

= I Can Only Imagine (MercyMe song) =

" I Can Only Imagine " (sometimes shortened to " Imagine ") is a single recorded by Christian rock band MercyMe . Written and composed by Bart Millard , the song , based around a main piano track , was inspired by the death of Millard 's father and considers what it would be like in Heaven and to be standing before God . The song was first issued as a track on MercyMe 's 1999 album The Worship Project , which was released on an independent record label . The song was re-recorded and included on their 2001 major label debut album Almost There as the fifth song on the album .

" I Can Only Imagine " was released in 2001 as the album 's lead single . It gained significant airplay on Christian radio formats before crossing over to mainstream radio formats such as adult contemporary and Top 40 in late 2003 and into 2004 ; to aid in promotion to these markets , a double A side physical single (combined with " Word of God Speak ") was released in 2003 . It charted on several formats , including the Billboard Adult Contemporary (where it peaked at No. 5) and the Hot 100 (where it peaked at No. 71) . In 2002 , " I Can Only Imagine " earned the Dove Awards for ' Pop / Contemporary Recorded Song of the Year ' and ' Song of the Year ' ; Millard earned the Dove Award ' Songwriter of the Year ' at the same ceremony . The song has been certified 2x platinum RIAA for sales of over two million digital downloads , and is the first (and so far only) Christian single to reach that milestone .

= = Background = =

" I Can Only Imagine " was the debut single for United States contemporary Christian and Christian rock band MercyMe . The father of Bart Millard , the band 's vocalist , died in 1991 . Millard was 18 at the time . Millard began writing the words " I can only imagine " on items when he was thinking about his father . During the recording of the band 's 1999 independent album The Worship Project , MercyMe needed one more song to fill out the album . Millard , alone on a bus in the middle of the night , finally wrote the lyrics to the song by drawing on his thoughts and personal faith about what one would experience standing before God in Heaven . Millard attests that " [' I Can Only Imagine '] is one of the only songs I have ever written where there wasn 't any mistakes , it was just written the way it is and left at that " , and estimated that it took him only ten minutes to write the lyrics .

In writing the music for the song , however , the band faced more difficulty ; Millard noted that " at first it was a fast song ... it was all these random ideas " . Keyboardist Jim Bryson noted that " we were literally tearing down the stuff ... [Millard] and I were talking about arranging it differently and doing a slower version , so we just tried out a piano intro ... it was literally the first thing I played . It wasn 't anything to do with me , I think it was just a God thing . [Millard] said ' here it is , this is what 's going to happen ' , and we laid the song down in about five minutes . " At that time , the other MercyMe members were Robby Shaffer on drums and percussion , Nathan Cochran on bass guitar and Michael Scheuchzer on guitar . This line-up recorded the first version of the song for The Worship Project . In 2006 , it was included in the ' Platinum Edition ' of Almost There .

= = Composition = =

" I Can Only Imagine " is a ballad with a length of four minutes and eight seconds . The song is set in the key of E major and has a moderately slow tempo of 80 beats per minute with a vocal range from B3 ? G ? 5 . The song opens up with only a piano , and builds up to include guitar and drums . Millard is credited with both the lyrics and music to the song . The song was produced by Pete Kipley , who had worked with MercyMe previously as well as with artists including Rebecca St. James , Phil Wickham and Lincoln Brewster .

The lyrics to the song are based around the narrator wondering what it will be like in Heaven and to be standing before God . Regarding this theme , Millard explained to Fox News that " I was always told that if he could choose , he would rather be in Heaven than here with me . As a Christian I believed that , but as an 18-year-old it was a little hard to swallow . So the questions in

the song came from me asking God what was so great about Him that my dad would rather be there . "

= = Release and promotion = =

" I Can Only Imagine " was re @-@ recorded for their major @-@ label debut record Almost There and released as its lead single in 2001 . The album was recorded in various locations : Ivy Park , The Indigo Room , Paradise Sound and IBC Studios . The single gained radio airplay on some contemporary Christian formats ; by November , it peaked at number @-@ one on the Radio & Records Christian AC format and in the top twenty of the Radio & Records Christian CHR chart .

In 2003 , a Dallas mainstream radio station , 100 @.@ 3 Wild @-@ FM , first played the song on its morning show , The Fitz Radio Program . They had responded to a caller 's repeated requests and the urgings of the program 's producer , Todd Sheppard . The song soon became the most requested and most played song on the station . After hearing the song played on the station , Millard called @-@ in and spoke with the crew ; MercyMe then came in and played the song live .

As other stations around the country caught on , MercyMe 's label , INO Records , partnered with Curb Records . They marketed the single to wider audiences , such as Top 40 radio . In September , INO and Curb also released a double A @-@ side physical single , " I Can Only Imagine / Word of God Speak " . The latter track was co @-@ written by Millard with the band 's producer , Kipley . Eventually , the song cracked into secular charts , including the Billboard Hot 100 and the Hot Adult Contemporary Tracks charts .

= = Impact = =

MercyMe did not expect " I Can Only Imagine " to gain mainstream success , in part due to its explicit references to Jesus and Heaven . Millard noted that the band joked around about " the top five songs never to cross over , and they had included " I Can Only Imagine " on that list . Millard also believed some radio stations were playing the song to prove it could not succeed on mainstream radio . The song had a significant effect on the band 's musical image ; in an interview , Millard commented that " We were a rock band when we started 11 years ago . But we kind of became the ' adult contemporary poster child ' when ' I Can Only Imagine ' took off " .

= = Music video = =

A music video was released for " I Can Only Imagine " . Millard recalled the video 's inspiration : " I just kept seeing all these people holding picture frames [at MercyMe concerts] that are empty because we all carry these people with us in some way . I 've had so many people after a show pull out a picture of someone they 've lost . These people embrace these photos and I just thought how can we tap into that " . The video features everyday people as well as several music artists including Michael Tait , Tammy Trent , Bob Herdman , and Jesse Katina , each holding an empty picture frame to signify their loss of a loved one ; as the video progresses , they are holding pictures of their loved ones including Millard with his father 's photograph .

The video opens with a shot of an empty room and a chair , shifting to show a young boy climbing up a flight of stairs . The camera then shifts to the band before returning to the boy , now in an attic which is filled with many empty picture frames . The video alternates between shots of the boy and the band before shifting to individual shots of other people , each holding an empty picture frame . As the other instruments join in , the camera comes back to the band , focusing on them before returning to shots of the people , whose picture frames now contain pictures of deceased relatives . At the end of the video , the camera returns to the boy , now running down a street with an empty frame , climaxing with him lying down in a field with the empty frame .

= = Reception = =

= = = Critical response = = =

Critical reception for " I Can Only Imagine " was positive . Steve Losey of Allmusic commented that " [the song] is a passionate piano @-@ driven ballad . The song considers what it would be like to be in the presence of God . Delivered with conviction , the song is emotionally compelling " . Jesus Freak Hideout 's reviewer Kevin Chamberlin felt " The lyrics for the song are amazing . If you haven 't listened to the lyrics , because you 're afraid of hearing pop music , get over it and listen to it . " Kevin McNeese of NewReleaseTuesday commented that " The definite highlight on [Almost There] is the worship / ballad ' I Can Only Imagine ' ... The song starts out with just piano that instantly invokes chills and builds dynamically into a powerful display of drums and guitar . But what makes the song are the lyrics , penned by Bart Millard himself . The song speaks about that day that we all dream about when we finally meet Jesus ... It 's a song that can 't be listened to with eyes open " .

= = = Chart performance = = =

" I Can Only Imagine " debuted on the Billboard Hot 100 for the chart week of 11 October 2003 at No. 76 . The song peaked at No. 71 for two weeks and spent 16 non @-@ consecutive weeks on the Hot 100 . On the Adult Contemporary chart , " I Can Only Imagine " debuted at No. 29 for the chart week of 23 May 2003 , with an eventual peak of No. 5 for the chart week of 8 September 2003 ; in all , " I Can Only Imagine " spent 30 weeks on the chart .

On the Adult Top 40 chart , " I Can Only Imagine " debuted at No. 39 for the chart week of 9 August 2003 and reached a peak position of No. 27 , holding that spot for three consecutive weeks ; in all , the song spent 26 weeks on the chart . On the Mainstream Top 40 chart , the song debuted at No. 37 for the chart week of 12 July 2003 , reaching an eventual peak of No. 33 . On the Country Songs chart , the song debuted at No. 58 for the chart week of 27 December 2003 , reaching an eventual peak of No. 52 , which it held for two weeks . According to Mike Curb on the Curb Records website , " I Can Only Imagine " also peaked at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 Singles Sales chart for 10 weeks , No. 1 on the Radio & Records Christian AC chart for two weeks , and No. 15 on the Christian CHR chart .

In April 2010 , " I Can Only Imagine " was certified platinum by the RIAA , signifying sales of over 1 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 digital downloads . It is the first single by any artist in the Christian music genre to go platinum . The song was certified 2x platinum in 2014 .

= = = Awards and accolades = = =

" I Can Only Imagine " earned two GMA Dove Awards in 2002 ; ' Pop / Contemporary Recorded Song of the Year ' and ' Song of the Year ' . Millard also won ' Songwriter of the Year ' at the same ceremony . In November 2009 , the song was played on board Space Shuttle Atlantis as a wake @-@ up call for Barry E. Wilmore during STS @-@ 129 .

= = Other versions = =

The original version of " I Can Only Imagine " was a track on MercyMe 's 1999 independent release The Worship Project . In August 2006 , both an acoustic and live form (as well as the original 1999 version) were included in the ' Platinum edition ' of Almost There . MercyMe recorded a version of the song for their iTunes Originals album . In 2009 , two further variants were included on their compilation album 10 ; a ' symphony version ' featuring the London Symphony Orchestra , and a live version .

" I Can Only Imagine " has also been covered by several artists . In 2002 Amy Grant released a reworked version of the song (titled " Imagine " and paired with " Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus ") on her album , Legacy ... Hymns and Faith . In 2003 , Jeff Carson and Kathryn Scott each issued variants of the song ; Carson 's version peaked at No. 50 on the Country Songs chart . In 2005

Wynonna Judd issued her form of the song ; while in 2007 Emerson Drive provided theirs . The song was covered again in 2010 by Marie Osmond and in 2013 by gospel artist Tamela Mann .

The song was performed live by Garwin Dobbins , a man struggling with fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva , a crippling disease referred to as Stone Man 's syndrome , in which the body 's repair mechanism replaces muscle with bone , causing many joints to become permanently frozen in place . Dobbins , who died in 2004 , sang the song on a broadcast of Austin Awakening , accompanied by pastor Randy Phillips of Phillips , Craig and Dean . Footage of the performance was featured in the finale of the Trevor Glass documentary " Suffer the Children . " There is also a German version " Ich kann nur davon träumen " .

= = Track listing = =

CD release

" I Can Only Imagine " ? 4 : 08 (Bart Millard)

" Word of God Speak " ? 3 : 07 (Peter Kipley , Millard)

= = Release history = =

= = Charts and certifications = =