

coverstory

# Mark Hall: Just Making Disciples

By Dawn González





**“Y**our walk with Jesus is where it all starts.” The words are profound when spoken by Mark Hall, the lead singer and principal songwriter for the Contemporary Christian music band Casting Crowns. And while his success in the music industry is noteworthy, Hall would prefer to be recognized as the pastor of students at Eagle’s Landing First Baptist Church in McDonough, Georgia, where he shepherds 400 teens and their families.

Despite eight years of burgeoning success in the music industry, the seven band members remain active in student ministries in the Atlanta area, scheduling their tours around local church commitments. Although the group members met at Eagle’s Landing where the band began, three members have gone on to ministries in other Atlanta churches. “All of us are still involved in youth ministry through the local church,” Hall says of his six band mates, Megan Garrett, Melodee DeVevo, Hector Cervantes, Chris Huffman, Juan DeVevo, and Brian Scoggin.

Casting Crowns has risen to the top of the Christian music industry, with 14 Gospel Music Association Dove Awards, three Grammy Awards, and two American Music Awards since its launch in 2003. The mega group has sold more than 8.2 million albums and has been named Billboard magazine’s top selling Christian act for the past five years. “Who am I,” a single from their self-titled debut album, recently sold more than 500,000 copies, becoming one of only 12 Christian tracks ever to secure Gold status. The band has performed internationally for the U.S. troops in Kuwait and Qatar, and twice in North Korea in partnership with Global Resource Services.

When the opportunity arose to start recording as a signed band to a label, the band members insisted that the church remain their priority. They met with record labels, managers, and all who would work with Casting Crowns to decide how to make it work.

“We knew it wasn’t going to be the norm,” says Hall, who grew up in church and felt a call to ministry at age 20. “It’s been amazing to see how it’s affected the industry as far as other bands and other artists who are now becoming more connected to the local church.”

Hall, in his eighteenth year of youth ministry and his eleventh at Eagle’s Landing, insists that the connection between weekly local-church ministry, and Crowns (as he calls the band) is vital. “It’s

where our songs come from,” he says. “I don’t think you’d have Casting Crowns if we weren’t at work in the church.”

Hall’s church ministry also colors his view of success. “It was totally unexpected. We were amazed that we were even getting to make a record and tour with Rebecca St. James as her opening act,” he remembers. The band had been doing music ministry together for years before, and it was always secondary to student ministry. Because of this, Casting Crowns measures its success not by music awards and industry standards, but by discipleship. “Success to me is making a disciple,” Hall says, “someone who can walk with Jesus for himself when he or she gets to college. Even in music, if you’re not (making disciples), you’re not successful.”



project to be involved in,” Hall says. “While I’m singing, I’m thinking, I need to be listening to Abraham too. Abraham walked out into nothing. (In contrast), I want emails and tweets from God about how it’s going to pan out when he leads me to do something.”

Casting Crowns recently finished their 43-city Come to the Well spring tour, which featured music from their fifth studio album. Inspired by Hall’s student Bible studies at Eagle’s Landing on Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well; it includes the hits “Courageous” and “Jesus, Friend of Sinners.” Fellow Grammy winner and adoptive father Steven Curtis Chapman co-wrote “So Far to Find You,” a song about Hall’s adopted daughter Hope. Attendance exceeded 370,000 at the fall and spring tours combined. Forty arenas sold out.

Not surprisingly, the songs are born from their student ministry as well. The challenging and encouraging lyrics come from the lessons they teach students and their families in their home churches. The themes that resonate with people usually slowly evolve into songs. “These are the things we need to talk about,” Hall says. He visualizes his songs like movies, using storyboards to write them. He puts the chorus in the middle and develops verses with the ideas he wants to communicate on all sides.

Hall also enjoys collaborating with other songwriters. He has co-written with Steven Curtis Chapman, Bernie Herms (writer and producer of *The Story*), Matthew West, and award-winning country music songwriter Tom Douglas. “Everyone has certain patterns,” Hall says of his collaborative efforts. “Writing with others gets you out of your comfort zone and takes you off to another place.”

It was through Herms that Hall became involved with *The Story*. The Christmas spectacular features an all-star cast of today’s top Christian recording artists such as Selah, Jeremy Camp, Natalie Grant, and Nichole Nordeman, among others. The tour is coming to Columbia’s Colonial Life Arena on November 27, 2012.

The Story is a fully produced multi-media experience. The artists perform the album of the same name in its entirety, accompanied by stunning visuals projected onto a screen that encompasses the entire stage. A musical journey from Genesis to Revelation, *The Story* puts timeless biblical narratives into an entirely new context. God’s story of love and redemption intersects with mankind’s story of brokenness and failure, resulting in a redemptive story of hope and rescue.

Hall’s duet, “Who But You,” with band mate Megan Garrett, depicts first-person accounts of Abraham and Sarah. “It’s been an amazing

Hall expanded his teaching on the woman at the well into a book *The Well: Why Are So Many Still Thirsty?*, was released in September by Zondervan. *The Well* explores why life is often unsatisfying and considers various wells from which people draw to sustain themselves. Success, talent, control, relationships, and careers—they’re all just holes in the ground that keep people from going to Jesus as their source. Hall writes, “One morning, reading through John chapter 4, I realized she’s really standing next to a hole in the ground, and she’s talking to the well. I think that’s where we all live.”

Balancing many avenues of ministry can be challenging for him and his band members. “We have to say no to a lot of things,” he says. “There are many opportunities we can’t be a part of because we’ve decided we’re going to do family, then we’re going to do church, and then we’re going to do Crowns.”

Christians are not the audience of Christ, he believes, but the body of Christ. “Guard your time with Jesus,” he urges. “Discover your ministry. Soak him in and pour him out to the people around you. There’s no next level in the church. After that, if someday later, somebody wants to put your song on the radio, that’s fine. But it’s not a step up. There’s just making disciples.” 



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