

# STEPHANIE SMITH

When Stephanie Smith got her first glimpse of the father she'd desperately missed all of her 14 years, her heart was in her throat. She waited breathlessly as he shook hands with her mother, greeted her brother Matt, and finally turned to Stephanie. But his next words were anything but the healing she'd dreamed of for so long. "This must be Priscilla?" he asked.

The powerful story of Gotee artist Stephanie Smith might have played out very differently for someone less open to the hand of God. The young rocker with the big voice chose to surrender her sorrows to His glorious alchemy. The result? The eleven rocking tracks of *Not Afraid*, a debut overflowing with encouragement and solid pop rock anthems, all written or co-written by Stephanie. Not surprisingly, a theme of empowerment runs through the youthful, edgy album, sure to reach deeply into the audience Stephanie cares for so passionately.

Stephanie's own compelling redemption story drives the hope-drenched lyrics and gutsy honesty of *Not Afraid*. In a style as radio-friendly as today's top charters and with a message equally timely, Stephanie pours her road-tested strength into songs of affirmation like the fiercely-delivered, "Superstar," her raw vocals reminding the hopeless of their worth. Soaring pop-rock track "Beauty" is just as uplifting, its compassionate message directing toward peace within. Sprinkled liberally within the infectious rock hooks and crunchy rhythms of *Not Afraid* are much needed messages of affirmation and solace, sure to encourage a hungry generation. Smith and producer Jamie Moore have clearly given much thoughtful attention to the immaculate arrangements but the album's artful, expressive lyrics are equally captivating. Chris Stevens, best known for his work with Tobymac, Sanctus Real, Paul Wright, Ayiesha Woods, Group 1 Crew, also added his production work to the standout "Renew Me."

And don't think it's only about the message. One listen to the thick guitars of the powerhouse title track will set you straight on that. Stephanie is a rock chick at heart, vocally stretching out in a big way over its crisp rhythms. The catchy breakup song packs a strong emotive punch, reminding us all of what relationships are *really* about. She covers one of her life's most central relationships in the stunningly vulnerable album closer and hidden track, piano ballad "First Words," telling of that first encounter with her father. Movingly sharing of her 'first wound' and its aftermath, she ultimately expresses the healing power she found in forgiving, a central theme on *Not Afraid*.

Stephanie's first meeting with her father was at the funeral of her grandmother. He was not expected to attend, but when Stephanie saw the 6'5" tall, broad-shouldered man with the dark, slicked-back hair through the hallway of the funeral home, she knew immediately she was gazing at her father. She describes it as "seeing a fairy tale character come to life."

In telling this story that she knows God will use to help many others, Stephanie now recognizes her father's error as a slip of the tongue due to nervousness. But at 14 she didn't see it that way. "I had invested so much thought into him, and wondered for so long what that day would be like," Stephanie shares. "All I could think was that he didn't know my name, and I was so wounded. I felt like I lost my innocence with this first wound."

In the aftermath of that meeting, Stephanie processed a great many life lessons about the power of right choices. Following a spiritual reality check she experienced through the rock band she joined during college, a fateful door was opened for Stephanie to travel overseas. "I ended up going just a few months later to Guatemala on a mission trip. If anyone is struggling with pride or self-righteousness," she laughs, "you need to go haul cinder blocks up a mountain. The hard work will cure you!"

That was only the first part of the plan for Stephanie's redemption. Immediately after her return she had to ask her father for financial help to stay in school. As scary as it was, it was the first step to the ongoing restoration of the relationship. "The first time I met with him, I could feel this supernatural love for him seeping from my pores," she exclaims. "I didn't know where it came from, but it felt like freedom to me, and I thought, 'wow, this is what forgiveness is. At that point, I really understood the choice it is to forgive and love.'"

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In embracing that vital life lesson, many doors were opened to the young girl who was discovering in her music a deep sense of calling, including a life changing four month trip to Africa to serve the poor where she spent one month living on the equivalent of one US dollar a day. Shortly after her return she accompanied a friend to a contest where the winning act would go on to play at AgapeFest. In that momentous choice, Stephanie had unwittingly stepped right into the plan of God. After winning the spot, she met her childhood idol, TobyMac, who, spotting her abundant talent, advised her "don't take the first deal that comes your way." Those words came back to haunt her when she initially turned Gotee down! Thankfully, she soon realized the good fit between them and the stunning debut *Not Afraid* followed soon after.

It all comes full circle in *Not Afraid*, an album thoughtfully crafted to deliver the goods both sonically and spiritually to an audience Stephanie feels deeply connected to. Strongly aware of how the Lord has woven together her gift of music with her passion to serve and help meet the needs of others, she ministers regularly with Soles4Soles, a Nashville-based non-profit that facilitates the donation of shoes to the hurting worldwide. She also has a long-standing relationship with the Pure Freedom founders, having been present at their very first sexual purity retreat, back when she was 13. "I still wear my pearl around my neck today," she shares, "and it's been neat to come around full circle and now partner with them." Ten years later, Stephanie, a young woman who has come to truly understand the value of relationships, continues to speak and perform at Pure Freedom conferences.

Of all of Stephanie Smith's accomplishments, her most significant growth shows through the clear maturity of *Not Afraid*, both musically and spiritually. She has chosen to spin her history into energetic pop rock that uplifts and encourages, and will be especially accessible to young listeners. Sharing the story of her "first wound" and its aftermath, she ultimately expresses the healing power she found in forgiving. It's a word in season for the many hurting teenagers in Stephanie's audience, and she bravely explores the experience more deeply in her Youth Specialties/Zondervan book releasing this spring, titled like her gutsy album closer, "First Words."

We all have choices to make, some more difficult than others. Checking out Stephanie Smith's *Not Afraid* is one of the easy ones. When the potent pop-rock album debuts in December 2008, its empowering message will lead listeners onward to their own good choices and healings. "My generation celebrates wounds, instead of celebrating the healing we can have in Christ," says Stephanie. "But my story is not a sad one anymore. It's a story of redemption."

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