



Mike Farris Bio

This isn't a story about a worship band, or about a youth pastor who happens to write songs. It's a story about a guy working out his salvation with a guitar.

Mike Farris isn't the kind of person you're likely to find giving the altar call at a youth rally. He's recovering from chemical and alcohol dependency, clean two years, trying to get through each new day still intact.

And these are the songs that have come out of being saved by grace.

Salvation in Lights ([INO Records](#)) is a traveling tent-revival of an album, working its way up the banks of the Mississippi River from New Orleans through Memphis and onto points north. Recorded at the same Nashville house-studio where White Stripes/Raconteurs leader Jack White recorded Loretta Lynn's award-winning Van Lear Rose album, Farris' sophomore solo effort uses the musical language of spirituals, timeless stories of struggle, some of which are centuries-old slave spirituals, and soul to tell a uniquely redemptive story.

"When I'm playing music, it's like prayer to me," Farris says. "I'm closer to God than I ever am, outside of my prayer. That's the best way I can portray what I'm feeling in my heart."

Farris recorded Salvation in Lights with a band that included Johnny Cash's longtime bassist Dave Roe, singer Ann McCrary - daughter of the Fairfield Four's founder, the Rev. Sam McCrary and a host of top shelf Nashville musicians. Farris plants his own roots deep, down to traditional songs like "Oh Mary Don't

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"You Weep" and "Can't No Grave Hold My Body Down." "A Change Is Gonna Come" and "I'll Take You There" come from a soul movement that identified with struggle and the ongoing search for transcendence and peace to songs that are turn-of-the-century New Orleans Gospel.

"Something about that music, it moves me like nothing else," Farris says. "Hearing somebody like Skip James or Mavis Staples sing, it's painful to me, it's spiritual, it's deep and it's enlightening. It's like somebody shedding a little bit of light on the soul, on what makes people really tick."

Original songs like "Selah! Selah!" and "The Lonely Road" evoke late-period Stax soul and Willie Mitchell's horn-drenched Hi Records funk. Some bear the influence of Tom Waits and Bob Dylan, and others find their groove somewhere between the "oom-pah" of a Crescent City funeral band and the "boom-chick" of a Johnny Cash railroad.

"When I was growing up, we had five records in my family - and three of them were by Johnny Cash," Farris says. "I didn't realize how much that stuff was engrained in my being."

Perhaps nothing, though, reflects Farris' own journey so perfectly as "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." Written by Thomas A. Dorsey, a writer and performer of bawdy blues tunes who later became the "Father of Gospel Music," the song's plea to "guide my feet to the light," is one that Farris has made his own. He transforms the gospel favorite into a sanctified blues shuffle punctuated with bright, celebratory bursts of horns and slide guitar. "That was the last song we recorded for the album," he says. "Every time we'd do a session, I'd try it. I just felt like it had to get on there."

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That song's lyrics parallel Farris' own life story.

Nearly dead from an accidental overdose of pills and alcohol before he turned 21, Farris made a desperate cry out to God, and God responded.

"I moved in with my father," Farris recalls. "He had a guitar. I taught myself how to play the guitar, and I started writing songs, songs that were healing me.

"But as soon as God gave me the gift, I went about destroying it."

That began a 15-year journey to get back to God.

Farris continued to write, and he formed a band, the Screamin' Cheetah Wheelies. The band had some success, signing to Atlantic Records and having a Top 10 rock-radio hit, touring with such known acts as Blues Traveler, Joan Osborne, Sheryl Crow, Dave Matthews Band, ZZ Top and the Allman Brothers Band, but, deep inside himself, Farris knew that the bars and clubs the band often played were the last places somebody with his struggles needed to be.

"I talked myself into it," he says. "I told myself, 'I can go in there and sing songs and help people, just like Jesus did.' But I wasn't strong enough to do that. It ate me alive."

The addictions returned with a vengeance, throughout the Cheetah Wheelies' existence and beyond, even as Farris fronted Double Trouble, the rhythm section of the late guitar legend Stevie Ray Vaughn.

From his earliest interviews, however, Farris had expressed his deep admiration





of those deep Southern inspired gospel tunes. "They were just kind of ringing in my head the whole time," he says.

In the winter of 2004, Farris found himself at the end of his rope, standing graveside, at a relative's funeral. "I realized how tired I I'd become from running all those years, and I just wanted to go back home. Just like the prodigal son," Farris says, "I'd had enough of it all and decided I was not going to be that man ever again."

With the help of his family and church, Farris became sober, and soon after he began writing in order to heal again. He quickly realized the new songs he was writing dovetailed nicely with those old familiar songs that had been with him all along.

"I finally said, 'I think it's time for me to take those traditional, turn-of-the-century songs and add these things I'm writing that sound like that, and just go with it; this is what I want to do,'" he says. "It became real clear to me."

Now, original songs like "Devil Don't Sleep" and "Lonely Road" serve as much as to remind Farris of where he's been as they do to encourage his listeners. By doing so, they forge a bond between audience and performer, even as they connect him to a rich tradition of spirituality that runs through American folk, gospel, soul and rock.

"If not for the grace of God I would surely be dead or wishing I were dead." Farris says. "My life is a testament that God has an unique and special place for everyone. God will use people no matter how tattered and torn. Just surrender to His love and trust in His grace."

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