

GUNGOR

BIOGRAPHY

Two minutes in to *Beautiful Things*, the new CD by Gungor, the listener realizes, "Wow. This is really different. And it's really good."

A lot has changed in the past few years for Michael Gungor and his bandmates: new band name, new location, new church, a stellar new sound, and most importantly a new understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

"The story of God has gotten bigger to me," relates Gungor, who is perhaps best known for co-writing distinguished songs like "Friend of God" and the Dove Award-winning "Say So." "We had become 'professional' Christians. We got to the point where we needed to figure out how to be the church in a more honest way for us."

This bigger story of God shows up on *Beautiful Things* in songs born of an honest journey of faith and a struggle with what should result from worship.

"If leading worship is just about bringing a group of people into a room so we can get goosebumps and sing songs together, there's not much value in that. But if leading worship is a means to an end, that we leave this place as a different kind of people, as part of a new humanity that God wants to create – the people that are caring for the widows and orphans, that aren't bound by the systems of this world but becoming free, becoming fully engaged in our world – then that matters."

It is fascinating to see what has gotten Gungor to this point of introspection. He has been leading worship since he was 12 years old, if you count an audience of 2- and 3-year olds. From there he graduated to children's church, then youth group, then adults. Gungor studied jazz in college, then connected with teen ministry Acquire the Fire and a position at Resurrection Life Church in Michigan.

As Gungor's idea of God changed, so did his idea of church, so he and his wife moved to Denver and eventually founded a community of believers called Bloom. The connection between worship and social justice became concrete in Denver, and the outcome is evident on *Beautiful Things*.

Ironically, most of the music is not directly about caring for the poor and ministering to widows and orphans. Instead, much of the album addresses the spiritual journey and the understanding of God that happens when we do these acts. Like many before him, Gungor has had to fight off feelings of disillusionment when he's tried to love the unlovable and gotten no love in return. "Sometimes it feels like the love just turns to dust," Gungor admits. "This album is an expression of hope that God will make beautiful things out of the dust in our lives, that God will somehow use us, use our obedience and love, our feeble human effort, and build Himself a kingdom." Gungor has captured this hope with sparse, poetic words.

"Please Be My Strength" likens the struggle to water on the sand, or grasping at the wind, and confesses doubt before concluding, "I cannot create it / I cannot sustain it / You are my strength." The title track starts from a voice of pain and ends with a confident declaration of God's ability to make us new.

Other songs emerge from an awareness of the unimaginable scope of God and our compulsion to praise. "The Earth is Yours" uses layer upon layer of instrument and voice to liken a tumultuous earthquake to creation's praise of its Creator. The simple, almost delicate first minute of "Dry Bones" becomes a much deeper and desperate cry to God, punctuated by a pounding drum and Gungor's transition from pleading to praising to wailing. By the fourth minute, the minor-keyed wall of sound somehow becomes triumphant as Gungor declares that life and love are breaking out.

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BIOGRAPHY (cont.)

There is remarkably creative instrumentation throughout, hinting at influences ranging as wide as Sigur Rós, Muse, and Sufjan Stevens. Gungor calls this unique sound "liturgical post-rock," noting that it was written for and still works in a corporate worship setting. Israel Houghton guests on a bass-driven romp called "Heaven." Rocker "Call Me Out" makes a banjo sound downright funky. And "Higher" feels like a more accessible form of Sufjan. The self-produced album's credits, which reflect a loose and varying lineup, include Gungor's wife Lisa on glockenspiel along with bandmates on horns, strings, banjos, a melodica, "foot-stomping mayhem", and Gungor's now-signature toy piano.

"Musically, it's kind of odd," says Michael. "We rock pretty hard, then we pull out the banjo and sit around and cry together." Indeed, the album closes with an extended instrumental session recorded live at a house in the Rockies, punctuated by a deeply emotional response to God's presence.

His reflective analyses of the foundations of his calling have even led Michael Gungor to change the name of his band. The former Michael Gungor Band, whose 2008 debut on Brash Music, *Ancient Skies*, garnered critical acclaim, is now simply Gungor. "With where I'd like to go as a band, 'The Michael Gungor Band' doesn't make sense," says Michael. "So we're changing the name to Gungor, to be a little less concretely about one front person. I don't want this band to simply be about me."

Just as the band is about far more than one person, this album is about a God so great and grand that our response should be deep, creative, and passionate. In *Beautiful Things*, Gungor has achieved just that.

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