

# CHRIS TOMLIN

## BURNING LIGHTS

Under a vast, October sky, standing on stage before tens of thousands deep in the heart of Africa, Chris Tomlin felt right at home. Even all those miles removed from the familiar, Tomlin detected the steady, burning light that's universal and uniting. He's aware that no matter where in the world, we all seek connection, to know that we're part of a grander narrative, a special story in the exquisite design of creation.

For that reason Tomlin has dedicated his life career to a singular pursuit: to bring people closer to God. Building a career is just fine, he says, but nothing compares to building bridges through music that lead to hope, healing and higher ground.

"I *have to* put out songs that bridge the gap," Tomlin says, putting the emphasis on "have to" as though his musical life depended on it. "I want to write songs that people sing to God. There's nothing wrong with a three-minute pop song, but I want these songs to be special to the church. There's more of a laser focus on that than ever."

Yet Tomlin also embodies something rare in popular music. On his latest disc, *Burning Lights*, he not only hits the mark for deep substance, but also delivers lean, muscular songs that exert a magnetic pop pull. True to its title, *Burning Lights* shines like a sonic supernova, yet never loses its human scope and beating heart in the process.

That's because Tomlin—after ten No. 1 radio singles, a GRAMMY® Award and eight additional nominations, 21 Dove Awards, one platinum album and four gold discs—touches the hearts of listeners like no other. On the one hand, he's achieved global scope that moved TIME magazine to proclaim him "likely the most often sung artist anywhere." It's estimated that more than 40 million men, women and children sing Chris Tomlin songs each week.

But for all those people it's still personal, as Tomlin gives voice and narrative to the most elemental longings any believer can profess. You can hear it on "Awake My Soul," where Tomlin pleads for breath-of-life deliverance: "*Awake, awake, awake my soul/ God resurrect these bones/ From death to life, for You alone/ Awake my soul.*"

"This is record number 10 for me, and it's so exciting to feel this great about it," Tomlin says. "We definitely did not hit cruise control. This record developed in a way that no other record has and I feel it's the strongest thing I've ever put together."

Tomlin extends props to three talented producers—Jason Ingram (Brandon Heath, Britt Nicole, Tenth Avenue North, Rebecca St. James, Point of Grace), Dan Muckala (Backstreet Boys, Amy Grant, MercyMe) and Ed Cash (Kari Jobe, Laura Story, Bebo Norman)—along with a wide range of musical guests, including Kari Jobe, Phil Wickham, Lecrae and Christy Nockels.

But to tell the story of *Burning Lights* properly, you have to start near the end. As Tomlin and crew wound down the scheduled album sessions, they had every reason to believe they'd accomplished their mission. Little did they know they'd get sent back to the well not once, not twice, but three times in pursuit of the best material they could muster.

For Tomlin, it was the artistic equivalent of Naaman's bathing in the Jordan River seven times—a test of patience and persistence that yielded startling results. Each time, he fashioned new tracks that propelled *Burning Lights* to higher melodic and lyrical vistas. And to get there, Tomlin had to empty himself and lean on God like never before as a recording artist.

To hear Tomlin tell it, his albums almost always start with a full complement of finished songs, ready for him and his musicians to execute. "But this time, we met with the record company as we

were wrapping up and they said, 'We don't feel that it's quite finished yet. Maybe there's more.' And that's a big hit to take when you've already put your heart on your sleeve."

Then came the majestic triumph of "Awake My Soul," a song that had been orphaned earlier in the album sessions because it didn't match Tomlin's exacting standards. He tackled it with renewed vigor and then called on his friend Lecrae, who telegraphs a spoken-word interlude from Ezekiel 37 with a preacher's passion. Looking back, Tomlin's still amazed that this once-rejected track now kicks off *Burning Lights*. "That's the result of being pushed by your team—people who are not just yes people—and being asked to give your best."

But it also crated a dilemma. Tomlin's team loved the song so much, they wondered what might happen if he tried to pull another rabbit out of the musical hat. The singer was flustered; he had a few musical ideas, but nothing fully formed. So he texted Ed Cash, an ally from way back. As providence would have it, Cash had just written a chorus and was about to contact Tomlin to see if he wanted to help him finish the song.

That collaboration became "Whom Shall I Fear (God of Angel Armies)," a dynamic song that celebrates God's constant companionship, set to a soundtrack framed by chiming guitars and a crisp, military-style snare drum.

Relieved, Tomlin delivered the result to his label, and here's what happened: "They asked me, 'Do you have anything else?' Now this was the third time. I thought, 'Who do you guys think you are? I've worked my tail off!'"

But Tomlin bit his tongue, racked his brain and searched his heart. He sent in a demo that updated the hymn "Crown Him With Many Crowns," expecting rejection. "But sure enough they said, 'This is amazing, we have to put this on the record.'"

The recorded version teams Tomlin with Matt Maher, a Christian artist who's Catholic. As the session started, they came to learn an amazing fact: "This song is a back and forth between the Catholic and Protestant churches. Several verses were written in a Protestant way and some were written a Catholic way. One side claimed it as theirs, and so did the other. We sat at the piano and started laughing. We thought, 'How divine is that?'" A special spotlight vocal by Kari Jobe also graces the track.

To be sure, the rest of *Burning Lights* lives up to the thrill of those three tracks, from the spirit of surrender that raises "White Flag" to the tenderness that brings "Shepherd Boy" to life. It's also the song that gives the album its moniker. "David was a shepherd boy right before he was king, out in the field, keeping watch over his flock and singing a song of praise to God: 'I'm just a shepherd boy, singing to a choir of burning light.' That sums up what I feel inside. I want to be that. The people I sing to are the burning light, and I sing to them night after night."

"I love at the end of the day how we got all these left and right turns and tried to follow them," Tomlin says of the path that led to *Burning Lights*. "It was a lesson in humility. It was great to take a step back, listen to what people were saying and go for it. When a song like 'Whom Shall I Fear' comes along at the last minute, it's not only something you could hear on the radio, but at any church. And that means more to me than platinum records, tours and sales."

He adds: "It's not just about good marketing. It's songs that become part of the fabric of the culture. That's God's spirit, God's favor on a song. And to be part of that in some little way is so special. It lasts so much longer than quick fame."