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

Foreword by TIM TEBOW
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MARK STUART STORY

MARK STUART
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
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. Scrappy. 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 . . .”
Belief in God was never optional in my family, or in southern Indiana. God was a casual part of every conversation. He was called on to bless meals or help pass a biology test, small requests for small lives and for which God was adequately sized. God’s only heavy lifting came on Sunday, when it was time to forgive any sins that had been committed, intentionally or unintentionally, since the previous Sunday. Because the line between mistakes and sins was so thin, we were encouraged to plead forgiveness for the broadest of transgressions, though if I were to forget, my mom or one of the ladies from church were praying for my sins on my behalf.

By the time I entered high school, I had experienced enough imperfections in the church to begin to question it. My mind was governed by science and math, which required consistency and accuracy. Things had to make sense. I had worked for several tobacco farmers, setting plants, cutting them down, and putting them in barns to dry. The farms were very profitable, and some of the farmers went to our church. I was perplexed. I could get a paycheck from growing tobacco but it would be a sin to ever smoke it. I asked our youth group leaders about my moral dilemma, but the answers were largely dismissive. I answered by getting a new job. I started a lawn mowing business, sitting atop a riding Snapper Comet. The job suited me well, and I could indulge in my growing love of music by listening to tapes of Bruce Springsteen and Van Halen on my Walkman while I worked. A natural entrepreneur, I grew the business,
obtaining clients with the biggest lawns in town, including the cemetery, which came with its own set of questions.

SCHOOL POLITICS

Called the South Spencer Marching Rebels, our high school marching band had made it to regionals every year since 1981. After several unsuccessful sporting attempts, I tried out for school band. My years playing music in church gave me an advantage, and I was a natural fit. My mom was my biggest fan.

One Sunday, the concert band was performing a Christmas show at the mall, where there was no need for a drum line, so I was given the humiliating task of playing the triangle. During the performance, I tried to hide behind the tuba players, but in church the following Sunday, while circled by a large group of ladies, my mom called me over.

“Mark, was that you playing the triangle in the mall?”

“Yes,” I said. I had hoped the whole occasion would just slip away unnoticed.

“Honey, you are so good. It was beautiful. I couldn’t see you, but I knew it was you on that instrument.”

The rest of the circle nodded enthusiastically. Some asked if I would play again. They would like to come hear.

“Mom. It was the triangle.”

“You have a gift, honey. You should consider playing the triangle more often.”

She was so sincere that if we’d had the money, I was afraid she would try to place me in the Juilliard School of percussive triangle. She brought it up again at dinner that night, much to my brother and sister’s amusement. Fortunately, my dad was too preoccupied to weigh in.

As a baby boomer, my dad embodied the Protestant work ethic and fully employed it as a minister of a small, country church. There was always a problem that needed solving, either with the mechanical systems or with the faithful flock, who, though appearing perfect on Sunday, somehow managed to fall apart during the week. Dad was a natural problem solver, with no failure—mechanical or moral—beyond his repair. In addition to his pastoral duties, he was doing missions work in Haiti. After each trip, he told adventure-filled
stories of pirate islands and waterfalls spilling into deep blue pools—and of fixing a lot of generators. He began to dream of moving there as a full-time missionary. The flip side of the Protestant work ethic is the guilt that comes with anything that brings joy, and he believed there was no way God would allow him to do something he loved so much.

I too was falling in love. Only my love was music. I improved rapidly in marching band and soon became the center snare, which is the lead percussionist of the whole marching band. (Some mistakenly believe the lead position belongs to the drum major, but the drum major is merely eye candy.) The band improved too, and we toured in the fall, spring, and, summer. While our sports teams were good, the marching band was great, and other students took notice.

I was an active leader in the church youth group, and with my rising popularity in band circles, I considered running for senior class president. The focus of my platform was academics and sports, nothing controversial, and I aimed at the widest demographic. I thought I had a chance until I heard my archnemesis, Garth, would also be running. He played football and drove fast cars and smoked cigarettes with popular girls and did other things beyond the redemptive powers of the praying church ladies. He didn’t bother to develop a platform to run on. Instead, he passed out cigarettes to anyone who agreed to vote for him. Not surprisingly, Garth won. Handily. I’d find out much later that there was a lot more to Garth than cigarettes.

With marching band, my dad’s preaching, and the busy lives of my brother and sister, it was my mom who kept the family connected. She loved fiercely and believed we could become anything God called us to be. I desperately wanted her belief.

Mom drew us together with the tool of many Midwestern preachers’ wives: food. Once a week, we had family night and ordered pizza with any toppings we wanted, an expensive luxury for a family on a budget, but on this night, we ate slices of pepperoni and olive pizza with upper-class restraint. My dad was always first in line.
In the 1980s, most teens across the country hung out at fast-food places, complaining that their hometowns were boring. However, there were no fast-food places in Richland. To get a greasy burger and fries, or to catch a movie, we crossed through farmlands and over the sleepy Ohio River into the city of Owensboro, Kentucky. It had music venues and theaters and a brick-faced downtown along a riverfront that boasted buildings above three stories, which felt like skyscrapers to farm kids.

When the movie Top Gun came out, I saw it with a couple of buddies at the Malco Cinema in Owensboro. I’d always had a fascination with airplanes, and the movie convinced me to become a pilot. I wanted to be Tom Cruise. I wanted to fight the Russians from the cockpit of a supersonic aircraft. I wanted comradery with guys on my team that included our own special high fives. After the movie, we dined at McDonald’s. Between bites of Big Mac and fries, a plan emerged. I decided I would enroll in the Air Force Academy after high school.

In the meantime, news circulated through youth group circles that the Christian rock band Petra was playing in nearby Evansville. I had several Petra tapes, with their hard rock sound, screaming guitars, passionate vocals, and hair to match. All across our small county, students were pleading with parents to see the band live. Local youth pastors promoted the concert as an event to invite unsaved friends to. A certain friend came to mind. He had never heard
of Petra and would rather have gone to a Van Halen or Mötley Crüe concert, but it was unlikely those bands would play in rural Indiana anytime soon. He agreed to go.

Toward the end of the set, the band turned up the lights to give an earnest talk about the power of Jesus and the life he was calling us to. Growing up in church, I’d seen many people make decisions to turn from their sins and follow Jesus. As exciting as that always was, it somehow felt predestined as only a slight turn from the life they had been living. This friend, however, was different. He would have kept the prayer ladies busy for weeks. If he raised his hand, accepting the offer to give his life to Jesus, it would be a radical turn. He did raise his hand, and at that moment, I felt something in my own heart. It was the power of God, merging with rock and roll. Both grew in intensity and urgency, and every bent guitar note and crashing cymbal and screaming lyric sounded like the fires of Pentecost being released through the speakers. It was a new tongue, and I knew it.

Weeks went by, and I couldn’t shake the concert. My friend, now a part of the youth group, was growing in his faith. Something was different in him, and he wasn’t the only one. Our youth group was growing, too, with more kids than I ever expected to see. And something else was growing: a desire in my heart to do what Petra was doing, which didn’t make any sense. I wasn’t going to be a preacher, and there was no way a triangle-playing, rural Indiana kid could become a rock star. So, I tried to dismiss it. When that didn’t work, I tried praying about it. I didn’t hear an audible voice of God or see writing on any walls, but I had a strong confidence that his answer was yes. The more I prayed, the more certain I became.

The Petra experience fueled my desire for music. I sought every opportunity I could to perform, including in the school musicals Oklahoma! and Camelot, and eventually landed a place in the show choir. I got my big small-town break when the show choir decided to do a performance of “We Are the World” my senior year of high school. They needed a gravelly, rock and roll voice to belt out the Bruce Springsteen lyric. I practiced my part over and over through the church sound system. Not just the voice, but the attitude that sold it. The night of the performance, I put on my best rock and roll attire and stepped onto the stage with all the swagger of the Boss. I sang with conviction, the auditorium burst into applause, and for days after, classmates came up to congratulate me and compliment my singing. Even Garth, my onetime
nemesis, gave me a thumbs-up, taking notice of my new rock and roll swagger. He even stopped calling me “band geek.”

I wanted a rock band. A legitimate, in-your-face, move-your-feet, make-your-head-pulse rock and roll band. I purchased a CB 700 drum kit with money I’d saved from my lawn-mowing business. The outer drum skins were a deep blue and black, and every rim and stand was polished chrome. It was the coolest thing I’d ever seen, but it sounded terrible. My friend Timmy was a good guitar player and looked like Prince, including his yellow Gibson Flying V guitar. I asked Timmy to sing, and we recruited a tuba player from the marching band to play bass. We called our three-piece band Bassin Bleu, after a waterfall from my dad’s Haiti stories. We played gigs at dances and birthday parties and even a sock hop, covering songs from Journey, Prince, Bryan Adams, and Bruce Springsteen. A dormant part of my heart came fully alive when we played. This experience confirmed everything I loved about music, and every gig and practice and writing session deepened this feeling that I was supposed to be praying for a platform.

This feeling that God was calling me to talk about him in front of groups or audiences created problems in my life planning, though. Specifically, I had no idea how music could pay for life, let alone college. Tuition at any college was beyond the reach of a small-town pastor, so I would have to pay my own way. Like my dad, I also didn’t believe that God would allow me to do something that I loved so much. The Air Force made more sense. It followed a path of logic. With my grades at nearly 4.0, I could get a scholarship to Kentucky Christian College, where my brother already attended. I could take a year of Bible courses to ground my faith, math and science courses to prepare for my aeronautics degree, then head to the Air Force Academy. I determined this was the path I would take. I had already entered an early application to the Academy and received a preliminary green light.

When I landed a scholarship and cobbled together the rest of the tuition through financial aid, I was ready for my freshman year at Kentucky Christian. I only needed to pass some prerequisite freshman-year classes and take a physical exam. Then I’d be on my way to being a fighter pilot. It all lined up. It all made sense.
ON MY OWN

Dad was conflicted about his passion for Haiti. It seemed ludicrous to leave the stability of the United States and follow his heart to small, developing island-nation. He sought the wisdom of men he trusted in the church. They told him that God wants to give us the desires of our hearts and assured him it was God who planted the desires in the first place. When we make the courageous first step toward the life for which he has called and prepared us, he is even prouder than a mother whose son just rocked the triangle. A switch in my dad’s heart flipped from guilt to joy. He and my mom, along with my baby sister, Kelly, made plans to move to Haiti the day after I graduated from high school.

Days before graduation, my dad called me out to the driveway. He was giving me his car, a 1977 Chevette, the only new car he had ever owned. He’d always only made a few hundred dollars per week as a preacher, and with all the bells and whistles, the new Chevette cost $3,200. I had never seen my dad look as rich as he had the day he drove it home. We had lined up on the driveway and welcomed him with all the enthusiasm of a ticker-tape parade. The exterior was a refined eggshell white, and the interior had fire red bucket seats, red carpet, and a hatchback from which we could lean back and watch the stars zoom by on late-night drives down country roads. It had only an AM radio, but with windows down and four-on-the-floor, the highway was the only music it needed. In a few days, I would be loading everything I owned into that car. Then I’d wander bluegrass hills along my drive to begin my freshman year at Kentucky Christian College.

Standing with my dad, I thought this might be the moment he single-handedly made sense of life for me. I had enough questions about faith and what to do with my life to fill that hatchback. I thought maybe we’d take a drive together and I’d recline my seat and watch the stars and he would tell me the purpose behind them. He looked at the car, then to the front door of the house, then back to me. This was the moment. He cleared his throat.

“Son.”
I leaned in. The air was still. Quiet. I held my breath.
“Here you go.”
He dropped the keys in my hand.
“Good luck.”
He walked back into the house. It was pizza night.