

MercyMe

inhale (exhale)

Identity. That's something everyone has undoubtedly pondered during 2020 when the pandemic thrust idleness and isolation on so many. It's a topic MercyMe frontman/principal songwriter Bart Millard has wrestled with before during the band's award-winning career but perhaps never has the subject felt more relevant or more urgent than it does on the new album *inhale (exhale)*.

The 16-song collection includes "Almost Home," a stunningly poignant anthem that topped the charts for a combined total of 17 weeks. There's also the buoyant "A Little Love" featuring Millard's close friend Gary LeVox, lead vocalist for award-winning country super group Rascal Flatts. Disco legend and friend Gloria Gaynor lends her signature vocals to "Brand New," and Millard's son Sam Wesley joins the band on the upbeat "On Our Way."

The fast-rising single "Say I Won't" is a potent declaration of faith and perseverance colored by tragedy that struck very close to the band. Gary Miracle, a longtime friend that worked with MercyMe for many years, contracted an infection that resulted in having both his arms and legs amputated. His indomitable spirit in the face of such challenges was inspiring.

"When I first started writing 'Say I Won't,' it was all about identity and grace and what I've been harping about on the last two records," Millard says. "That's what the first verse is talking about. It's when you realize that you've been going 35 mph but you have a rocket inside and you find out what you are actually capable of. When you realize who we are in Christ, everything comes to life. I actually almost had the song finished, and then all of this went down with our friend Gary, who had both arms and legs amputated. And the pandemic just really wrecked me, and that's when the second verse kind of takes the turn. It's still about who I am, but it takes on this 'I dare you to say that I can't do this.' I call it the 'Rocky moment,' saying, 'I'm going to overcome this.' It's an overcoming song."

The powerful video spotlights Miracle and his family as well as others who have faced obstacles and found identity and hope in Christ, including NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, ice skating legend Scott Hamilton and Grammy Award winning artist TobyMac. Miracle is using his newfound platform to help others. "He's meeting so many Army veterans and military people who have lost limbs and it's amazing the contacts and the people who have reached out to him through the video" Millard shares. "Multiple times he has said, 'Man, you don't understand

how hopeless I've felt. You don't understand the purpose this gives me on a daily basis, just answering an email or phone call or whatever.' That's been pretty awesome to watch."

"Say I Won't" is just the latest in a long line of MercyMe hits that have inspired listeners by illuminating the hope and peace to be found in a life of faith. It's been 20 years this year since the band signed their first record deal after releasing six independent albums. Since then Millard, drummer Robby Shaffer, bassist Nathan Cochran and guitarists Mike Scheuchzer and Barry Graul have become one of the most successful bands in any genre, winning multiple American Music Awards and Dove Awards as well as being named *Billboard's* Top Christian Artist of the 2010s. Populating American culture with such powerful songs of faith as "Word of God Speak," "Finally Home" "Even If" and "I Can Only Imagine," the band has built a powerful musical legacy. *inhale (exhale)* is the latest chapter in their creative adventure, and Millard admits this one was a long time in coming together. "It was two years and one month to the day that we started writing for this new record until we finally finished," Millard says. "'Almost Home,' which is the first single, will be out a year and a half before the record releases. We would have had it done a year or so ago, but when the pandemic hit, it slowed everything down. We practically re-wrote the album two or three different times."

The band bought an old log cabin outside Nashville where Tommy Sims, Gordon Kennedy and Wayne Kirkpatrick wrote the Grammy-winning Eric Clapton song "Change the World" and turned it into a recording studio. "It was the weirdest bachelor pad you've ever seen," Millard laughs in describing the cabin when they bought it. "It was really cheap considering it's about a 5,000 sq. ft studio. So we probably spent about six months converting it, taking out walls and making it a studio. What we thought was going to be a quick process, turned out much longer than expected."

The band began writing and wound up with more than 40 songs. Millard admits having the new record to focus on offered a welcome sense of purpose during pandemic life, and the opportunity to inhale (exhale). "It's been a life saver working on this record during the pandemic when you can't do shows and everything else. I love being with my family but I think my wife is like, 'Yeah you function better when there is an outside purpose going along with this.' I agree," he says with a laugh. "The pandemic—as awful as it's been—has been amazing for our family, just getting to spend so much time together. It's been such a scary place, but at the same time, it's been great to have this much time with family, to push pause and not have a deadline. Everything has stopped. That's a crazy feeling and after a few weeks or a month of me freaking out like, 'What's going to happen?' I realized that we're all freaking out together. Music has been put on hold and so once I realized that, I kind of let go and started enjoying the fact that some days my most important decision was what flavor of ice cream I'm getting with my youngest daughter. I love that. It's making lemonade out of lemons. For many reasons, I'll

never forget this season in my life.” In addition to drawing closer to family, Millard also developed some new creative relationships. He and The Afters’ Jordan Mohilowski began writing songs for the new project and developed a deep friendship. “Our first day of writing, we wrote ‘Say I Won’t’ and ‘Whiplash.’ Jordan and I wrote 80% of the album,” Millard says. “We hit it off. It was like love at first sight.”

MercyMe worked with several producers on *inhale (exhale)*, but Tedd T., Brown Bannister and Mohilowski emerged as dominant voices as the album came together. “Brown and Tedd would be the first to say that we’ve watched Jordan work and he’s one of the most talented guys we know. So Jordan has been driving the ship. He’s the pastor and Brown and Tedd are the Elders is a good way of putting it,” Millard says of the band’s collaborative process. “It’s been unbelievable. Jordan became one of my dearest friends. We’re done with the album, but still writing. We call it ‘Taco Tuesdays’ where we get together on Tuesdays and just write songs for whomever needs songs. Jordan’s fingerprints are on every song on this album in some way, shape or form. We spent almost every day together, made some hard decisions, had some amazing times and it’s just been so great.”

The result is a finely crafted album that offers hope and encouragement to a hurting world. From the one-minute opener “*inhale*” that urges us to “hold onto Jesus and breathe” to the rollicking anthem “*Blessed*” that reminds us of the power of grace. “*Bright Side of Broken*” is a powerful anthem that acknowledges pain and struggle while reminding us there’s hope in such lines as “the bright side of being broken is in the hands that are holdin’ every piece, reminding me that it’s gonna be ok.”

“*Hurry Up and Wait*” is a breath of fresh air, and that was intentional. “Our motto for this album literally was, ‘If it doesn’t rip your heart out, then it better make you dance.’ That was the balance,” he says of blending the upbeat with the heart-tugging. “Sometimes I really just need to make somebody laugh because I am getting hit hard with the gut wrenching, and there’s nothing wrong with that, but you can hardly watch *The Notebook* so many times before you need to see a comedy.”

“*The Moment*” captures the joy Millard experienced when he first accepted Jesus. As Millard sings, “Here’s to the day that I met grace,” it’s impossible not to feel the power of those words and flash back to the young boy whose life was changed. The closing track “*Exhale*” reminds us “it’s always darkest just before the light” and urges listeners to keep sight of the fact that hope is not far behind.

“We want people to inhale the promise of Jesus and exhale just this joy. A lot of people are tired and kind of beat down by just being hit

from every direction, whether it's media or whatever it is. They just get bombarded," Millard says. "One reason why we're calling the album inhale (exhale) is we all just want to sit back for a second and take a deep breath and be like, 'Okay this is what matters. This is what matters.' I'm grateful that messages like that seem to resonate with people on a consistent basis because there is hope in that, and if they can still get fired up about what's to come then not all is lost."