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Mitch McVicker: Memories, Writing and Mullins

(October 2007)

Ten years ago, the Christian music world was shocked to learn that Rich Mullins had passed away as the result of a tragic car accident. Also in the car at the time of the wreck was Mitch McVicker, a tour mate, co-writer and friend of Rich. McVicker was in a coma for six weeks before embarking on a two-year recovery period during which he relearned how to live his life.

Recently, Mitch released *Love Will Rise*, the latest album in his growing discography. Brenten Gilbert caught up with Mitch to talk about the new album, the process of writing, some memories of Rich Mullins and more.

Below is that interview.

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How are you doing this morning?

I'm doing great.

I guess it's a bit earlier for you there than it is for me.

A little bit, but I've been up and it's just fine.

Are you normally an early riser?

(laughs) Typically I am. I have a toddler - she's almost two-years old - and she's up real early. So at home I'll be up with my daughter and then just doing this touring, you're usually leaving early in the morning to drive to the next place.

It's often hard to get interviews in the morning with musicians, because everyone likes to sleep in.

(laughs)

So you're in Wisconsin today. . .

Yeah, on my way to. . . tonight's concert is in Menomonie and last night was in Osceola, Wisconsin. A couple of little towns, but they're great to get the concerts there.

It seems like you're in the midst of a pretty rigorous touring schedule. Is that specifically for the album release, or is that typical for you?

Well, it's just what I've been doing for years, because I think that the backbone of what I do is getting out and being able to communicate with people and rub shoulders with the body of Christ and steering people's attention over to Christ. And actually being there, that's what that means. So that's pretty typical. Now this tour is coinciding with the release of my newest record and so it is rigorous, but when I'm out here doing it, I figure I should be doing it as hard as I can and just going for it, trusting that everything will work out.

And I'm sure by now, you're a seasoned veteran. . .

(laughs)

Yeah, it's funny how time just passes and you go from being the young, stupid, "fly by the seat of your pants" guy to being a seasoned veteran.

Well, you've aged well.

(laughs)

I think that music really keeps you young. The travel here and there can really wear you out, but it also energizes you.

That's good. Now you mentioned your daughter. You are married now and you have a family. Do they get to tag along on some of these trips?

Hardly ever. Once in a blue moon my wife and family will come to a concert. They all have real lives and my wife has a real job. So they're pretty set there and I get to go and do this. I'm grateful that they're so supportive. I couldn't do this to the extent that I do it apart from that support. So I'm really thankful when I get to be home for a short while.

How do you keep connected with them on a regular basis?

Pretty much the phone. . . You know, there's all kinds of communication these days. So phone and text messages and email. . . You can stay pretty connected even when it's difficult to get a hold of somebody. A lot of times, my wife's hours and my hours are very different which can make connecting pretty hard, but it's really not an issue when you're both interested in making it happen and it's not a chore to do it. You actually want to. And then you have to put quality above quantity. We both realize that we don't probably get near as much communication as the normal, average couple that lives in the same home, but we just try to make the most of the communication.

Yeah. And I know from my own experience that phone calls with two-year olds are very precious.

(laughs) Oh man. Yeah, that's my favorite. I have so many messages saved on my phone from Brooklyn singing me the twinkle twinkle star song or the ABC song. It is really, really nice and I find myself listening to those as I'm driving down the road.

Always puts a smile on your face.

Yeah, it does. It's a great blessing that wears you out, but I would never trade it. It's so exciting and fun and energizing and it's a blessing to be a part of the actual formation of a little life. So, you know, at times it gets hard, but all good things are hard and many hard things are good. I am grateful.

So on Tuesday, you released your latest album. Can you tell us a little bit about *Love Will Rise*?

Well, the album is just kind of... Each song is a faith expression of mine and hopefully it's a little catchy. Hopefully, it'll give people something that they can hold on to. I just want to direct people towards Jesus with the music I've been given and to make something of a really high quality. I didn't want to just rely on the fact that it has a Jesus stamp on it so it doesn't have to be as good artistically as what's out there. I hope that it's good.

(laughs)

I never really set out to make thematic records, but the theme that did arise long after I was well into the process of recording this project was that love will rise. I wanted to put a balloon on the cover, because I'm trying to be a balloon these days with my life. In the sense that a balloon isn't what it was fully intended to be until it is filled with that which is lighter and less dense than what's around it. A balloon isn't what it can truly be until it begins to rise. *Love Will Rise*, the spirit of the Lord will rise. So I'm just trying to open myself up to being filled because that's my only hope of rising above circumstances and situations that come at me in this life and being truly what I'm intended to be. So I'm hoping that I can communicate that to people through these songs and I hope that I can remind people that love will rise in the midst of our struggles. Our struggles and in the midst of what is hard because that seems to be when the Lord is most instructing us and turning us into the people that He would like us to become. So I'm just getting to do music and hopefully I'll communicate that to people. I'm just grateful that I get to document these songs and like I said, I hope it's catchy and quality and that it glorifies God.

Definitely. Now, it's been five years since your last release. Was this one particularly difficult for you to write, or was it just all the stuff taking place in your life that delayed it?

I think it's always a good bit of work to write a song. It's just like anything else, you know? There's a good bit of work that goes into teaching classes, in plumbing a sink, in painting a house. It's not any different to me than a lot of work. But it's just a discipline to do it. Songwriting to me is just paying attention to life around me and what's going on within me and all around me. It's keeping track of and piecing things together. I'm always writing songs. I've never been the one who needs to retreat away from life and set aside some songwriting time in a cabin in the hills. I do my writing when I'm driving down the road or when I'm running and then I put it together on my guitar. This record was whittled down from about 50 songs that I'd written over the past few years.

So, yeah it is always work. And yeah I think that anyone's life will change drastically over the course of five years. I had some significant changes in my life, getting married, having a child and moving to a new city. At the same time continuing to go about this, going here and there and using the means that I've been given in concerts to point people to the Lord. So it's always hard and it's always good and I'm so glad that it's come to fruition now.

Yeah, I loved the quote in your press materials where you said that songs are an outpouring of your life.

Yeah. Exactly. That's kind of what I was touching on. You know, it's kind of like, our cup overruns. And so you don't go away to reach into something and try to manufacture something. You simply realize what you've received through trials and difficulties, through ease and comfort and we are overflowing. It's just a matter of learning to embrace that, recognize that and communicate that. And it does just spill out of those life experiences.

Does that encourage you to constantly try new things so that you're not pulling from the same well?

It does. Of course, we all have certain things that we are all about, certain things that make us who we are. At the end of one of the servant songs in Isaiah the Lord says, "Pay attention to me, for I will show you what I am doing next." And I hear that and think, "Wow! What could that be?" Then I realize that the Lord is always doing what is next. He's always doing the next thing and it's about paying attention to what He's doing now, because that's the next thing. The Lord is constantly active in each of our lives so if we are faithful to what He's doing within us, we are going to be trying new things, whether we know it or not. And I'm always wanting to stretch and grow and try new things. That's what growing does. Growth doesn't take breaks. A plant doesn't grow for a while and then take leave. A plant is always growing, even in the dormant times when you look at a tree and it's just bare branches. That's when the chlorophyll is most alive inside of it working and growing. So, growth doesn't take a break and if we are truly seeking to grow, we are always looking to try new things. That doesn't mean it has to be some life-altering thing, something that people might perceive as this great big change. It just means that we're looking to see how the Lord is moving within us. So, yeah, I'm always open to trying new things.

Neat. Now, on a more specific level, the song "Strap My Hat On" kind of lends the album its title with the line, "live will rise to my defense." When have you recently had to strap your hat on and look to love to see you through a tough time.

Wow, that's a good question. I don't know. I think. . . You know, I do all this. I book my concerts. I do my own management. There's no such thing as a road manager for me. So every time I look at a calendar and it's time to start working on booking shows for, say, Fall of 2007, that's scary. It's scary to look at a blank calendar and know that I wanna go out and follow my calling and show people to the Lord and do what I can. It's a scary thing to work towards that and know that. . . Well, my temptation is to put it all on my shoulders, my might and strength, whatever I can muster up, but I realize that I have to strap my hat on. I realize that there are things that come at me and I need love to be my defender. I need love to lift me up above the situation and the scary feelings and doubts that are within myself. You know, this is around the time of the ten year anniversary of the death of Rich Mullins.

Yeah.

Those are, gosh, those are fears that never really leave you. Especially over the past number of years when I was recovering. When I was relearning to walk. Relearning to talk. Trying to figure out how to sing again. Wondering if I'd ever be able to do this again. Not that it's the most important thing in the world. I know that the last thing that the world needs is another Christian musician, but I do know that the world needs the Truth. This is my way of trying to help get the Truth out there a little bit. So I wanted to keep doing this and I just didn't know [if I could]. So I had to strap my hat on and trust and be ready for what was coming in trying to keep the ball rolling for this quote-end quote music ministry. I think it's not unlike all of us to say that every day there are fears, every day there are doubts and wonderings - if we're growing. If we're growing, those will be there. So, there's all kinds of opportunities to strap our hats on, but the thing is that love will rise consistently, always when we do that.

Yeah definitely. It seems like every morning we have to get up and decide to grow.

That is right. It is always a decision. You hit it on the head. Getting up and shuffling around, and saying "Lord, I get to do this again. I get to live and I get to experience your overcoming in my life."

Yeah. Now, you mentioned Rich and it's hard for me to separate the two of you in my head, because I saw you two in concert together when I was in college - I think you played *The Lemonade Song* when Rich walked off the stage.

Yeah.

And you recently did a concert in memory of Rich, so can you kind of share some of your favorite memories of Rich or what he's meant to you?

Wow. Well, I tell you what memories I've kind of jumbled together over the past ten years. I loved how honest and authentic he was. He was the truest pursuer of the Lord. He was truly unencumbered by the trappings of the world that we find ourselves so often entangled up in. He was interested in not much else than living in God. I remember one time, we were in a nice, consumerville type of town. When you travel, those places are great. You love going there with their bookstores and really nice shops. But we pulled into the parking lot and he just looked at me and said, "You know, things of this world just don't satisfy." And that hit me especially hard at that point and it's stayed with me throughout the years.

Yeah.

I always loved doing concerts with him. I loved when he played the song "*Bound to Come Some Trouble*" because it's such a truth and it's a powerful thing. And it's such a vulnerable song, it's beautiful. He was such an inspiring guy to be around musically. He was an inspiring community leader and he was just so funny which I think happens when you're honest with yourself and with people. That's the thing is that a lot of people were impressed by how Rich was so quote-end quote real. Well, I think his approach was, "God knows me as I am, so why shouldn't everyone else?"

Right.

I know the last memory I have of Rich was an extremely funny one and I'm glad for it. My memory from the wreck is such that I don't really have one from six weeks prior to six weeks after except for some little bits that pop up in there. And I have one that I'm told is from about two hours before the wreck happened. We were on the drive and we pulled into a gas station and we each went in to get some coffee. It was one of those coffee machines where you put your cup under the spout and it fills it up and then stops. Well, he put his cup under there and it filled up, except it didn't stop. It just kept running. He had walked off to get a snack and it was just running over and all over the floor and everything and he made this huge mess. So then he went up to pay for his coffee and the cashier recognized him as Rich Mullins and said, "Wow. You're Rich Mullins and you made that big mess on my floor."

(laughs)

That's my last memory. Rich was always kind of the bungled bud, arguably one of the greatest, most amazing people that has lived.

Yeah. I was really impressed when I saw you guys in concert. I didn't know who he was - my wife to be had some of his tapes, but I hadn't heard of him. I just went 'cause I went to all the concerts that came to our school.

(laughs)

But, I was so blown away. You know, there's so many people who, when they take the stage, you're clearly at a show that's about them. But when Rich was singing and playing his songs, it was almost like he was part of the audience as well and we were all participating in something so much bigger.

Yeah. Man, that's a good way to put it.

Well, we need to wrap up soon, but I was reading through your song stories and noticed that they all kind of have Scripture references as far as what you were reading that inspired that particular song.

Uh-huh, Yeah.

So, one could assume that the Bible plays a pretty important role in your life and in your songwriting. Can you tell me a little bit about how it's impacted you?

Well, the Scriptures. . . I daily spend time mulling over them and wrestling with them and meditating upon what I've been reading that day. I tend to really get infatuated with chunks of Scripture. You know, like, John 10, John 14, Matthew 25, Lamentations 3, Galatians 5, just chunks of Scripture. And the first chapter of 2 Peter and all that stuff, hopefully, becomes a part of you and yes, it spills out of you into song. If I'm gonna go to the trouble of writing a song, there's going to be big parts of me in it and hopefully a big part of me is the Scriptures and how they are affecting me. I'm not a big Bible thumper or anything, but I'm a firm believer in the Scriptures being our lifeblood. For me that's. . . I have a hard time functioning when I'm not immersed in the Scriptures each day, because during my life. . . It's the witness to Jesus. Scriptures direct our attention to Jesus. They are the very Word and Jesus is the Word made flesh.

Yeah, definitely.

So yeah, they're going to be intertwined and very instrumental to my songs. I spend weeks being impacted by Scriptures like Galatians 5:25 - "Since we live by the Spirit, let us walk by the Spirit". My gosh. I'll probably be turning that around in my head for the rest of my life. Romans 8:32 - "For He who did not withhold His only son. . . won't He continue to give us all things." Everything. I used to think that meant chocolate chip cookies, silver-lined clouds and care bears, but it's all things. Everything else that comes our way, you know? The rough, the smooth, the easy, the hard, all things. And He'll use it all to construct us into the person He would have us to become. I get stuck on things for a long time. That's probably not the best answer to your question, but that's. . .

No, it's a good answer. It's good stuff. Now to finish things up on a different note. With all the touring and the songwriting that sprouts up out of everyday living, what do you do for fun?

(laughs)

Not that songwriting isn't fun, but you know. . .

Yeah. My most fun times are when I'm getting to wrestle around on the floor with Brooklyn. I don't get to do that all the time when I'm travelling and doing concerts, but those are my most fun times. I love sitting on the couch and watching meaningless TV shows with my wife Paula. I don't get to do that all the time, but those are my most fun times. When I'm travelling, I love just hanging out - I'm a hanger outer. The guys that I travel with are so much fun that surprisingly enough, the van ride can be a lot of fun. Meals are a lot of fun. Just talking and interacting. Every now and again, we'll play frisbee golf or watch a movie. That's fun. Basically, though, I don't have a life and I'm really boring.

(laughs)

We're all boring in our own right.

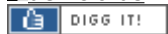
Right.

Well, thanks for taking the time to talk to me this morning. Have a great day and a good, fun concert tonight.

Thanks for having me.

Find out more about Mitch McVicker at MitchMcVicker.com, MySpace.com/MitchMcVicker, or SurrogateRecords.com and pick up *Love Will Rise* at iTunes, Amazon.com, or CBD/ChristianBook.com.

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