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“I didn't set out to be  
the first openly gay athlete  
of a major American team  
sport. But I'm happy to start  
the conversation.”


– Jason Collins



# AMY GRANT In Her First Gay Press Interview

“When you don't understand  
something, you can either  
default to judgment or you  
can default to compassion.”





# HEART IN MOTION

## A Conversation With Christian Music Legend Amy Grant

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

A call from Amy Grant started as these promo chats usually do. Hellos were exchanged, small talk was made and questions about her first studio album of all-new material in 10 years, “How Mercy Looks From Here,” were answered.

Then we shifted into territory the most successful Christian music artist of all time, now 52, has never spoken about publicly since hitting the scene in the '70s with her spiritual pop, before “Heart in Motion” turned her into a crossover success.

During her first gay press interview, and for an entire hour, the Grammy winner reflected – with her usual sincerity and thoughtfulness – on her loyal gay fan base, how she reconciles Christianity and homosexuality, her “compassion” for gay marriage and the unforgettable dinner she shared with out ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero.

### How are you, Amy?

Honestly, my brain is so rattled today.

### There's a lot going on in the world right now, especially with the Boston Marathon bombing and the Texas plant explosion.

There is a lot going on, yes. I just want to go somewhere and sit and be very still. I just did, with the band, a kind of unplugged performance for SiriusXM Radio. It was the first time I have sung some of those songs for an audience and, you know, you can create muscle memory with a song. You just work on your technique and then it becomes like muscle memory. But the first couple of times you do it, it engages all the emotions around the song – and I just kept getting choked up.

### Which songs from the album were you performing?

The first one was “How Mercy Looks From Here,” and with all the stuff going on I could hardly get the song out. I was going, “Well, great, they’ll be playing this over and over on XM.” So, there were the nerves of this being the first time performing those songs for anybody. I guess I have felt emotionally drained, but you’re right – it’s because of what’s been going on. We’re all connected.

### How does this new album reflect your life at this point?

Photo: Jim Wright

It's funny, being 52 and putting a record out, I have felt this incredible freedom. It feels like this is going to be the least required of me as a person to sell the songs. As a woman, when you're younger, so much of it has to do with looking pretty, doing a video and wearing the right clothes, because a lot of music is visual.

But there is real freedom in going, "I never have to worry about what I'm going to look like in a bikini again." Not that I ever looked good in one, but I would feel weird even just putting one on, because I'm old ... er. Older! (Laughs) You sort of go, "Whew. That pressure's not going to be there." And I feel that way about the music. To me, it feels essentially about the message of the songs and not even a reflection of me. It just feels like collective life experience.

**I know you have a thing for eating chips in the studio because the oil coats your throat. How many bags of Lay's potato chips did you go through while recording "How Mercy Looks From Here"?**

It was funny, because (producer) Marshall (Altman), who I had never worked with before, we did a lot of preproduction work. I knew him from (working with) Natasha Bedingfield. And when we started comparing notes, and when I made a request to make sure we have Lay's potato chips, he came around the corner wide-eyed and he said, "I didn't think about it until you said that. This is part of urban legend that this started with you." I said, "Well, I don't know if it started with me, but all those early days up at Caribou Ranch, where it was so dry, that's when I started doing it." Marshall said, "You don't go to a studio if they don't have a bowl of potato chips." And I laughed my head off. I said, "Well, it works; the whole world should do it!"

**When the biggest Christian music artist of all time is doing gay press, you know we've come a long way. Were you kept at bay from gay press beforehand, earlier in your career?**

It never came up.

**But you have obviously had a big gay following for quite sometime. Why have gay people connected to you in such**

### profound ways?

All of us sometimes feel disenfranchised or, for whatever reason, like we're just on the periphery or marginalized. People feel that for all kinds of reasons, and by the time you've lived any amount of life, I think anybody has had that experience somewhere. I remember doing concerts back in the early '80s and going shopping with some of the singers that I was working with and one of them, Donna McElroy, had to get some makeup – and she's African-American – and I said, "Hey, I'll meet you back here." I ran my errands and I came back and said, "Are you done?" She said, "No one's waited on me."

Everybody is outside of some circle, but what I've always wanted to do is have a message of honesty and welcoming, and being willing to say this is the good, bad and the ugly. This is who I am. And if I'm saying that about myself, it's like, jump in, the water's fine. So I love that. I love that people connect to my music.

**“The journey of faith is just being willing and open to have a relationship with God. And everybody is welcome. Everybody.”**

**At this point in your career, are you at all concerned about people passing judgment on you for talking to gay press?**

We all ultimately need to know that we're loved, and I think it would be really crazy if you said, "I'm not going to talk to this group of people because someone's looking on that's not a part of the conversation and might have an opinion about it." I mean, my whole life has been that. (Laughs) It takes all of our energy to navigate whatever road we're on. What's interesting is, this last year I was invited on Monday mornings to go to a woman's house – also a songwriter, also a singer – and just have some time of quiet stillness all together. But her house wasn't even quiet. There were workers there sometimes, or there was nowhere to get that was quiet.

As we were sitting there trying to get quiet, she said, "It never gets still, and so I'm not gonna get all rankled in my head. I'm just gonna say, 'Well, there's the noise of the person next door blowing off their driveway with that

really loud motor. There it is. There's the sound of sirens going up and down the street.'" She said, "When we learn to observe without judgment, then we have the ability to observe and learn, or to observe and be." And I said, "Do you know how exhausting it is to observe with judgment all the time? It's just exhausting." I have thanked her many times. We could all stand to hear that.

**You came from a fairly strict religious upbringing, but it sounds like there's been an evolution in the way you see people.**

Well, I don't know. When you say strict, that's interesting. What do you mean by that? (Laughs) I mean, we went to church every Sunday morning, every Sunday night, every Wednesday night.

**You're right. I should say diligently religious.**

Yeah. I remember when we moved to Texas and my parents went to this really, I guess, conservative church – a Church of Christ – and something incredible was happening within that church community. I remember seeing this transformation in my mom and dad. I was old enough to remember that. What I remember about our home after that was that it was welcoming ... to everybody.

**To black people? To gay people?**

Just to people.


**Did you ever feel that you had to reconcile your Christian faith with your acceptance of homosexuality?**

That's not my life experience. In the same way, if you put my shoes on, you would go, "I thought this experience was going to be one way and it was totally different." None of us has any idea what somebody's life experience is like.


**Do you remember the first gay person you knew? Did you have a close gay friend?**

Absolutely. But my first: maybe college. Someone might have just seemed theatrical or, I don't know, effeminate, but when I was in high school – I graduated in '78 – I had friends in high school who eventually said, "I'm living a gay lifestyle," but they didn't say it then. People were very private about their sexuality, period. Maybe not everywhere, but I just don't remember,

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## ► Amy Grant

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“I’m exploring this, I’m exploring that.”

### **When did you first know you had a gay fan base?**

Probably by the time I was 18.

### **How did you know? Did a fan tell you his or her coming-out story?**

No. Just from meeting people. I don’t know. I guess I’m kind of going, that was a long time ago. I’m 52. (Laughs) I’ve never even thought about it. It’s like saying, “There’s gray-haired people in the crowd, too.” If people come to my shows, this is what they say: “Wow, there are people of all ages and lifestyles in your crowd.” That’s what they always say. But then someone will come up and say, “You know, I saw a guy with a boa on,” and I’ll say, “Oh yeah, yeah, I’ve always had a big gay following.” (Laughs)

To me, I don’t give it a second thought. I remember the first time someone from the crew said, “I smell pot in the back of the crowd,” and I went, “Well, fantastic! Yay!” I’m so glad that just *people* are coming.

### **From photos I’ve seen and conversations I’ve heard, you seem to have established some close relationships with people in the Gay Friends of Amy Grant group on Facebook over the years. Can you describe your relationship with them?**

When you’ve done something for a long time, there is a great familiarity that comes over the years. I will say that I have a couple of friends that I made – just because they came to shows for a long time – and I figure we must have some things in common because, of all the music we’re all attracted to, at least we share this music in common.

### **Weren’t you invited to perform at the wedding of one of your gay fans but couldn’t due to your schedule?**

I was invited. I was honored to be invited. I have to tell you: Anytime somebody asks me to perform at a wedding, I say, “I do not have a good track record.” (Laughs) A lot of the weddings I’ve performed at, the marriages have ended poorly.



Check out writer Chris Azzopardi’s personal reflection on this interview on page 19

### **I recall seeing you perform with Melissa Etheridge for Lifetime’s “Women Rock!” special in 2000 and thinking, as a teenager struggling with his sexuality, “She’s performing with an openly lesbian performer; she’s throwing her gay fans a bone.”**

You know what’s so interesting, even when I was discovering my own sexuality and meeting people that had a different experience, I didn’t categorize then, and I don’t categorize right now. It makes me realize that I don’t have any idea of what it would feel like every moment of my life to go somewhere and feel judged.

### **But you have felt judged, right? Judged for getting divorced. Judged for your pop crossover, even.**

No, no. Do people from a distance have an opinion? Yeah, that’s human nature to have an opinion. Whatever was going on in a rag magazine, or whatever someone was saying behind my back or in a heated conversation, I was never in that circle. I wasn’t part of that conversation. I never, ever pursued one chat room. If there was an article or some argument – “I can’t believe you’re doing this” – I just never pursued it because I thought, “We don’t understand each other.”

There are a lot of times that I wind up in situations that I do not see eye to eye with somebody. And it doesn’t help to throw gas on the fire. Clearly they’re going to have their opinion. Carry on. And I’m gonna go do what I’m gonna go do.

### **I know you are not a political person.**

Yeah, I’m not.

### **So how do you respond to people when they ask you about your feelings on gay marriage?**

In the same way that I did not tell one person who I voted for. I don’t. I never talk about anything like that. I did tell Vince (Gill, her husband) the day after the election. (Laughs)

But I think my response is, I have had so many occasions in my life where I have felt really strongly about something – but that feeling has changed. Those feelings change about different situations, and so because I’m a public person – and because I want always to bring people together – I really do say this is a world that’s unfamiliar to me and I am always trying to observe with compassion.

### **This isn’t a cut-and-dry issue for you, then.**

Well, nothing is cut-and-dry. You know, one of the most fascinating dinners I’ve ever spent sitting next to somebody I had not met was at a large function with my family. We were all seated with place cards; it was a large group and I introduced myself to the fellow next to me. It was Anthony Romero (executive director of the ACLU). I mean, we didn’t line up our views; I just said, “Oh my goodness.” And he said, “I think they probably thought this was going to be very funny having us sit next to each other.” (Laughs)

I just said, “Tell me about your life.” He asked me the same thing. He told me good things about his job and hard things about his job. It was two human beings that have had very different lifestyles sitting next to each other and sharing life. Given 10 choices, would Anthony and I choose the same things? Maybe so. Maybe not. But I felt so changed by that. And what I really felt was, well ... I ... (pauses)

### **What did you feel?**

Well, I kept his card for a long time, and I hoped that our paths would cross again. I felt a lot of compassion for his parents, first-generation immigrants, and he described his childhood and what it was like. I went, “This makes

total sense that he has invested his life coming to the aid of the people in his world that are disenfranchised because, for a whole different set of reasons, his parents were marginalized.”

### **And you found that inspiring?**

Yes. You know what, we all face challenges in our life that we didn’t anticipate, and the most important thing is that we not face them alone. To me, if there’s anything that comes out of this conversation, in the same way that a relationship cannot be nurturing if it’s competitive, it’s this: When you don’t understand something, you can either default to judgment or you can default to compassion. Those take you down completely different roads.

### **Are you speaking about yourself?**

Yeah, and that’s really ... ahh, I’m just talking about life in general. This is interesting because I have never done an interview where it feels every question is saying, “Tell me I’m OK.” That’s what feels like the underlying energy behind the questions, and I’m just going, “That’s a powerful kind of energy” – and for different reasons. Maybe not sexuality. Because that’s what every person’s crying out for. Anyway, sometimes a good night’s sleep helps for more concise answers.

It’s just that we’re living lives that are different from each other. It’s like two people sitting at a dinner table having a long conversation. If you and I were facing each other at a different table and we walked away and somebody asked us to describe where we were, my entire view was behind your head. I mean, I’m gonna describe the place differently than you. That’s just true about all of life and really, I’m trying to listen and learn and in a way have a great opportunity to try to understand the fan base that comes to a show. I’m even more glad they feel welcome. Even more glad after this. Can I say one thing?

### **Of course.**

I know that the religious community has not been very welcoming, but I just want to stress that the journey of faith brings us into community, but it’s really about one relationship. The journey of faith is just being willing and open to have a relationship with God. And everybody is welcome. Everybody.