

# JARS OF CLAY PRESENTS THE SHELTER

***“Ar scath a cheile a mhaireas na daoine.”***

**An old Irish proverb, as translated:**

**“It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”**

It is among our most basic of needs.

And like the other simple building blocks of life – air, food, water – it can take on many forms. It can be physical or spiritual, close-in or far-flung, untested or time-honored.

For the men that make up the creative force called Jars of Clay, this season has tested their perceptions, challenged their beliefs, underscored their experiences and opened up the possibilities for new definitions of this necessary component.

And now it’s time to share their vision of *The Shelter*.

**“Cast off the robes you’re wearing, set aside the names that you’ve been given...”**

Writing songs about community as an aspect of shelter wouldn’t seem like a revolutionary idea. Neither would recruiting talented friends, both long-time and brand new, into your working environment. But for Jars of Clay, long-known as a self-contained creative organism, opening up the doors to let new voices speak into the process wasn’t the easiest decision.

“Jars of Clay, historically, has been this kind of compact creative environment; we’re known for doing everything from the songwriting to the producing to the artwork,” says guitarist Matt Odmark. “This was a push in a totally different direction. We brought people in on the songwriting side of things, and we knew in the beginning that we wanted as many voices as possible in the record.

“We wanted to make a record about community, and we wanted the recording process to be community. We wanted it to be an expression of what it was trying to articulate from a concept standpoint,” Odmark continues. “It wasn’t going to work any other way, and it didn’t make sense to us to write a record about community that was just us talking to one another.”

So the call went out to the creative community Jars has long been part of, but hadn’t felt led to truly tap into previously. Songwriters they respect, like Laura Story, Thad Cockrell and Phillip LaRue, injected new lifeblood into songs that had been percolating for more than a year, and long-established, readily recognizable voices, like those of Mac Powell, Amy Grant, Brandon Heath, Leigh Nash, TobyMac and more, lent timbre and texture to this new set of Jars of Clay songs.

And yet, the motivation was there to make them more than just a set of Jars of Clay songs.

“We wanted the songs to sound like a group of people more than ‘there’s Toby, there’s Leigh, there’s Mac,’ so we brought in a choir,” says keyboardist Charlie Lowell. “Steve did a great job of rallying a bunch of independent musicians from around the Nashville area,” including Katie Herzig, Andy and Jill Gullahorn, Sarah Masen Dark, Julie Lee, Trent Dabbs and Kate York.

“I should really be in A&R,” interjects guitarist Stephen Mason.

“He directed the choir, as well, so not only did he get ’em in the room, he told ’em what to do,” Lowell continues. “I should really be a V.P.,” Mason laughingly concludes, to the amusement of his bandmates.

### **“It’s out of my hands, it was from the start...”**

Another of the challenges of trusting this new method of creating was not only asking others into the *The Shelter* process, but also convincing them to bring their own imprint into the project.

“One of the great parts, too, was to let the artists who weren’t able to physically come into the studio with us, just let them loose where they were,” says vocalist/lyricist Dan Haseltine. “I think a lot of artists create in a very controlled environment, where they’re taking cues from people on what they should be singing and how they should be singing it. We said to them, ‘What we really want is your instinct.’

“It doesn’t speak to the idea of community to tell them ‘sing this exactly like we did on the demo.’ We wanted them to do it how they’d do it, sing it how they’d sing it. If you hear other things that should be in the song, put them on there, then we’ll piece through it and figure it out what’s working with other peoples’ instincts.”

Even if it meant sometimes getting the exact opposite of what was asked for. “One of the ironies – at least I think it’s irony because I’m still confused by Alanis Morissette – was that some of the people we told to let loose would send back exactly what we sent them, and then others we’d tell ‘we need you to sing this exact part’ and they’d send us back something totally different,” Odmark says. “It was an interesting look in the mirror... ‘Oh. So this is what we’re like.’”

### **“Where you lead us, we will follow...”**

What emerges on *The Shelter* is more of Jars of Clay’s signature sonics, informed by the season of their last project *The Long Fall Back To Earth* but echoing all the way back to its much-heralded self-titled debut, meshed with an heretofore underexplored inclusiveness of lyric that encourages the listener to join in on the song.

In short, these songs are designed to be sung aloud, with others, within the parameters of that listener’s own shelter.

For some, including the members of Jars of Clay, that will entail bringing them into the church environment proper, something that hadn’t really been a purposeful part of the band’s work before.

“One of the things we’re excited about with this record is to offer, with humility, what we’re excited about within the church,” Mason says. “We’re all big fans of the church. We attend church, so part of the passion we want to get to the people is that, hopefully, this is the language we can use to rejuvenate the way we speak about God in terms of each other.

“What has been, graciously, changing us is this idea that when we look around we see God in other people and in what they’re doing. We are the hands and feet,” Stephen continues. “We’re trying to find new language to describe stuff that we’re all probably in some regards cynical or bored about, because we want to believe there is life in those places.”

### **“In our weakness let us see, that alone we’ll never be...”**

Sometimes the hardest part of following the path you think you’re being led down is finding that motivation to keep going. And more often than not, that motivation comes from a place you least expect.

Crafting *The Shelter* project has dominated the work thoughts of the men of Jars of Clay for more than a year, but it was the massive flooding in the Nashville area the first weekend of May 2010 and the subsequent aftermath that brought the idea of both a community in need and needing your community into stark relief.

The band experienced flood-related setbacks both personal and professional. Its recording studio suffered significant damage, as did Dan Haseltine’s home. But it was in that moment when the ephemeral idea of taking shelter within your community became concrete.

“When we were discussing making a record about community and really celebrating that, this story keeps coming up in my mind, because I realize that community can be inconvenience,” Haseltine says. “I’ve experienced that at my own house with people showing up with shovels and gloves and doing work that I couldn’t have done without them.

“A lot of us have experienced that; we’ve seen the character of our community,” Dan continues. “But we need Jesus to remind us sometimes that when we stop, we’re actually part of a great privilege, a privilege to be a community, a privilege to see God’s hand working and moving through us and for us.”

**Pull out the roots we’ve dug in so deep, finish what you’ve started...help us to believe...**

It’s never easy to change how you do what you do, especially after a decade and a half and a fair amount of success and acclaim. But tapping into new wells of creativity has long been a hallmark of Jars of Clay’s career, and letting go the reins and letting in a trusted community of talented people has generated one of the richest projects in the band’s long history.

It’s simply part of reacting to a change in the culture. “It used to be, when you met somebody new, the first question you asked was ‘So, what do you do?’” Haseltine says. “It’s becoming more and more that first question asked is ‘So, where are you from?’ Which means that we’re becoming a culture where we feel like our identity is more woven into the places where we live rather than the things we do for a living.

“So we hope this project will reflect this shift and reaffirm that as a more important thing, what we’re connected to as a community,” Dan concludes.

It’s a community that Jars of Clay has worked hard to build and engage with, and one that covers, comforts, strengthens, nourishes and emboldens. Like any good shelter should do.

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