

Q&A



AMY GRANT

Life changes kick-start a creative revival for the Christian music icon

"I LOVE ALL FORMS OF THE CREATIVE process, whether it's cooking a meal or doing an art project," says Amy Grant, "but I'd forgotten how much I missed that really intense process of making an album."

When it came time to record *How Mercy Looks From Here*, her first full-length album in eight years, Grant—who began her career as a contemporary Christian artist, crossed over to pop in the early '90s, and crossed back a decade later—threw herself into her work, writing or co-writing 10 of the record's 11 songs. She enlisted producer Marshall Altman (Marc Broussard, Natasha Bedingfield), and the two spent months tweaking every aspect of the album. "We decided, 'Let's just make a

record that we would like to listen to and trust that it will find its own audience,'" she says. Grant tapped several A-list guest artists, including Carole King, James Taylor, and her husband, Vince Gill, to back her warm alto.

Though she's won a half-dozen Grammys and 25 Gospel Music Association Dove Awards, and has sold 30 million albums over the course of her career—which began when she was a teen—Grant has no desire to stop creating. "I think my best songs are still ahead," she says. "I would love to write until the day I die. I don't know if I could do anything else very well." Grant discussed with us the new album, her creative process, and how one eventful week in her life yielded the record's title track.

What inspired the album?

While I never stopped writing or touring, the music I was making would trickle out a few songs at a time on a "Best of" or a Christmas compilation. I hadn't pursued a contract for current material just because it takes a certain amount of energy and effort to make a full-blown recording. I had teenagers at home—though I'm sure they wished I would disappear and go work on something—and my mom's health was failing. My mom passed away in April 2011, and about a year later, I felt this rocket engine of creativity get slapped onto my brain. The songs that would become *How Mercy Looks From Here* came from that. Around the same time, Peter York of Sparrow Records

introduced me to Marshall. [Marshall] said, "Play me everything you've written. We're going to take one song a week, tear it apart, and improve what you have." We started that process immediately and did that for a year.

How do you write?

At this stage of the game, I usually come up with an idea first. The hardest song to write is the one where you don't know what you want to say. I think writing lyrics is my strength, but I don't write every week. Sometimes I'll work on a song for months, picking it up and putting it aside. I'm not prolific. I guess I could be, but there are too many other things going on in life. I'll maybe write five or six songs a year. Several of the songs on the record are songs I had written but, in trying to improve them, other writers were brought on. Composing music is not my strong point. A lot of the time, a producer would say, "Can we just work on the music a little bit more? I love the idea of the song, but the music is leaving me cold."

Where did the title track come from?

I had that phrase, "How mercy looks from here," in my head for nearly three years. I kept saying, "I'm going to write this song," but I didn't know what I wanted to say. In one week in 2010, a flood hit Nashville, a good friend took his life, my cousin was killed in Afghanistan, and Jenny Gill [husband Vince Gill's daughter] got married in our backyard. It was unbelievable. That was the week I needed to write this song, though I didn't begin writing it for some time. We used the context of the flood for the story. The great thing about the song is that it doesn't matter if the listener knows the details behind it. There's a story behind every one of these songs, but if you can authentically capture the feeling, somebody can take that song and think, "Hey, that's just like my experience." Then the song is theirs, which is what you hope for with your music.

How did you choose the guest singers?

The backing vocals are one of the last things you add—the songs have already been tracked, the lead vocals are done—and choosing singers is like casting a part in a movie. You think, "What voice do I want to hear doing this?" The background part on "Don't Try So Hard" was going to be sparse, but I wanted the voice to be familiar. When Marshall and I were listening to the song, I said, "There is no other voice I'd rather hear singing 'You're lovely even with your scars' than James Taylor." I've loved his voice my whole life, and I'd believe

those words coming from him.

With Carole, I was included in a benefit concert for a camp for terminally ill children. Everybody was singing Carole King songs—Katy Perry, Alicia Keys, Jakob Dylan, me. As we were leaving, I said to her, "Oh, would you sing on this song? You'd be perfect for it!" And she said yes. Carole and I were never in the studio together. Marshall and I sent the digital file of "Our Time Is Now" to her studio. We did the same thing with James.

What was the recording like?

It was so much fun. Marshall is so spontaneous, and he's always willing and happy to chase an idea. We did months of pre-production work, tweaking lyrics and figuring out song structure and tempo. We have a recording studio at our house, but it made sense for me to go where Marshall

would like that woman. Stop saying all that stuff!" Every one of us changes as people. We grow and we're shaped by events and people in our lives. When you only live in the moment, none of those record deals or sales from the past affect today. At one point they were an amazing income stream, but it's different today, and that's good. Life keeps changing. When I'm home, I want to be just "Mom." I've never hung a gold record in the house or put an award out. I didn't want to be reminded of anything public when I was home.

Anything you still want to achieve?

Last night, my 12-year-old daughter asked me to tell her a bedtime story for old time's sake. Until that moment, I had forgotten how much I loved doing that. I think that's why I love writing songs, because those are three-and-a-half minute stories. I don't think



Onstage in Nashville, 2010

'I felt this rocket engine of creativity get slapped onto my brain.'

I've got the patience to completely flesh out a story—writing all that dialogue sounds exhausting—but someday I'd like to write those stories down.

—Juli Thanki

'The hardest song to write is the one where you don't know what you want to say.'

