

Sarah Kelly

Born to Worship

The opening chorus of the first song on Sarah Kelly's 2008 release, third album *Born to Worship*, really does say it all: "*It's a brand new day/And I'm free to live and I'm free to love/In a whole new way.*" After more than a decade of wrestling with self-hate and succumbing again and again to abusive relationships, Sarah Kelly is now a free woman, a woman who knows who she is, who she belongs to and what her life and music are supposed to be about. Her new day is just beginning.

"In a nutshell," Sarah explains, "I am a person who has dealt with an addiction, and my addiction was self-hate. I didn't ask to deal with it. It just found me, and I gave in to it. I fell into a pattern of sin, thinking poorly about myself to an unhealthy degree. I wasn't seeing myself how God sees me."

Instead, Sarah saw only negatives in her self-assessments as a teenager and young adult, and her self-hatred led her to three different relationships—all with church leaders—in which she was physically and emotionally abused. She acknowledges that, in some sense, she stayed with these men, seeking their approval because, "I thought if they liked me, as leaders in the church, then God must like me."

Her last and most serious relationship, however, literally brought her to the brink of life and death, but it also forced her to break the abuse cycle, end her self-imposed isolation and step forward into her true calling as a lead worshipper. "Eventually you come to a place where you're either going to commit suicide or you're going to get out of it. Like other addictions, you have to hit bottom. You have to decide, 'I'm going to do what I need to do to clean up my life, to make a better place for myself because I'm worth it.'"

Thanks in large part to the intervention of her sister and the loving support of her parents, Sarah has been able to start her life anew, though in many ways her "brand new day" is a return to the roots that were just beginning to sprout in childhood.

"*Born to Worship* is the album I had to do. Two years ago I thought, 'if I died would I have any regrets?' I realized that the only regret I had would be not putting out these songs. I've got to do this. My first album is actually this one, the first one that's actually me and not 'Sarah Abuse Victim.' This is the me that God created me to be, a worshiper. I am the Lord's to do with as He chooses. I am not born to rock, I am not born to scream, I am not born to talk. I am born to worship. "

In fact, the entire album proves the point as the 10 songs offer Sarah's perceptions of God today as well as a number of tracks that she's written throughout her life, including "Sit With You Awhile" and "Not Quite Home" which she started writing when she was only seven years old.

"I started writing music when I was 5, but it didn't get good until I was about 7," she says with a laugh. "It's not like I was 'great.' I was still a 7-year-old, but it was noticeably a gift and a passion at a young age. I've been a worship writer all my life. Worship music just naturally comes out of me. This should tell you something. My first two albums took two years each to write. This one took me one month. This is what I do, and this is who I am. I love choirs, and I love inspiring people to sing new songs to God that are written in honesty and truth."

Produced by Mitch Dane (Jars of Clay, Bebo Norman) and featuring an adult rock sound *a la* Sheryl Crow, *Born to Worship* represents a distinct shift in terms of Sarah's input into the process. She explains, "I approached this album completely differently because I stopped saying yes. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I trusted myself enough to do it. On both of the other albums, I listened to everyone else and did what they wanted because they know so much more than me. This time I relied on the anointing that God has put on my life. I stood there and fought for what I knew worked. A producer might think one way is catchier, but I know the reason I wrote the song the way I did. I had to stand there in the studio and fight for my vision. What works in my church, what works live, that's what I put on the album."

"Musically, it's a lot happier than what people are used to hearing from me. I think it's simple but deep. It's the very truest part of me that I couldn't release when my inside and my outside weren't the same. Most artists when they put out their first album, they put out their best songs. I couldn't. Now I am."

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Not only is she putting out her best songs, representing a snapshot of her life, Sarah hopes to inspire others to do the same. Her long-term goal is to create a connection point that will get songs into the body of Christ that aren't just artist-written but are church written. She seeks to build a place, possibly online, for songs that are making a difference in local congregations. For now, she's working with a few churches and teaching a monthly class on songwriting at the University of Southern California.

"I don't know if I'm a worship leader—I hope so—but I know that I am a worshipper, and I hope that I can inspire others to worship. You don't have to be a prodigy to be writing music. I think worship really comes down to who are you trying to glorify? Are you contributing to God's kingdom here on earth? Do you care about the same things God cares about?"

"Really, it's just another avenue of communication to God, and it's the avenue that brought me through the toughest times in my life, which is why I have such a passion to share how to do it. Without that form of communication, I wouldn't have the relationship with God that I have. Without that way of expressing myself, I don't know if I would have made it."

Worship music—and her need to write out her prayers to God in that fashion—not only helped Sarah survive the trauma of abuse, it also has aided in her recovery. The healing that has happened, which was just starting as her last CD, *Where the Past Meets Today*, released in 2006, continues, but the Sarah one encounters today is already showing remarkable progress.

"I'm 31 now, and I'm okay. I did hate myself and fell into relationships with guys who treated me poorly, but it all stemmed from how I felt about myself. After two and a half years of being completely out of that, I realize my enemy is not flesh and blood. It has never been a man or a pattern of behavior in a man's life. It has always been my own self-hatred that kept me there, but now I feel like God has truly made me victorious over that. I *like* me now," she declares emphatically and with a smile.

"Since the last record came out, everything—I mean EVERYTHING—has changed in my life. My relationships with my parents, with God and with myself are all completely restored. I know that God has good things for me. I know what grace means now... Now I get what I've been saved from. Now I see what I won't have to experience in hell and what I won't have to live like here. Now I know how much God loves me."

And that knowledge is giving Sarah the confidence to defy expectations and pursue her real passion. While both her debut album *Take Me Away* and her last CD *Where The Past Meets Today* garnered Grammy nominations for the passionate red head and scored thousands of fans in Europe, not to mention increasing mainstream interest, Sarah knew instinctively that she had to make an album that revealed her heart rather than one that simply dug deeper into a dark and painful past.

"The fans in Europe thought I was like Sarah McLachlan and Janis Joplin shaken in a bottle. They loved it. Seven thousand people a night were telling me so. There was no question that taking my music in that direction—angry girl dealing with her past—was going to work at a mainstream level. But I had to make a statement, and I had to disappoint a lot of people who had invested a lot of money and time in me. It's time for me to take a stand and leave the past. Do I want to live there? Do I want to live in constant abuse, to drudge up those feelings to write those songs? Or do I want to move into the victorious life God has for me? I chose to move on."

"I have gone from victim to victor, and I am sitting here in the middle of a 'Brand New Day.' That song is my anthem. I go to bed with it in my head, and I wake up with it in my head. I'm looking forward to what each new day has for me. I'm living proof that there's a God—I'm a walking miracle because these kinds of things people don't just get out of. So I want every single day of my life to glorify him."

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