

A man with a beard and short hair is singing passionately into a microphone on stage. He is wearing a dark long-sleeved shirt and playing an acoustic guitar. The background is a deep blue with some stage lights visible.

**PHIL STACEY**

*with* **THOMAS JEFFRIES**

**MADE TO**  
**WORSHIP**

Empty Idols and the Fullness of God

FOCUS ON THE FAMILY®

**MADE TO WORSHIP**



PHIL STACEY

with THOMAS JEFFRIES



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WORSHIP

Empty Idols and the Fullness of God



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# INTRODUCTION

I'M BACKSTAGE on the set of *American Idol*, and I am absolutely terrified. Tens of millions will be watching tonight's live show, and my nerves are shot. Simply breathing is difficult. I'm sweating, and my legs are trembling.

I softly sing a Rich Mullins classic—"Hold me Jesus, 'cause I'm shaking like a leaf."

In a few minutes I will be escorted to the *Idol* stage to perform. While I'm waiting I wonder, *Why in the world have I gotten myself into this? All my dreams are right in front of me, but one misstep could cost me everything.*

The pressure has been building steadily, to the point where I'm having borderline panic attacks before each show. It's been this way for a few weeks now, and it's not getting any better.

Finally, the most wonderful woman in the world decides she's seen enough. My wife looks at me with all the love she can muster. The conversation goes something like this:

"Phil, you need to know that this is pride," Kendra says.



“It’s eating away at you, and you need to get rid of it or it will destroy you.”

I’m perplexed. “If this were pride,” I reply, “I’d have at least some measure of confidence. What you’re seeing right now is humility!”

“No, Phil. This is you being worried about how you come across on television because you want everyone to think you’re good. But this isn’t about you. There were thousands of auditions this year, and most of them were good. But those other singers aren’t here. You are. And I imagine the only way that’s possible is because God has prepared a way for you to be here.

“Seems to me that He has a purpose in all this. Seems to me that it’s in His hands. And if you can fully trust Him, you’ll stop worrying about how good you look and just start enjoying the ride. If you get eliminated, God has opened doors for you. If you make it through, God has opened doors for you. Either way, God will give you the grace to do whatever’s necessary to accomplish His purpose.”



Not only was Kendra right, her words immediately gave me a sense of peace. It wasn’t about me. I’d bought into the idea that I was born for this, that this was my big shot. But my life was not in the hands of the *American Idol* judges—Simon Cowell, Randy Jackson, and Paula Abdul. My life was not in the hands of the millions of viewers—voters!—tuning

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in at home. My life was in the hands of a loving heavenly Father who was fully capable of giving me supernatural singing abilities if He chose to do so. He was also capable of extending my run for no other reason than to use my *Idol* experience for *His* glory.

I know that He did use me. I received countless messages from *Idol* fans telling me how one performance or another moved them in some way. But my favorite message had very little to do with me.

The woman who wrote to me was a Navy wife. She and her husband were on the brink of divorce, and one of the few times the two of them were in the same room together, they were watching *American Idol*. Since I was also in the Navy at the time, she was rooting for me. Unfortunately, this particular episode was not one of my best moments. It was actually quite terrible. She recalled how Simon Cowell was dumbfounded by my whole performance.

That's when an *Idol* camera focused on a woman in the audience. Kendra has a beautiful smile, and apparently she was beaming as she made eye contact with me from the crowd. The image cut back to me, but I wasn't looking at Simon while he delivered his critique. Instead, I was staring right at Kendra, which brought a smile to my face as well.

The Navy wife described feeling an overwhelming presence of love. She began to cry. Later that night, having looked me up online, she discovered I was a part-time worship leader. Strangely, it was her husband who first commented on the connection they'd witnessed between Kendra and me

that night. That special connection, she told her husband, was because we had put God first in our relationship. After a conversation about how badly they both wanted their marriage to work, the couple made the decision to look for a Christian counselor and give their marriage one more try.

She told me that they had both committed their lives to Christ and had started attending a church close to their home. She said their marriage was reborn as they actively pursued a love built not on selfishness but on a foundation of faith. At the time I was probably more concerned about my lack-luster singing, but God had done something special with that couple. God can create beauty from ashes, whether it's a poor performance on *American Idol* or a rough few years in a dying marriage. He can work all things together for our good.

Her message moved me immensely. *Even when I'm at my worst, God is still able to use me!* How liberating is that? It takes the pressure of a perfect performance off of my shoulders. My purpose isn't to entertain people or somehow manipulate them through the power of my vocal prowess. It's to bring glory to God.

I'm not a singer. I'm a worshiper. When I place what little I have in God's hands, He takes it, blesses it, and uses it far beyond my wildest expectations.



I wish I could say that this couple's story transformed my attitude completely. I can't. I wish I could say that the rest of

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my experience with the show was positive and uplifting. It wasn't. I wish I could say that I performed on *American Idol* for my children. I didn't.

I did it for myself.

I'd wanted to be a singer my whole life, and I spent more time away from my kids during that year than I spent with them. My message on *Idol* was "I want to encourage my kids to pursue their dreams." I don't know if they actually aired that comment on the show. They might have. But the truth is that I said that stuff when they stuck a television camera in my face because I thought it sounded good.

When you achieve your dreams, they're rarely as fulfilling as you thought they'd be. Then you dream new dreams, and when you attain those, they're still not as fulfilling as you hoped.

So finally, as believers, we come to the point where we find our fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Period. When God opens the doors, we experience genuine fulfillment. It doesn't matter how hard we fight to break through a wall, we are not going to feel truly fulfilled unless Christ is involved.

That's how I look back on *American Idol*. I went off the rails spiritually during that time. The year I was on *Idol* was not a good year for my marriage. It was not a good year for my kids. It was not a good year for any of my friendships.

It's hard to explain this to people who don't know Christ. After all, my dreams were coming true. I was making a lot of money, because they paid contestants to be on the show and then paid us even more to be on the *Idol* concert tour. After that, I signed a recording contract with a big advance check.

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I was getting everything I ever wanted. I stayed in five-star hotels. I traveled around the country in a luxury bus. I enjoyed catered meals everywhere I went. You'd have thought my life was perfect; instead, it almost fell apart.

This is my story.

CHAPTER 1

# GROWING UP

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PEOPLE ASK ME if I remember performing music growing up. The truth is that I remember very little else.

I didn't do well in school. I wasn't good at making friends. I *was* good at music. In my house, my brother, sister, and I were challenged—and we were *rewarded*—when we learned new songs. We all took piano lessons; we all performed. My dad was a pastor, so he always had us kids singing onstage at church. We performed as individuals, in duets, and in trios. We gave out audio tapes of us singing as Christmas gifts.

Singing was like speaking in our house. Music was my life.

I arrived into the world on January 21, 1978, as Joel Philip Stacey, the third child of Gary and Adrell. I don't remember when it first happened, but I've always been called Phil. Everywhere I've moved since I was a child, I've tried to get people to start calling me Joel. If you watch my *American Idol* audition, you can hear Simon Cowell refer to me as Joel, but host Ryan Seacrest called me Phil and that was that.

I was born in Harlan County, Kentucky. Harlan County was a coal-mining area, and my dad was a Church of God pastor. We come from a long line of coal miners, preachers, farmers, and musicians. Both sides of my family are from pioneer-day Kentucky. I never watched it, but there was a popular television show called *Justified* that was based on the city of Harlan. They still make moonshine there—it's that kind of town.

My father wasn't always a preacher. He was the son of a preacher, and he went to Lee College, a Christian college, in the mid-1960s. Dad's life was kind of derailed during the Vietnam War era. The details are cloudy, because there are still things he won't talk to me about.

For a time in the late 1960s he was AWOL from the military, and it was during this period that he tried to become a professional musician. He played keyboards and trumpet in Chicago, Illinois, and connected with some really big stars at the time. But eventually, when he had run out of gigs and options, he turned himself in to the local police.

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After my father served his time and fulfilled the rest of his enlistment, he actually tried to become a career military guy. “No,” they said, “we don’t need you.” My dad is a patriot; he always has been. I guess I would call him a hippie patriot.

Vietnam was traumatic for him. He’s told me a few stories. In one of them his company heard rustling in the leaves. They all simultaneously turned their M16s toward the noise and started firing. When the dust cleared, there were a million pieces of bunny rabbit all over the place. “That describes Vietnam,” my father said. “Every single sound, every little impulse, was terrifying.”

His typical response to questions I asked when I was younger was that anything that happened before he got saved didn’t matter. He was born in 1945, but he says his life truly began when he surrendered his life to Christ in 1971. He eventually met my mom, returned to Lee College (today it’s Lee University), graduated, and became a minister. He served first as a music minister, and then as an associate pastor, and then he started pastoring churches of his own. The Harlan County church was his first lead pastor role.



My father is a great musician. He’s skilled at both the trumpet and piano, and he has a brilliant musical mind. He served on music boards in the church, and he wrote lots of convention songs and modern hymns. My father also sang. He would never call himself a singer because he was a band guy



first, but he had a beautiful voice and, more importantly, a very emotional voice. A dramatic voice.

When I was a kid, I was sitting in church while Dad sang an old song called “The Day He Wore My Crown.” (Sandi Patty later recorded it.) I just bawled. I was five or six years old, and I cried because Dad’s performance was so emotionally powerful. It was a landmark moment for me, because it was when I first recognized music’s strong influence on people.

My mother, Adrell, was born in 1953 in Neon, Kentucky—another region full of coal-mining towns. She was also raised in a pastor’s home. In a pastor’s home, there’s always a lot of pressure, and my mother and her siblings definitely weren’t immune. In spite of this, she grew up with a love and passion for ministry and used the incredible voice God gave her to sing and minister all over Kentucky.

Gary met Adrell while he was playing the piano at a camp meeting in Kentucky, which is like a regional spiritual revival. They were married in 1973.

My older brother, Keith, was born in 1975 in Cleveland, Tennessee. By the time my sister, Rebecca, arrived in 1976, the family had moved to a fishing village in Maryland. My father had various ministry jobs that took the family from place to place—all of them with the Church of God. My parents are Church of God through and through. Both of their parents were Church of God pastors. You know how some folks are dedicated, die-hard fans of their favorite sports team? That’s the way it was with denominations. There was even a

song with lyrics that said, “The Church of God is right, hal-lelujah to the Lamb.” Yep, that was a song people really sang!

My siblings and I sang songs from convention books. You could walk into any church in Ohio or Kentucky, open these convention books, and see Dad’s twenty or so songwriting credits. These books were the equivalent of our modern hymnals. We would thumb through them just to see how many songs Dad had written. You found them in Baptist churches, Assembly of God churches, and many others, but they were published by the Church of God publishing house. The denomination printed the red-back hymnals, and they were everywhere.

The Church of God always was—and still is—known for its music. On *The Voice* or *American Idol* or any of these other singing competitions, you’ll often see people from the Church of God who have done well. If they’re like me, they were raised in a musical environment. My mother grew up singing in church, and she was spectacular. She would *floor* people when she performed.

My mother’s side of the family is overflowing with musical talent. Our family reunions always looked like a “Gaither Homecoming.” At a certain point, everybody pulled out their musical instruments. We have a Julliard graduate who’s played with the New York Philharmonic, and several people have toured musically around the country. Two of my uncles played guitar—both of them just bad to the bone—and my dad was on the keyboard. And then there were all these singers, basically a giant family choir.

My grandparents on that side had nine kids, and all of my mom's siblings had families, so family reunions included at least fifty people. When they'd start to jam, it was all gospel music—100 percent old hymns. When Dad got saved, he stopped playing secular music, because there was this idea in the church that anything other than gospel music was evil—an idea that was around until probably 1990.

My brother and sister and I were products of this musical environment. We were featured at the family reunions, along with all the other families' kids, and we all sang. Every one of the families had trios or duets, depending on how many kids they had. To me, there was a palpable sense of competition. My cousins inspired me to work harder and get better.

By the time I turned eight, I was already writing songs. I'm not saying I was a good songwriter back then. It's just who we were as a family. It wasn't that I was simply passionate about music—music was everything. For me, I can't remember a time *without* singing.

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There are photos of me in my diaper up in front of a church, with one hand raised and a microphone in the other. I was probably singing “Jesus Loves Me” or something. It's ridiculous, but it was real. At that age you're barely learning vowels; you're not learning words. You have no idea what you're singing; you're just repeating what you've been taught to do.

One of my earliest memories involves my mother in

church. I was around three or four years old, and I can picture Mom standing next to me, clapping her hands and singing along to the old red-back hymnal. The year was 1981, and we were living in Pinsonfork, Kentucky.

The memory is as grainy as an old photo. The church had a small sanctuary with red carpet and wooden pews. Men wore suits; women wore dresses and big buns in their hair. It was a charming church filled with salt-of-the-earth type people. An old man named J.J. Phillips used to give the kids Red Hots candies every Sunday. He was a descendant of “Bad Frank” Phillips, the infamous deputy sheriff from the bitter Hatfield and McCoy feud that had plagued the area so many years before.

I remember an intense moment of learning on one particular Sunday. In fact, it could have been the moment I really learned how to sing. My mom was lifting her hands, and I joined her by lifting my hand. I remember watching her sing and watching people respond, because she couldn’t sing without people standing up all over the congregation.

Not only that, but audiences were genuinely *moved* when my mother sang—crying, all that stuff—and it was profound. I witnessed the impact that her voice had on people. I didn’t understand it yet, because I didn’t understand the emotions. I didn’t understand that there were stories in every one of those pews. I didn’t understand that she was ministering spiritually, but I could see that the congregation was affected.

Mom was standing to my right, belting out the alto line with all her might. Her voice was mesmerizing, perfectly fit

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for a choir of angels. I stood next to her trying to mimic the way she sounded. I found myself using vibrato and learning to complement the melody of a song with a harmony line.

I was hooked.