

A close-up portrait of Mark Stuart, the lead singer of Audio Adrenaline, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. He has short, dark hair and a light beard. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Foreword by TIM TEBOW



losing my voice to find it

HOW A ROCKSTAR
DISCOVERED
HIS GREATEST
PURPOSE

Grammy-Winning Lead Singer of

Audio Adrenaline

MARK STUART

WITH ROGER W. THOMPSON

**losing
my voice
to find it**



losing my voice to find it

MARK STUART STORY

MARK STUART



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ISBN 978-1-4002-1331-3 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

ISBN 978-1-4002-1329-0 (HC)

Printed in the United States of America

19 20 21 22 23 LSC 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

When families gather, our voices inevitably gain strength.

We come alive. We laugh. We cry. We get real. We get loud. Somehow, together, our weaknesses are forgotten, selfishness is scattered, and our purpose . . . our voice becomes more clear. I thank God for my family.

My voice, and this book are dedicated to them.

Aegis, my wife, for intimacy and courage.

Journey and Christela, my children, for joy and purpose.

Drex and Jo, my mom and dad, for inspiration and belief

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PART I

My Father's House

“Come and go with me to my Father’s House.”

—AUDIO ADRENALINE, “BIG HOUSE”

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”

—JOHN 14:1–3 NIV

ONE

The Arena, Part 1

My childhood church was planted in a rural Indiana town called Richland, named after the fertile soil that surrounded it. My father was the preacher and a singer, and I learned about God somewhere between the two. In the wide-open spaces of Indiana bean-and cornfields, I would pray with full confidence for ways to tell of God's goodness. I had little doubt he would deliver.

The brown brick building had a sanctuary that sat two hundred people, about half the town's population. The Baptist and Methodist churches had seating for the rest. There were no stoplights or gas stations, but a hardware store specializing in farming supplies and a grocery store provided the other basics.

By local standards, Richland Christian Church was a little edgy. We had no denominational ties, and we had a sound system that kept the Baptists safely away. On Sundays, we kept the organ and piano within acceptable limits for the hearing aids in the back row, but the rest of the week had no limit.

On weeknights, my father practiced in the sanctuary with his gospel group, the Mud Chapel Singers. They covered popular songs from the Cathedrals, the Stamps Quartet, and the Gaither Vocal Band. My brother and I liked to lie on the wooden pews to listen to them practice. As my dad's voice boomed through the sound system, it reverberated from the walls and filled the room like the

presence of God. I sang along at times, my voice sounding small in comparison, and I wondered if one day it might sound as big as his.

David, my older brother by almost two years, learned to play the piano and became a really good musician. Since I couldn't compete with him on piano, I learned to play the drums. When he started singing onstage on Sunday mornings, I sometimes sang backup. One day, while no one else was at church and our father was preparing a sermon in his office, my brother was playing on the sound system in the sanctuary. I rushed to finish my job of mowing the church lawn while Russ Taff and the Imperials blasted through the speakers, cranked up much higher than usual. The power was electric. My brother hooked up a couple of microphones, and we took turns singing harmonies and riffs with Russ when a high and powerful vocal came up. When it was my turn at melody again, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath—and sang from someplace new. Someplace previously hidden from me. My voice entered the microphone and came out of the speakers as something transcendent. It was as big and strong as any voice ever heard in that sanctuary. My brother stopped and stared at me. His eyes confirmed the same thing I'd heard: I could sing.

Several lifetimes later, these memories came to me as I waited in a private room at my doctor's office. The chairs in the waiting room were lined up straight and reminded me of those church pews from long ago. They faced a beige wall with enough space between them that patients could avoid looking at each other. Dark wooden arms and legs met at right angles to support seat and back cushions covered in neutral tones that contrasted only slightly with the carpet. I restacked the magazines on the coffee table and noticed the veneer had worn from the edges revealing the wood was fake. What was supposed to be solid oak was only a composite of other materials.

Gold records of musicians who were also patients hung horizontally across the walls, including one from my band, Audio Adrenaline. Kerri, my wife, had directed the photo shoot for the album, *Bloom*, and we'd done the cd insert art together. It was the best thing we'd ever created as a couple.

Bloom had released around the same time I'd become a patient. The biggest accomplishment of my life at that time, it signified the transition from a struggling rock band to one who had made it. Several gold record plaques were given away as gifts to those who had been a part of helping us achieve it. One

hung proudly in our record label's entryway. Another hung in my dad's church office. This is the one I saw most often.

I waited for a nurse to call me to the exam room. When the door opened, it was the doctor. He smiled and casually called me back. As I walked past my gold record I realized that it was framed in the same material as the coffee table. I walked down halls crammed with standing scales, medical equipment, and floor-to-ceiling files to the exam room and hopped on the exam bench, the disposable white paper crunching under my weight. The doctor grabbed his stethoscope and warmed it between his hands. He and I had met through mutual friends in the music industry, and he often came to our local shows. We shared a love of both music and the Kentucky Wildcats. During college, he'd been a radio personality, and now his soothing voice filled the room with a classic Southern baritone.

"How's your voice workin'?"

I tried to speak. Nothing came out.

He alternated the stethoscope between my neck and chest and back. I appreciated that he'd warmed it first.

I tried again. Thoughts traveled from my head to my larynx and were met with wind from my lungs. The wind passed through my vocal cords, and my lips made the shapes of consonants and vowels, but the words came out as thin as secrets whispered into a storm. Scratchy. Pale.

"I've got a show tomorrow night." I leaned in so he could hear me. "We're playing at the Arena. At the Dove Awards. We're nominated for song and album of the year."

I'd started seeing him a couple of years ago after our band played a show in Nashville. That night, while onstage, my voice had completely cut out. It sounded like somebody had turned off the microphone in the middle of the song. I remember stepping back and then trying to sing again. Nothing came out. My voice was paralyzed. I couldn't finish the show. This was the first time I'd ever experienced anything like that, and I felt panicked. Two hours later, my voice came back, but I knew the problem was significant.

A specialist at the Vanderbilt Voice Center found some swelling along my vocal cords, my body's natural response to protect my voice. The specialist administered a steroid shot that bypassed my body's defense mechanisms, keeping the swelling down, and for the next album and tour, my voice was

invincible. Then I learned this doctor could administer the shots and started going to him before every album and tour.

My doctor believed God was blessing people through our music and wanted to do his part to keep my voice working as long as possible so that we could reach as many people as possible. Our relationship grew beyond the borders of the usual doctor-patient confines. We became partners in ministry. His job was to medically intervene. My job was to sing about Jesus and somehow convince the audience that my voice was fine.

The problem is, our bodies are smart. They build new defenses. So as the shots became less effective, my doctor had to increase their frequency. He grew increasingly concerned, saying that if we were to continue the shots at this rate, there would be negative side effects. As he did more research, we hoped the shots would only be a bridge until another, more permanent solution was found.

“Doc,” I said, my voice scratchy and distant, “give me a double.”

The needle pierced my skin and muscle, and the thick liquid pushed into my bloodstream. My body initially rejected the violation, sending signals of pain and fear, but eventually, submission. I sat quietly. The tile on the floor had a pattern to it. I traced it from the wall to my feet.

“We’re going to have to slow this down, Mark.”

“I know.”

“I don’t even know for sure that this will help with your show tomorrow.”

I exhaled. “I know.”

When it was done, he walked out and closed the door softly behind him. I sat for a moment. The floor pattern was a maze, and I couldn’t find a way out.

THE DOVE AWARDS, 2003

At the Nashville Arena, a line had formed that extended down the street. Home of Nashville’s hockey team, it had seating capacity for twenty thousand. The performers and event coordinators entered from the back, through doors that led underneath and into a maze of halls and cinder block rooms.

I hadn’t sung at sound check. Too soon. I figured I’d do a quick voice check just before we played. I found the guys in the greenroom where the cold

underground felt like the doctor's office, only with less posters. I looked at my longtime friend, Will. He and I had started the band twenty years earlier, while students at Kentucky Christian College. Next to him were Tyler and Ben, newer members, who felt like younger brothers. Most of the crew was there too. We had become family, and the struggles we'd faced while recording the album *Lift*, the one up for a Dove Award this evening, had given us an even stronger bond. This was our moment.

After grueling studio sessions and baring their souls onstage in city after city, the biggest names in Christian music would receive their grandest accolades and awards in front of an adoring audience. Tonight was their fairy-tale moment. For me, it was my moment of judgment.

Outside the greenroom, suits and dresses were double-checked in mirrors, makeup artists made last-minute adjustments, and artists were whisked back and forth by managers and people in black suits. I looked down the hall, hoping to spot Kerri. TobyMac stood nearby. So did CeCe Winans. They smiled at me, and I did my best preacher's kid impression and faked a smile back.

I weaved through the activity and found my dressing room. I closed the door behind me, and in the quiet, I put on a white suit and a red shirt with bold white letters that said "PREACHER," reminding me of my dad. I looked in the mirror and fixed my hair. Then I sat. Typically, I would have practiced some lines, but I was afraid to sing. I was also afraid of who I would be without a voice.

I couldn't hear anything from the show except a dim roar when the audience clapped. But the walls and the floor vibrated. Above me, through the concrete, was an arena filled with people who had paid to see the biggest show representing the height of the Christian music industry. We were the gladiators they'd paid to see. I tried to steady myself. I tried to pray. Then there was a knock on the door. It was time.

The band and crew moved to the stage during the commercial break. I looked out at the audience and saw Michael W. Smith and DC Talk on the front row. Bill Gaither was a few rows back. I scanned the seats for my wife. When I found her seat, it was empty. I felt like I was sinking under the pressure of my band. My marriage. My voice. My mind was heading toward a dark place when I locked eyes with Mac Powell of Third Day. He smiled, then gave a thumbs-up. His warmth brought me back to the moment.

The set crawled with guys in black shirts and black pants and headsets. Every movement was orchestrated for the live TV audience. The crane camera swung across the stage to focus on my face for the opening lines of the song. There was no time to check my voice. I would find out if it worked at the same time as everybody else. My throat felt dry. The commercial break ended, and lights went up. The click track cued, and the whole arena clapped as Steven Curtis Chapman stood on the announcer's stage to introduce us. He had won more Dove Awards than anyone in history.

“Last year, this group soared to the top of the charts with a song that explored the depths of God’s mercy. Performing ‘Ocean Floor,’ here are my old touring buddies, Audio Adrenaline!”

The clapping settled into silent anticipation. Cellos and violins soared into the intro. Then the guitar. Then the drums. The song was launched, with no way to turn it around now. Thousands of people filled the arena. Millions more watched on live TV. I stepped to the microphone. I had never felt more alone.

One more time, I thought. *Just like sharing riffs with my brother. I can do this.* Then came my opening line.

“The mistakes I’ve made . . .”