



Jennifer Shaw: How a trained opera singer found her inspirational high note

March 14, 3:24 PM · Gina Adams - Nashville Inspirational Music Examiner

As Jennifer Shaw releases her new CD, **LOVE BROKE THROUGH** (produced by Nashville-based songwriter/producer [Paul Marino](#)), which has already garnered a # 3 song on the national worship radio charts, she is still amazed at the directional change in her musical aspirations. Most praise & worship artists do not begin their careers singing as Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, Susanna in *The Marriage of Figaro*, or performing arias from Puccini operas such as *La Rondine* and *La Boheme*. But then Jennifer never really meant to become a Christian singer, let alone a worship leader for a church. She was simply giving her dying father a Christmas gift.

Jennifer began her musical ambitions early in life with an intense love for the piano, and after hearing her first Beethoven sonata, she was hooked on classical music. At an audition for a piano scholarship, she was urged by her choir director to also audition in voice, and much to Jennifer's dismay, ended up receiving the voice scholarship instead. She studied her craft in New York and received a Master's Degree in Vocal Performance from the Manhattan School of Music. Jennifer has performed in over forty shows in the theater, everything from Shakespeare and straight drama to musicals and children's theater. After moving back home to Ohio, Jennifer began performing with the Columbus Symphony and later appeared at Carnegie Hall. She also became a Professor of Music for Cedarville University as well as music director for her local church, until one day the pastor came to her with a special request.

"The pastor told me, 'We'd like to transition our service from traditional to contemporary and we need you to start a band,'" says Jennifer. "So I said, 'I don't know if I forgot to mention that I'm an opera singer and I'd be terrible at that.' But he insisted that I pray about it. Oddly enough, I did feel the Lord call me to that job. I was seriously reluctant, and kept telling the Lord that singing this way was wrecking my classical voice. But God went even further. I felt He was leading me to quit the symphony AND quit teaching at the university, both of which I thought were career suicide moves. But eventually I obeyed, and started to truly enjoy leading worship with the band. Now, I love it."

Life for Jennifer and her husband and their two daughters seemed to be moving along nicely. Then, in 2003, Jennifer miscarried and unbeknownst to her, began to bleed internally. After symptoms persisted, she was rushed to the hospital only to find out that she was dangerously close to death. After recuperating for over a month, Jennifer learned that her beloved father had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. The family was devastated as their father began to deteriorate over the coming months. Jennifer became pregnant again and gave birth to son Toby the next year. But their brief joy turned to terror when at 6 months, her son was found to have severe hearing impairment from repeated ear infections. Several surgeries followed on her baby boy over the next few months, but Toby's behavior got more and more bizarre and extreme. He couldn't touch anything, be touched, couldn't eat anything, made no sounds except for crying all the time, couldn't get water on himself or be messy. Jennifer's charmed life seemed to be spinning out of control.

"I remember feeling like I was falling and had no idea how far down the bottom was," Jennifer recalls. "There is no other way to describe it except that when I got to the bottom, God caught me. I was still in the pit, but He was there with me, and that gave me something to grab on to. I learned that God is amazingly powerful, and that He will absolutely use all things to the good of those who love Him, even when we can't see how that could be possible in the moment. I now understand that our purpose here is just to glorify Him, and that these are 'light and momentary troubles' as Paul wrote. When we were going through everything with dad and then with Toby, I could trust God for His goodness and strength every day, trust Him with my dad, and trust Him for the strength I needed to deal with my special needs child. And He absolutely met us there. Nothing is the same for me now."

It was during this process that Jennifer decided to write some songs and record them just for her father as a Christmas present. A CD entitled **Be Still** was her first foray into recording Christian music, and it quickly got picked up by over 300 radio stations across the country and even around the world in places such as South Africa and Australia. In less than six weeks, she had sold enough CDs to pay for the entire project. It was yet another directional shift in Jennifer's own personal musical plans.

Jennifer's father died in 2006 and Toby was diagnosed with a neurological condition known as Sensory Processing Disorder, a condition described as a neurological "traffic jam" that prevents certain parts of the brain from receiving the information needed to interpret sensory information correctly. Through therapy and miraculous intervention, Toby has begun to live a more normal life (Click here for Jennifer's thoughts on being the parent of a special needs child).

The songs on [LOVE BROKE THROUGH](#) certainly reflect the mountain of intense moments in Jennifer's life and the lessons learned in the midst of it all. The CD's first top radio hit, "Your Great Name," was a no-brainer addition to the album after Jennifer heard the song. "The lyrics spoke to me so much of what we had been through, and what we had learned - that everything of value that's done, and everything that's possible, is possible through the name of Jesus."

Many of the songs that Jennifer penned for the CD were inspired not only by her years of despair but with her encounters on various mission trips, especially the title cut. "I was talking to a young man from Ruthin, Wales --an area that is very dark. It's a coal town where the jobs have left and there is very little hope. The suicide rate here in the US among young people is about 1 in 2000, but in Ruthin it is 1 in 50. He was telling me how he met the Lord, and his face was just shining with the love and hope of God. It was just an incredible contrast and transformation."

"Asante sana, Jesu" is a song that came to Jennifer during her trip to Africa. "I was leading worship at a church in Nairobi, and they opened the service with the people singing those words which mean, 'Thank you so much, Jesus.' When we were in Kenya, we saw some of the most difficult living situations, and yet the Christians there had such joy. We met one local pastor and sat in his dung hut with chickens hopping in and out of the door, and he was telling me all the amazing things God has done; how he had started 10 churches of 500 people meeting under trees. I was so inspired by him, and his faith and trust in God that I wrote this song for him and the other Kenyan Christians we were privileged to meet."

[LOVE BROKE THROUGH](#) features six songs co-written by Jennifer. But the CD's final cut is a classical benediction that Jennifer ends every concert with -- "E'en So Lord Jesus Quickly Come." The song gave Jennifer a chance to dust off her operatic vocals and stretch to the ethereal melodies she first fell in love with as a child.

"Honestly, this whole thing of having a music ministry never occurred to us," Jennifer admits. "The idea of me trying to be a contemporary singer was so ludicrous, but it was fun, and dad liked it. I wanted him to have a gift, and never thought people would hear it outside our church. It became such an encouragement to us during the darkest days, but now I see God giving us a brand new ministry, and growing it like crazy.

"Our entire focus is different now. Before, I wanted to follow Christ and live a nice, comfortable, respectable life with some accolades thrown in there to remind me that I was special. Now, all I want is for people to see Christ. I feel a definite urgency and impatience with wasting time on things that don't really matter. Christ matters. And that's it."

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LOVE BROKE THROUGH by Jennifer Shaw, produced by Paul Marino
Aaron Crisler