

# Mary James

## A Journey From Darkness Into Light

By: Tom Gorton with Phil Sweetland

**“N**ow she sings from the mountain of rubble she stands upon,” Mary James wails in an autobiographical musical portrait that taps the deep inner strength of her personal struggle and her firm, abiding belief in the Christ beside her. Her voice — rich, powerful and soaring — stretches from clear and ringing highs to the belting throbs of a Country-Rock concert. It’s a resonant, full-bodied sound, with professional-quality backup that relies heavily on acoustic and electric guitar, Dobro, fiddle, banjo, mandolin and keyboard. Rising above it, Mary’s sometimes robust, sometimes tender voice carries a message full of verve and soulful conviction: “Her greatest hope is that the ones that she loves will hear the news she brings.”

Mary James, today, stands on the threshold of a growing avalanche of acclaim and popularity. “Her time has come,” one fan sums it up. For the last three years, Mary has been a top-five nominee for ICM’s Female Vocalist of the Year and has had numerous top 10 singles and several No. 1’s, among them “Now That I Know Love” and the recent “Come To The Well,” which is from her 2008 CD, *Beautiful Savior*. In 2006, her Gospel song, “It’s A Good Thing,” co-authored with Jim Soldi, was a semifinalist in both the John Lennon Songwriting Contest and the International Songwriting Contest.

In addition, she has recorded two other CDs, *Truth Cries Out* (2005) and *Little Things* (2001), all produced by San Diego record producer Steve Wetherbee. The popularity of her recordings has made Mary James one of the most frequently

played independent female artists on the nationally syndicated *Power Source Country* radio program.

“I’m also very excited about my latest single, ‘I’m Not Willing,’” she added. Co-written along with many of her songs from *Beautiful Savior* with lead guitarist Gary Livesay, “I’m Not Willing” tugs the heartstrings of unwillingness to end a relationship: “But I’m not willing, baby,

to walk away from you,” she croons. “If leavin’ is the thing to do, I’m not willing to.”

“I know that ‘I’m Not Willing’ is different for me, but God gives me the music that He knows people need to hear,” Mary says. “I have prayed that God will use this song in a mighty way, especially in the lives of couples whose marriages are teetering on the edge of collapse.”

“Come To The Well,” one of her most popular tunes which she wrote with both Livesay and her guitarist husband, Dan Barker, beckons listeners to “proclaim a life of victory, no shackles, no more chains. We’ll live as His forgiven, eternally secure, to everyone we’ll spread the news. Yeah, we’ll let the truth be heard.”

In most of her music, Mary appeals to those whose lives are filled with shame, degradation and feelings of being unwanted and unloved. Woven through all her songs is a message of hope inspired by 1 Peter 2:9: “You have been saved to proclaim the excellence of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

Explains Mary: “The best medicine in the world for our hearts is God’s love, proven through the sacrifice of His son on the cross. If you can get your heart and mind around how big His love is for you, life lights up.”

Much of her message comes from personal experience. As an infant born to a teenager who was not prepared to parent, Mary was adopted by a Lutheran minister and his wife in San Diego. Despite a home environment that grew increasingly complicated due to her adoptive mother’s alcoholism and cancer, music often was at the center of family and church gatherings. It became evident at an early age that Mary had a gift for music and the pipes to match. Early on, she was training to be an opera singer, but that wasn’t the music that truly moved her. She loved musicals, such as the Gene Kelly-Debbie Reynolds classic *Singin’ In the Rain*, as well as artists such as Tom Jones, Creedence Clearwater Revival and Fleetwood Mac.

At the age of 13, shortly before her adoptive mother passed away, Mary was sent to live with an aunt in Tulsa, Oklahoma. There, a school music director heard her sing and encouraged her to do something with her talent. Mary responded by making her solo debut, performing Bette Midler’s difficult and dramatic “The Rose.” That led to school musicals and ultimately a trip to Europe to perform with an American youth chorus at the Monteux and North Sea jazz festivals.

“I wasn’t allowed to return to San Diego when my adoptive mom died,” Mary said in a recent interview. “My aunt told me that my dad blamed my brother and me for her premature death. Years later, I found out this was a lie, but I had believed it at the time, and I was profoundly hurt. I was already a mess, and my aunt’s fabrication really sent me into a tailspin.” The early use of drugs and alcohol became the teenager’s means for numbing her already painful past.

With no place to turn, and at that stage, having little or no rela-



tionship with Christ, Mary ran away from her new home in Tulsa. She turned to life as a teenage runaway, witnessing first-hand the darker side of the Oklahoma town. "I stayed with shoplifters, drug dealers and witnessed women being beaten," she says. "For a year and a half, I basically lived from couch to couch." At this point, Mary says, "I wanted my family to forget me, to forget I ever lived. I hoped that life would end sooner rather than later."

After a prolonged visit with her aunt in Tulsa, Mary returned to San Diego and continued her education and musical pursuits. A major turning point in her life came when she was miraculously reunited with both of her birth parents at age 20, through the random act of a stranger. She learned that her biological mother had fought to save Mary's infant life. Her biological grandmother, as the story unfolded, wanted to send her daughter to Europe for an abortion, since it was illegal at that time in the United States. But her biological mother insisted on giving birth to her baby. "In spite of the pressure," Mary writes on her website, "my mom was willing to go through with the pregnancy and all of the social stigmas related to being a pregnant teenager in order to give me a chance to live."

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Still, Mary's personal journey to Christ was incomplete. She married, had two beautiful children, endured a painful divorce, and continued in her quest to find love. "During much of that time, alcohol still remained a prominent force in my life," she recalls. "But God met me on the bathroom floor one New Year's Eve. I was on that floor, not because I was drunk, but because I was lonely. I realized that if I continued on the same path, the destruction would continue, and I would never find healing."

Mary sold her house and began to respond to God's call in her life. Soon, a Christian co-worker invited Mary, her boyfriend Dan Barker, and her two children to see a play that presented a strong message of sin and salvation. Her daughter Jessica recalls that this was the day that they were "washed clean." It was an undeniable turning point for them as they each made a decision for Christ that night. Together, they began searching for a church home, and Mary and Dan Barker were married in 1999.

During this time, she developed a love for the music of Patsy Cline, The Judds and Alison Krauss, to name a few. As a result, she began working with other musicians and songwriters in an effort to develop her craft as a songwriter and Country artist. Mary and Dan had originally met while playing Country music in the clubs around San Diego. But God had a different plan. Mary began serving as a worship leader at church. Her home church is now Shadow Mountain Community Church, also home to the leading Bible scholar Dr. David Jeremiah, where she is often called to sing.

One of the strongest bonds Mary James has formed, both from a business and faith standpoint, has been with *Power Source Magazine* and Higgins Music Group (HMG) in Nashville. "*Power Source* and HMG have become a family to me," Mary commented. They have been very, very supportive; year after year, there is always something that they are doing to encourage me as an artist."

With a powerful message of restoration and faith and songs that reach deep into the heart, Mary is called to sing and speak up to 100 times per year all over the country. She has led worship and provided special music alongside influential Christian leaders and Bible teachers such as Dr. Jeremiah, Kay Arthur, E.V. Hill, Dr. Timothy LaHaye and Beverly LaHaye, Kirk



Cameron, Ken Davis, Nancy Stafford, Miles McPherson and PBR Chaplain Todd Pierce.

At a recent appearance at the San Diego Mission Valley Town and Country Convention Center, over 400 women came to hear Mary speak and sing at a program presented by Women of Purpose called "The Real Me: A Journey From Darkness Into Light."

Mary later toured for three weeks in Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico, and then in June, with Dan, Gary and guitars in tow, they presented "The Real Me" once again in Portland, Maine. Not only did their visit brighten the lives and faith of many New Englanders, Mary was able to reconnect with a treasured friend. "I've known Eileen Oberholtzer since college, and we've been friends ever since," Mary says. "Now Eileen has joined the ministry as Director of Media and Events."

With a personal story that undeniably reveals the power of God's grace, Mary has just launched a new blog on her website where she will share what she calls, "News and Nuggets (Lessons Learned Along The Way)." The blog will also be the medium she uses to pen her much-anticipated autobiography, *Unwanted Beloved*.

Mary has found that her combination of Country and Contemporary influences has given her the ideal mix that churches and ministries happily accept and embrace. Mary's musical and Christian journey continues, all across the country and the musical landscape. She's come so far already, and Mary James fans around the world know that the best is yet to come. **PS**