

# Kingdom Bound 2023: We Are Messengers find 'Where The Joy Is'

BY JOSHUA MALONI

GM/Managing Editor

When a kid grabs a comb to start belting out the latest rock hit, strums an air guitar or pats their hands on some pots, they're not thinking about record sales and charts. They just want to play, man – and to find a platform to share their musical talents. It's only after they've "made it" that the corporate cares start to creep into their creative process.

It's not uncommon to find a singer or music-maker, feeling somewhat stifled, throw up their hands and finally cast those cares to the wind. They rediscover the sweet spot – that position where they stop listening to outside voices and start relinking with their inner rockstar.

Despite co-writing a song, "Maybe it's Ok," in which he proclaims, "Maybe it's OK if I'm not OK // 'Cause the One who holds the world is holding onto me // Maybe it's alright if I'm not alright // 'Cause the One who holds the stars is holding my whole life," it took We Are Messengers frontman Darren Mulligan a minute to reconnect with that happy place.

Now that he has, new songs are flowing – fans are flocking to festivals to find his favorite cuts – and the Irish singer is super-jazzed with what's transpired.

Like, bopping up and down in his car, kind of happy.

Previewing songs from We Are Messengers' next full-length album, "Where The Joy Is," Mulligan said it's "Full of bangers. Absolute bangers. I was actually listening to it before I jumped on the call with you. I was just praising the Lord ... and thumping the steering wheel! (Laughs)."

Will the album chart?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Numbers are nowhere near the endgame for We Are Messengers – but it's worth noting the group has more than 400 million career streams, an airplay audience of 2.5 billion-plus, and a multi-month No. 1 Billboard hit song in "Come What May." What's more, "Image of God," "Power," "Maybe It's Ok," "Magnify," "Point To You," "Love," "Everything Comes Alive," "God With Us," "This Is Jesus" and "From Heaven To Earth (Joy To The World)" each tracked Top 10 or better.

We Are Messengers recently performed with TobyMac and Casting Crowns. They will head to the West Coast later this summer for a trek with Phil Wickham and Brandon Lake, before hitting the road this fall for a 40-city headlining tour.

First up for Buffalo-area fans is a return to Kingdom Bound.

In 2021, We Are Messengers re-

leased their seminal album, "Wholehearted." They followed that with two more collections in 2022: the seasonal "Savior" and the Irish-tinged "Hills of Tyrone."

Armed with ample songs to sing when he takes the stage on night No. 1 of Kingdom Bound, Mulligan spoke of his recent inspiration – and the longstanding admiration he feels for the Western New York Christian music festival.

"I'm genuinely delighted," he said. "Festival season is brutal – it is really hard work. But we found a way in the past few years to strip back and to do very few shows in the summer. And so, when Kingdom Bound asked us to come, it was a no-brainer. But it always will be. I will always say 'Yes' when they call because, when nobody cared about us – when nobody wanted We Are Messengers at a festival – Kingdom Bound treated us with dignity and respect. And I've never forgotten that. And so, no matter how big the band gets, or has gotten, it will always be the first festival in our list when they ask."

More of our edited Q&A follows.

**Q:** One of the things we talked about at great length (in 2022) was "Wholehearted." There was something you said to me at that time, you said your wife basically asked if it was going to be the last record you were going to make. You talked about the significance of that music – you called that the record the one you always wanted to make. Certainly, I'm sure you had the thought of, "Where do we go from here? What do we want to do from here?" You followed that up with two more collections of music. Was it easier or more challenging to get back at it, and to craft the new songs you've released since then?

**Darren Mulligan:** Yeah, it was a real challenge, in many ways.

That record was so much more successful than I thought it would be. Our first single, "Come What May," was a 15-week No. 1 song, and it's just been so well-received by the people that we love, which is regular human beings that love listening to music of a message that conveys that God is good.

The easy part of it was that I had this EP ("Hills of Tyrone") sitting in me, and these were songs that I



Darren Mulligan of We Are Messengers (Photo courtesy of Southside Entertainment)

was just writing in my living room back in Ireland here in the cabin. And I was just writing songs about my parents, about my kids, about loss and life – and everything in between.

And so, I went to the record label after "Wholehearted" and I said, "Guys, I have these songs, and I want to put them out. And yeah, they're not gonna fit on Christian radio, not even necessarily going to sound like they're all directly related to Jesus. But I just want to do it, because I need to get it out of the system."

And they were wonderful. They said, "Yeah, go do it."

And so, we got to drop an EP called "The Hills of Tyrone," which references the little place that I live in. It was just really cool. Even last night we played "Hills of Tyrone" again in the show. And to see our audience understand a very different side of us – because we're a very diverse band, musically, and even just personality-wise.

And sometimes if you just stick to the one side, the one type of thing, you can lose a good deal of joy in that. So, it helped me rediscover joy.

Literally, this week, I got the last mastering on our next full-length record ("Where The Joy Is"). It was really easy to do. This re-

cord was an absolute breeze. I decided I wasn't going to have any pressure; wasn't going to worry about what would be hit songs, or getting the audience what they need. And I just decided I wanted to make a record full of bangers. And so, it's a real up-tempo, old, contemporary, 1975-sounding record.

I don't know if it's going to be critically well received, or well received by our followers, but I really don't care. I wanted to make a record that I just wanted to put on in the car. Turn it up loud. Just good, old-fashioned, consistent rock 'n' roll record.

**Q:** As a Christian, and as an artist, is that the best place to be in to make music? The average musician – they are probably

thinking about, "How am I going to look? How is it going to play on social media?" All these other business things. But, as someone who trusts in God for guidance, on the one hand, and on the other hand as someone who is an artist at their core, just relying on your own sort of, "This is what seems right. This is what feels right. We're not going to worry about all that other stuff." Is that the best place to be from a creative standpoint?

**Darren Mulligan:** Yeah, great question, and 100% true. It is the healthiest place I've ever been in making music.

It's kind of that thin line, the fine line you walk between being creative artistically and wanting to honor your audience.

I suppose what I've given up, in that pursuit, is worrying about what happens with it.

When you're just starting out in your career, you have to worry about what happens with it, because you don't know how to put food on the table. And we've been blessed by God, and fortunate to have incredible supporters and fans all around the world, who have put us in a position where, if the record fails, that's OK. Like, if it critically fails, it's all right. It's not the end of our career. It's not the end of what we do.

I can honestly say I'm still in

that mindset. I suppose I treat every album like it's my last.

It's been a long time since I have needed applause to go to sleep.

Unfortunately, many artists get sucked into this kind of cycle of needing the applause or requiring the acclaim of people to rest at night. I don't need that anymore. God has been so good. I've got all of the applause and acclaim I ever needed.

**Q:** You're kicking off Kingdom Bound (on Monday, July 24). You've got this new, creative mindset. You've got these new songs that you're thinking about. You've got recent songs that you are also trying to get out and share with your audience. You've got quite an extensive back catalog with hit songs and deep cuts and other things that you're proud of, and the fans look forward to. So, how do you tie all this together for a setlist? What can we expect from the live show?

**Darren Mulligan:** Yeah, it changes so often.

You know, that's the funny thing. When you start playing, you don't have enough songs for a set. And now, you have too many songs for the set.

I think, for Kingdom Bound, we have found that audience is pretty rowdy and very receptive to going to very strange places with us. So, we do want to leave freedom in the set to change our mind midway through, but we'll definitely play a bunch of the hit songs that people have known for years.

But I think Kingdom Bound will be one of the first shows in America that we introduce two or three brand-new songs that have never been released, off this new record. Because it's an audience that we know; we love them; they've loved us really well. And I guess I trust them not to throw tomatoes at us (laughs). So, yeah, we'll take some risks.

We've played Kingdom Bound more than any other festival in America. I think it's our fifth time, and it doesn't feel awkward. It feels familiar; it feels normal; and in a way, that allows us to be the truest version of ourselves. So, we're gonna give you a bunch of new stuff, some of the old ones, and I'm pretty sure, at some point, I may go on a five-minute rant about something! (Laughs.)

We Are Messengers will perform at 7:30 p.m. Monday, July 24, on the Darien Lake Main Stage, as part of night No. 1 of Kingdom Bound.

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