

Apologies for any formatting issues. Heads up, this is a hefty read!

By Jonathan Poletti - 2020

An early songwriter for Amy Grant, he helped make contemporary Christian music a commercial force. In 1988 his song “Awesome God” was a mega-hit.

Later albums were influential, and he keeps a cult of admirers. His vibe was a more loving faith. He died in 1997 at age 41. Reading up on singer-songwriter Rich Mullins, I find vagueness and strangeness around his personal life. Never married, no girlfriends. Androgynous. I wondered if he was gay.

That would make getting access to his real story a problem. His commercial value to the Christian demographic then depends on all knowledge of it being suppressed. Tricky. I might need an angel to whisper in my ear? I kept researching, and was watching a 2014 documentary, Rich Mullins: A Ragamuffin’s Legacy. I paused the player, backed up, watched again.

Amy Grant says it again, exactly the same way.

“He was, you know, very— Um. Honest about his— Everything from his sexuality, to his appetites to his— He was just so raw.”

That’s not a very Christian way to be.

She recalls once being at a radio station, and people there asked her to talk about the “real” Rich Mullins. So she threw out some “shocker stories”—without repeating them.

“Everybody in the radio station was very conservative and they kinda withdrew, and dropped the subject,” she adds. “And I thought: ‘You wanted to really know him.’”

I hear back from Reed Arvin, Mullins’ longtime producer.

“He was the most authentic poet in the history of contemporary Christian music, a truth-teller in the best sense, and a true believer in Christ. I’ve never met anyone who so thoroughly conformed his life to the image of Christ, which, naturally, made him an outlier in many ways. I have no idea if Rich was gay or trying not to be gay. I do know that on the spectrum of ‘things that matter about Rich Mullins,’ his sexuality rates about 90th.”

But it might explain his whole life.

There was a ‘devotional biography’ about Mullins in 2000, An Arrow Pointing to Heaven by James Bryan Smith, heavier on devotion than facts. I email Smith asking if he can supply evidence to disrupt a ‘gay reading’ of Mullins’ life, and don’t hear back.

There’s been three documentaries about his life. But mostly, there’s Mullins’ own odd self-reflections. Asked to speak about “grace” on a 1996 radio show, he’s back into his childhood in rural Indiana.

“When I was young, I was angry and I was kind of going, ‘God, why am I such a freak? Why couldn’t I have been a good basketball player? I wanted to be a jock or something. Instead I’m a musician. I feel like such a sissy all the time. Why couldn’t I be just like a regular guy?’”

I search newspaper archives of decades, finding many unnoticed clips. “We went to see the movie *Music Man* when he was just a child,” his mother, Neva Mullins, says in a 1984 interview. “He came home and pecked out the songs he’d heard on our old upright piano.” Not the first boy to love Broadway musicals—or to horrify his father. Smith quotes Neva reflecting on her husband. “John’s generation of men did not express their feelings to their children.”

Which isn’t true. John Mullins expressed disappointment. He was famous for saying: “I have two sons, two daughters, and a piano player.”

Many others found young ‘Wayne’ mystical and magical.

After his death, his hometown paper has memories from schoolmates. “Even as a young teen-ager, it was apparent that he was not like all other kids,” a man writes. “He was chosen by God.”

A female classmate: “While most of us were asking questions about how do we get ahead in the world, he was asking why are we in this world? And wondering don’t we truly belong in the next world?”

By his teenage years his interest in Christianity was flagging—as may track with his father’s growing interest in it. Not wanting to be a “blah old Christian,” Mullins will recall: “I knew I wouldn’t make a good atheist. But I do remember thinking I just wouldn’t have anything to do with God. Yet, even then, I felt driven back to God. I wanted intimacy with Him.”

His real conversion may have happened at the movies. In 1972, age 17, he sees *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, the Franco Zeffirelli bio-pic of Francis of Assisi. Mullins nurtures a lifelong obsession — less with the saint than the movie. He says in 1997: “My vision of Saint Francis was really just an actor dressed up in funny clothes.”

Actually, the actor was only sometimes wearing clothes.

“*Brother Sun, Sister Moon*” (1972)

Graduating high school, Mullins went to Bible college.

He’s remembered for being weird—like his talk of Jesus as a human man, capable of an erotic relationship. His messiah was a “lover,” and he’d go on about being “ravaged” by the divine.

He grew his hair out. “His dad did not like it at all, and sometimes they fought about it,” his mother says.

He launched a band called Zion. His bandmate Beth Snell Lutz recalls in a recent interview: “He had a lot of darkness in him. That was a constant wrestling for him.” All his life, friends refer to his ‘dark’ or ‘sinful’ side, his ‘temptation’, etc., without clarification.

With funding from a non-Christian uncle who believed in Mullins’ talent, Zion released an album, *Behold the Man*. The track “Heaven in His Eyes” might warrant some attention, but “Praise to the Lord” was the standout. A praise song, it leaps from Bach’s *Prelude & Fugue No. 2 in C Minor* into a sonic extravaganza too exciting to be really Christian.

In a contribution to a 2017 book, *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth*, Amy Grant remembers first hearing it. She writes: "I have been moved by a lot of songs, but when that song reached its iconic release point, I was levitating."

The Christian music scholar Nathan Myrick has an interview from Michael Blanton, head of Reunion Records, recalling asking Mullins what inspired the song, especially its long introduction. He recalls Mullins saying:

"Well, it's just like sex. You've gotta have a really good foreplay before you get to the climax."

The song became "Sing Your Praise to the Lord," Grant's first #1 hit in the Christian market. Amusingly, she was singing a rapturous 'sex song' when unmarried. When she married Gary Chapman not long after, she called the lackluster sex a "yawn."

Mullins was bringing a heightened sexual energy to the Christian world.

But what kind of sex would this be, exactly? The biographies are silent about the Christian boy being anything but—Christian?

In *Rich Mullins: A Ragamuffin's Legacy*, a friend recalls going to Nashville with him to help get him into the music biz. An industry gatekeeper, Jon Rivers, takes her aside and advises her that Mullins had talked about his "friends in Cincinnati," and that he was in for a bumpy ride. No explanation.

No long after, Mullins left Nashville. He looked back to the period in a 1995 interview: "I was not going to be your typical run-of-the-mill, Pollyanna, goody-two shoes Christian musician. I became so boring trying to be bad that I gave up the pursuit."

In a 1984 interview he was singing a different tune: "I felt I was getting self-obsessed there," he says. "I'm really not a very career-oriented person. If I don't enjoy what I'm doing for the sake of doing it, then I've lost integrity." Not the only time that Mullins will offer, without explanation, oddly divergent accounts of his own life.

Amy Grant included his song "Doubly Good to You" on her 1984 *Straight Ahead* album. This is sometimes called a love song, but seems to revise a traditional Irish blessing, and concerns a romance which has yet to occur.

"And if you find a love that's tender  
If you find someone who's true  
Then thank the Lord He's been doubly good to you"

As often in a Mullins song, there is no gender information at all.

He worked as a youth minister for several years.

Then comes a pivotal scene he narrates in a November 1995 interview with CCM. Mullins was, the reporter says, "about 30 when he confronted the power of a secret sin and found a greater power in confession."

If he was around 30, it happens around 1985. Mullins relates:

"I was in Michigan, on my way to somewhere where I knew I ought not to be going. I started praying, 'Oh God, why don't you just make my car crash so I won't get there because I can't

stop myself.' I remember thinking that He said, 'Yeah, you're right. You can't.' I said, 'Why can't I? What I'm doing makes me sick.' And it was as if God responded, 'Yes, what you do makes me sick too, but what you are makes me sicker. You do what you do, because you are what you are. You can't do otherwise.'"

Two Bible verses, he recalls, come to his mind. There's 1 John 1:9, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness," and then James 5:16: "Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed."

A course appears before him: confess in order to be healed.

He continues: "I thought, I'm just going to stop and confess to the first preacher I see. The first church I go by, I'm going in there and I'm going to tell everything."

He re-thinks. "No, that's not what it means. Confession has to be something other than just saying words. It must be something more than just owning up to what you've done, even though that's a big part of it. I need to tell this to people whose opinion is most important to me."

He drives to Cincinnati, and confesses his 'secret sin' to friends there. He continues:

"It was one of the most liberating things I have ever done. It's not like I haven't been tempted since that time. It's not that I don't still deal with the same sorts of things. I still have to make right choices. I still have to flee temptation. But the power of that sin was broken."

Amy Grant brought him back to the public eye.

He was the opening act for her Unguarded tour, as she opened with his song, "Love of Another Kind," which she'd covered for her album of the same name. Her version is about her very special love for Jesus: "The love I know is a love so few discover."

On YouTube, there's a few recordings of Mullins performing the song himself, around 1987 with an Elton John-like flourish, and different lyrics. His version has: "I feel you're closer than a brother.... The love you give is like no other."

The song was sung to a man.

Amy Grant writes a bit about Mullins in a forward to the 2017 book, *Winds of Heaven, Stuff of Earth*. She dwells on the theme of his unexplained moral ambivalence.

"Rich didn't waste any time trying to be good, or at least trying to appear good. There's a little bit of good and bad in every one of us. But what Rich wanted to know, what we all want to know, is that we are loved."

His first album flopped.

Mullins' describes it as an album "that nobody bought and that no one would play on the radio." It had tracks like "Elijah" that would later be fan favorites, but somehow his persona wasn't translating.

His second album, *Pictures in the Sky*, though a leap forward in artistry, also didn't produce any hits. As in the back cover, he seems to like the idea of being a range of poses.

rear cover of "Pictures in the Sky" LP (1986; colorized)

Neither album was overtly 'Christian'.

But to look more closely, there's biblical details. "Elijah" is the Old Testament prophet, who's swept up to Heaven. The lyrics are also inflected with details of the memorials for the murdered John Lennon—the usual Mullins' recipe of one part Christian, one part something else.

In the song "Be With You," the singer is deceased and appealing to God for resurrection. It also seems to be a bit of autobiography.

"And when my body lies in the ruins  
Of the lies that nearly ruined me  
Will You pick up the pieces  
That were pure and true  
And breathe Your life into them  
And set them free?"

Not having any hits, Mullins' career in Christian music seemed to be over.

Reed Arvin once noted: "I sometimes think about how different my life would be if Rich hadn't played me a certain rough cassette tape in 1988."

The opening line has been a challenge for Christian listeners. This is how it's typically presented:

"When He rolls up his sleeves he ain't just puttin' on the ritz..."

Let's read the song. The "ritz" language surely alludes to Irving Berlin's song "Puttin' on the Ritz," but perhaps more to the point, the 1982 novelty hit for Taco, the flamboyant Dutch singer. The video was a staple on MTV. Taco seems not to have commented on his sexuality, but he and the performance would certainly translate as 'very gay'.

A few lines down in "Awesome God," Mullins nails down this context:

"Judgment and wrath He poured out on Sodom  
Mercy and grace He gave us at the cross"

It looks like "Awesome God" is about a deity who has no time for homosexuals—and indeed, will pulverize them out of existence. It was sung in 1987—against the backdrop of people dying of AIDS.

A story circulates about how the song was written.

Rich was driving late at night to a youth concert in Colorado. To keep himself awake he imagined a Southern preacher on a roll. He rolled down the window, and started 'preaching' to the wind.

Was the song just a monologue, delivering a sermon he didn't personally believe? "Awesome God" made his career, but remains a strange outlier in his work.

It was his only song the Nashville CCM establishment remotely liked. An unnamed executive, quoted by Nathan Myrick, called Mullins "a weirdo with one good song."

It's worth noting that Mullins never viewed himself as Evangelical. He'd frame himself as a religious outsider.

He explains in 1988:

“I take comfort in knowing that it was the shepherds in whom the angels appeared when they announced Christ’s birth. Invariably throughout the course of history, God has appeared to people on the fringes.”

For years he spoke of being about to convert to Catholicism. In a 1994 interview he talks up the Pope as an important religious voice: “You know, at least this guy has some credentials.”

He spoke of having had a fiancé of ten years.

As his story went, she broke up with him as their wedding was almost happening. He’d say his song “Damascus Road” was written in the immediate aftermath. This is puzzle. The song has no female figure, and is only about Mullins being too focused on his career.

Mullins fans have accepted uncritically the story that he had a fiancé, and they were about to marry. The Smith biography and the two biographies have no reference to her. No friends recall her. There’s no photos. The woman is never named.

Mullins sometimes adds that the break-up was so crushing that he did not wish to date ever again.

He says in one interview:

“I have no interest in anybody else and she is married to someone else so that’s the way it goes and I don’t mind that. Right now I cannot imagine that life could be happier married than it is single so I’m not in a panic about getting married. And I think, you know, maybe God wanted me to be celibate and the way that he accomplished that was to break my heart. So that’s the way it goes.”

He would also say the relationship with this unnamed female was unsatisfying, as here:

“I had a ten year thing with this girl and I would often wonder why, even in those most intimate moments of our relationship, I would still feel really lonely.”

The recollections waver crazily. In a 1994 concert he recalls being at Amy Grant’s house and playing “Doubly Good For You” for her, explaining:

“Oh because at the time I was engaged — I said well you know I wrote this song for — For my wedding which actually didn’t happen, thank God.”

He was close with a young man named Beaker—who later refused all interviews.

As in the video for Mullins’ 2006 song “Here in America,” the Evangelical world got a nice portrait of two men frolicking around the world.

Rich Mullins, “Here in America” (2006)

The story about them most familiar to Mullins fans might be the night in 1992 when the two men in a hotel room in Amsterdam. Mullins told the story many times. Hoping Beaker would fall asleep, he thought to slip out into the city and do some unspecified illicit activity.

He stayed awake in a tortured anticipation, as he narrates in 1994:

“After years of behaving myself as best as I could, I was really having to hang on for dear life. I was thinking, no one would know. I could do anything I wanted to do. Wouldn’t it be fun just to cut loose for a couple nights and misbehave as much as I want?”

Unsure that Beaker was asleep, Mullins never snuck out. He adds: “But I sure felt the temptation to toss out my morals for an evening.”

These tellings don't suggest the intensity of the resulting song. "Hold Me Jesus" has a narrator all but destroyed by unnamed yearnings. It's "so hot inside my soul," he sings to God, as he prays for the power to 'surrender', rather than "fight you for something I don't really want."

A scene of self-labeling happens just after.

At a train station, Mullins tells Beaker the story of the dark night of temptation in the hotel room. I'm transcribing:

"Well Beaker and I were talking in a train station about the whole thing, kinda where we were and where we wanted to be, and we got into some, actually, some pretty explicit detail about the nature of our temptations and of those struggles. And this guy leans over...in the train station, the only other guy in there, and he says, 'Excuse me, but are you Rich Mullins?'

So I had to think back over our conversation to see if I was or not, and decided that I must be. Whether or not I like who I am, that is who I am."

As often with Mullins interviews, one can only wonder why he is going into these details. For a Christian, it's just really unusual.

Many of his songs are ripe for 'queer' readings.

In "Boy Like Me, Man Like You," the singer and Jesus are two awkward guys meeting each other.

"Did the little girls giggle when you walked past?

Did you wonder what it was that made them laugh?"

In 1992 song, "What Susan Said," two "lonely-eyed boys in a pick-up truck" seem to be sexually attracted to each other, but keep up the God-talk that "love is found in the things we've given up..."

Even his well-known song "Creed," reciting the wording of basic Christian tenants, might be an assertion of his 'salvation' in the face of any who'd say different.

He developed a devoted fanbase

A blog post from 2014 speaks to Mullins' appeal in his heyday:

"Rich Mullins was the Holden Caulfield of our faith: the one guy who refused to be phony. The one guy who refused to play the game. The one guy who questioned the status quo in a music industry often driven by image and sales. The one guy who made faith seem real rather than cliché to Gen-Xers hungry for something authentic."

But Mullins himself, in stark contrast, discussed the period in terms of his phoniness. In September 1995, he's interviewed by the Arizona Republic:

"There are times when I know that the overwhelming motivating factor for me is the acceptance and the applause of the audience," he says. "So you feel like a total phony because you're up there talking about all this great, grand stuff and you're going, 'The filthy truth is I'm saying this because they will clap.'"

CCM: May 1990; June 1992; November 1995 (thanks to Joey DiGuglielmo)

He left his career—to go back to college?

His story was that he wanted to go do missionary work, or something—like teach music at a Navajo reservation in New Mexico. He tells people that he was going to Friends University to get a degree to teach music, though such a certification wasn't required.

At Friends University, Mullins meets James Bryan Smith, his future biographer, a professor at the school. Smith notes in the 2014 documentary that he often did Mullins' homework—as Mullins says he spent his time going to the movies. In February 1994, he gave a lecture on 'Christian living' that veers into unexpected disclosures:

"I really have to watch or I would go to a movie constantly and never do homework, never make my bed. If they showed movies at 8 in the morning I would get up and go. It's the only excuse I can think of for getting up in the morning."

If the audience had expected the sunlit Mullins of the "Creed" video, here was a strange man who was warning them not to look to contemporary Christian music for meaning. "You don't go to churches for excitement," he says. "That's why you go to movies!"

He chatters about his non-existent love life.

"Most women who get to know me do not want to marry me," he says. "My life does not play out like my albums do. It's even worse than my music."

He had a love song once on an album, he says. It was his producer's idea. He doesn't write them. "I don't have a lot of occasions to do that."

He is likely referring here to a hypothetical romance that feels oddly inserted into his 1991 song "The River."

"Maybe she could come to Wichita  
And maybe we could borrow Beaker's bike"

When he writes about his actual life, Mullins continues, he throws those songs away, since they're "my own business," and "my own personal therapy going on here. There's no reason to burden listeners with that."

The result, he laments, is people think the albums are him. "I kinda go, 'Wow, these albums don't address some of the real central issues of my life.' And I have some real hang-ups."

His albums are illusions, he says.

"The truth is you know what I have chosen for you to know. I have shown you my absolute best side."

If they're his best side, then it's useful to note that his songs are, in fact, full of personal darkness: loneliness, with suggestions of a drinking problem. Especially after Beaker got married and moved to Atlanta. That might suggest context for Mullins' 1995 song "Wounds of Love," about a distant, unnamed, ungendered person...in Atlanta.

"The bottle is still so full

There's no one here to turn the tap

So much in me wants to reach out and hold you

But you're so far away I can't do that"

Later memoirs by friends in blog posts suggest some the material omitted from his songs.

Mullins was well-known privately for being 'messed up' and 'screwed up'. One friend writes:



“Telling ‘Rich was messed-up’ stories is rather like breaking into an AA meeting and saying, ‘Ha HA! You’re all alcoholics! Gotcha!’”

Another comments:

“I was always blown away with how he could smoke then sing beautifully, cuss then write profoundly.”

In 2007, the Christian musician Shaun Groves leaves a memoir in a comment that is a bit startling.

“He had a foul mouth, quirky irreverent stage presence at times and despised elements of American culture and politics, and often had as hard time liking those he played music for, yet he possessed a deep love of liturgies, creeds, silence, solitude, prayer, mercy, children, and Jesus and he kept, making music for us no matter how much we perplexed him. This paradox confounded and still does.

This man pooped his pants during a concert and then cleaned up in the church bathroom afterward (long afterward) using the soiled boxers he’d worn and tossed them in the church trash can like they were a tissue. He got stoned drunk and sobered up just in time to play ‘Awesome God’ for a bunch of Baptists in Texas. He wrote a song about a homeless man he met with a colostomy bag — the song compared the American Church to this colostomy bag: ‘full of shit,’ he said. It never got recorded. He sent all his royalties to charity and paid himself a teacher’s salary and he never knew how much he’d actually made from all that music he made us. He didn’t smell good, look good, or act good a lot of the time. Rich was, well, just weird. Very weird.”

Mullins moved to New Mexico.

Though widely discussed as a missionary effort, he discouraged that idea. “If you don’t love your neighbor where you live, you’re not going to love them in another place,” he told the Greenville News. “I just happen to like this region, and so my neighbors are going to be Navajo.”

He’d acquired a new special friend in a fellow student, Mitch McVicker—or as Mullins says, “just this basketball player who happened to be in this religion class I was in.”

In all, five young men from the college went down to New Mexico with him, with the idea to create a sort of spiritual community, the ‘Kid Brothers of St. Frank’ as Mullins and Beaker had called it, after Francis of Assisi.

Mullins still did concerts, and phone interviews with regional newspapers. Unnoticed at the time, they now seem darkly revealing. He chats with the Indianapolis News in 1995:

“Everybody struggles. If people knew the stuff I struggled with, they would hate me . . . I do the best I can. I have failures and I don’t think Christianity is less true because I’m not an exemplary Christian. What I want to communicate to people is what I think is at the heart of the gospel, which is that God loves us.”

A young reporter spends a week in New Mexico, doing a profile.

Today, Lou Carlozo doesn't like any talk of Mullins and same-sex intimacy, but notes of their few days together: "I slept with Rich Mullins—in the same way I slept with my kid brother as a kid."

Mullins tells him, in the profile, that he isn't sure why he's ducking out of his career. "I don't know if I'm afraid of success; I might be," he says. "I can make records for the rest of my life and talk about love, but it won't mean anything until I love somebody."

"It all seems ironic and weird to me," he adds. "I'm thankful for it, but I never had any ambitions in Christian music."

Why is he on the reservation? He replies: "For me, it's much more to work out my own salvation with fear and trembling."

It's fine if his celebrity fades. "If it continues, that'd be fine," he says. "If it doesn't, that'd be fine. I've had more than my 15 minutes."

The crux of Mullins' biography can seem to be his painful relationship with his dad.

Though this point is often made in biographical treatments, there are further entries in interviews which contribute textures to the theme. In an April 1997 interview, Mullins is telling a story of a "friend of mine" who'd been a youth pastor of a church, and realizing he was gay.

"And he, uh, finally really came to a—a crisis about this. He was going, 'Gosh I feel like I'm a phony because I, you know, I go to church and I tell kids all this stuff.'"

This youth group pastor went to Rich Mullins' father to talk about it. "You know, what should I do?" he asks the older man.

And my Dad said, "You need to decide what's most important to you and do it. You can't do everything. And uh, you know what the Bible teaches and uh, decide if you can live with the Bible or if you can live without it."

The story as presented has the gay friend later telling Mullins about coming out to Mullins' father, as Mullins relays the story of his 'friend'. It might be, however, that he was narrating his own story.

I go back and re-read the 'secret sin' interview, when God said to him:

"Yes, what you do makes me sick too, but what you are makes me sicker. You do what you do, because you are what you are."

Was that God's voice—or his dad's?

He quit his job as a music teacher on the reservation.

The story he told was that the school was fundamentalist Christian, and he wasn't one himself.

"And I can respect that," he says. "We both agreed that I don't really need to be there right now, just because I don't get fundamentalists, and I don't really know that I want to be stuck with a bunch of 'em."

In a 2014 blog post, Melody K. Anderson, the daughter of a well-known Christian author, recalls spending a week visiting a Christian school in New Mexico in March 1995. She was at first unaware of the identity of the man wearing shorts on a snowy day.

“He seemed uncomfortable, nervous, distracted, and out of place.”

Mullins’ musicality is magic, she thought, but something is wrong? “Rich seemed ill-suited in his own skin and misplaced on the planet,” she writes.

When she’ll later hear of his death, “my first reaction was relief.”

Toward the end, there’s a wasting.

As Jeremy Klaszus observes: “In his last months he looked like hell — haggard with big bags under his eyes. A man passing through. He seemed almost to know what was coming.”

Mullins explains his worn appearance as from being so long on tour. In photos, his body shape changes rapidly from overweight to frail.

People come to interview him to ask about the key questions of life. Like how does he, a super duper Christian, manage to live among Native Americans?

“The same way I dealt with living in Middle America,” he replies. “I think most Middle-American beliefs are in direct conflict with the scriptures.”

In March 1997 he says: “I really came here more to try to get beyond my white, middle-class Protestant upbringing and see life through a different lens.”

In June 1997, CCM did a feature on AIDS and quoted him. Mullins seems more concerned with the general Evangelical approach to homosexuality. “It seems like the church has picked homosexuality out to be the ultimate evil thing, and I’m just not always sure that it is.”

He worked on a new album, *The Jesus Record*, narrating the birth and rise of the messiah. It’s as if Jesus is born once again in the wilderness—among the shepherds.

In his final months he seemed to try to tell a story he couldn’t tell.

He was interviewed by Les Sussman for a posthumously published book, and relates:

“From my junior year of high school until age thirty I felt tormented all the time. I was depressed. I just think I have that sort of personality.”

Mullins adds there was “more than ten years of darkness where I felt tormented all the time.” No explanation.

In concert banter, he speaks of his anticipation of resurrection. “I’ll have no bags under my eyes. I’ll have a jaw line, biceps, the whole works. I’ll be a jock. Either a jock or a fife player, I haven’t decided which.”

The young men he was with seem to know more than they wish to say.

“Resignation and longing are his two major themes, according to him, in his songs,” Mitch says in *Rich Mullins: A Ragamuffin’s Legacy*. “And those wouldn’t be there if he wasn’t — ”

Mitch pauses, and adds: “The messed up pile of stuff that he was.”

A church friend, interviewed in the documentary as well, recalls Mullins calling and saying plans for work on the reservation were being dropped: “My health has been bad. I don’t know what’s going on or why. I just know I’m not going to be able to do this.”

His concert banter got edgy.

On April 11, 1997, Mullins was giving a performance in the chapel of Wheaton College. He dismisses Christian music. "If you really tuned into that stuff all the time, it would warp you."

His own fans only knew, he suggests, part of his music.

"The grim stuff doesn't sell well," he says, in one of many talky interludes between songs. He knows Christian musicians are often saying that God "inspired" their stuff. "I know God gives a lot of people their songs, but I hear a lot of those, and I understand why He gave them away. I've never gotten this Christian thing about always blaming God for everything."

He's back in his childhood. "I think I was raised Christian, but once I left home I began to find out how un-Christian my family was."

One segue to the next, tapping out background music, he's Kierkegaard at the piano.

"We live in a time when we have come to believe that there are answers. I don't know why we believe that. Even more worrisome is: I'm not even sure why we ever came to believe the questions are all that important."

He dismisses academic treatments of the faith.

"Christianity is communicated the same way diseases are. It's communicated through touch, through breath, through life, not through information."

In September 1997, Mullins and crew stay at the home of young Caleb Kruse.

Kruse remembers the three week visit in a 2016 memoir, *Meeting Rich*. If he was expected to have superstar ways, he didn't. Caleb writes: "When he spoke, he was polite. Almost even shy." Mullins explains his worn appearance by saying he's been busy.

Mitch McVicker, Rich Mullins, Caleb Kruse (credit: *Meeting Rich*)

They had multiple musical projects in progress, from Mitch's first solo album to Mullins' latest project, a passion play about Jesus. In *Rich Mullins: A Ragamuffin's Legacy*, a friend recalls: "He was real, real tired. Real tired."

Mullins gives a concert in Kruse house, with lots of talky interludes. "I wanted to be a jock, but I don't have any athletic skills at all," he says.

He's back remembering the house he'd lived in Cincinnati as a struggling Bible college student.

"And I had so little money, I was in the attic with one other guy. And we had to sleep together for the two years I lived there, because he had an electric blanket. I woke him up one night, my teeth were chattering so loud. He said, 'Why don't you just sleep with me? That way, I can get some sleep and you can too.'"

During the stay, Caleb's mom has an odd moment where she wonders if something's amiss. "I just need to ask," she says, "are you okay?"

"Yeah," Mullins says.

"I just feel like something's wrong," she says.

"Don't worry," he says.

Mullins and Mitch leave for an event.

It's September 19, 1997. Mitch remembers the gas station where they refueled that night before heading southbound on I-39 north of Bloomington, Illinois. He remembers Mullins at the push-button cappuccino machine, now spilling all over the floor. Mullins walks away?

The gas station clerk had recognized him. "It was just funny to me that he made that big mess and gets recognized," Mitch says. "That's my last memory."

Both were thrown from the Jeep. That might've done it for Mullins. The semi truck didn't help. Pam Destri, an EMT called to the scene, was later interviewed about meeting him in death.

"He had such an angelic face," she recalls. "I really thought he was a young man, like young, like fifteen, sixteen."