

Excerpt from:
*The Walls of Spain: Diary of a
Short-Term Mission*
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SPRING 2002

**The author
has just turned
21.**



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APRIL

It's April 2002 in Sunny Southern California, and my life is good—real good. My Ska band, *The MentoneTones*, is promoting our full-length album *Are We There Yet?* that recently received some great British magazine press. Southern California is a hotbed for Ska bands like *The O.C. Supertones* and *Five Iron Frenzy*. Our local band is scheduling shows every possible weekend that we can play. On top of that, I'm heading into my senior year at California Baptist University. My parents met there, and if it could happen for them, who knows? So if all goes well, if I can balance the band and school and my acting, then I'll be graduating next spring with my B.A. in Theatre. Maybe I'll find a serious love interest amid all the excitement. No matter, I wouldn't want to trade my life for anyone else's.

Today, as usual, I'm running from thing to thing trying to keep it all together. I'm headed home from Wallace Book of Life Theatre at the moment. Wallace Theater is where I spend most of my days running to my theatre and choir classes and theatre rehearsals. Usually, for a full-on production, we have two-hour rehearsals there each afternoon, from 3 until 5 p.m. Then during tech-week we have even longer nights, sometimes rehearsing the entire play twice in an evening to get all the bugs out. Lately, I've been trying to balance three productions at the same time, the main one being a lead role in *The Foreigner*, so life has been more insane than usual.

I absolutely love performing, even though I get giddy before going on stage. Sometimes I feel sick, other times hyper, and it doesn't help when you also have very funny, naughty friends who are waiting with you backstage! Sometimes when I'm standing in the darkness backstage, waiting for my cues, my fellow actors Chad Freeman and Briana Bates will do things to try to make me laugh or just to make me

lose my lunch! Sometimes one of them will do something so hilarious, like chasing me with a prop while acting possessed, right up until it's my turn to go on stage. Then I'm all freaked out and sweating in full costume and makeup. My friends know fog machines are my biggest weakness; I get choked up and my stomach gets lots of butterflies from it. Chad and Briana especially like to yank my chain when the ol' fog machine is rolling. But even if I lose my cookies out the emergency exit, I run right back in to my place before my cue. I always come through.

Ask my band *The MentoneTones* to verify this! If you can, try to picture the fury of our concert mode: The band is playing loud with a mix of Big Band horns, pumping rock drum rhythms, and constant motion. As the lead singer, I'm rapping and singing while running from one side of the stage to the other and doing Ska music's signature move, the skank. When I get all worked up, my face turns bright red and the veins in my forehead stand out. More than once, I got sick and even passed out after a concert. Our manager doesn't like it too much when I get all overheated and nauseated in concert, but she isn't surprised that we get ourselves burned out. She knows that we are a clean band—no drugs or alcohol; she knows that we just over-exert ourselves. Our music is over the top, high octane, Ska-core. It doesn't seem to faze her that her Ska band is acting crazy off-stage either. Acting a bit wacky sort of comes with our genre's scene.

Part of living the "California Dream" of being in a popular band means figuring out show logistics with my band's manager. One afternoon, she wanted an answer from my band-mates about some show. Ever since our album was completed, we have more credibility as musicians and more concerts than ever. Our manager is on top of us to make sure that we're rehearsing new songs. I was calling around to the rest of *The MentoneTones*, asking all seven of them about our next rehearsal, whether at my house or Shaun's house. I'm doing all this between theater rehearsals while drinking a Mountain Dew and sitting in gridlock traffic on the 91 Freeway, when I get a phone call from Spain.

"Hello John D?" It was my sister's voice, not a band mate. Only my sister Alicia calls me John D. Everyone else calls me JD or Dr. Mentone.

What was Alicia doing calling me from Europe? Without waiting to hear her purpose, I started in with my usual *What's-new-How's-the-family-in-Spain-Can-I-talk-to-the-girls* conversation. After a few minutes of that, Alicia got down to business.

"Will you come help us for the summer John D? We want you here so badly." I wasn't really expecting to hear that. I could easily have just glazed over, but the pang of family need in my sister's voice grabbed my attention.

"In June we're going to need your talents to put on a play in *Arroyo*. I would need you to help me pull it together. You could direct it, and I have ideas of how we could adapt a really great children's book by Max Lucado, a story that would really address the social problems in *Arroyo*," she said.

Wow. This was heavy. My head started to spin a bit.

Alicia reminded me that they could use my help with their 500-year-old house as well. Its thick stone walls really needed repairs. Her husband Rod could use my help fixing up the old house.

"Please John D," Alicia said in a very serious tone. "Please come help us this summer."

My sister Alicia is my only sibling, the only other person who shared the same great privilege of growing up in the home of our grandparents David and Lydia Alcalá. My grandparents met at the Los Angeles Methodist Mexican Convention of 1941. By the time they were in their twenties, they were both already involved in the Hispanic Protestant revivals of the 1930s. Both shared a rich history tracing back from Mexico to Spain and centuries before that to Israel (*Judea*). Alicia and I grew up sitting at our grandparents' formal dining table each night hearing their stories of God's work in Spanish-speaking communities. We got to spend hours of our childhood immersed in the dreams and realities of Spanish culture. So it wasn't surprising when we both felt the same strong draw to Spain growing up.

Actually, our upbringing probably had a lot to do with Alicia's and my interest in the performing arts. We came by it naturally, what with growing up in a house where even our living room, furnished with two pianos, was a fertile environment for cultivating the arts. My sister rehearsed songs

that she was going to perform in that living room, my Mom practiced for church services, and my grandma would give piano lessons to neighborhood kids. Over the years I rehearsed my poems and sketches for the annual speech competition at my elementary and junior high schools in that room. My family would sit in their chairs and critique my speeches, and that's how I gained confidence and poise as an actor.

Now my sister was asking me to chip in and devote some of this rich background we shared to help her with her summer camp in *Arroyo*, Spain. Her request couldn't have come at a worse time.

Still, the thought of working with Rod was enticing. I had always admired him. He was quiet, but very handy. He had lots of mettle. The thought of moving his family of four to Spain might seem quixotic, but I couldn't deny my own romantic inclinations towards the culture of castles and pageants—Spain, where my ancestors had lived.

But what about the band? We were on a roll. How often does a local band get a record contract? Summer was prime time for our concert tour. I just knew the band wouldn't want me to bug out on them. I'm the lyricist, singer, and band founder.

Yet on the other hand, I had been preparing as an actor and camp leader for years. Who could help Alicia better than her own brother? I was a Theater major. I had performed in musicals with a theatre troupe called One Voice in Riverside, California. At Thousand Pines, the summer camp that I work at, I'm usually asked to ham it up for the "camp rules" movie that our camp shows to the campers at the beginning of each week. I'd be a natural to help her put on her camp.

Then I thought of the band and all the momentum we had going. *The MentoneTones* were finally getting into a real solid groove after fighting an uphill battle with lineup changes since 1996. As of April 2002, we have a real steady line-up, and our newer band members are even better and more committed than the guys they replaced, so I'm pretty thankful that my band has finally found its stride. No, we aren't world famous, but people walk up and ask me if I'm "that guy" from *The MentoneTones*. It helps that we have a steady gig to play about once a month at the Upper Room, which is a show venue in an old brick building in the town of Redlands.

My band has played around the Redlands-Mentone Beach area since 1996 when as sophomores in high-school, *The MentoneTones* got started as a Trivia Team in Mr. Hebster's "History of the Ancient Near East" class. Hebster divided our class into teams of three to do trivia games. My team consisted of Jon, who played guitar; Richard, a drummer; and me. We joked about us being a band, and we named our trivia team *The MentoneTones* after nearby Mentone Beach. From that joke we began practicing songs. We played two songs for our high school at the end of our sophomore year.

By 1998, *The MentoneTones* had bumper stickers made, and many of our classmates were "representin' Mentone" on the back windows of their cars. During our senior year of high school, my friends and I would swarm to our cars for "off-campus lunch," and we'd have a line of cars that had *MentoneTones* stickers on their windows pulling out onto Alabama Street. So we enjoyed getting our name out before we had even graduated from high school.

Alicia, being older, had started out with her own culture quest before my band days. She first went to Spain in 1992 with two different music groups that she was in. She had gigs singing at the World's Fair in *Sevilla*, Spain, with her college's chorale, then sang in nine more European countries with her band "Sounds." She bought me a sword in *Toledo*, a steel letter opener in *Barcelona*, and made me a bullfighting poster with my own name on it at The World's Fair in *Sevilla* in 1992. When she came back and brought me these things, I was more enchanted than ever with romantic ideas about knights and castles in Spain. Keep in mind, I was only eleven years old at the time, and it's a very special thing for an eleven year old to receive his own Spanish sword. The next year, in 1993, Alicia married Rod Paddock, and in 1995 they had a spiritual journey together where they debated whether or not to leave the land of plenty, San Diego, California, and give up promising respective careers in bridal fashion and education.

The outlook of the Paddocks' marriage was extremely outgoing and spiritual. They took the investment of their lives very seriously. Rod and Alicia wrestled with God for a time on whether God wanted them to get to Spain or not. They had to deal with the question of whether or not it

was the right decision for their young family. Once convinced of their direction, they went through months of frustration, searching, and waiting while figuring out the “how” and “when” to get to Spain.

By 1999, Rod and Alicia had two little girls. In May of that year, Rosie would be turning four and baby Gracie would be having her first birthday. I recall vividly that on *Cinco de Mayo* (May 5th), I drove Rod and Alicia from Grand Terrace, California, all the way to Colorado. I drove for Rod, who had come down with the chicken pox on May 4th. I drove them so that they could attend a candidate school to test the waters of going to Spain under the banner of an organization called Tentmakers Bible Mission.

In September of 1999 Rod and Alicia moved to *Arroyo*, Spain. They took it on themselves to teach literacy, both of the English language and of the Bible. After many years of religious and cultural intolerance in

Spain, Rod and Alicia detected what appeared to be faint glimmers of hope that religious freedom may be returning to Spain, once a leading world power and a center of cultural diversity.

Three years had already flown by since they had moved to Spain. Now, in the summer of 2002, with three little children and that big ongoing home renovation project on their hands, my sister and brother-in-law really did need more manpower if they were going to make headway in their city-wide campaign, called *Día del*



Evangelio, a rally of all the Protestant churches in Spain's northern State of *Navarra*. Rod and Alicia needed help on so many projects, and wanted me, as one of their closest loved ones, to join them. So how could a decent brother and the uncle of her children turn that down?

In fact, I was dying to see what my sister's life was like in person. And how could I not want to see my adorable nieces? And how could I not be anxious to finally hold my baby nephew Bryan for the first time? I

had only seen baby pictures of him up until this point! I hadn't been there for his birth, as I was for Rosie and Gracie, because Alicia gave birth to Bryan in Spain at the *Universitaria* Hospital in *Arroyo*. Alicia had assured my family about giving birth in *Arroyo*, telling us that *Universitaria* is one of the elite hospitals in Northern Spain. By choosing to have their baby in Spain, my sister and brother-in-law had obviously come a long way already in their cultural assimilation.

I didn't like the knot in my stomach. My love of Southern California pop culture was holding a wrestling match with the alluring call of the Spanish culture of my sister's life. And that wasn't all that was bothering me. Having just finished my junior year in college, I've got heavy decisions to make about my future. Last year, my dad died suddenly of a heart attack. I've had to deal with my own bereavement and the weight of knowing that I no longer have my father around to assist me with my life decisions. The loss of my father made me want to see my family in Spain so much more. I began realizing that my selfish and sometimes reckless drive to have a successful band had often overshadowed the importance of my own family.

So my decision about whether to go to Spain or to stay weighs heavy on me after I hang up the phone with Alicia. I'm still sitting in traffic on the 91 freeway, now wide-eyed from Alicia's call and from all the Mountain Dew that I'm drinking. I'm wrestling with my objectives for the summer of '02. I know now, since the passing of my father, that my family is more important and should be my priority. That's what I've been accepting recently, but my desire to find success as the lead singer of a Ska band is also consuming me. I want my identity and my career to revolve around being a famous singer and actor, not as "somebody's nice little brother."

I began to realize that I was going to make either my sister and her family very happy at the expense of letting down my band, or vice versa.

In a way, the members of our evolving band were also like a family to me. I met our drummer turned guitarist, Shaun Goff, my freshman year of college when we both lived on the same dormitory hall at Christian Heritage College. Shaun had introduced us to his trombone-playing friend Luke, who played in the brass section of the

University of Southern California marching band. Several of the *MentoneTones*—our one-name band mate “Cowmaster,” and Richard and Matt Higgins—knew a mutual friend and trumpeter, Billy Faulkner, who became our long-time first trumpet player. Billy, after a few years with *The MentoneTones*, invited his friend Brad Dodson to join the band. Billy and Brad had been signed to Boost-Up Records together with another band. So our band has sort of gone like the story of “Stone Soup,” getting better as we added new ingredients, in our case, more experienced members.

It would have been easier if this looked like a ho-hum summer for the band, but instead it looks like the year with our best prospects yet. Our manager Eva is sending our CD out to some different festivals to get us in the lineup. And it doesn't hurt that our album had two very good producers. Bob Moon had produced bands like *MxPx* and *The O.C. Supertones* and pretty much every other *Tooth-and-Nail Records* band. And the other producer, who also played guitar on four tracks for us, was Andrew Shirley, the guitar player for the modern rock bands *Switchfoot* and *All Together Separate*.

What about commitment?! I'm always trying to talk my band-mates and fellow actors into sticking in there for the length of a commitment, whether it be a musical or a concert. I'm definitely guilty of telling my cohorts that they shouldn't let their personal life side-rail our professional projects. We have to sell CD's and tickets. And as lead singer of my band, I don't like to think of myself as easily replaceable. In fact, I'm saying to myself, *It's my band, and I want The MentoneTones to succeed! Why should I give up our summer, which is vital for us, and lose out on getting bigger festival venues like we had earlier this year at the "Somebody Loves You Crusade" and at "Harvest"? If we're going to share our music and our message, I'm thinking, how can that succeed, and how can all the songs that we've been writing and rehearsing since 1996 succeed unless I'm there this summer to make sure it happens?*

I remembered how earlier this week I had talked to our guitar player Shaun, who told me that we were now officially on the bill to play at San Diego's *Miles Ahead Festival*. I had immediately called Andrew Shirley to tell him we'd be playing with his band *Switchfoot* in July. In addition to

being one of our producers, Andrew had been an MC at our concerts years before, and I really looked up to Andrew in Christian music. I was looking to follow in his footsteps of musical success.

That is exactly what made it a crisis for me when I got Alicia's phone call. I was imagining both the applause at shows and also the thrill of living in the land of castles and bull fights. It would be so amazing to direct a play in Europe, but then again what would happen to my shows in America?

By this time, I already knew what I had to do. I knew my band family would be upset and frustrated, but my absence would only amount to missing or postponing two concerts. It was only for two months—May and June—that I'd be gone, and then we could pick up where we left off, or at least I thought so. It was clear that my sister's need was far greater, and besides that—I needed to go visit my family *for me*. It was time to hold that new nephew and tease my little nieces, to breathe in Spanish air and walk under Spanish skies. A castle or two was calling my name.

After I drove home to Grand Terrace, I had to sit down in my comfy office chair and think about what to tell Eva and Shaun and *The MentoneTones*. I knew that my last play, *The Foreigner*, would be over with plenty of time to get to Europe, so that posed no problem. I thought about my band again. I knew Shaun had put a lot into getting us this juicy concert, so I called him to verify the date. It was happening July 4th, 2002. So I got to thinking that I could ask our manager Eva to just drop or postpone any shows that we were pursuing until July. Then I figured that I got out of school on the last day of April, so we could do our *MentoneTones* show scheduled for Saturday April 30th, then on May 2nd or 3rd I could fly to Spain.

I talked to my family, then I called and told Alicia that I would come. She was so happy! She immediately began chattering about mimes and sets and props and paints. I told her that I would be there for two months only, because I needed to be back in California for our gig at the Festival on July 4th. Alicia was very relieved that I was coming and told me that the *Dia del Evangelio* city-wide event and their Vacation Bible School were both in June, so if I was there for those, it would be a good trip.

Alicia and Rod explained to me the funds I would need to raise to pay for my expenses for the trip. I would need to pay for lodging with the Mendaza family, where I would be staying while taking Spanish lessons. It's not that I didn't speak Spanish, because that was spoken in my household. I needed to get the proper Castillian that Spaniards speak under my belt if I wanted to be taken seriously, and I needed money to pay for the tutoring.

\$1000+	Airfare
\$ 900+	Room and meals at the Mendazas' home
\$ 600	<u>Tutoring fees for the professor</u>
\$2,500	Total

The basic cost for my trip came to \$2,500, and that didn't even take into account the price of everyday things like food money and supplies for putting on the play. Ugh.

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