

## Dustin Kensrue + *The Water & The Blood*

When seeing the tattooed and bearded Dustin Kensrue lead worship on a Sunday morning for the first time, you may be tempted to think that this hasn't always been his gig.

And you'd be right.

For the last decade and a half, the now worship pastor at Mars Hill Bellevue was the front man for the alternative rock band Thrice. The group built a concrete army of fans who faithfully followed them through eight full-length albums, two live records, a smattering of EP's, and countless tours. While he loved his years with the band, as a father and husband the constant touring ultimately became too hard to sustain with a growing family. In order to spend more time with his wife of eleven years and their three young girls, Kensrue transitioned Thrice into an indefinite hiatus, and closed the current chapter of the band with a farewell tour in the summer of 2012.

Although the band was not a part of any Christian market, Kensrue was open about his faith, and his lyrics were full of rich, theological concepts. Kensrue felt it was important to write honestly and engagingly, and the things that generally interested him were the bigger issues of life and death, faith and doubt, love and loss. The candid yet layered themes in his songs opened doors for fans, friends, and fellow musicians to discuss faith and God without animosity. "I feel like through the music a place for conversation was created where there generally wasn't one before," Kensrue explains, noting, "It can be taboo to talk about certain things like faith and religion, but I've been able to talk about those things and build great relationships with a lot of musicians and fans and people in general, many of whom I completely disagree with and who disagree with me."

After Thrice decided to put their musical endeavors on pause, Kensrue, musically gifted and armed with an adept theological mind, accepted a Worship Director position at Mars Hill Church. Though this may have seemed a logical step from the outside, he in fact never intended on being a worship pastor. "At one point I apparently told my wife I'd never be a worship leader," recounts Kensrue, "but obviously God had different plans. I felt him challenge me to use the gifts he'd given me to help change the things in the worship music world that I felt were out of step with scripture and the truth of the gospel."

Kensrue laments the fact that most worship music seems to have fallen into a creative rut and has no engagement with the surrounding culture. "Our God creates with excellence, and we should as well," he explains. Beyond taking issue with the musical monotony, he also has strong feelings about the lyrical content of many popular worship tunes. "Growing up and going to church, I felt despair while singing. No matter how flowery or nicely it was stated, the majority of worship songs were essentially just a big dose of Law, of what I needed to do for God. Without first soaking in the good news that Jesus has done it all, that 'It is Finished' in him, the Law is condemning because we simply can't fulfill it." These worship songs, creatively stale and theologically lopsided, spurred in Kensrue the desire to write better songs for the church to sing.

Although it can be somewhat vexing to write faith-filled lyrics that are exciting, theologically sound, and easy to digest, Kensrue does it well. But creating that balance wasn't easy. "You can have people that love Jesus and are doing great music as far as the actual music," he explains, "but if the lyrics aren't constantly pointing to the sufficiency of Jesus, I think you can unwittingly be causing great harm." With all of this in mind, his album *The Water and the Blood* was created. The worship project aims to present a robust gospel for gathered worship that's also genuinely enjoyable to listen to. The album is a fusion of rich hymnody, pop, and rock – it's tight structures and easy to memorize lines lay flawlessly atop creative arrangements with more modern sensibilities. Outside of "Oh God" (another Mars Hill arrangement) and "Rock of Ages" (a hymn rewrite with a new chorus and bridge), each track is an original, structured to communicate big truths in a simple way.

"My One Comfort" demonstrates this flawlessly. The lyrics "My one comfort both in life and death / is that I am not my own / I was bought with blood and I confess / I belong to you alone" explains the Gospel in four simple lines. "Rejoice," "It Is Finished," and "God is Good," all carry the same disposition; the songs carry strong hooks, instrumentals heavy with electric guitar, a full-bodied rhythm section and upbeat measures, and dense yet clear lyrical content.

Together with the celebratory tracks are meditative ballads of veneration. The song "Come Lord Jesus" echoes the end of the book of Revelation pining for Christ's return, with lyrics like "Come again to claim your own. Come to reap what you have sown. All creation weeps and groans for you." The song, no doubt intentional to fit with the theme, is orchestrated around a 5/4 time signature. The unique arrangement, uncommon for most musical genres, forms a sound that doesn't settle, break, or quell. The time signature's ability to create an environment of expectancy and anticipation provides the perfect platform for a song about Jesus' return.

The only song not built for corporate worship is the poetic lament, "It's Not Enough". The ballad (drawing heavily from the book of Ecclesiastes) recognizes the grievous inadequacy of our efforts in this world to satisfy ourselves. The song builds with mighty force, confessing, "Though I indulged my every dark desire / Exhausting every avenue of sin / It's not enough, it's not enough / I could walk the world forever / Till my shoes were filled with blood / It's not enough, it's not enough." The content is relatable to churchgoers and the non-religious alike. Its accessibility demonstrates Kensrue's ability to delicately interlace and break down the false walls between the spiritual and secular, inviting both to engage content without labels.

The album showcases Kensrue's experience, talent, and whole-hearted reverence for God. He welds together doctrinal richness with memorable melodies, truly setting a challenge and raising the bar for worship music yet to come.

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