

# TRAVELING DOWN TO MERCYLAND



Jimmy Abegg

A CONVERSATION WITH MUSICIAN, ARTIST,  
& AUTHOR PHIL MADEIRA

INTERVIEW BY AL TIZON | PAINTINGS BY PHIL MADEIRA

*So much trouble, so much pain.  
I want to heal the blind and cure the lame.  
I want every man and woman to claim some dignity,  
so let's you and me take each other's hands.  
let's travel on down, down to Mercyland.*

*Life is mean. Life is hard.  
Can't we just change the way things are?  
I want all God's children to live in harmony,  
so let's take each other's hands.  
Let's travel on down, down to Mercyland.*

**PHIL** Madeira sings those lyrics, written by Merrill Farnsworth, at every show he performs. The title track of his 2012 project, a collaboration of contemporary "hymns" for the bruised but hopeful among us, "Mercyland" conjures a picture of both earth and heaven and calls us to live today in a way that brings heaven a little closer.

"I think the great irony of life is that when your message is mercy, it slaps you in the face fairly often," Madeira says. "I sense God's mercy in my constant need of it. Thankfully the arts are a way to bring a cup of mercy to the world."

Madeira has been serving up cups of mercy through his music for four decades. A trained visual artist as well, he recently added book-writing to his list of creative endeavors. I recently caught up with him to ask him about his faith, music, and his new book, *God on the Rocks*.

A member of the Phil Keaggy Band in the 1970s, Madeira never fit comfortably into the "Christian music" scene—and the wider world of music is the richer for that. Currently a member of Emmylou Harris' Red Dirt Boys, Madeira has partnered over the years with renowned musicians such as Daniel Amos, Pierce Pettis, Mavis Staples, Julie Miller, the Neville Brothers, Keb' Mo', and many more. He has also shared the stage with the likes of Elvis Costello, Dave Matthews, and Patty Griffin. Though he has occasionally released solo projects, such as his 2013 album, *PM*, Madeira's main contribution to the music world has been his multi-instrumental and songwriting collaboration with other artists. His humility has him seeking community rather than celebrity, and his consistent ability to point in that direction is perhaps his greatest spiritual gift.

Excellent musicianship, creative artistry, candid writing, a collaborative spirit, and a faith that embraces brokenness—all these characterize Phil Madeira's body of work. If navigating the intersection of faith, arts, and culture is important to you, Madeira's work can be a valuable guide. Especially if you're looking for Mercyland.

### Tell us about your new book, *God on the Rocks*.

I love to write. I love to create. I started writing without really knowing that it would be a book. Just as an exercise in intimacy, I decided to write a story from my past for my partner, Merrill. But I found it was turning into a spiritual memoir. I started putting chapters online and heard from a number of people who said, "Hey, man, this is a book." And then I got an agent, and the next thing I knew I was finishing a book.

### How did the title come about?

Well, it's kind of a double entendre. "On the rocks" has at least two meanings. One is how you might order a drink, which to my mind is a positive thing. And then, of course, there's the other way—your marriage can be on the rocks, your life can be on the rocks—so it's a purposeful double entendre. And then when we came up with our subtitle—"distilling religion, savoring faith"—we really pushed the pun more towards God being something to be savored.



**By the very nature of a memoir, the book is soul-baring. You talk about your tentative relationship with your mom, your break-up with your wife, your break with evangelicalism, etc. What was it like laying yourself out like that for all of us to see and read?**

My personality type doesn't really have a problem divulging information! But writing about my ex-wife—I was very careful with that. I've got as good a relationship with her as one could hope for. We have a great deal of affection for each other. So when I wrote about our marriage breaking up I really did so with the hope in mind that she wouldn't be hurt by it. I know it's emotional territory, but acrimony was not the goal, and certainly we do not have an acrimonious relationship.

My mother is one of the most interesting characters of the book. She's a fantastic person. We're both very passionate people, but when my passions don't align with her passions, it's a difficult thing for her. So writing about that stuff, which really resonates with a lot of people who have grown up in the church with parents who want them to toe the exact line that they toed, I think is helpful, and hopefully my mother comes across as being honored.

**You also talked about your dad in a very positive way.**

My father was the most exemplary person I ever met, and I'm sure that my faith has remained intact and been something to continue to pursue in part because he was so real, so lovely and humble.



Your 2012 compilation album, *Mercyland: Hymns for the Rest of Us*, got terrific accolades when it came out. What was the inspiration behind that album?

The inspiration was actually a negative one. During the 2008 election I was so disturbed by the behavior of religious people. I felt there was so much racist and hateful stuff coming from people who call themselves Christians. I was playing with Emmylou Harris at the time, so I went to her and said, "I want to do a record that says 'What if God is love? What if we just start there and add nothing else, like God loves you unless you're gay,' or 'God loves you unless you don't love God,' or however you want to finish the sentence." She loved that idea, and once Emmylou said "yes," almost everybody else I asked wanted to be in on it—the Carolina Chocolate Drops, Buddy Miller, Mat Kearney, John Scofield, the Civil Wars. There is something for everyone on the project.

*Mercyland* is definitely the work of my life. The whole record is a labor of love. It got a lot of accolades, even from the editor of *Maverick*, an independent country music magazine in the UK. He's an atheist, but he said, "Everyone needs this CD."

My hope is that it will find its way into as many people's hands as possible. It's not just about something I created, but it represents such a cross section of people trying to express something beyond ourselves. What better message can we bring to the world than love?

In playing with a wide span of musicians through the years—from Phil Keaggy to Elvis Costello to Keb' Mo' to Emmylou Harris—you seem to have ignored the line between so-called "Christian music" and so-called "secular music." How has the integration of music and Christian faith worked out in your career?

Well, I certainly have tried to ignore Christian music, to be honest with you. If you go to my website you'll see that I make very little mention, if any, of Christian music. I'm grateful that my career had its start with a guy named Phil Keaggy, who's an acclaimed musician, but there was very little room for me in Christian music. I did a record in 1986 called *Citizen of Heaven*. That

whole record was really about social justice and Christianity. And man, it just did not matter. So I'm not into creating "Christian music," just great music for anyone who cares to listen.

And yet, I recently accepted the offer to produce a record for a Christian label—I've got friends in that world—with my friend Lynn Nichols, who was also part of that Phil Keaggy era. We produced *The Pawn Shop Kings* project, which I think is going to be a mainstream release, though it's on a Christian label, but I'm very careful about being involved in that world. I don't want to sound ungrateful here, but basically there's so little room in that industry for people who want to sing about brokenness. I just don't see it as a friendly place for me to dwell in.

I'm blessed that that part of my past did lead me to playing with Buddy and Judy Miller, who were also frustrated by the relig biz. I have to credit my years of playing with Buddy as the thing that opened a door for me to eventually play with Emmylou in her band. Then I got to perform with Elvis Costello and so many others. I just played Willy Nelson's 80th birthday party. Pinch me!

My mantra is "yes." Saying "yes" has seen me through the last decade in a way that blows my mind. I'm 61 years old and having the time of my life, working with many incredible artists. "Yes" has led me to work with some of my heroes—John Scofield and Emmylou are at the top of the list. "Yes" has brought people into my life who are not necessarily of the same faith but who continually teach me about love. I'm blessed and humbled to know and work with so many beautiful friends. I should remark that I continue to work with many folks who are Christians as well, and who exemplify the love of Jesus well—Wayne Kirkpatrick, Gordon Kennedy, Matraca Berg, and Amy Grant to name a few.

I think it's extremely difficult to mix God and commerce. Obviously, I am conflicted and uncomfortable speaking of Christian music. I have to accept that I was never right for that world, but I'm grateful to my many friends who were or are in that world.

**How would you advise musicians who are Christian to navigate the waters of "secular" music?**

I love playing clubs, I love playing for people who want to hear great music and the thing they're going to judge me on is did I play and sing well, did I lay out a good song, not do I agree with them about—whatever...

So my advice is, "Be yourself, hone your craft, be good enough to play anywhere." A lot of Christians go in with an

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agenda of what they think they can teach these people they're working with who don't claim their faith. But I think you're supposed to be thinking, "Okay, what are they going to teach me?" I don't know if Emmylou's learned anything working with me, but I've learned so much working with her—her commitment to good, her way of moving through the world. She's a saint who doesn't put a name to her beliefs, yet she moves in grace. I suppose my advice would also be, "Walk humbly, be gracious, and let your actions do the preaching."

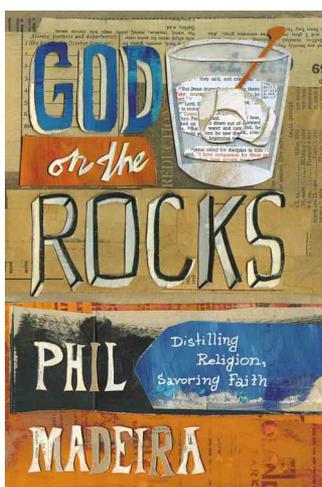
**In 1986, you received the humanitarian award from the ASCAP Foundation for raising awareness of and money for the famine in Ethiopia. What role do you see the arts playing in "transforming the world?"**

That was an opportunity to write a song and to donate all the proceeds to charity. It was related to Compassion International. I think it raised about \$150,000, which hopefully fed some kids. It highlights my belief that the arts exist to represent conscience in the world. I think the reason you have so many artists who are left-wingers is because there's an ethos that's more apparent on that side of the political fence than there is on the right-wing side, and often an artist is going to feel things deeply. They may not be solution-oriented or numbers-oriented, but artists are here to be the soul and conscience of society and to ask, "What are we doing?" That's why a person like Bob Dylan resonated in the 1960s and of course continues to do so. Our great artists are going to be the ones who disturb us—or reveal such brokenness that we can't help but see our own brokenness.

That humanitarian project in 1986 was a beautiful thing to be able to do as a young man, and yet it was so organized and publicized. Ironically, I have learned that the charity you do in private is what really counts.

**How does your new album, *PM*, relate to your new book?**

I hadn't done a solo record in 16 years, and I was getting a lot of encouragement to put a new CD out. With *PM* I didn't want to make as overt a spiritual statement as in *Mercyland* or as in *God on the Rocks*. But the first song—"God on the Rocks"—and the last song—"Lonesome Owl"—are very tied to my spiritual journey.



## WHAT IF GOD IS LOVE? What if we just start there and add nothing else, like God loves you unless you're gay,' or 'God loves you unless you don't love God'?

**What do you want people to take away from your book?**

There are those of us who have grown up in the church who don't want to jettison faith, but so much of what we've grown up with is negative, based on fear and control. So I feel like my book is a worthy read for someone who wants to see that the Spirit is still moving but not pushing them towards turn-or-burn.

Let's start with "God loves you." I am certainly a Christian; I am a person who believes in Jesus, but I have had to search for a way to express that—and have it expressed to me—



From left to right: Buddy Miller, Phil Madeira, Emmylou Harris, Rickie Simpkins, and Chris Donohue. Photo by Tanya Braganti (TanyaBraganti.com).

that doesn't carry the weight of what a parent wants from me or a church leader wants from me.

The time of my life when I was with the Phil Keaggy Band, that was a devastating time that I wrote about in the book, in the chapter called "Love Inn." There's no good ending to that chapter, because the dance of forgiveness was never completed. It was the hardest chapter to write. That story is more typical than not of people who are really trying to give their lives to the Lord and in doing so put themselves under some crazy authority. I know so many exiles from Christian communities in the 1970s, who gave their lives to young men with

hubris and bravado and genuine zeal but who lacked the true faith to allow their disciples to experience grace. I'm so thankful for my father, whose years as a pastor were highlighted by his humility, his love, and his kindness, not to mention a great sense of humor.

**What does following Jesus look like for you these days?**

I'm listening for God's voice and realizing that it's in some unlikely places. Being a Christian for me ties into trying to be a great father and a great partner. I blow my horn a little less intensely than I might have 30 years ago. I'm not worried about the way God is moving in the world. My pursuit of God is worked out in very quiet ways, like going to a prayer service at 7 a.m. that is just liturgical, just a few people in a big sanctuary going through the prayer book together. I am drawn to the little ways of centering myself on God. And then there's the journey of writing, of creativity, of jamming with my compadres—whether one is writing or singing about God or not, God is in it.

*Al Tizon is co-director of the Sider Center of Eastern University, associate professor of holistic ministry at Palmer Theological Seminary, author, preacher, and avid bonafide music freak. While attending a book signing and musical event featuring Madeira, at Hearts & Minds Bookstore in central Pennsylvania, Tizon, a longtime fan, remembered an obscure benefit concert that Madeira had done in the early 1990s. When Madeira himself could not remember doing the concert, he called Tizon a "freak." He cherishes both the memory and the moniker!*