

# BEBO NORMAN

## CHRISTMAS: FROM THE REALMS OF GLORY

Music is as integral to the modern Christmas season as gifts, cheery lights, and office parties.

That's one reason why Bebo Norman took the time he needed to release his first Christmas album. Getting those details – and going beyond them into a realm of richer mystery – required years of reflection, before the time came for the project to begin.

Christmas ... from the Realms of Glory is an inspired gathering of songs, which Norman performs with the intense musicality and passion that have positioned him at the forefront of Christian music. It captures the celebratory side of the season, as nearly every Christmas album strives to do, through lighthearted renditions of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” and “Silver Bells,” which stroll through familiar melodies like shoppers passing brilliant window displays.

But Norman knew there had to be more to his offering than this. In fact, there had to be two views of Christmas, each one complementing the other, even when their meanings seem to contradict. He had to recount the true and neglected message of this special day while also acknowledging the pleasures of modern festivity. “This album isn't just about the feeling of Christmas,” he emphasizes. “It's about digging into what Christmas really is. That's what I wanted this record to communicate.”

As a Dove Award-winning artist, producer, and performer, Norman has emerged from his involvement in youth ministries in his home state of Georgia to garner widespread radio exposure, dating back to his debut album release in the mid '90s. Additionally, Norman's string of achievements and accolades extends beyond radio with several best-selling records along with sold-out concerts, culminating most recently in the 43-city “Dreaming True” Tour.

Norman bases Christmas ... from the Realms of Glory on the convergence of his musical gifts, his meditations on the needs of those who do and do not believe, and above all in his trust that he would know when he was ready to speak – and sing – out on this subject.

But why a Christmas record now? “I've wanted to make this record for years,” he insists. “But I always promised myself that I wouldn't do it until I knew we had the right songs.”

The first of these, and in some ways the essence of Christmas ... from the Realms of Glory, was “The Rebel Jesus,” a beautiful but somewhat overlooked song by Jackson Browne. “It cuts to the heart of what Jesus lived for,” Norman says. “It's a sobering song about the fact that we may answer the Salvation Army bells during that particular time of year, and perhaps we'll give a little because we're feeling generous. But Jesus calls us to live that way all the time, not just at Christmas.”

When Norman played that song for his producer and friend Jason Ingram, “The Rebel Jesus” became the foundation on which the rest of the record was built. “It set the tone for going deeper than the typical Christmas record might go,” Norman continued. “We started talking about looking at Christmas from a different perspective, and ‘Angels from the Realms of Glory’ popped into our minds because it talks about Christmas from Heaven's perspective rather than ours. We rewrote that hymn, which became ‘Come and Worship.’” That perspective guided Norman and Ingram as they wrote “Born to Die,” told as well from Heaven's point of view. “We're trying to imagine how it must have been to know the story in advance,” Norman explains. “This baby, whose birth we celebrate, was from the moment he was born preparing for the moment of his sacrifice. It's one thing to die for someone on the spur of the moment. It's another thing when you know, for your whole life, that this is going to happen. It's a sobering and beautiful thought, and I think it became a beautiful moment on this record too.”

These three songs, in Norman's words "jump-started" the rest of the album, as he and Ingram drew closer to the riddle of Christmas in our time. "We live in a hard world, where we need to find moments of joy and pleasure," Norman says. "There's beauty in the fact that Christmas can be about celebrating a moment that feels happy and peaceful. But you can be concerned about that at the same time you can be concerned about the poverty and sadness that is all around us. There's room for both."

The album took shape as a thoughtful look into these contrasting sides of Christmas. Songs of solemn or joyful wonder are grouped toward the beginning; their mood sustains up to "Angel's Interlude," a variation on "Angels We Have Heard on High," played on hammered dulcimer by Gabe Scott. His instrument echoes the ringing of bells, a reference that takes listeners to an evocation of earthy, country-church gospel on "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and then into city streets alive with Yuletide sights and sounds with "Silver Bells," the Norman/Ingram composition "Christmas Time Is Here," and the cheery "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas."

But then these moments recede, and Norman comes home to the enduring glory of Christmas. "The Rebel Jesus" anticipates the stark beauty of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," which ascends from the simple drone of a pump organ into a bloom of David Henry's intimate strings. This trajectory continues with "Great Light of the World," a heartfelt prayer to the Lord to "fill up my soul." The journey closes with "Mary's Prayer," a lullaby for the newborn Savior, sung to a gentle acoustic guitar; this peaceful setting nonetheless stirs our awareness of the sacrifice, redemption, and salvation, the eternal story foreseen even at its very beginning.

It is a tribute to Norman's self-awareness and sense of responsibility that he waited until now to complete Christmas ... from the Realms of Glory. And the originality of his artistry, whether conceiving new material or executing skillful rearrangements of familiar tunes, becomes even clearer when he discloses the names of the artists whose example guided him.

"Elvis, John Denver, Amy Grant, Alabama, and those orchestral albums on vinyl that my mother loved to play," he says, laughing at the memory. "None of them sound at all like Christmas ... from the Realms of Glory, but of course it wasn't their sound I wanted to capture; it was their spirit. These artists all had something to say."

This spirit of Christmas is always alive. It manifests itself in different ways, through the work of artists who have something real to share. So it is with Bebo Norman, whose patience is now our reward.

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