

Big Songs, Big Life

An Interview with Desmond Child



Desmond Child

EDITORS' NOTE Grammy-winning and Emmy-nominated songwriter Desmond Child is one of music's most prolific and accomplished hitmakers. He's a film, television, theater, and music producer, recording artist, performer, and author. His credits appear on more than eighty Billboard Top 40 singles spanning six decades, including "Livin' On A Prayer," "You Give Love A Bad Name," "I Was Made For Lovin' You," "Dude Looks Like A Lady," "How Can We Be Lovers If We Can't Be Friends," "I Hate Myself For Loving You," "Livin' La Vida Loca," "The Cup Of Life," "Waking Up In Vegas," "Kings & Queens" and many more. From Aerosmith to Zedd, his genre-defying collaborations also include KISS, Bon Jovi, Cher, Barbra Streisand, Ricky Martin, Alice Cooper, Joan Jett, Michael Bolton, Katy Perry, Kelly Clarkson, Carrie Underwood, Garth Brooks, Cyndi Lauper, Christina Aguilera, Ava Max, Mickey Mouse, and Kermit the Frog, selling over 500 million records worldwide with downloads, YouTube views and streaming plays in the billions. Child was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 2008 and serves on its Board of Directors as

well as the Board of ASCAP. In 2018, he received ASCAP's prestigious Founders Award celebrating 40 years as a proud member of ASCAP. In 2012, he also co-founded the Latin Songwriters Hall Of Fame where he serves as Chairman Emeritus. In 2022, he was inducted into the Latin Songwriters Hall Of Fame and "Livin' La Vida Loca" was inducted into the National Archives of the Library of Congress for its cultural significance to America. In 2023, "Livin' On A Prayer" was certified to have reached 1 billion streams on Spotify. His autobiography, *Livin' On A Prayer: Big Songs Big Life*, was released in 2023.

When did you know that you had a passion for music and songwriting?

My mother was the Cuban songwriter and poet, Elena Casals, now known as "La Musa" and as I was growing up in the housing projects in Miami's Liberty City, I didn't know that most people didn't write songs. My mom was always surrounded by her wild Bohemian friends and creativity was the same as breathing. I began composing as soon as I could crawl up on the piano bench and would bang away singing melodies that came to me.



Desmond Child with Paul Stanley of KISS



Desmond Child and his musical guests perform at "Desmond Child Rocks The Parthenon" at the Roman theater Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens, Greece on June 27, 2022

Later in junior high when I was 14 years old, I wrote my first pop song as a birthday gift to a beautiful raven-haired well-to-do girl, Laura Stern, whom I had a crush on. As I grew up very poor and didn't have the money to buy her a gift, I thought that a song would do the trick. It was titled "Birthday Blues" and must have somehow made an impression on her – although I didn't get my first kiss – cause when she unexpectedly turned up at our Class of '72 Miami Beach High School 30th reunion, she wept when I sang it to her from the stage. I didn't get the girl...but I got the song.

Will you highlight your career journey?

My friends and I snuck into the three-day Palm Beach Pop Festival in 1969 and I watched Janis Joplin perform live for two hours without a break backed by the Edgar and Johnny Winter band completely mesmerizing the crowd. I saw the effect she had bringing us all together as a community and making us feel every word and note she sang. I knew at that very moment that this is what I wanted to do – become a rock star.

At Miami Beach High, I joined the choir where all the other rock musicians had enrolled and soon met Debbie Wall who became my first singing and songwriting partner in a duo we called "Nightchild," renaming ourselves Virgil Night and Desmond Child to match. The name Desmond was inspired by the Beatles' song "Ob-la-di, Ob-la-da" who's last stanza is "Desmond stays at home and does his pretty

face and in the evening she's a singer with the band." I recently met Paul McCartney for the first time and told him the story and he wistfully said, "I always wondered if people out there understood that Desmond was gay?" I assured him that I totally got it.

It was the summer of 1971 and Nightchild hit the road headed to Woodstock, New York which became a mecca for musicians and hippies left over from the famous music festival. There, while working along with seasonal migrant workers during the day



Jon Bon Jovi, Cher, Desmond Child, and Steven Tyler



Desmond Child in the studio with Barbra Streisand

at a nearby apple packing plant, we would sing for our supper at the many folk music clubs that had sprung up. I also spent time at nearby Bearsville Recording Studios as a “coffee boy” while musical genius Todd Rundgren was reinventing pop music for his epic album, “Something Anything.” His sounds inspired me to break the musical harmony rules of the day and learn to change keys and tempos to bring out the meaning of the song’s narrative.

By January 1972, we were starving and freezing and headed back to Miami Beach with our first demo of three songs professionally recorded by kind-hearted members of Van Morrison’s band. That’s when we found out

that the president of Columbia Records, Clive Davis, would be attending a music conference there and we snuck in disguised as John and Yoko. After the free dinner and show, we approached Clive and handed him our demo. Charmed by our daring imposter getups, he took the demo with him and a few months later sent it back to us with a very polite turn-down letter personally signed by him. God, I wish I still had it now.

I consider this day one of being in the music business. In 2012, exactly 40 years later, after 80 top 40 hits and 500 million albums sold, I became the fourth recipient of the Clive Davis Legend In Songwriting Award – that’s what I call resilience.

How important has resilience been throughout your career?

“Resilience” – this is the word that best describes the process of building the core inner strength it takes to keep going in the face of the many obstacles and rejections one inevitably experiences as you reach for your highest dreams and still create the best version of yourself.

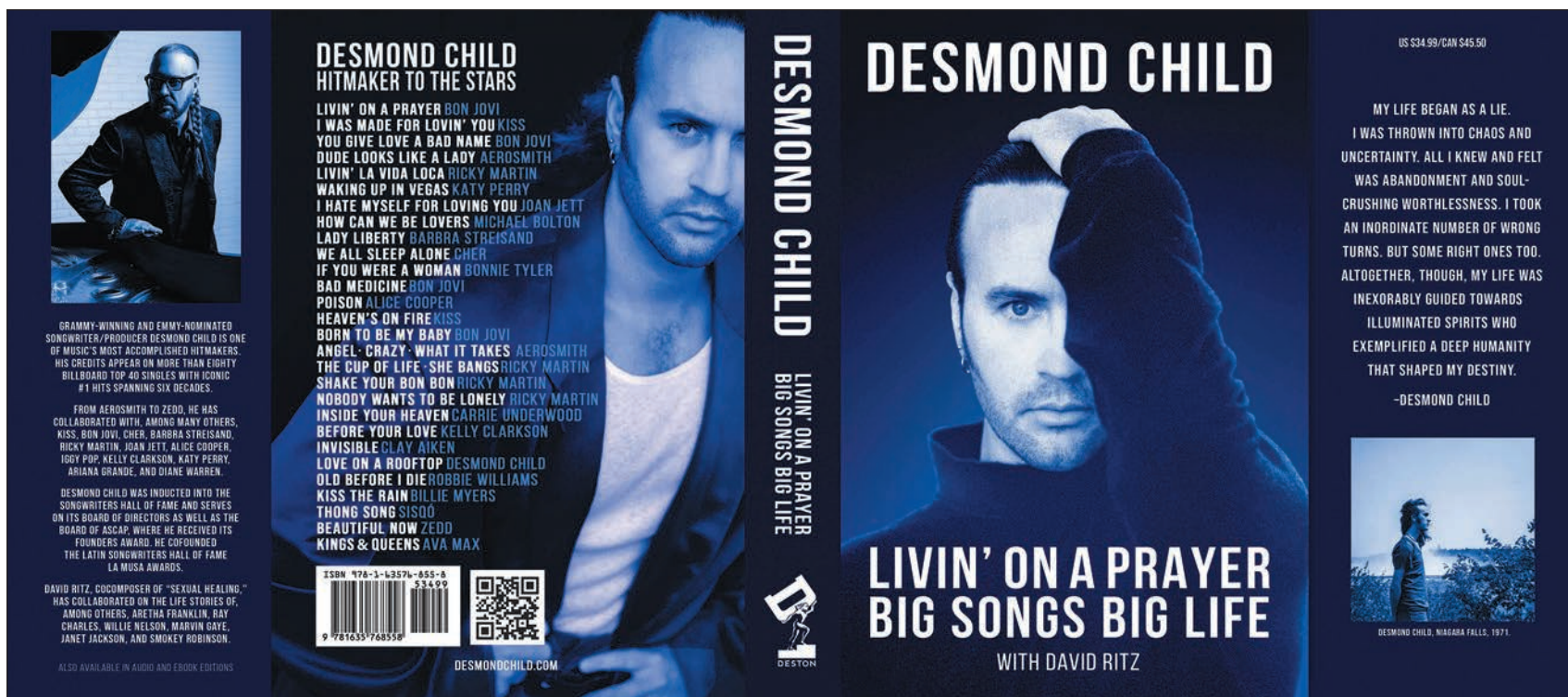
As a child, it would crush me every time I heard my mother sobbing after being fired from one of her many low paying jobs as she sifted through the pile of unpaid bills on our kitchen table. As a single mom, she often couldn’t manage to put food on the table at night or gas in her beat-up car to find work or even get there on time after taking a series of unreliable public buses. She desperately wanted to be a respected artist and successful songwriter but didn’t have the resources and connections it would take to make that happen, but she had resilience and would always pick herself up and live to dream another day. Her determination and unrepentant magic still echos inside me as I wake up every morning in gratitude next to my loving husband of 34 years, Curtis, and restart my career all over again – never taking anything for granted.

Will you discuss your current projects?

I have been working for many years on a Broadway musical called *Cuba Libre* which is the true story of my mother’s two extraordinary younger sisters caught up in the “conga line of history” before and after the turbulent aftermath of the Cuban revolution. One became the mistress of the dictator Fulgencio Batista and the other the lover of Fidel Castro.



Desmond Child performing with Alice Cooper



Cover of Desmond Child's book, *Livin' On A Prayer - Big Songs Big Life*

I also keep doing my "day job" of writing and producing various established and upcoming recording artists including Barbra Streisand, Ricky Martin, Jon Bon Jovi, and Jojo Siwa, as well as composing original theme songs for theater, film, and television.

What interested you in writing your autobiography, and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

I got to the point in my life where I felt it was important to tell my story for our sons, Roman and Nyro, to be able to read someday and be proud of me, and be able to hear my voice and feel me around them. I was born poor, Latino, and gay between two centuries that have brought more technological advancements and economic growth than had ever existed in the history of mankind, yet I always felt I had to keep breaking down barriers and cracking through the glass ceilings to be able to succeed.

My book, *Livin' On A Prayer: Big Songs Big Life*, is the story of my struggles and achievements in spite of difficult circumstances I was born into. My deepest hope is that letting the truth of all of me show will serve to be a guiding light for new generations to keep feeding the fire they have inside and reach for their highest goals.

With all that you have achieved and the many awards that you have earned, are you able to take moments to reflect on your accomplishments?

I recently watched a thrilling tribute of my career achievements which highlighted all the global icons I've had the honor of working with and the timeless songs I've helped them to bring to the world, and I have to admit that I was really impressed with my "bad self." Ha ha ha! ●



Desmond Child working with Jon Bon Jovi