

Heart Cry of a Generation

True to its name, Maverick City Music has taken the Christian worship industry by storm with a fresh perspective and an ardent commitment to authentic, Spirit-led worship. Though the worship group was only founded three years ago, many of its songs can already be found in church worship setlists worldwide, including “Promises,” “Jireh,” “Million Little Miracles” and “Man of Your Word.” Acclaim has come not only from churches but from secular media outlets as well. In May, the group received two separate nominations for the Top Gospel Album at the 2021 Billboard Music Awards, ultimately winning for their album *Maverick City, Vol. 3 Part 1*. And this fall, the group will embark on its first stadium tour, which has already sold out most of its venues.

Yet perhaps most stunning of all is the way the group managed to maintain its momentum and fervency in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the initial wave of shutdowns, Maverick City has released five albums and four EPs of original music. No one can accuse the collective of resting on its laurels, and the group’s hard work has paid off.

Naomi Raine, one of Maverick City’s lead singers and songwriters, says the group’s rapid ascent has been stunning for the members.

“Our heads are spinning by the speed of it and by the weight of what we’re carrying,” Raine says. “But one reason it is easier for us is because there are so many of us. If Dante [Bowe Jr.] was leading a worship night by himself, he would have to carry all of the moments, but we don’t have to do that when we’re all together. We carry it together. And that’s what makes it much simpler.”

Maverick City Music’s members view the collective’s size, diversity and tightly knit unity in the Spirit as its greatest

strength. Though its impact cannot be denied, describing what exactly Maverick City Music is can be challenging. It's all at once a music record label, a publishing company for corporate worship music and a collective of over 100 different musical artists. That's not to say that this fall's tour will feature 100 people onstage at once; rather, Maverick City Music is made up of many distinct groups (or "little families," as Raine calls them) that often collaborate and intermix with one another. These groups include TRIBL Music, Maverick Español and the Maverick City Choir.

Dante Bowe Jr., a Bethel-affiliated singer-songwriter who has been with Maverick City Music since the beginning, believes the group's success is the result of talented people faithfully following the Holy Spirit.

"For me, I've been a student of worship since I've been alive," Bowe says. "But I don't know if I've ever heard such vocal skill from a group in the contemporary space. It just feels so skillful and Spirit-led, and I think that resonates. ... I think people can hear and see the skill, and also hear and see the Spirit of Jesus."

Unity Through Diversity

Bowe says he first got involved with Maverick City Music as part of a group text with Tony Brown, who invited him to get together with friends in Atlanta—including Raine, Alton Eugene and Chandler Moore—to write worship songs. The artists assembled were not yet called Maverick City Music; they didn't even expect to formally record the songs they were writing. Raine says the collective began as a publishing company, with a goal to write songs, record demos and then sell them to other worship artists. But when they all arrived in Atlanta, Bowe says the writing process became very relaxed and free. Between recording demos of the songs they had written, artists would break out in spontaneous worship during soundchecks.

“We were just demoing songs [in the studio], hoping maybe artists would want to sing the songs we were demoing,” Raine says. “But then it became, ‘Wait—these songwriters are actually artists too. Let’s put [these demos] out.’”

That album of demos—Maverick City, Vol. 1—released in July 2019, and its minimalist title reflects its unexpected creation: “We didn’t even have a name for the first album,” Raines says with a laugh.

But if the first album was a happy accident, the names included in that initial invitation were not. Brown and Jonathan Jay—both members of the Atlanta-based worship band Housefires—started Maverick City Music as a way to increase opportunities for diverse voices to create worship music for the corporate church. Raine says that, within the worship music genre and even the larger contemporary Christian music space, about 10 people were writing 98% of the most popular songs. Maverick City Music’s founders shook up the industry by giving people of diverse backgrounds an opportunity.

For Bowe, that commitment to diversity has been a game-changer. He says Maverick City has given him opportunities and a platform he never would have been able to receive otherwise.

“Being a young Black kid and a Christian artist, I thought I’d never sell a stadium out,” Bowe says. “Because I never saw it. I never saw a single Black man or a Black woman like Naomi leading the worship movement. But now ... people are tasting heaven, and this is what it’s going to sound like. This is what it’s going to look like. Everybody—different tribes, different creeds, different tongues—singing the same song to Jesus.”

In many ways, Maverick City’s diversity parallels the diversity of the next generation of Christians. Thus, in many ways, the racially diverse, Spirit-empowered leaders of Maverick City reflect the future of the church. Perhaps this

is why, in an era when many people are quick to talk about and signal their support for diversity, Bowe says living out diversity comes naturally.

Maverick City Music is continually growing, adding new songwriters and artists; Raine likens it to a high school, where there are always new freshmen classes. And the group's commitment to diversity expands beyond public optics. Though he was reticent to talk much about it (saying they prefer to do this part privately), Bowe mentioned that Maverick is involved behind the scenes in local community causes and prison reform.

Raine describes Maverick City as a unified "family," one where everyone gets a chance to shine and where competition is eschewed in favor of cooperation. The leaders pray for each other, worship together and even eat, shop and laugh with one another. They seek to embody the concept of the unity of the Spirit.

"We are family," Raine says. "We fight. We disagree. We don't like certain things that happen with each other. But we always sit down and talk about it. ... But you love your family because y'all have worked together. You've sweated together, prayed together, cried together, eaten together. ... We get to be a part of something that's bigger than us individually."

Space for the Spirit

For all Maverick City's diverse makeup, something about its music itself has resonated with millions of listeners. Its writers and artists have tapped into the heart cry of the next generation, which is bringing them before the altar to worship. So what is Maverick City Music doing differently?

Raine's theory may surprise you.

"I'm going to be honest: Most worship artists right now are singing vertical songs to the Father," Raine says. "They're

lifting Him up. We're all singing and worshipping Jesus. There's nothing so special in terms of [our lyrical] content. We're loving on God; everybody's doing that. But I think what sets Maverick apart is that you can hear the room."

She says the final recording is left extremely raw. Listeners can hear it all: The chatter between musicians. Clothes rubbing against each other as people pack tightly into the studio. People chewing gum. A singer working out a spontaneous moment mid-track and the choir fumbling to figure out how to follow her. The creaks in the floorboards. Raine says the recordings are not "stripped and filtered down to perfection" so Maverick City can maintain the authentic worship encounter in all of its rawness.

"I think it's the actual sound of real people in a room together that has really ignited the hearts of people in worship," Raine says. "I think when people are alone, on YouTube in their room, listening to that recording, it makes them feel like they're gathered with the saints. I think that when people are on a stage on a Sunday morning, they are able to pull from that corporate sound of this whole group of people lifting their voices, loud and unashamed, to worship God. And I think that's the secret sauce. That's what makes Maverick special."

If the room noise is part of the "secret sauce," the atmosphere that produces each song is also a critical ingredient. Raine says she wishes people could see or hear their songwriting and rehearsal sessions because of how powerfully the Spirit moves there.

Bowe walks through a normal day in the studio: "We wake up in the morning. We start with worship, and we start with the Word. Naomi will prophesy over one of our choir members. Chandler will pray over this person. I'll be in the middle leading a song. We're all singing a song. And then we're like, 'Let's go write.' So the atmosphere is already there. We don't

have to [ask the Holy Spirit to show up] because He's already there."Raine agrees.

"We may schedule 45 minutes [for worship], and we'll be there for an hour and a half, and almost miss out on writing time or have to cut some of our writing time short," Raine says. "But that's what happens. ... The rehearsal moments? To me, those are some of the sweetest moments that we get with the Holy Spirit."

Yet perhaps Maverick City's greatest asset is the simplest: The leaders profess their dedication to the fundamentals of worship, or as they call it, keeping "the main thing the main thing." What does the main thing mean for them? Both Bowe and Raine immediately reply, "Jesus."

"For me, it's Jesus and all He encompasses," Raine explains. "And I know that sounds so simple, but when you look at Jesus' life that He lived, He lived to glorify God. I think that we've all been given gifts to shine in the world as light, so that people would see it and glorify God in heaven. I don't think that's just by saying, 'Oh, God is great.' I think that's by them living their lives for Him and living in a way that loves people and shows them who He is, you know? I think it's by giving Him back what He's given us."

Bowe says there is a "Maverick sound," a shared lyrical DNA among the group's songs; they write stories about doubt, Jesus and overcoming. Those are the fundamentals of their writing—the gospel in three pieces—and that's the reason for Maverick City's existence. Raine hopes it will always stay that way.

"I pray that we stay focused on the assignment that we have been given, and I pray that we don't get distracted from what we've been called to do," she says. "I think it's easy when you start to get some level of success to begin to adjust and shift your heart and your goals, but I pray that we keep the

main thing the main thing ... and that we always love Him and let Him be our goal."

Endurance in Adversity

If the music of Maverick City creates a space for authentic worship, it's an extension of the musicians' authentic love for Jesus. The leaders strive to follow God not only in public but also in private. Both Raine and Bowe reflected on how God is at work in their lives, still shaping and molding them in His image. For Raine, that means focusing on endurance in the face of adversity and failure. She says "Wait on You"—one of Maverick City Music's hit songs, originally written by Bowe and Moore—has gained new meaning for her in recent months. The chorus promises, "I've tasted Your goodness/ I'll trust in Your promise/ I'm gonna wait on You," with a bridge that quotes Isaiah 40:31.

"I think sometimes we have created this magical-thinking theology that things just happen instantly," Raine says. "They don't happen instantly. When you think about the children of Israel standing at the front of the Red Sea, the Bible doesn't say that the sea instantly just split open. No, it says that the wind came and began to push back the waters, and they began to recede. How long do you think that took, while Pharaoh's army was still coming? I think we read some of these stories and we look at people's lives and we hear the sermons, but we don't really get it. It takes waiting. It takes endurance. That is the type of process and journey the Lord has taken us through. So that's what God's been dealing with me on: 'Naomi, wait, trust Me and endure. Do not give up. Do not throw in the towel. Don't give in and make decisions based on fear.'"

And Bowe says God is challenging him to show kindness, patience and love, even for situations and people that irritate him.

“The higher you go, the more you know; I’ll say that,” Bowe says. “For me, I’ve been growing in the industry for three or four years. So you experience a lot of accolades. You get people always congratulating you and building you up. You get the hundreds of thousands of followers, and everyone knows your name. You get stopped in airports. And the Lord’s been dealing with me on this like, ‘Dante, how should you love today? How kind can you be today?’ [That means] being patient with my friends and patient with the world when you make a statement and you can see Christians arguing in your comments. The higher you go, you have to work on love. How can I be patient? How can I be more loving and kind? That’s literally my everyday right now. When I wake up, it’s a conscious decision to be kind and loving and patient.”

The leaders of Maverick City share that commitment to following Jesus in the private, quiet moments of everyday life. In fact, on the business side of things, Raine even mentions that Brown and the label leaders have been generous with financially supporting the collective’s members to ensure that they can support themselves from their work with Maverick City Music—a rare perk in the music industry, even among Christians.

“If I can be frank, we’re super blessed to not be taken advantage of by Maverick City Music, as a record label and as a company,” Raine says. “We’ve been able to reap and eat off of what we produce. That is a blessing because that is not a lot of people’s stories in the industry. I’m grateful that we get to be a part of it, and I’m praying that more people get to be a part of it as well. [I hope] it will shift the paradigm for labels and that their way of doing business will hopefully change, so that it’s not just companies making a bunch of money off of artists.”

Bowe and Raine say they don’t know whether Maverick will remain a force in worship music for decades as Hillsong or other groups have, but for however long the group lasts, they

hope to keep shifting the industry in a positive direction.

“I pray that Maverick is not a flash in the pan, that it’s not just a ‘15 minutes of fame’ thing,” Raine says. “And mind you, if it is, then it is. We didn’t set out for any of this. It’s not like we had a goal to last forever. But I do believe we are changing things not only in the worship sphere, not only in churches, but in the industry and in the business side of it that I think honors people and reflects the heart of the Father.”

“And it was a choice,” Bowe says. “None of us signed to this massive label. ... I mean, we didn’t sign at all. That’s what people don’t know—we didn’t even sign any contracts when we were blowing up. And it was because Tony was trying to literally change narratives. It wasn’t about money. It wasn’t about fame. It wasn’t about opportunity. It was about, ‘How can we as Maverick City change the narratives?’ And that’s been our goal with Jesus: How can we make a change for Him? ... And I pray that we would honor and love Jesus deeper and deeper as the years go on.”

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