

NICOLE C. MULLEN

Sharecropper's Seed Vol. 1

Much of who we become is shaped by the people God places in our lives. We are all a product of the love and wisdom we glean from family and friends who sow into us. They guide and teach us, leaving an indelible impression not just on our hearts and minds, but on future generations as well. On her new Word Records collection, *Sharecropper's Seed Vol. 1*, Nicole C. Mullen examines the gift of relationships. Whether saluting her grandfather in the title track or sharing the tender mother's lullaby "Babylove," Nicole celebrates the rich tapestry of life.

"It's all of our stories," says Nicole. "We all have come from someone else's toil. They've prayed for us or planted seeds on our behalf or encouraged us along the way. We all have somebody who's responsible for the great harvest that we might receive in life. For me, it's my mama, my grandparents, and my dad."

Her maternal grandfather inspired the title track of the album. "My inspiration came from a conversation that I had with my mom," she recalls. "She was speaking about her dad and how they grew up in Georgia. He was a sharecropper when she was a small child and life was hard, but at the same time he had a hope and a dream for a better life for his family."

As a sharecropper, Nicole's grandfather had to give a portion of his crops to the landowner. It was a hard life, but it didn't rob him or his family of the joy they found in their faith. That priceless legacy was passed down to her.

"Many people in my family have paid a price for me to do what I do today," she says appreciatively. "It just made me want to stop and honor them, give credit where credit was due, and at the same time remind us that what we do with a seed has power for generations to come. If you bless the seed and nurture it just the right way, then the seed can rise up, but if you contaminate the seed, in future generations, there will be nothing to prosper from."

Both of Nicole's grandfathers were Pentecostal preachers. "So we grew up going to church 11 days a week," she says with a laugh. Among all those fond memories, there was a particular New Year's Eve church service she recalls having life-changing impact. Nicole and her two sisters were sitting in the front row when her father bestowed a special gift. "He came around and laid his hands on the three of us. When he got to me, he laid his hands on me and prayed that God would bless me in music and that He would take me around the world and that I would sing. My sister still jokes that the only reason I'm doing this is because Daddy gave me that blessing. They say, had he not given them that blessing on that day, there would be no Nicole C. Mullen. It's one of our family jokes, but at the same time I think there's a lot of truth in that. The way that we've been blessed, and the way that we bless each other, can actually produce fruit."

Nicole's life and ministry is a shining example of that fruit. She's a sharp businesswoman who designs her own clothing line. She's collected eight Gospel Music Association Dove Awards, including two Female Vocalist of the Year honors, two Song of Year honors ("On My Knees" and "Redeemer"), Songwriter of the Year and the 2005 Urban Album of the Year for her previous CD, *Everyday People*.

Beyond the numerous music industry accolades, Nicole has accomplished so much more with the desire to impact others from her own backyard to across the globe. She has worked to help free the Trokosi slaves held captive in Ghana, West Africa, and for more than a dozen years she has sown into the lives of young girls through her Baby Girls Club, an organization that mentors young women.

Perhaps even more important than her far-reaching ministry are the seeds she's planting in her four children. "I think a lot of times it's just the simple things like hugs. I tell my kids often, 'I'm so thrilled that out of all the parents and all the kids, that I've been chosen to be your mom,'" says Nicole, who lives with her husband, David, their kids and lots of animals on a farm outside of Nashville. "I see greatness in my kids. I love to be able to ask them what their hopes and desires are for the future, and be able to call those things out."

Nicole's music is inspired and informed not only by those closest to her in her daily life, but also her encounters on the road. "There are faces that I see when I write albums," says Nicole who penned all the lyrics on *Sharecropper's Seed Vol. 1*. "Many of those are faces I see after a concert. I love to talk to those who have come and enjoy hearing their stories. I want to hear it all. These are the faces and the names that I'm writing toward when I'm sitting down with a pen and paper."

Produced by Tony McAnany (Chant, Missy Elliott, Jennifer Knapp), the album features many top musicians in the country, whose creative expertise runs the gamut from jazz to Broadway to pop to classical to country. "It's definitely one of those albums you can listen to and unwind when you come home from work and want to just contemplate on something good. When you want to just relax, this is one of those albums. Hopefully people will, in their relaxing, find something that's worth chewing on."

Anticipating new music from Nicole, Christian radio is sure to quickly embrace the up-tempo debut single "Convinced," a compelling declaration of faith that nothing separates us from the love of God. The song features guest vocalist Curtis King, who has worked with Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin and Rod Stewart.

One of the most talked about tracks on the project is "One Touch." Inspired by scripture, the poignant ballad describes one woman's desire to be healed by simply touching the hem of Jesus' garment. "Unless you humble yourself, you can never be exalted. If you exalt yourself, then you have to be humbled," says Nicole. "So in this album, part of the thread woven throughout teaches us to make the choice to humble ourselves. It's the same thread of the woman who wants to be healed. The only way she knows is to go low and to touch the hem of his garment, then she could rise up and be made whole."

"He loved her and affirmed her in front of people," Nicole continues. "She went away from that encounter truly made whole, not just in body, but in spirit also. I've always loved that story and been fascinated by it at the same time. I felt some kind of a kinship to it. In some crazy way, her story becomes my story. Her story becomes our story as to how he embraces us in the midst our pain and our doubt. In the midst of our unworthiness, he embraces us and loves us. It's a reminder for me and to all of us that this is the kind of God we serve."

"Elohim" features Nicole's voice, a stunning, vulnerably beautiful instrument that captures the passion of a heart crying out to God in surrender. "I Wish" is a prayer for those she cares about, inspired by her Babygirls. "It says, 'Of all the things that I would want for you, I wish this more than life--to love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, your mind and strength,'" she says, citing the poignant lyric.

"Some of these songs are just prayers that have been born out of joy," states Nicole. "Some were born out of frustration, the ups and downs of life. It's the journey that we walk, the truth that we see in it all."

Musically there are songs like "So in Love" that will make the listener surrender to the groove, unable to sit still. Then there are songs sure to make other people break down and weep, but at the essence, this is music that will plant seeds. It's an outpouring of emotion from a sharecropper's granddaughter—a woman who knows the importance of continuing a powerful legacy.

"My granddad is a man of few words, not a talker like we women in the family are, but a sweet man," says Nicole. "He taught my mother the love for prayer and power of prayer. It's amazing to see how God has honored him and his life, even though he's probably never had more than 30-50 people in his congregation. But he's been faithful. You can see how God has been rewarding his faith and not just through me, but through other family members honoring my granddad's faith. It's a testament to him, and at the same time, I am encouraged, and want to do the same for those who come after me. I want to do the same for those who come after me."

Nicole is doing that through her music. "I just aim for the heart and hopefully that was accomplished on this album," she says. "There are everyday people that are heroes to me. These are people who keep me fired up and keep me going. These are the people that I aim toward, and I want to get it right. Hopefully, at the end of the day, they will not have just heard pretty music, but somewhere between the lines, pages, and phrases, they will have heard the whisper of God to the depths of their hearts."