

## KENNEDY CENTER HONORS

Amy Grant conquered Christian music. That was just her first act.

Grant will become the first contemporary Christian music star to receive the Kennedy Center Honors. The award caps a traumatic year for the beloved singer.

By [Emily Yahr](#)

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### *NASHVILLE*

When Amy Grant is awarded the [Kennedy Center Honors](#) on Sunday, it will celebrate the career of a superstar who broke barriers in [contemporary Christian music](#) before she crossed over to pop and mainstream audiences and established herself an artist beloved across genres and generations. The lifetime achievement is a natural occasion for reflection, which makes it incredibly bittersweet that when it comes to the most recent significant event in her life, Grant can't remember anything. She doesn't remember how she fell off her bicycle [that day](#) in late July when she was riding with a friend at Nashville's Percy Warner Park. She was unconscious for about 10 minutes and doesn't remember her nearly week-long hospital stay, where she was treated for a concussion and a shoulder injury that would eventually require surgery, along with cuts and abrasions. Her doctors said if she hadn't been wearing a helmet, it could have been much worse.

She's not exactly sure about her first memory after the accident. She recalls her husband of 20-plus years, country music icon Vince Gill, and their family and friends gathering at her home, but it's all a blur. Really, her main takeaway is the slowdown that came during her recovery.

#### The search for the perfect sound

Grant hasn't had much downtime since she was discovered as a teenage singer and released her first album at the age of 16. She went on to sell more than 30 million albums, won Grammy Awards and Gospel Music Association Dove Awards, and became the "queen of Christian pop." Though she was able to kick off her much-anticipated Christmas concert tour the weekend after Thanksgiving, the Kennedy Center Honors will be her first major event in months.

"It has been the quietest season of my life," said Grant, 62, the first contemporary Christian artist [to be awarded](#) the prize. She's sitting in an armchair in the front room of her stately yet cozy home, the sun streaming through the windows on an unusually warm November morning with her publicist and management associate nearby. Occasionally, a cocker spaniel mix named Okie wanders into the room to urgently sniff everyone.

"There are times in our lives where we can just be so busy that you're present, but you're also ticking off that list of things that need to be done. Or somebody sits down for a conversation and you're giving 100 percent attention, but you also can't make the next thing on the calendar completely go away," Grant said. "That was the biggest adjustment."

Fall tour dates [were canceled](#) and doctors advised her to limit her screen time. She suffered some memory loss, and although she's perfectly fine to recall many things, she started a journal called "Writing to Remember."

"I was just trying to remember people's, like my extended family, names," she said with a laugh. "Every conversation would start with 'Are they dead or alive?'" (Gill, always one for jokes, likes to say that he now has her believing he produced the Beatles, won Olympic gold medals and he was right about the curtains in the living room.)

#### Perspective: A Grammy nominee list that capitalizes on endless uniformity

It's hard to snap out of work mode when you have been working your whole life — and when you're the kind of person whom friends describe as someone who always puts others first, inspired by her Nashville-based great-grandparents who put an emphasis on philanthropy. But since the accident, Grant has found herself appreciating her days and the people in them in a new way.

"The timing of this ... it's really given me the opportunity to look at the majority of my life," Grant said. "And kind of, I don't know — just wrap my arms around the whole thing. I mean, that's a gift for anybody."

Sweetest soul I've ever known'

That Grant could go through a traumatic event, find the silver lining and even declare a serious accident to be a gift is not exactly surprising to those who know her. She's the kind of person who radiates positivity and joy. Ask anyone to describe how they feel about her, and, well ...

"Amy! Oh my goodness, it's hard to describe Amy," said gospel star CeCe Winans, who used to perform Grant's songs with her brother, BeBe, when they were starting out as a duo. "Amy has got to be one of the nicest people I've ever met before in my whole life. And she's consistent with it — she's unassuming, humble, and she honors people. Every time I'm with her, I just want to be a better person."

"She might be the sweetest soul I've ever known," said singer-songwriter Michael W. Smith, her longtime friend who is joining her on the Christmas tour.

"When I worked with Amy Grant, I recognized a kindred spirit — someone who embodies harmony, hope and optimism in her life and in her work," former Kennedy Center honoree Carole King, who collaborated with Grant on the 2013 track "Our Time Is Now," said in an email. "In addition to her accomplishments as a songwriter and artist, I admire Amy's poise, grace and generosity. I'm proud to call her a friend."

#### From 2021: Reinventing the Kennedy Center Honors

There are so many different entry points that listeners might have with Grant. Maybe you had [the five-time platinum "Heart in Motion"](#) album on repeat in the early '90s, or your parents [play her Christmas records](#) every year, or you saw "El Shaddai" in hymn books in church. Her lyrics span the spectrum from giddy love songs to serious ballads confronting difficult issues, but if one theme remains constant in her work it's a reminder that even in dark times there are better days ahead.

Growing up in Nashville, Grant liked playing piano and guitar and singing hymns in church, but her interests in music and religion didn't really collide until high school. She was inspired by spending time at the Koinonia Bookstore and Coffeehouse, a popular gathering place in the 1970s at the height of the Jesus Music movement, which eventually led to the contemporary Christian music genre. At the time, many young people who were disillusioned by race riots, assassinations and the Vietnam War found hope and meaning in Jesus as a "countercultural peacenik," as Christian and gospel music historian John J. Thompson put it.

"From the outside it might have seemed like, 'Oh, it's a coffee shop next to a church and people are coming and singing songs about Jesus. What in the world is boundary-pressing with that?' But the fact is, a lot of these people singing songs about Jesus still had very crazy lives," Grant said. "It was a beautiful environment to be exposed to when I was that young."

Around that time, Brown Bannister — Grant's youth-group leader and eventual producer — helped her record a cassette tape of songs for her great-grandmother's birthday. He was impressed by what he heard and, on a whim, made an extra copy and gave it to Chris Christian, a producer who worked at Myrrh Records, a faith-based label. The label head immediately agreed to sign her.

From what Bannister remembers, 15-year-old Grant's reaction that she had an offer from a record label was "Oh, cool!" Grant is often self-deprecating when it comes to her singing ability ("I knew so many people who were just technically so much more talented than I was") and heaps praise on the team that guided her career from its earliest days.

Despite her humble nature, however, "she wasn't just a wallflower that's going to do what everybody tells her to do," said Thompson, the historian and host of the podcast "[True Tunes](#)." "And fortunately, some smart people around her let her take charge."

You don't have to just sing about Jesus'

Like any female artist in the spotlight, Grant faced enormous scrutiny. In many ways, it was even more intense for her, particularly when she shifted from being strictly a Christian musician to one with crossover appeal in pop music.

"I always felt like I was trying to walk on one leg when I only sang gospel songs, when I played the part of the good girl, when I only sang my acceptable thoughts," Grant said in an interview in the late 1980s, later adding, "I don't know how to live without my beliefs, but I didn't want my life to be just church songs."

"The directions she chose to take with her music, growing evangelically and then branching out into pop, those are the kind of decisions that [people in the music industry] are generally more hesitant to make," said John Darnielle, singer of indie rock

mainstays the Mountain Goats. His own music couldn't sound more different from Grant's, but he's an outspoken fan who was deeply moved by her 2002 album "Legacy ... Hymns & Faith." He says her music helped crystallize an important idea for him: "You don't have to just sing about Jesus — Jesus isn't mad at you if you sing about other stuff."

As Grant emerged into the mainstream, some critics could not wrap their minds around her wardrobe. A 1985 article in The Washington Post [described her](#) image as "confusingly sexy." There was a strange amount of fixation on her leopard-print jacket and leather pants she wore in concert. Bannister even recalls "the three-button controversy," when she wore a shirt with the three top buttons opened on the cover of her sophomore album. (Grant, for what it's worth, said she barely puts any thought into her clothes and is amused they get so much attention.)

"She was such a pioneer," said Nashville journalist Deborah Evans Price, who has covered Grant's career for 30 years and credits her with being ahead of the curve both sonically and lyrically. "The perception back then was that Christian music artists couldn't be 'cool.' ... But everything about her: her look, her style, her rapport with people, anyone, any audience. All the gifts she had combined to break down a lot of walls."

As each album became more successful than the last (1982's "Age to Age" was the first Christian album to go platinum, 1985's "Unguarded" was a massive hit, 1991's "Heart in Motion" exploded into the mainstream with the inescapable single "Baby, Baby"), a narrative began to form within the Christian music community: Grant was "controversial."

When she started releasing pop songs, some fans thought she was abandoning them. When she tossed her hair and danced like a rock singer onstage in concerts, she was behaving like Madonna (not exactly a favorite within religious circles). When she was featured with a male actor in the "Baby, Baby" music video, some said it was a sin because the man wasn't her husband.

"She got a lot of criticism, and so did I, in the Christian music industry — people thought we both sold out," said producer Keith Thomas, her co-writer on "Baby, Baby." "But she was just expanding her audience and it worked for her."

"I never was curious about negative input," Grant said. "There's only so much energy in a day, and if you spend your energy chasing down all the negativity that's aimed toward you, well, then all that energy is gone."

The most difficult blowback came in 1999, when she divorced husband and close musical collaborator Gary Chapman, the father of her three oldest children. Grant was candid that she had challenges in her marriage, but after she married Gill the following year, a crush of coverage followed. She and Gill, who was also previously married and had a daughter, [sat for interviews](#) where they repeatedly explained they had been friends for years and reiterated nothing inappropriate ever happened while they were married to other people.

#### From 2021: Kennedy Center Honors: A toast to tradition

Many evangelical fans were still furious and judgmental, and some radio stations stopped playing her music. But Grant and Gill weathered the storm. "The beauty is [the criticism] doesn't seem to faze her and sure as hell doesn't change her," Gill said.

Two decades later, the couple, who have another daughter together, are considered Nashville royalty — particularly for their famous "Christmas at the Ryman" concerts, which resume in December. Though the duo share billing as headliners, Gill jokes that his role will be "the village idiot" while the audience is really there for Grant.

"The first time I heard her voice in 1983, 1984, I just said, 'Whatever that voice is, it sounds familiar, it sounds friendly, it sounds welcoming,'" Gill said. "There's a welcoming spirit she has of anything and anybody that crosses her path."

#### Support for LGBTQ community

The word "welcome" comes up frequently when talking to Grant. In recent years, she has [voiced](#) support for the LGBTQ community, where she has had a large fan base for decades. Now, she talks about her and Gill's plans to host her niece's wedding at their farm, which is her family's "first bride and bride" nuptials. Grant recalls her reaction when she learned her niece had come out: *What a gift to our whole family to just widen the experience of our whole family.*

"Honestly, from a faith perspective, I do always say, 'Jesus, you just narrowed it down to two things: love God and love each other,'" Grant said. "I mean, hey — that's pretty simple."

Journalist Hunter Kelly, who hosts Apple Music's "[Proud Radio](#)" spotlighting LGBTQ country artists and allies, [interviewed](#) Grant in July 2021 when she made [her most direct comments](#) of support to date.

"I think it's just her view of valuing human beings ... which gets lost a lot of time when we get into these culture war things," Kelly said.

Like other fans, Kelly said he looks up to Grant like an older sister who helped him navigate life, which helped him as a member of the LGBTQ community who was raised in the evangelical church and struggled to find a place of acceptance for himself.

"She's not a person who ever presents herself as 'I have it all together, I have the answers,' " Kelly said. "She's very open in her music and speech about ... continually needing to have that connection with God or a higher power, and being honest about times she feels far apart or removed."

[Opinion: Amy Grant's Christmas album reignites the old 'What's Christian enough?' question](#)

As Grant prepares for her trip to Washington for the Kennedy Center Honors to accept an award honoring a lifetime of achievement, she won't forget the lessons she's learned in the past several months.

Grant said that the friend who was with her on the day of her accident told her that after regaining consciousness, Grant kept saying three things: "I can't believe I still have my teeth." "Something is wrong with my shoulder." And, finally, "I needed this." "It's crazy that I don't have a memory of that conversation," Grant says now. "So I just look at this season of my life and go: Some things are a mystery to us, but they happen."

Maybe, she theorizes, what she needed was to just slow down — just for a bit. "I have worked and loved it from the time I was in high school," she said. "And what a gift to have total rhythm change when there's still a whole lot of work ahead."