

Jarring Success

Story by Mike Latona

Charlie Lowell couldn't have picked a better moment to contact his old buddy and bandmate, Matt Odmark, to see if he'd like to become part of Charlie's new Christian rock band.

The call arrived as Matt was taking final exams at the University of Rochester, where he was a sophomore.

"I was obviously at a bit of a low point as far as my love for school went," joked Matt in a telephone interview from Nashville with the *Catholic Courier*.

Matt decided to take Charlie up on his offer and move to Illinois in the summer of 1994. The 1992 McQuaid Jesuit High School graduate - who played together in a rock band during their teen years - were thus reunited as one-half of Charlie's band, the Jars of Clay.

The rest, as they say, is history.

The band has enjoyed a meteoric rise, logging more than 2.6 million total sales for their first two albums. The Jars' 1995 self-titled album, with sales of 1.8 million copies, is the biggest selling debut pop album in the history of Christian contemporary music. In addition, that album contains the crossover hit "Flood," which reached *Billboard* magazine's "Hot 100" top 40 and was also a top-10 alternative rock song.

And earlier this year, the Jars of Clay saw their 1997 follow-up album, *Much Afraid*, earn a Grammy Award as the best Pop Contemporary Gospel album.

"Never before in the 25-year-history of contemporary Christian music has an unknown act emerged with such immediate fury and success as has Jars of Clay," wrote Jerry Williams in the summer 1997 edition of *New Music*, a magazine that previews new Christian releases.

Matt still seems a bit stunned over the Jars' quick success.

"It's tremendously exciting," Matt said. "A lot of the songs were written on a college dorm floor."

Matt plays guitar and mandolin for the Jars, and Charlie is the keyboardist. Both 24-year-olds are also vocalists. Completing the group are Dan Haseltine, vocals and percussion; and Stephen Mason, vocals, guitar and bass.

The group derived its name from Second Corinthians 4:7 - "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."

Many of the band's lyrics tell of a human condition as fragile as clay jars, and the need to turn to God when facing struggles, Matt said. Take the chorus from the Jars' most famous song to date, "Flood":

Lift me up when I'm falling/
Lift me up I'm weak and dying/
Lift me up I need you to hold me/
Lift me up to keep me from drowning again.

And the title song from the band's second album:

I'm so much afraid/
Scared out of my mind/
By the demons I've made/
Sweet Jesus, you never ever let me go/
Oh, sweet Jesus, you never ever let me go.

Matthew Craig, a Jars of Clay fan for about a year, said he became attracted to the group because he "liked what they had to say."

"They could give me something to remember if I came into trouble," added Matthew, 13.

Matthew, a McQuaid Junior High seventh-grader, said he wasn't aware two Jars



The Jars of Clay, from left: Dan Haseltine, Steve Mason and McQuaid Jesuit High School graduates Matt Odmark, Charlie Lowell. Below, art from their debut and Grammy-winning albums.

of Clay members were from McQuaid until he walked by a "Famous McQuaid Graduates" display in the hallway last September.

Matt Odmark remarked that his group's music may not be as blunt with its message as other Christian bands.

"Our music is very much focused not only on the church at large, but also people outside the church. We try to strip away exclusive language and try not to

speak in a way that's cliched or 'Christianese,'" Matt said.

Neither does Matt feel that it's his place to preach a certain brand of Christianity.

"We're very, very firm believers that the Christian walk is a personal journey each of us must go on," Matt said.

Matt said that he and Charlie have been sensitive to varying views of Christianity since their childhood, when they attended Parkminster Presbyterian Church in the town of Chili but also went to a Catholic high school.

"I'm thankful for all the denominational exposure I had growing up. It's given me a picture of the church in the most general sense, and what it's all about," Matt said.

Their interest in Christian rock began taking root during their teen years when they were members of Simple Truth, a band that played at local dances and community gatherings. Matt noted that his and Charlie's involvement in Young Life - an ecumenical youth-ministry program - helped shape their musical path.

"The leaders really had a profound impact on us. We learned a lot about the Bible, Christianity, who Christ was," Matt remarked.

The Jars' world has expanded rapidly since then. They have been featured on covers of numerous magazines, and their "Flood" video has aired on MTV and VH-1. In addition, the band recently played in front of a crowd of 60,000 in Australia. (The Jars began their current tour March 10. Although they will not appear within Rochester diocesan boundaries, they are scheduled for concerts in Buffalo on May 5 and Albany on May 7.)

Interestingly, McQuaid teacher Bob Schwartz said he was surprised Matt and Charlie made it so big because they were not involved with musical groups at McQuaid.

"I never would have envisioned all this - never," said Schwartz, a part-time musician who recently released his own CD, *Long Time Coming*.

Charlie's father, Chuck, agreed that he didn't foresee stardom for Matt and Charlie during their Simple Truth days.

"How many people take their kid to Little League baseball thinking he'll wind up in the major leagues?" Chuck Lowell explained.

Yet Schwartz said that the Jars' music is of the highest professional level.

"They can, with their words, reach an awful lot of kids - and they're proud of that. There's not a weak song on either album," Schwartz said.

A review in an October 1997 edition of *People* magazine praised the Jars' *Much Afraid* album, saying, "They frame their Beatlesque harmonies with sharp melodies and delicately strummed acoustic guitars, occasionally peppering things up with danceable rhythms and fleeting psychedelic touches."

Why have the Jars of Clay enjoyed such crossover success? Matt suggested that the band emerged at a time when pop music needed a message of hope that such "grunge" bands as Nirvana were not providing.

"It's good music, but all that dismal stuff, the angst - the market got a little unbalanced," Matt commented.

Although all the Jars now reside in Nashville, Matt said he remains loyal to his hometown roots. He often travels to the Northeast with his new wife Kristen, an Erie, Pa., native; and he also plans to attend his sister's graduation from William Smith College in Geneva this spring.

And Schwartz - who has been battling pancreatic cancer - noted that his famous ex-students have remained in touch with him during his illness.

While such rapid success might give some rock bands the impulse to enjoy the trappings of fame, Charlie's dad emphasized that the Jars consider themselves instruments of God first - and rock stars second.

"The guys feel this is someplace the Lord has placed them," Chuck Lowell said.

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