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## **Closer**

### **Shawn McDonald**



Shawn McDonald’s life has been marked by a string of heartaches, bad breaks, and personal mistakes, events that have landed him both in trouble with the law and in love with the Lord – in that order. The street-tough but tenderhearted McDonald has never shied away from telling his story – of growing up in Eugene, Oregon, as an angry, rebellious teen who was a drug addict and a dealer, looking for any and every way to escape his pain and a dysfunctional home. In 1998, at just 20 years old and at the end of his rope – and facing nine felony counts on a drug bust – McDonald cried out to God . . . and started turning his life around. He hasn’t looked back since.

When his first album, *Simply Nothing*, released in 2004, it was clear that this was a guy who would spill his guts into every song and every gig. His lyrics were bold, stark, palpably authentic. Ditto his shows, where McDonald shared his compelling testimony night after night, holding nothing back. “Honesty,” he said at the time, “is huge.”

Six and a half years later, it still is. So it makes perfect sense that McDonald would call *Closer*, his fourth studio project, “a very honest and vulnerable record.” Honestly, what else *could* it be?

His first three albums – *Simply Nothing* (2004), *Ripen* (2006), and *Roots* (2008) – chronicled the journey of a broken man who’d found redemption, who was growing in faith while expressing his doubts, singing praises and lamentations along the way. But always a picture of a man drawing closer to the God who saved his life . . . and his soul.

“I was starting to mature in my faith and putting my roots down,” McDonald says of his 2008 release. “I was reaching a point where I was allowing my life to be rooted in Christ. But that was also about the time when I really started going through it.”

Which brings us to *Closer*. McDonald wrote most of the 13 songs while “going through it” – a painful few years that ultimately ended in a failed marriage.

He’d walked down the aisle in 2005; two years later, they had a baby boy named Cohen. But all was not well on the home front: Their marriage was falling apart. McDonald says he and his wife both made mistakes from the start, and they never found unity they’d longed for. “I was too young when I got married,” he says. “I had no clue what I was doing. My parents were never in my life, so marriage had never really been modeled for me. I had no idea how hard it was going to be.”

McDonald and his wife tried to reconcile their differences. They underwent counseling, and Shawn mostly put his music career aside to focus on their marriage. But after a couple of years, things were only getting worse, and the marriage finally ended in divorce in April 2010.

“It’s incredibly humiliating,” McDonald says. “I feel like I’ve failed, like I’ve let a lot of people down. I hate what happened. This definitely wasn’t something that I ever thought would be part of my story, but now it is my story, and I have to deal with it.”

McDonald is concerned about how fans, retailers, and radio will react, but says he won't try to defend himself. "The reality is that my wife and I both made mistakes," he says. "We both screwed up. For me to try and defend myself, that's almost like trying to deny the fact that I messed up. But I did mess up, I hurt people, and I feel ashamed about it."

He says his label and management have supported him "and walked with me on this road" – but only once they were convinced that McDonald was doing everything he could to turn things around. They suggested that he step away from music for a while to sort things out. Even the new album, which has been ready for over a year, was indefinitely shelved. They wouldn't release it until they felt McDonald was making progress in working through his problems.

"I felt like Shawn did the work to try to reconcile and make his marriage work," says David McCollum, McDonald's manager. "The last thing he wanted was to become a statistic. He's having a hard time accepting the fact that he's a divorced father. But he's grown up a lot through this, and we feel like Shawn's in a good place and ready to move forward. We're putting our professional reputations on the line by continuing to stand behind him, but we believe he can safely go out now and facilitate his career."

Peter York, president of EMI Christian Music Group, agrees. "I think the world of Shawn," he says, "but I've never thought from the day we signed him that he was going to be the perfect model artist. Some believers will have difficulty with the news of his divorce, but divorce is just as much of an issue with believers as non-believers. It's an unpleasant reality that we, and the church, need to deal with."

"Our artists have a responsibility to be models, but they still have problems. If an artist is willing to contend with their problems, I try to find grace and walk with them down that road. If they don't want to take responsibility, it's not a good relationship for us. That's the delineating factor. I've seen Shawn wrestle with his failures, and I've seen him earnestly contending with this challenge."

York and the label helped by putting McDonald into a rigorous 6-week counseling program in Nashville, an experience the artist says was life-changing. "It was extremely intense and very hard," he says. "You just get real honest with your life and your heart. There was a lot of crying and healing, working through a lot of brokenness."

The kind of brokenness that brings one *Closer* to God, that is. It's a recurrent theme on the new album, one McDonald wrote mostly while in the midst of his struggles.

"If you listen to these songs," he says, "you can hear the pain I was going through."

Most of the songs were penned by McDonald, but he shares several writing credits with Brandon Heath, Joy Williams, Ben Glover, and Josh Garrels. The album is produced by Christopher Stevens (tobyMac, Sanctus Real). First single "Closer" released to radio in October and was being played nationwide on a number of stations.

McDonald hopes the songs – and his own mistakes and heartaches – can help others who are hurting, by pointing them to the One who heals.

"I don't ever wish anybody to go through what I've been through," he says. "But regardless of my pain, on days when I would be like *Where are you, God?*, I would remember that He is faithful. Even in my brokenness, there was always a deeper feeling of hope. God was showing me immense mercy, even as He was rocking my faith to the core. It was like He allowed things to crumble just so He could rebuild it all. God has redeemed me, and He is healing my heart."

"So I hope this record can be a redemption story for people, that God can use it to speak and bring hope. Because that's what He's done for me."

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