

For Musician, Road to Sobriety Leads to Back to Faith, Church By Mark Pattison

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WASHINGTON (CNS)—For rock singer Christopher John Campion, the road to sobriety led him back to his Catholic faith and the church.

"I really feel like God has had his hand in my entire journey," Campion told Catholic News Service in a Feb. 11 telephone interview from his home in New York City.

Campion, 44, the lead singer in an indie-rock band called the Knockout Drops, had many lows on his bumpy road toward sobriety, which he achieved 10 years ago.

"I was so hot-wired into the mythology of drinking and boozing—and drugs, too, but ... alcohol was my great love when it comes to all that stuff," said Campion, whose memoir, *Escape From Bellevue*, came out in paperback after Christmas. "I was into all that myself: Jim Morrison and Jack Kerouac and (Irish author) Brendan Behan, (rock singer) Shane McGowan, you name any drunk artist, I was a fan of him."

Campion never defined himself as a nonbeliever, even during his most rambunctious periods. He recalled a face-to-face talk with Brother Gerard, an Augustinian monk who lived at Villanova University near Philadelphia, where Campion went to college.

"I was at the lunch table one day, and sat next to him, told a couple of off-color stories, made everybody laugh. When they all went away, I sidled up to him, and told him my problem. He invited me to his room," Campion told CNS.

He recounted that conversation with the monk, who asked him if he knew who St. Augustine was.

"He struggled with faith his whole life. And he was this boozing, womanizing saint," he told Campion, who replied that sounded like his "kind of saint!"

"He went on to tell me, 'Faith is dark. It requires a leap.' It was really an important moment," Campion said. "I said, 'You know, I miss that kind of belief and I really don't feel like going through life as an atheist, as someone who just has no hope.' I missed the camaraderie and a relationship with God, as well as the security of it."

Campion said he also has the utmost regard for the late Father Peter Sweisgood for staging an intervention to bring Campion's father back to sobriety.

When Campion was 14, the priest "drove a convertible. He looked like Ken Howard, the guy who played the coach on 'The White Shadow.' I think he played football at Fordham. And so my dad met him and he had a lot of respect for him. He was a man's man."

Alcoholism runs in his family, Chris Campion said. "We got to having so many interventions we started calling them 'surprise parties.'"

His brother, Billy Campion, also a rock musician, has gotten sober. Their parents are daily Massgoers. Chris Campion goes weekly, mostly to St. Joseph Church in his East Village neighborhood of Manhattan, but also to either St. Francis Assisi or St. Francis Xavier, also in Manhattan if he's not going to make it to St. Joseph on time.

One thing Campion feared was that drying out would rob him of his creative spark. "It turns out I was dead wrong. As soon as I got up on dry land, my imagination came back threefold. It was an avalanche of ideas."

And not just songs, either. Campion wrote a stage play that shares the same title as his memoir, "Escape From Bellevue." The play details his sobering up at the Bellevue Hospital Center in New York, where he escaped not once but twice from earlier attempts to get him straight.

His memoir—released in hardback last June—is not for the faint of heart as it serves up, often in vulgar detail, events of Campion's booze-drenched odyssey. "Some people may find it profane, but I never intended to be that way. I did not write to try to shock anybody," he said. "I said a prayer to the Holy Spirit and let whatever come out, come out. There was very little editing."

Despite the episodes showing Campion careening in despair toward his eventual redemption, there are still moments so touching that even the author remains affected by them.

"I'm doing this weekly serialization of the book at a place in the East Village," he said. "I read a short passage from each chapter. I was going to do Chapter 1 about my first Communion and how my father was cleaning me off (after he got sick in church). I was practicing the reading, but I got so choked up thinking about it, I went over to a different reading. I didn't think I was going to make it through that first one without crying onstage."