

In every artist's career there is a project that represents a true labor of love, the one that takes the artist back to their roots and incorporates all they have learned about life and their craft. For international superstar Billy Ray Cyrus, THE OTHER SIDE is that project.

"I call this the record of a lifetime for me, because this record has been a lifetime in the making," says Cyrus. "Every bit of my roots, my influences and every bit of who I am is on this record."

Those familiar with the Billy Ray Cyrus story know that the Kentucky native's musical roots lie firmly in the church. Billy Ray Cyrus grew up surrounded by gospel music: the grandson of a Pentecostal preacher, the young Cyrus was singing with his father's gospel quartet before he'd started grade school. Though Cyrus went on to fame as the multi-platinum hunky heartthrob behind such country hits as "Achy Breaky Heart," "Could've Been Me," "In the Heart of a Woman" and "Busy Man," his own faith still runs deep.

Now with THE OTHER SIDE, his first studio release in three years, Billy Ray Cyrus has come full circle. For the first time Cyrus shares his faith journey on 11 tracks that range from rollicking Southern rock, to pure country story-songs, to heartfelt balladry. There's nothing staid about this collection: even Cyrus' rendition of "Amazing Grace," the album's only traditional hymn, is performed in a bluesy, rock style. This album has something for everyone in the family.

"This whole album came together very naturally, it just fell into place," Cyrus says. "Nothing was forced about it, nothing was planned, it just evolved into what it was meant to be. Making this album was probably most similar to Some Gave All, my first album, in that it became who I was and what I wanted to sing and where I am at in my life. It was very real -- I hate to be so cliché about it, but that's the truth."

In fact, THE OTHER SIDE has its genesis in a coincidence. Cyrus was in Toronto, where he films his lead role on the hit PAX-TV series "DOC," and thinking about his next studio release. "My inner voice said, you need to make the record that you've wanted to make your whole life, and that's a gospel record, an inspirational record. And within minutes my phone rings, and it's this legendary producer out of Nashville, and he says, How'd you like to cut an inspirational album? It is one of if not the most bizarre things that has ever happened in my career -- and there are not a whole lot of normal things about my career!"

In fact, that phone call came from renowned country producer Billy Joe Walker Jr., known for his work with such country stars as Pam Tillis, Travis Tritt, Tammy Cochran and Tracy Byrd. Walker had never produced a gospel record before, but in exploring the idea one day he says the name Billy Ray Cyrus just popped into his head. "I thought, Oh of course, Billy Ray Cyrus would be the most honest, believable, sincere person to do an inspirational album. So I got a number and called him in Toronto."

From this goose-flesh inducing start, *THE OTHER SIDE* took off. Without a record label signed on for the project, Cyrus and Walker went into the studio intending to demo some new songs. Instead, they decided to record "Amazing Grace," long a staple of Cyrus' live show and a fan favorite. "Whenever I do it with my band, I play it in the blues style," says Cyrus. "I always thought it lended itself to being a great blues song. Billy and I came up with that arrangement, and it became the cornerstone and foundation of this entire album."

After hearing their track for "Amazing Grace," Word Records requested an entire album, and a six-month song search began. At the label's request for a song about Cyrus' own background and faith, he wrote the title track for the project, the personal and gentle ballad "The Other Side." Cyrus and Walker mined Nashville's rich and varied talent pool for the other material, finding songs by writers from the worlds of country (Bob DiPiero, Tom Shapiro, Rivers Rutherford, Kelly Shiver, Victoria Shaw), gospel (Bebo Norman) and pop (Richard Marx). The Jordanaires also added their tight southern gospel harmonies.

Musically, *THE OTHER SIDE* has a rousing, energized feel unique to country gospel. Much of this rock and roll spirit comes from special guests such as Marx, '80s pop icon Kim Carnes, rocker Bekka Bramlett and Denise Walls of Anointed, all of whom lent their vocals to the project.

Lyricaly, the songs offer vivid country storytelling and a gospel message of encouragement. Some of the album's most compelling tracks offer a challenge to listeners to live their faith transparently -- and Cyrus puts himself at the top of the list of those needing to hear that message.

Indeed, Cyrus admits his long, hard struggle to get his career off the ground and the ensuing rocket ride as "Achy Breaky Heart" catapulted him to international fame tested his faith. A devoted family man -- he and wife Tish have six children -- Cyrus' dual role as TV star and recording artist often requires long separations from his family.

"I have to say my world was spinning so out of control in the last 10 years, I hit a couple of spots where I didn't feel like God could hear me anymore," Cyrus says. "There were times I felt like, is anybody listening? Does anybody care? But it wasn't that God wasn't listening, it's that I wasn't taking the time to be still and make sure that prayer was getting through."

With that realization came a shift in his priorities. "My family became my foundation, and my spirituality became my foundation," he says. "That's when I started reconnecting back to life, instead of being out there in the twilight zone on some rocket spinning out of control."

Though he's come full circle musically, Billy Ray Cyrus stresses he's still the same imperfect person he's always been.

"By no means because I put out this record am I proclaiming that I'm this perfect, religious person," he notes. "I'm not all of a sudden stepping up on a pedestal and saying I'm holier than thou, because I'm not! I'm a very imperfect person, but isn't that why God sent his son Jesus to this earth? ... to save sinners like me? I just always try to work to make myself better in the eyes of God."

And that, he says, is what life on THE OTHER SIDE is all about.