for that," he says. "I'm just trying to stay in that place of being humble before God and before people while realizing that this is the favor of God. It's His choosing."

On Good Friday he completed a 35-city tour with Israel Houghton and New Breed to promote *Hello Love*, his latest album. The tour, he believes, was his best yet. The premise behind the album is "the idea of worship and about loving your neighbor and loving God," Tomlin says.

"We worship God because of our love for Him—but mostly because of His love for us. Our music was about that," he says

Apparently the message was well-received by fans, who responded by packing stadiums and auditoriums throughout the country during the tour. Yet when asked why he feels his songs are so popular Tomlin answers, "I don't know."

He admits his focus is writing worship music and songs for the church. "I try to write a song that hopefully is worthy of people to sing that really puts their heart on God. It's not so much about what I feel but about God and His faithfulness. I think that's what has made my songs relevant to a large group of people," he explains.

Tomlin will always remember his Hello Love tour not just for the music but also for an unexpected e-mail he received.

"We got an e-mail from a guy in one of the cities who said he was coming to see the tour as a last-ditch effort. He said if he didn't hear from God, he would kill himself," Tomlin says.

Tomlin is used to receiving e-mails from fans who appreciate his music, but he had never gotten a note like that one. Though concerned about it, Tomlin and his band took the stage and did what they do best—glorified God through music.

As it turns out, that's exactly what they needed to do. They received another e-mail from the same man, but his tone was different the second time.

"He said during the song 'I Will Rise' he got what he needed. That just humbles me to know that God would send him to our concert," Tomlin says.

Although the constant travel of touring can sometimes be tough, Tomlin says it gives him the opportunity to see the diversity of the global church.

"I've played in every type of church under the sun," he says,

noting that many people in the audiences are from Spirit-filled churches and organizations. That's just fine with him, though: "To me, worship is not a style, it's about spirit."

One of the biggest surprises he has encountered during his global tours is seeing how popular his songs have become in the Asian community. He has witnessed Catholics, Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals singing his songs and reiterates how surprised he is at the music's popularity and appeal. "I'm writing for the church—and the church comes in all flavors and sizes," he says.

Success of this magnitude can be difficult to manage for some people. The rigors and temptations artists face on the road can be tough. However, Tomlin keeps himself grounded and accountable by staying surrounded by good friends who, he says, help keep his ego in check.

"I don't ever travel alone. It's a challenge to keep my head on straight. You're only as good as the people you surround yourself with," he notes.

Off tour, Tomlin retreats for solitude to a place special to him in east Texas. "My favorite spot is my grandfather's place on the lake in east Texas. That's where I grew up in the summers and that's where I'm most comfortable," he says.

On the lake are no songs, crowds or music; only solitude. And that's the way he likes it. The lake is also a place where Tomlin can reflect on how his musical journey got started. It was actually the result of a bad situation that eventually turned out good.

At around age 10, Tomlin was sick at home in Grand Saline, Texas—and bored—with a case of mononucleosis.

To help him pass the time, his father, Connie, gave him his first guitar and began teaching him how to play. Although he liked music, Tomlin says he wasn't really interested in

learning how to play the guitar during that time.

Finding His Heart

It was in that period in his life, though, when his gift for songwriting developed and started to become noticeable. He continued to hone his skill and eventually wrote his first worship song at age 14.

High school and college kept Tomlin busy. He maintained his grades while continuing to write and perform songs as he traveled throughout Texas to various youth meetings.

At high school is also where another aspect of Tomlin's talent started to surface—athletics. Aside from the singer-songwriter he was and continues to be, he grew up as an athlete.

"I loved sports and grew up playing baseball, but basketball was probably my favorite," he says.

He played guard for the Grand Saline High School varsity team, but music was never far away; he also played in the school band. He is a fierce competitor, and that competitiveness pushes him in his music.

"I always want to do the best. Whether it's a CD or a tour, I want it to be the best," he says.

As much as Tomlin loved sports, and he was pretty good according to those who knew him, it was his music that began to blossom and present him with new opportunities. His songs began to take on a life of their own.

"For several years I was chasing my songs around. People knew of the songs but didn't know who I was," he says with a slight chuckle. "I got some opportunities to play, and God just sort of opened the doors.

"I certainly wasn't trying to do it. It was word of mouth. I'd just go where people asked me to play."

After high school he attended Texas A&M University to study physical therapy. His growing musical success created a dilemma, though: pursue a career as a therapist or take a leap of faith and follow his heart—which was in music.

He decided to finish college and then pursue his musical aspirations; but in 1997 after he had graduated his life took a drastic turn. Louie Giglio, founder of the popular Passion conferences, asked him to play for one of the events and featured his songs on the CD that was cut for the national gathering.

The album became extremely popular, and Tomlin's music was exposed to a receptive global audience. He and Giglio developed a friendship and have been together ever since.

Passion Church

Tomlin says he is really excited about their next joint venture: Passion Church. The church, named after the popular conferences, will be based in Atlanta. Tomlin moved to the Georgia capital from Austin, Texas, in 2008 to join Giglio and good friend Matt Redmond, who also relocated to the city to help start the project.

No date has been set to open the church, and no location has been announced. "We hold public gatherings once a month in different locations," Tomlin says.

Passion Church will not follow the traditional church-planting route, though. No particular demographic group is being targeted, and the founders are trusting God to show them how the church will look and where it should be located, instead of relying on a slick vision and mission statement.

"There's no model for what we're doing. Most churches start small and then grow, but Passion has been a global movement. How do you take that and go the opposite way? We're taking our time and trying to do it the right way," Tomlin explains.

By meeting in various parts of the city, the church leaders believe a greater diversity of people will be drawn into the congregation. "It's everybody—it's for God and the people," Tomlin says.

"We wanted to be in a major city, a city that is influential. We want our church to affect the city while also having a global reach. ... We want to be a good model for what the church could be."

Undoubtedly, Tomlin's role in the new church will be a musical one, but he also sees more in store for him. He wants to one day train future worship leaders.

"I'd like us to really invest in the next generation of worship leaders," he says.

He believes it might be another year before the church starts weekly meetings. In the meantime, Tomlin is busy working on his first Christmas album and pondering another aspect of his life that also could emerge in the near future.

"My main goal is to have a family. That's something I hope for and pray for," he says.

Tomlin, who is single, points out that his immediate focus is on helping plant the new church in Atlanta. However, he adds, becoming a husband and a father doesn't sound too bad when the time is right.

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