Culture



Jelly Roll performs during a concert in St. Peter's Square for the conclusion of the World Meeting on Human Fraternity at the Vatican, Saturday, Sept. 13, 2025. (AP/Gregorio Borgia)



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October 11, 2025

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When the Vatican's World Meeting on Human Fraternity concluded with a concert in St. Peter's Square on Sept. 13, one performer must have been baffled to find himself there. But Jelly Roll's gravelly voice electrified an audience of 80,000, the gray ink of his face tattoos fully exposed in the spotlight as he sang "Hard Fought Hallelujah." The song, a duet with contemporary Christian artist Brandon Lake, was voted 2025 Song of the Year in the K-Love Fan Awards and is nominated for the Song of the Year Dove Award by the Gospel Music Association.

With a youth choir harmonizing behind him at the "Grace For the World" concert, Jelly Roll performed the song full-throttle, punching the air with each word of the refrain: "I'll bring my storm-tossed, torn-sail story to tell hallelujah." The camera cut to a majestic, aerial view over the yellow-domed Vatican glowing below, and then back to the musician, framed by rows of Bernini's colonnades. "Oh, I've wrestled with the darkness, but I'm trying to reach for the light" (Hard Fought Hallelujah).



The finger of Adam and the finger of God from the creation scene in Michelangelo's ceiling fresco in the Sistine Chapel is recreated by drones flying over St. Peter's

Basilica at the Vatican Sept. 13, 2025, during the concert, "Grace for the World," which concluded the World Meeting on Human Fraternity. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

At that moment it was hard to believe the Grammy-nominated artist was once a drug dealer struggling with addiction and convicted of aggravated robbery. How has a man who's declared that he's nothing but a "broken down car on a side street" ended up grinning with joy as he shakes the hand of Pope Leo XIV?

Jelly Roll's growing, worldwide fanbase is populated with people like me: ordinary, struggling people whose lives have been impacted by addiction. We hear in Jelly Roll's music something unique and distinct; not pretty, but beautiful — because it holds something true.



Jelly Roll performs live on stage at the Global Citizen Festival on Sept. 28, 2024. (Wikimedia Commons/Setoxxx/CC BY-SA 4.0)

In lines like "Somebody save me, me from myself" ("Save Me") and "I am not okay, I'm barely getting by" ("I Am Not Okay"), there's an uncluttered way of communicating, to the listener and to God. The words aren't fancy, yet they are his, direct and often anguished. His lyrics are psalm-like in construction: a lament, a cry citing a specific pain and then a pivot to faith, even praise. Song after song, despair and hope intertwine.

Jelly Roll writes about the disease of addiction from the inside out: stuck, sick on floors and in church pews, pining to fly away. Though it's a physical condition, he is able to articulate the truth of where addiction really lives: in our core. He deftly describes how addiction misshapes our lives spiritually, the way it festers in the soul and makes everything distorted and warped — perhaps especially our relationship with God.

The longing for healing, for Jesus, runs through all of Jelly Roll's work. It's a restless, panicked search for restoration. Sometimes he finds it, more often he doesn't: "I only talk to God when I need a favor / but God, I need a favor" ("Need A Favor"). Yet he keeps crawling and confessing, hoping to stand up in the light.

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When he speaks of feeling shattered (the accompanying image to "Son of a Sinner" is his face broken into shards), it isn't just because of his own sickness. His pared-down lines capture the deeper pain of loving other addicts: "Little Mike cried when he got that time / Gavel came down and he kissed this world goodbye." But this is followed by the offering of hope: "One thing I learned in life / Save room for the little light" ("Little Light").

The continual returning to, and offering of, light is why Jelly Roll's followers seek out his music. Many have expressed being changed by it. A song on his most recent album "Beautifully Broken" asks the question: "When the drugs don't work no more, who's gonna drive you home?" And there's a moving, resounding answer from the singer: "I will, I will, I will" ("When The Drugs Don't Work").



Tens of thousands of people gathered in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Sept. 13, 2025, for the concert, "Grace for the World," which concluded the World Meeting on Human Fraternity. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Addicts are sometimes shamed, judged and mocked. I know this all too well. What could counter that attitude more strongly than Jesus' words in Matthew 25:40? "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters, you did for me." Who will drive an addict home?

"Grace For the World" was billed as the first concert in St. Peter's Square in 2,000 years, and it had one holy goal: unity through music. Right there in the place we call the cradle of the Catholic faith, Jelly Roll pointed to the sky and vowed: "I'ma keep on singing / 'til my soul catches up with my song" ("Hard Fought Hallulujah"). This is an artist who takes the stage as his full, true self. In between stanzas, he offered these words spontaneously: "God is good, baby, God is good." This is the addict who also sings, "I'm a lost cause, baby, don't waste your time on me" ("Save Me"). Both lines make me cry.

"Grace For the World" is now available on Hulu.

A version of this story appeared in the **Nov 7-20, 2025** print issue under the headline: Jelly Roll offers hope in Vatican performance.