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*David Lyle Morris - who's just released a new praise
album - was trained from childhood for a cross-
cultural worship ministry. You could say God
'engineered' it all. He told Clive Price the full story...*



Ambassador for Christ

He could have been a diplomat for New Zealand. Instead he's become an ambassador for Jesus. David Lyle Morris even got as far as an interview with the High Commissioner in London. But it wasn't to be.

Instead, he's become well known as Graham Kendrick's right hand man, while also playing a supportive role for other worship leaders such as Chris Bowater, Dave Fellingham and Darlene Zschech.

But now this 37-year-old father of two has released his own album of praise songs that gently mix different cultural influences from across the globe. And he's written or co-written five of the 12 tracks.

Recorded 'live' at Forest Hill Boys School, South London, *Jesus, King Of The Ages* (Kingsway) is full of catchy melodies with accessible lyrics. There's also an impressive line-up of backing musicians like 'world' drummer and percussionist Martin Neil, classical flute player Julia Plaut (yes, writer of the epic children's song *Mr Cow!*) and producer Caroline Bonnett.

There are high hopes for the album. Signs are that it should put this New Zealander on the map as a worship leader/composer in his own right.

David has already recorded two albums and released them himself: *Faith Over Reason* and *Destiny*. And his own composition *Surely Our God (Revealer Of Mysteries)* - which appears on the new recording - has been introduced to churches after its inclusion in *Spring Harvest New Songs 1997*.

RUGBY ANTHEM

But now an even wider audience has the chance to appreciate the skills of this daring

diplomat of devotional music who places a Welsh rugby anthem (*Bread Of Heaven*) alongside sounds from the Pacific Islands and...Finland!

Interestingly, the latest album features the Dave Bilbrough song *The Waves Are Breaking (To The Ends Of The Earth)*. David shares a similar vision as Bilbrough - to embrace different cultures in the context of worship. And the work of both artists shows traces of a Paul Simon influence.

Son of a career soldier, David travelled to different countries in his formative years. When he was six, the family spent a couple of years in Fiji. 'That had a huge impact on me in terms of music, spirituality and culture,' he recalled.

'They're really into acapella singing there. If you go into a Methodist church there, they don't have any instruments - they get into these incredible harmonies.' David has been concerned about the recent troubles of that normally peaceful country.

When he turned eight, the next posting brought them to Britain. David attended Dulwich College, a school for kids from junior to senior age, who were mainly of military, political or diplomatic stock. His class was full of different nationalities - an ideal training ground for his future cross-cultural ministry.

At age nine he was asked to write his obituary as an exercise in an English lesson. 'I remember that what I put down was that I was going to be a diplomat,' said David. 'I had this real desire to travel, and cultures was my big thing.'

He sang in the school choir at the Royal Festival Hall. But most importantly, he had the opportunity to sample different cultures because of his father's work. 'A missionary

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'It's been a family of unity in itself'



heart was birthed in me because of all the travelling and experience – even though I didn't have a Christian background.'

After a few years the family returned to New Zealand. David had some music inside him that had to get out - possibly from his Celtic heritage (his grandfather was from North Wales) - and in his teenage years started playing in bands.

However, those islands were about to be hit by a new sound - the guitar-toting rock and roll evangelists of the Jesus Movement. 'Friends took me along to concerts by Larry Norman, Randy Stonehill and Phil Keaggy,' David remembered.

STREET CRED

'That had a huge impact on me. I recognised they were great musicians, but Larry's tough message cut me to the core, and I was impressed by Randy's humour - that he could be so zany as a Christian was comforting. And Phil's musicianship blew me away.

'You could be a brilliant musician, you could be a nutcase and you could have street cred. All that played a big part in my getting saved.' At 16 David became a committed Christian.

Adulthood brought potential opportunities in diplomacy and civil engineering. David actually studied for the latter, but realised it wasn't where his heart was. So like many other New Zealanders and Australians, he sought a form of escape in the guise of 'overseas

experience' - and returned to the UK in 1986.

'I knew I could get away with that, because that was the norm,' he said. 'But while I was here, I got baptised, left my work and started to sing full time. I never turned back.' He said 'goodbye' to engineering and 'hello' to music in 1988.

Folks back home were disappointed that he hadn't pursued a supposedly stable career (though strangely enough, a crisis hit the engineering industry in the 80s). David stayed in Britain and met a young Scots woman Liz, who's now his wife. He'd started a new life.

'When I arrived in England, someone mentioned to me that if I looked out for adverts for Greenbelt, I would find bands looking for players at the last minute.' David did just that, and answered some ads in the 'musicians' music paper' *Melody Maker*.

He linked up with a band in Hextable, Kent - and ended up finding a spiritual home in a local Anglican church. 'I thought God had drawn me there for the band, but I realised it was for the church. They gave me tremendous grounding in things of the Spirit, and helped me when I took that step out of a career and into a music ministry.'

David met charismatic leader Gerald Coates and worship musician Noel Richards. 'They've been a very positive influence,' he said. He attended a worship forum that Noel

used to run, and moved to the same church at Cobham in 1989.

He also got to know Delirious? lead guitarist Stu Garrard, who was then playing in a band called Treasure Park in North London. They were an up-and-coming outfit, with a loyal following but no recording contract. David became their lead vocalist.

A big fan of top Australian rock band INXS, David loved to play the role of the rock and roll frontman. If you caught any of the Treasure Park gigs, you might have even seen David throwing mike stands around and jumping into the crowd (not quite the thing he's done since with Graham Kendrick's band!)

ABUSIVE HECKLERS

As well as appearing at Christian events like Spring Harvest, Treasure Park ran the rock gauntlet of playing at famous London venues such as The Marquee - sometimes before hecklers. 'I remember playing at The Mean Fiddler,' said David, 'and getting a lot of abuse from the audience.'

He didn't like the angry reaction that produced inside him. He now feels he was denying a sensitivity - and an ability to be a peacemaker and reconciler - that God had placed in him.

'When I met Stu G I recognised there was a calling on him,' he said. 'He had that edge to him which cuts it in the marketplace. I think God had a different path for me, and it took me a while to realise that.'

David sang at their last concert at Greenbelt. Stu G went on to help form Delirious?, and a key phase was also about to begin for David. He was to sing alongside one of the best known worship leaders in the world.

David joined Graham Kendrick's band in 1990, and became based at his South London offices. He has provided backing vocals on most of Graham's albums since 1988. David admitted it's been a major challenge to work with one of the great pioneers of contemporary worship.

On one occasion, Graham handed his guitar to him - without warning, in the middle of a worship event in Russia! 'It was him saying, "one day you're going to be in this place, and this is how hard it is"! It was such an incredible learning curve.'

David felt that Graham's band - made up of musicians and singers from different churches and traditions - was outworking the very thing that was on his heart. 'It's been a family of unity in itself. And it's been real, not superficial.'

One particular memory was also of a concert in Russia - at Nevsky Prospect, St Petersburg, at the end of 1990. 'It was literally when they were changing from the old system into the new,' said David.

'I can't remember what we sang - except for the fact that we immediately pulled a crowd round us. Very much in our minds was the realisation that a few years before, we would've

been arrested for doing that. It was a sense of, "goodness me, we're getting away with it!"

'Some soldiers joined the crowd and were listening to us. They just began to weep when they heard the music. Their lives were crumbling. They didn't know if they were going to get paid or fed. But they were drawn to this gospel music and message. I'll never forget that.'

'It makes it all worthwhile. You realise you're part of something historic. That's just priceless.'

David took control of his own destiny again in 1996. Finland, Northern Ireland, France and Czechoslovakia opened up to his own worship ministry. Of his experience of Ulster he said, 'It's such a different kind of role to lead a mix of denominations in worship.'

'I just seem to be that kind of conciliator, who draws people together. I find it a very tough role, because it often means you have to compromise on what you'd really like to do. You have to find a way that draws people rather than divides. It's extremely challenging.'

LONELY WALK

In Finland, he works within the Lutheran tradition. 'Immediately you stumble on all kinds of issues - even just by strumming a guitar in church,' he explained. 'It's all about trying to honour the tradition but bringing in the new. It's a very lonely walk sometimes.'

Yet he has noticed how even within the Lutheran Church, worship bands have started to emerge. 'It's exciting to see them leading worship and writing songs in Finnish - rather than just translating English songs,' he pointed out.

Amid all the challenges, David wants to continue working across a variety of different churches and cultures. That's reflected in the fact that he's not only travelled but also sung 'live' in various languages - including German, Russian, Fijian, Maori, Spanish, Swahili, Finnish and French!

He is now worship leader at Ichthus Christian Fellowship in South London, a church that he and Liz have attended for the past seven years. It's fitting that for someone with such a missionary heart, David should base himself at a church with a strong missions focus. He also keeps an openness to other traditions.

'I really never had denominational roots,' said David. 'That helps me in the role God has given me. People don't tend to label me. I like the fact that I'm not waving a particular banner. I just want to be known as Jesus' ambassador.'

Clive Price

Clive Price is Editor of Worship Together magazine, and contributes to a number of magazines in the UK and USA. David Lyle Morris' website can be found at www.mp3.com/davidlylemorris

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