

Q&A: Tori Kelly makes mother of an album

New mom to bring new songs to Buffalo, joining Forrest Frank for show at KeyBank Center

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It's hard to believe that the same Tori Kelly who recently performed on the mammoth "American Idol" season finale, toured Europe last summer with Ed Sheeran, and lent vocals to the billion-dollar "Sing" film franchise, once had to self-record and release songs online just to be heard.

After falling short on "Star Search," "America's Most Talented Kid" and "American Idol," Kelly was on her own. So, she learned to play guitar, built a fanbase on YouTube, and ultimately landed a record deal with Capitol after about a decade of honing her skills.

Now, 11 years after her major label introduction, Kelly is declaring "God Must Really Love Me" following an even better debut – that of her first-born child last November.

It was an unusual pregnancy for Kelly, who just two years prior made national news for a weeklong, blood-clot-related hospitalization. The Platinum-selling, three-time-Grammy-Award-winning singer said she felt euphoric and giddy while Zayden was in her womb. She booked studio time while on the road and made a concerted effort to capture her special season – even if that meant keeping so-called vocal imperfections in for the sake of authenticity. Kelly is also sharing Zayden's voice and a snippet of his birth on the new album.

"Before the baby was born I'd tried to work on as many songs as possible, because I thought maybe I wouldn't want to write once I was in mom mode," Kelly said in her bio. "But then everything just hit me at once, which I think had to do with feeling so overwhelmed with love in this new chapter of my life. Right away I knew what I needed to say and exactly how I wanted it to sound, and by January the whole record was done."

A musical masterclass, "God Must Really Love Me" showcases what defines Kelly: a powerful, soulful voice; optimism for the future; and devotion to family and faith.

The joyful collection of songs will be available June 12 via Epic Records.

Just a few days prior, Kelly will accompany Forrest Frank's "The Jesus Generation" tour to Buffalo, where she'll perform at KeyBank Center on June 8.

Kelly shared more in this edited Q&A.

Q: Looking at what your team said about your work on this project, I love that it says you were cool with letting the imperfections in. I wish my im-



Tori Kelly, "God Must Really Love Me." (Album cover image courtesy of Shore Fire Media) Kelly will perform Monday, June 8, at KeyBank Center in Buffalo. Her hit songs include "Hollow," "I Was Made For Loving You," "Should've Been Us," "Nobody Love," and a collaboration with for KING & COUNTRY and Kirk Franklin called "Together." (Photo credit: Daniel Antropik // courtesy of Shore Fire Media)

perfections sounded that good! With this album, it's another reminder of what an amazing singer you are, and an amazing talent.

I want to start at the beginning because, if I had your musical ability and I had to jump through some of the hoops you did to turn your talent into a career, I might have just said, "Forget it; it's not worth it."

What is it about music, about performing and connecting with people, that made your journey and your fight worthwhile?

TORI KELLY: Wow, what a great question!

I can't really picture doing anything else, to be honest. I said this before, but I look back on my career, and I'm like, I'm so grateful for all the things I've gotten to do. I think I'm at a place now in my career where I feel like I have done so much. I obviously have this amazing, established career; and grateful I get to do shows and I have these fans, and all these things. But I also, at the same time, I feel like a new artist, kind of. I feel like there's so many things more to do, that I want to strive for, and so I feel like I'm at this kind of cool spot in my career. I kind of feel like young and old at the same time (laughs), and it's been really fun because I think it's given me this sense of freedom to not overthink anything.

You kind of touched on this, that

it's a big reason why I'm like, "You know what? Let's leave these imperfections in there; let's make it feel really lived in; and have these songs not be so perfect." I really wanted to capture the emotion and the story, and the just the essence of where I'm at in my life, stepping into motherhood and this really awesome new chapter that I'm in.

I guess, to answer your question, I think music is something I'm so grateful for because I get to live my life, and then put that into my art. It's like they're not these separate things – my work is literally connected to my actual life – which has been kind of crazy to realize that. I think I'm just now realizing that with having a baby, and then getting to just have a whole album, basically, about him, has been really special.

Q: We've always heard you have to be in a dark place or going through something bad to make great music. Clearly, we see with this project that that is incorrect. As far as learning about yourself as a musician, and as a human being, what did it feel like to be making music not during a dark time or when something bad has happened, but in one of the happiest times of your life?

TORI KELLY: That's so interesting that you touched on that, because I've been thinking about this. I think I've been in my head in the past, too,

like when I am going through just a good season, or kind of like nothing really crazy happening in my life. I've struggled with, "Ooh, are people going to relate to these feelings?" Because I obviously have sad songs, and I've gone through so many different seasons, and everything, and there's been healing and hurt, and it's all over the place.

But, like you said – I don't even think there's technically a sad song on this one at all, which is pretty new for me. But it still feels like there's this range, there's this depth, and there's these layers – and it's not all just, like, happy, happy, happy, happy, not singing about anything. It's like, I'm really getting into (things).

There's a song, "Hurts So Good," where it is a love song, but I talk about the highs and lows of being with someone for so long, and telling them you're never leaving; you're in it for the long haul.

There's songs about my son, and then I sing about my faith on this album. I wanted to do that again on this album. I have my gospel album but, on this project, I wanted to just incorporate singing about God and how he's been in my life.

It's the first time that I've really just said, "OK, let's just do whatever. Tori, do whatever is happening right now – don't overthink it. These are the songs that are coming out of you, so they must be for a reason." And it feels really, really good, because I feel like I've sort of taken off this pressure to be a certain thing, and just allow myself to celebrate this joyful season and give myself permission to be happy, basically.

It's been a really cool thing to step back and feel that peace, and kind of let go of any expectations. There's a lot that goes into making an album, and so it sometimes can be overwhelming. I think, with this project, I've just really felt a sense of peace the whole time, which has been pretty cool to experience.

Q: In terms of your faith and the times in your music, and in your career – and even now touring with Forrest Frank when you are sharing that a little bit more – I mean, obviously everyone's faith journey is different. You have musicians who sing about their faith all the time. You have musicians who don't ever sing about their faith. You have musicians who sing about it sometimes. So, as far as knowing how much you want to share, or what feels right, or how you're being led, what guides you as far as pressing into that and sharing with others? What makes it a time to share more or share less?

TORI KELLY: It's really interesting because I feel that, within Chris-

tian music, or even gospel music, there's different genres within even that, right? So, I think some of it for me starts with, "OK, what direction do I want to go sonically?"

For example, the gospel project that I did, I knew that I wanted it to sound like a gospel album. I knew I wanted to go to Kirk Franklin, and give you that sound; and we're going to sing about this, this and this; and it's going to be very explicitly gospel music, right? And even before that, I had some songs – I think even on my debut album – where it wasn't super explicit, but I would kind of sprinkle it in there and talk about it, and just kind of let it be this natural thing.

And then now, for me stepping into motherhood, it's this divine thing. It's this miracle that you're growing. I just could not help but connect the two. I was like, "These are the types of songs that are coming out of me. This is such a spiritual experience, having a baby."

And so, immediately, it was kind of the only place I know to go, was go to God and feel that connection in that way. I think that's just kind of what happened on this album – that's sort of just what came out. And it is new for me, I guess, singing songs that incorporate my faith, but also are still within the genre of the rest of the album.

I guess, overall, the way that I look at it is, if I'm kind of like sitting above the music, if all the songs I'm kind of like zoomed out and I'm looking down at all the songs, for me it's not really broken up. It's not like, "OK, this song is about this, and then, OK, let me make sure I put in a song about God here." For me, I sort of have this birds-eye view, and I'm just sort of like, "OK, all of this fits within the world of who I am, and what I care about, and what I believe in, and what I'm really passionate about."

And for me, this album, it's literally the three pillars I keep talking about are my faith, my husband, and me as a mother.

Q: Tell me about Forrest Frank?.

TORI KELLY: So excited!

I've known Forrest for a little bit. We met when he asked me to be on one of his songs on his last album, and it's called "Miracle Worker." He sent it to me. I had heard of him and seen him online, and saw he was just crushing it, and so good at just basically marketing himself and putting out these awesome songs – and everything was just so positive and uplifting, which I really loved. He asked me to be on this song, and I loved how the song felt – like, a little more R&B, which I'm a huge fan of. So, popped on it; it was super great; and we still haven't done it live, actually. That's something that people can maybe get a taste of at the show. ... I haven't confirmed that yet, but I'm hoping we can do it live.

As far as my show, kind of what I was saying a little bit ago about just this upcoming album, singing about my faith – I think you can definitely expect some songs like that. I think you'll be able to hear some new music on this run; some of the throwbacks, maybe, that people know me for; maybe a little bit of some "Sing" – a little "Sing" on there for the "Sing" fans. So, kind of a little bit of everything.

It's sometimes a challenge to have such a short set, because you want to cram in as much as you can; but this has actually been fun to put together, because you get kind of like a snapshot of all the things that I've done up until now.

I'm really looking forward to it. It's been a little bit since I've been in the U.S. touring, too, so I'm really excited.

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