

Selah

When the members of Selah chose to record "It Is Well with My Soul" and "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" for their 1999 debut, *Be Still My Soul* (Curb), they had absolutely no idea how such potent hymns would help them through unfathomable tragedy a decade later. Sure, Selah knew the remarkable circumstances under which the timeless classics were written. How Horatio Spafford

penned "It Is Well with My Soul" after all four of his young daughters died in an 1873 disaster at sea. And how, in 1932, renowned musician Thomas A. Dorsey composed "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" out of grief when both his wife and infant son succumbed to complications during childbirth. Yet even as Selah marked its 10th anniversary by recording the new album, *You Deliver Me*, as a stylistic homage to that very debut, the group was working on songs that would soon seem more intended for itself than Selah's fans.

The popular trio had already prevailed through a season that any successful recording artist would deem tumultuous. In fact, at one point in mid 2005, the group's very existence came into question. No small matter for the 2-million-album-selling act that has won the Dove Award for "Inspirational Album of the Year" four times and has repeatedly hit No.1 at Christian radio. At the time, founding members Todd Smith (vocals) and Allan Hall (piano/vocals) were still rebounding from the departure of Todd's sister (and Selah co-founder) Nicol Sponberg several months earlier. She had left to pursue work both with her husband's ministry and a less-demanding solo career.

After Melodie Crittenden, a friend of Allan and Todd's from college, filled in for seven months, the two were at a loss for Nicol's permanent replacement. Throughout Selah's career, the group's key decisions had always been made with relational integrity in mind. The only option left at that point—holding impersonal auditions with vocalists they had never even met—was anything but relational. "That was a scary time," says Todd. "We thought Selah might be done."

After much prayer and wise counsel, Allan and Todd became convinced the group should continue. Stepping into personally uncharted territory, they auditioned 15 recommended vocalists. Less than halfway through the process, Todd and Allan noticed a troubling trend. "Most of the vocalists were either good at singing melodies or good at singing harmonies and blending as a trio, but many of them didn't do both well," recalls Todd. "And those that did do both well," says Allan, "didn't have a voice strong enough to project as much as Todd's."

"Todd is a powerful, powerful singer," he continues, "and he can be kind of aggressive on stage. If you're singing with him, he'll get in your face and just belt it out. And when he'd do that at these auditions, the girls would just shrink back. Some would even just start laughing because they didn't know what to do."

Enter Amy Perry. When the northern California native stepped up to the microphone, her stunning soprano voice mastered both Selah's melodies and harmonies. "You know how his singing intimidated those other girls? Well, when he leaned in with Amy and turned it on, she leaned right back in and turned it on harder," explains Allan. Much to his amazement, Todd actually had to ask the soundman to turn his vocals up for the rest of her audition.

Even though Amy had never heard Selah's music when she was tipped off about the group's opening, a mutual friend assured her the fit would be excellent in more ways than one. "Not just musically and vocally," says Amy, "She insisted I would click with them spiritually and relationally, and she was right."

America was introduced to Selah's new member when the trio released *Bless the Broken Road: The Duets Album* in 2006. And yes, Amy helped Selah win yet another Dove Award for Inspirational Album of the

Year. Thanks to lead vocal duties on four of *Bless the Broken Road*'s standout tracks – “Gentle Healer,” “Be Thou Near to Me,” “Ain’t No Grave,” and the radio single version of “Glory” – Amy quickly endeared herself to Selah’s fans. And when they experience her in concert? The feelings move far beyond endearment.

“They learn she’s more than an incredible vocalist,” explains Allan. “Each night when she speaks from stage, God uses her to minister to broken, hurting people in unique ways.” As she explains, “There are two things I talk about in concert. My husband went through a divorce before we ever met. His wife left him, and he was devastated. God eventually brought him to a place of healing and really restored him into direct relationship. After hearing me talk about God’s restoration the first time, Todd and Allan urged me to share it every time we’re on stage, especially since 50 percent of Christian marriages – like others – end in divorce.”

Amy’s honest, relatable approach takes her into more immediately vulnerable territory as well. “I also share about my struggle with my weight,” she says. “How I had a boyfriend who told me I was too overweight to marry, and how I lost a bunch of weight for the wrong reasons. God has really allowed me to have this platform with Selah where I can say, ‘I’m a real girl, I have real problems – look at me, I’m clearly not thin – but I’m okay with who I am, and it’s taken me this many years to get here.’” She adds, “I believe the best ministry is when you’re just being yourself and telling your story of what God’s done for you.”

In light of recent events, that belief defines Selah now more than ever. To say things didn’t go according to plan would be trivializing the profound. When the trio entered the studio to record its new album, *You Deliver Me*, the original intent was to bookend Selah’s tenth year by paying tribute to the group’s first project. *Be Still My Soul* was, after all, not only a notable commercial success; it foreshadowed big changes in Christian music. Indeed, Selah’s debut released more than four years before many other artists started recording hymns in 2004.

Song selection wasn’t the only thing that set them apart. “Back then, most albums were pretty highly produced, and the way we approached production, there was nowhere to hide,” says Allan. “If Todd and Nicol hadn’t been such strong vocalists, we couldn’t have hidden that with just the piano, occasional strings, and the voices. I think that’s what really appealed to people. Many were getting tired of some of the slickness, and here we came completely unvarnished.”

Like that first album, *You Deliver Me* was going to feature primarily hymns and a few worship choruses usually performed via piano, strings, and vocals. The recording process itself went off without a hitch, but when Selah returned to the studio in January of 2008 to mix the album, life took a suddenly traumatic turn.

Todd’s wife, Angie, was 18 weeks pregnant with their fourth daughter, Audrey Caroline, when they received the news. It was a routine ultrasound until the medical technician started asking Angie cryptic questions. And then came the knockout blow. “Your child, she has many conditions,” said her doctor. “Her kidneys aren’t functioning and her heart is much too large. Each of these is a lethal condition. There is no amniotic fluid, her lungs are not developing. ...You will have some choices to make and...” His words turned into a blur.

Overwhelmed, Angie and Todd sought the opinions of other doctors and specialists. The general consensus was that baby Audrey would die in the womb, and that if she did survive her actual birth, she would likely gasp for breath, living for but a minute at the most. Predictably, the primary doctor and his staff voiced their expectations that Angie and Todd would choose to have an abortion.

So here they were, six-and-a-half years into marriage, with three young daughters already at their side. The Smiths would never view life—or God—the same way again. "I was just crushed for them," says Allan. I told Todd, "I have no words for you other than that I love you, and I'm praying for you, and I'll be walking beside you on this road."

"Four months before we got the news about Audrey," recalls Todd, "we encountered a couple who had lost a trisomy baby that had lived about 8 days. And they were just incredible, the way they handled it. I remember thinking, '*How could anybody go through that?*' And one of the things they said was, "We wanted to be able to say before our 3-year-old daughter that we praised the Lord regardless of what He chose to do with our baby, that He would get the most glory." And I was just blown away by that, thinking, '*I could never do that. There's no way.*' And then when we found out about Audrey, that was one of the first things that came to my mind and really stayed with me."

Angie and Todd prayerfully committed themselves to keeping Audrey as long as God would grant her life. The couple quickly discovered that keeping family and friends updated, one emotional person at a time, was far too exhausting, so just five days after she received the news, Angie started a blog for their loved ones called "Bring the Rain." Recalls Todd, "I would ask our audiences for prayer during our concerts, and tell them about Angie's blog. She's such a great writer that fans would tell their friends about 'Bring The Rain,' and within a few months, we had hundreds of thousands of people praying for us." Before long, "Bring the Rain" was receiving 500,000 hits per month as Angie became one of America's top-ranked "mommy bloggers."

As Angie and Todd anticipated Audrey's birth, they concluded a C-section would be the best way to approach it. "That would give Audrey the greatest possibility to live," he explains. If Audrey could make it to 32 weeks in the womb, they could do the C-section. And that she did. "Angie was just so brave," says Todd. "She was in so much pain because there was no amniotic fluid. She just sacrificed her body."

And then the moment arrived. "When Audrey came out, we got to hear her cry, which we thought we would never get to do," reveals Todd. "And I got to see her move just a little bit. We brought her over to Angie, and we just wept. Everything that we could think of to tell her right there, we did. She just had this beautiful little face. And her sisters and many relatives got to see her. She lived for about two-and-a-half hours, and never gasped for breath. There was no screaming. It was just so peaceful. In fact, it was the most peaceful day I've ever experienced in my life. I would have never thought that was possible, but there was so much joy. We were with our girl, and we wanted to show her off to everybody. God just really turned a horrible experience into something amazing."

Shortly after learning Audrey's condition would be terminal, Angie found herself compelled to write a love letter, a song, to the precious daughter living inside her. Titled "I Will Carry You," Angie wrote it as a way to tell Audrey about experiences she longed to have with her, but knew the two would never share. Once Todd and their friend Christa Wells (who wrote the hit "Held" for Natalie Grant) put the finishing touches on Angie's song, Todd, Amy and Allan recorded it for Audrey's forthcoming memorial service.

"I'll never forget recording it in the studio," says Amy. "After I sang its powerful bridge, "*Such a short time / Such a long road / All this madness but I know / The silence has brought me to His voice,*" Angie came over to me and said, "Amy, when you sang that part, I had the headphones on my belly, and Audrey started kicking like crazy."

After Audrey's memorial, Angie posted the "I Will Carry You" clip from the service on her blog. The response was overwhelming as reader after reader pleaded for a way to obtain the song. Amy and Allan

could relate. They were so moved by it, they asked Todd if they could add their recording to Selah's album, which had been delayed. When Todd told Angie, she broke down in tears.

As the Smiths spent the weeks following Audrey's death trying to come to grips with what they had experienced, life unleashed yet another harsh blow. Merely a month-and-a-half after Audrey's passing, Todd's sister Nicol Sponberg suddenly lost a child of her own. She had laid her 2-month-old son Luke down for bed one evening. When she checked on him a short while later, she noticed he looked different. She turned him over, knew immediately he was gone and let out a scream for her husband Greg. Paramedics rushed to the scene and worked on baby Luke extensively to no avail. "He was this beautiful boy, super strong, really big," says Todd. "It was SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). We just couldn't believe it. It's like, 'God, what are You doing? Why is this happening again? We've had one life taken and that's enough!' I actually started to wonder, okay, who's next?"

Amidst unimaginable grief, the Smiths and their extended family had a foundational choice to make. Explains Todd, "What were we going to choose to believe? Is God going to be the God of just the good times, or is He also good and faithful in this horrific time that we just don't understand? We chose to trust Him. And it's not been easy, there have been – and still are – major ups and downs, but we believe He is good.

"You need to be honest about your desperation and honest about how awful it is," he continues. "And it is horrible. You deal with these different contrasts where you have disbelief and incredible pain and anger and frustration and unanswered questions, and, at the same time, there's this incredible peace and this Hope, and you've got nowhere else to go. You find strength through prayer, and people praying for you, and in God's word. We're still going through it, and Nicol and Greg are still going through it, and we don't try and candy-coat it."

Amy speaks to what she's seen from her vantage point. "We've faced that horrible monster all together, and we've watched Todd worship God through it," she says. "One of the things I've really come to admire about Todd and Angie is that they're so real. I've watched them be angry and, in that anger, give glory to God, Who's in control."

After observing the first several months of 2008, asking Todd, Amy and Allan to return their attention to finishing a new album might have seemed trivial, even inappropriate. Yet that couldn't have been further from the truth. As it turns out, *You Deliver Me* was for *them*. "It was amazing the songs that we had picked," says Allan, "obviously not knowing what was going to happen." Affirms Amy, "It's almost like we were choosing these songs to minister to ourselves. The Lord knew what we would need before we needed it." Todd agrees and begins citing one song after another. "'Into My Heart / Fairest Lord Jesus,' 'My Jesus I Love Thee,' 'I Surrender All,' 'How Deep the Father's Love for Us'..." he marvels, "... even 'I Have Decided to Follow Jesus,' though it has more of a fun African-type feel."

"Hymns are so strong, so well written," says Allan. "They have lasted for hundreds of years for a reason. A lot of them were written out of places of pain and sorrow, yet there's so much Truth and hope in them, and that resonates with people."

If there's anything on *You Deliver Me* that will resonate even more, it's Christ's words in the gorgeously performed song "The Lord's Prayer." Featuring music written by Jason Kyle, who continues to co-produce all of Selah's albums with Todd and Allan, "The Lord's Prayer" flows and builds through Allan's emotive ivory keys as Todd and Amy make the sacred seem almost tangible. On the other hand, the stellar title track, "You Deliver Me," wasn't nearly as obvious a fit for group – at least not to Todd. While Amy had

long loved the song so much, she thought of putting it on a solo side-project some day, a new arrangement opened Todd's eyes to its possibilities. With the veil lifted, it became one of his all-time favorites.

Already Selah's most personal album, *You Deliver Me* benefitted even further from its unexpected delay. While Angie's "I Will Carry You" had already been added, Selah took the opportunity to work with producer Bernie Herms (Natalie Grant, NewSong) to record two additional standouts that connected amidst the turmoil. The worshipful "Hosanna," which features Todd's passionate baritone vocals fronting full instrumentation, is a beauty Selah fell for when they heard versions performed by Hillsong and Christy Nockels. Herms' second shining moment is the emotionally moving "Unredeemed," a hopeful and deftly-produced song about unfulfilled dreams, painful experiences, and other circumstances yet to be made right. While Todd and Angie felt the song summed up where they are and what they've been through losing Audrey, Amy was moved to tears upon hearing it as she contemplated a member of her extended family that she'd almost given up hope of ever seeing in heaven. "It was like God was saying, 'Don't give up on him yet, because anything laid in My hands will be redeemed,'" she explains.

Eclectic, yet accessible, Selah's music remains undeniably unique. The group's evolving sound is indebted to each member for its broad palette. Though all three enjoy a variety of styles, each individual is deeply rooted in his or her historic favorites. Allan bleeds country and bluegrass, Todd breathes classic rock and yesteryear's CCM, and Amy marches to the beat of pop and urban gospel. And in Selah's music all, and more, are welcome at the table of influence.

Thanks to that inclusiveness, the group continues to reach a broad audience. And what they say to that audience is as vital as ever. "It's important that people leave our concerts encouraged, that they don't leave there the way they came," says Amy. "If we can remind them that God is real, and He is here, and He will take care of them, we're doing what He wants us to do."

Now, more than ever, Selah is in a unique position to convey such truths with potent authority. Naturally, Todd can't help but approach that reality as a loving, grateful father. "Every time we hear that a person's life has been changed through what happened to us, it gives weight to Audrey's life," he says. "My little girl, who was in the womb for 32 weeks, has made more of an impact on people than I probably will my whole life." The beauty of this is their legacies are interwoven. Interwoven, and just beginning.