

# Rocking the Red Letters

## A New Kind Of Musical Experience On A New Kind Of Record Company...

In 1899 a German-American journalist, printer and spiritual entrepreneur by the name of Louis Klopsch had the rather brilliant idea of printing a Bible with every word attributed to Jesus printed in shocking and thematically relevant **blood red**. Over a century later those crimson characters have been set to music; rock music no less, and just as they did in Klopsch's *Red Letter Testaments*, they jump off the page with the type of incendiary transformational power that Rock and Roll is supposed to be known for.

***The Red Letters Project*** may be the most radical and expansive musical - spiritual undertaking since its executive producer Russ Regan first 'green-lighted' *Jesus Christ Superstar*, a controversial and wildly successful "rock opera" that first dared to take Jesus to the mainstream in 1970. At the height of what *Time* and *Life Magazine* referred to as "The Jesus Movement," Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's multi-million selling rock and roll exploration of Jesus Christ's final week of physical ministry questioned whether the Savior really believed He was who He said He was. Scurrilous implications notwithstanding, *Jesus Christ Superstar* made believers of millions. Just two months after initially funding the project, however, it was taken from Regan's UNI Records roster and moved to sister label MCA. It seemed that certain elements felt Regan already had his hands full with other artists he had signed, including Neil Diamond and Elton John. Though Regan's legacy certainly ranks him among the most successful record men of all time (one estimate has him as one of only a few people directly involved with the sales of over one *billion* records,) the loss of the musical was long a sore spot in his otherwise rich resume. Little did he know that thirty-four years later a similar, but much more fully realized opportunity to present the actual words of Jesus to the world in an even more immersive multi-media experience would come walking into his life via two long-suffering veteran independent musicians.

## THE ARTISTS

Mario Canido, whose family is of Shoshone and Mayan descent, grew up on the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming where he pursued advanced piano, boxing and spirituality with fervor. He served as an altar boy and watched the local priests with great admiration. "Catholicism on the reservation is a bit different than outside of it," Canido remembers. "They allowed the Tribal Elders to speak and I got to meet priests from around the world. It gave me a different angle on it all." At the age of thirteen he wanted to become a priest. The young believer was inspired by the massive World Youth Day established by Pope John Paul II in 1984. "The Pope said 'You must first carefully prepare yourselves spiritually, in an atmosphere of faith and listening to the Word of God,'" Canido remembers of the event. "I thought that doing something like this project would bring the Word to a modern audience in a relevant way. When young people

spend half their time online or listening to their iPods and webcasts they're probably not sitting quietly reading Scripture." Eventually his interest in music overtook his interest in vocational ministry, but his love of the Bible never left him. His idea to use music in service of the Gospel laid dormant, but never died.

Years later, after scoring a record deal with Van Halen's label and building a full-time career as a touring rock and roller, Canido earned his rock chops the hard way with stints in Los Angeles and Nashville. The idea of setting the words of Christ to music came back to him while sitting at a Music City intersection hearing what he remembers as "The most foul rap music you can imagine" blasting from a car carrying two eleven year old girls. "It was totally vulgar," he says. "I wondered how I would have felt if my mom was riding in the car with me. That was the message those girls were hearing and singing along to at the top of their lungs. They didn't even know what it all meant, but there they were. That's when the concept hit me." Canido and his brother began arranging the musical interpretation of the Red Letters shortly thereafter.

The fully realized vision, however, would come when he connected with a long-time musician friend back out in LA who had ridden the rock and roll train from the heights of opportunity to the depths of self-destruction. Dennis Duncan was signed to Warner Brothers by Rob Cavallo (Sixpence None the Richer, My Chemical Romance, Alanis Morissette, Goo Goo Dolls,) right before the legendary producer discovered Green Day. Duncan's band faltered and the Kentucky native spent the next few years plying his trade with various major label artists and bands. Duncan then entered what he simply refers to as "a very dark time," personally.

His long-time friend, and one-time best man Mario found him and shared his idea for putting the words of Christ to music and Duncan jumped at the chance. Though he had carried a Bible around for years, he admitted that he never really understood it. Duncan, whose father and step-father died when he was young felt a definite yearning to find a true father. "I found that Father in the Bible," he explains with absolute sincerity. "I believed," he continues. "I wanted faith, but didn't know how to get it. I was doing everything I shouldn't do and then this project falls on my lap!" Mario moved in with Duncan during this time and the two began the long project of arranging all of the red letter passages in the *Gospel According to Matthew* to an eclectic blend of modern rock styles. The time spent reading, discussing and literally meditating on the Scriptures had a transformational effect on Duncan and created a rare type of brotherhood between the two artists. "It brought me around," he admits. "It's made me a better man." Duncan added his edgier rock style and powerful vocals to the frequently atmospheric and musically rich style Canido had started with.

## **FINDING A HOME**

Though never comfortable labeling themselves as “Christian artists,” Canido and Duncan began shopping their multi-media event project to Christian labels in Nashville, assuming that would be the logical place for a project like theirs. In the end, though, it was Russ Regan who signed them for a new type of label he had established with Kent Jacobs, a merchandising mogul who had established himself in the music business by helping to brand the Kiss Army Fanclub and guiding the merchandising campaigns that helped launch The Police, The Clash, U2 and several of the early rap acts in the 1980s. Jacobs, who describes his spiritual perspective in those days as that of a “secular Jew,” became a Christian in the late 90s after a miraculous healing from advanced cancer. Motivated to make a positive contribution to the world, Jacobs and Regan founded **Velocity Entertainment** with the vision to offer positive, inspirational and even spiritual music and entertainment to the mainstream world. When Regan discovered *The Red Letters Project* he immediately got it. “You didn’t forget me!” Regan proclaimed in thanks to God. “It sounds corny, but it’s true. Here it was, thirty-four years later and I’m given a project that I think could be more important spiritually and inspirationally than even *Jesus Christ Superstar* was.”

Inspired by genre-bending stage shows like Blue Man Group and Cirque Du Soleil as well as classic atmospheric concert experiences by bands like Radiohead and Pink Floyd, Canido and Duncan envisioned *The Red Letters Project* to be much more than just a two-disc set of music. Regan and Jacobs agree and the various multi-media aspects of the project are currently in production with plans for a massive tour of auditoriums, theaters, nightclubs and even churches in the works. “My vision,” Regan explains, “is to build *The Red Letters Project* into an incredible and fabulous road show; to make it a huge success so that the message of Jesus Christ gets out there in a spiritual and inspirational, but not ‘religious’ way.” Duncan says the goal is to create an experience that will connect the words of Christ to an audience that would likely not be interested in going into a church, though he is also excited for Christians to jump in as well.

A grass-roots distribution campaign is currently being developed with a heavy emphasis on street-level marketing, touring, internet networking and some surprising early interest from mainstream radio. Discussions are also underway with Tyndale Publishers, the creators of *The New Living Translation* of the Bible, the version Canido and Duncan chose for its readability and flow.

As *The Red Letters Project* readies for release, all involved are humbly expecting great things. “I think we have a masterpiece,” Regan proclaims with conviction. “This will be impacting people long after I’m gone.” Modern societal struggles and fears remind him of the social and political climate that gripped the world when *Jesus Christ Superstar* exploded. “In those days we were dealing with the Vietnam war. Now we have this terrible war in Iraq and I think the world is spiritually ready for this project. A lot of young people need this in their lives.”

Jacobs agrees. “We need something to get the word out there about Jesus Christ; about who the Savior is and to share His Gospel with the world. We’re not trying to tell the world what to do or who to be, but just to share the story.” Jacobs also believes that while religion, even sincere Christian evangelicalism, is still a turn-off to many people, Jesus is still very interesting. “Jewish people; Muslims; even atheists often have a lot of respect for Jesus and consider Him to be a great teacher. All this project does is present His actual words without commentary. I think everyone will find this interesting, at least.” Some of the first people to experience the music have been more than just interested. “We’ve had people weep,” Jacobs adds. “They’ve never heard anything like this and it’s impacting their life.”

The goal for Canido and Duncan is simple. “I really wish that I could be some kind of theologian,” Duncan confesses, “but I’m not cut out for that. I’m built to play music. I expect some people to come against us and say we’re trying to preach at them, but we’re not preaching anything. We’re just laying it out there. We’re playing music. If the Word permeates through you and makes you think about something, then I’ve done my job.” Canido agrees. “This is absolutely not about us as musicians, performers or even writers. This is all about the Word of God. We’re just the messengers. The last thing we want to do is preach. When people experience *The Red Letters Project* I just want to hear them say ‘Wow!’

For more information on **The Red Letters Project** visit [www.TheRedLettersProject.com](http://www.TheRedLettersProject.com). Sample audio tracks are also available at [www.MySpace.com/TheRedLettersProject](http://www.MySpace.com/TheRedLettersProject). For more information on Velocity Entertainment visit [www.Velocity.la](http://www.Velocity.la).