

## Mike Farris

Music is a beacon. The power of melodies, rhythms and lyrics illuminate a guiding path that takes us through a journey of revelation and preservation. Disciples are welcome. That healing door is always open.

Mike Farris walks through every day.

Singer-songwriter Farris at 44 is a much different man than he was at 21, when he had already endured a near-fatal drugs and alcohol overdose. The former leader of boozy, swaggering boogie-rock band Screamin' Cheetah Wheelies took control of his life, found spirituality, embraced sobriety and emerged with a Grammy Award for his sixth solo effort, 2014's *Shine for All the People*, in the Best Roots Gospel Album category.

"It all goes back to the music that moves me, lifts me up, encourages me," said Farris by phone from his home in Nashville. "It was clear to me that this music was from a unique place. This was to me a gift from God to the people."

*Shine for All the People* brims with a rousing, blues-and-rock-drenched brand of southern gospel. The record is soulful, authentic, and lifted to the heavens by Farris' stirring vocal performances on choice cuts such as "Mercy Now," "River Jordan," "Something Keeps Telling Me" and "The Lord Will Make a Way Somehow."

Farris will showcase *Shine for All the People* during a concert performance Friday, May 1, 2015 at 7 p.m. at Central Christian Church, 2611 Wesley Street in Greenville, Texas. Tickets are \$15 at the door or \$10 per person for groups of ten or more, available at [www.outhousetickets.com](http://www.outhousetickets.com) and at American National Bank of Texas in Greenville.

Central Christian Church is the perfect venue for Farris' stirring songs, given the church's Late Gothic Revival architecture and its inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Central Christian Church's present sanctuary was completed in 1899, making it the oldest church structure remaining in Greenville.

Spiritual music is now Farris' artistic cornerstone. He calls it "so powerful that it went on to shape the music that the entire western world is listening to today. The music is a healing salve, helps them cope, gets them through, and gives them hope. I just decided to make the music that I love."

Four years of sobriety led Farris to that musical mountain. He was a troubled youth whose father had skipped out on his family when Farris was a young boy. Farris' mother did all she could to feed five boys. But Farris grew up with no vision, no direction, and no sense of belonging. Drugs, alcohol, an overdose, and even a later dependency on prescription pain killers finally pointed Farris to successful rehab.

"It clears your mind to focus," said Farris about sobriety. "Otherwise your whole world is focused on trying to score. When people make the decision to be a better human being God rewards us immensely. He gives us clarity. I gained a vision of what I want to do, what makes me happy, what gives most joy. The goal is for someone who hears it to make that decision."

He is now vindicated. The husband and father felt the love and encouragement from his peers, including luminaries Rodney Crowell, Mary Gauthier, Emmylou Harris and Marty Stuart, when he took him that Grammy. It was perhaps the ultimate sign of approval, not only because a Grammy is the most prestigious honor in the music industry, but also because it capped years of personal and professional transformation.

"The most important thing for me is the people who supported you and believed in you even in times when you didn't believe in you," said Farris. "For all those people who supported you for all those years, it gave me more joy to see how they felt about it and how excited they were about it. It was God's way of showing you something, a peak at a wonderful view from the mountain."

He was blinded during the Screamin' Cheetah Wheelies days. Farris founded the Wheelies in the early '90s. He was a self-taught guitarist with a yearning to find his true calling in life. But Farris soon got caught up in the grips of major label pressures, next big thing proclamations and too much rocking and partying.

“I was a young man with no vision whatsoever, just drive and raw talent,” said Farris. “That whole run with that band was a lost boy trying to figure it out on his own. I carried every success and every failure on my shoulders. But that got me here.”

By 2002 Farris had gone solo with an independent album titled *Goodnight Sun*. He created a buzz with his second solo outing, 2007's *Salvation in Lights*, a critically acclaimed effort that positioned him as a roots gospel artist with promise. A couple of live concert albums and an EP followed as Farris coped with two ruptured discs, back surgery and the death of his cherished longtime manager Rose McGathy. He became hooked on prescription pain killers, and then finally emerged newly clean and sober four years ago.

Music is a beacon, now more than ever. Farris relinquished his ego and embraced songs by others (Mary Gauthier, Blind Willie McTell, J.B. Lenoir and the Reverend C.J. Johnson) during the recording of *Shine for All the People*.

“I was not letting ego and pride get in the way. I've always been more about honoring the process, the music. I don't care who wrote what. It's what I feel in my heart is the right song for me. Something keeps telling me to go on became a mantra for me. It was this amazing moment of humility.”

And Mike Farris again walks through that healing door.

*By Mario Tarradell*