EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

“It's Almost Like a Third Wind”

Petra lead singer John Schlitt, once the voice of Head East, and author Dorla Schlitt talk with Paul Salfen about Hope, the band's first new studio album in two decades, Dorla's book The Adventure of the Scarlet Thread, and walking through the doors that open.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

Paul Salfen had been trying to get John and Dorla Schlitt on the record for a while. There were false starts, including a conversation that was supposed to happen at the National Religious Broadcasters convention and did not. When they finally sat down, the Petra lead singer sounded relieved. “Doing well,” he said, “a whole lot better than last time.”

It was worth the wait. Petra, the Christian rock band that has won four Grammy Awards and 10 Dove Awards and was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2000, has a new studio album out, *Hope*, its first in more than 20 years. John, who also came to national attention as the lead singer of Head East, the Midwestern rock band behind the classic-rock staple “Never Been Any Reason,” is out with a solo album, *GO*. Dorla, an elementary school teacher and children's ministry leader, has written *The Adventure of the Scarlet Thread: The Promise Fulfilled*, a book that traces the Bible as one continuous story. Salfen spoke with both of them for AMFM Magazine.



Petra, Hope. Courtesy of McCain & Co. Public Relations.

A THIRD WIND

Salfen went first to the new Petra record, and to the long run behind it. How, he asked, do you keep topping yourself?

“Twenty years ago, we thought we'd retire,” John said. He had been doing his solo work and other projects when Bob called. That is Bob Hartman, Petra's founding guitarist. “It's been 50 years, John,” he recalled Hartman saying. “I think we probably should maybe do a couple of songs, see if the guys want to, or a couple shows, see if the guys want to do it.”

“And that turned into the 50th anniversary thing for, like, three years, which in turn, a new album, which was a shock to us, actually.” The results, he said, have been fantastic, and the reviews have been great. “It's really funny. It's almost like a third wind, you know?”

Hope arrived digitally on January 5, 2026, through Girder Music, with CD and vinyl editions following, the band's first album of all-new studio material in more than two decades. Salfen also pointed to John's solo album, *GO*. John did not linger on the solo title. He talked about time.

“I only have so much time here on the earth, and I figure as long as God allows, you know, I should maximize the opportunities.”

> *“It's really funny. It's almost like a third wind, you know?”*

THE SCARLET THREAD

Salfen turned to Dorla and her book.

She grew up in the church, she said, but did not know much about the Old Testament. “As time went, I came to Christ. So much changed, so much good teaching, God's Word.” Then she read a book that opened her eyes. “I want children to know about this. I'm an elementary school teacher, I've worked in children's ministry leadership.” She wrote a VBS program for her church. Twenty years later, after she stepped away from children's ministry staff, she wrote the book. “And so we have the book!”



The Adventure of the Scarlet Thread: The Promise Fulfilled, by Dorla Schlitt. Courtesy of McCain & Co. Public Relations.

The official cover gives the full title: *The Adventure of the Scarlet Thread: The Promise Fulfilled*.

She wrote it, she said, so that a reader, “whether it's a young child or an older one, even an adult, like me,” would find “that the Bible is one continuous story of God's love and mercy in providing the plan of salvation,” beginning in Genesis with the fall of man and God's promise to send a Savior. The book follows four Old Testament stories, kept “very clear, true to God's Word, not too complicated.”

“You can trace a scarlet thread,” she said. “And so then when you get to the story of Jesus and the sacrifice he made, at that point, you can see, oh, that's what that was about in the Old Testament, and it shows you the faithfulness of God through the ages, and to His promise, and to His people, and His love for us in giving us the gift of Jesus.”

BE CONTENT WITH SMALL THINGS

People look up to them, Salfen said, and want to get the word out the same way. What advice would each of them give?

John started with ministry, and with the bands that still come up after shows. “If God is leading you, follow Him. Be content with small things in the beginning, or through the whole time. You know, basically, doing a ministry, following God's lead, He never promised to have a gigantic thing. It's just His will, what He wants you to do.”

Hartman's usual advice, he said, is the same. “Be content with small things. Start. As the doors open, walk through them. Be real, and really, that's what you have to do. You just have to trust God. If the Holy Spirit's guiding you, just go for it, and He'll open the doors it's supposed to be, and when they're supposed to get bigger, they will. And just follow that rollercoaster.”

Salfen asked Dorla to add something for people who have a book in them.



Dorla Schlitt. Courtesy of McCain & Co. Public Relations.

“I would encourage them to write,” she said. “A lot of people journal, you know, and you never know how God will just inspire you to do something with what you write, or maybe it's something in your career.” Their daughter is a family therapist, she said, and may write a book of her own. “By writing, that's my way of communicating, is through words, in writing.”

“Just take what God opens up, what might be your gift, your passion, and be open to what might, where it might lead. And, you know, if it doesn't lead to anything big, that's okay, too. You can write for your family, or for your church. There's a lot of important places.”

If God is tugging, she said, listen. “Follow Him. Give it a shot. And if it's not Him, or if you're really not supposed to do it, you'll actually wear out. You'll wear out and say, you know what, I'm not that interested anymore. He'll close the door. So you just have to be available.”

THE DOORS KEPT OPENING

Salfen asked each of them for a Hail Mary moment, the kind of turn he also explores in his book *Going For It!*.

John went back to the beginning. “I put together a band back when I was in high school, and I thought it was going to be over when I went to college. Then another band opened up, and I always thought this was going to be part-time, and when I graduated as an engineer from the university, I quit music, but I never did, you know? And the doors kept opening, and I said, well, maybe for a couple years.”

That high school band became Head East, a major rock act with big hits. Though St. Louis is often mentioned as the group's hometown, the original members grew up in southern Illinois. They started as the TimeAtions and took the name Head East at the suggestion of roadie and stage-hand Baxter Forrest Twilight. August 6, 1969, is recognized as the official date, and the first gig was in Carbondale, Illinois, about 100 miles southeast of St. Louis. The original members were brothers Roger and Larry Boyd, Steve Huston, John Schlitt, and Dan Piper. John and Steve left to concentrate on their studies and returned full time in 1973.

The lineup for the first six albums took shape in Champaign-Urbana in 1973, where Roger Boyd and John Schlitt were students at the University of Illinois. Mike Somerville joined on guitar in late 1973, and by the summer of 1974 Dan Birney was on bass, with Roger Boyd, Steve Huston, John Schlitt, and Mike Somerville. That summer they recorded *Flat As A Pancake* at Golden Voice studios in Pekin, Illinois, and released it on their own Pyramid Records. A&M Records signed the band, re-released the album in 1975, and it was certified Gold, for 500,000 in sales, in 1978. The singles “Never Been Any Reason” and “Love Me Tonight” both charted on the Billboard Hot 100. “Never Been Any Reason” became a classic rock radio staple and one of the most frequently played classic rock anthems in many parts of the country.

A couple of years turned into five, then maybe five more. “It just was always that the doors opened, and I kept walking through them, and felt good about it, and tried to do the best I possibly could.”

> *“The doors opened, and I kept walking through them.”*

For Dorla, the through-line was the writing itself. She wrote that first VBS program, then another, four in all for four different years, and rotated them for a while. She set the work down while she was doing other things in children's ministry. The book came about 20 years later. She has hung on to the old notes. “Maybe God will open the opportunity to follow this book with another.”

John jumped in to say it took her 20 years. She had been, as the conversation put it, a mother, a grandmother, a teacher. “And so the time just wasn't right.” Then they agreed: “It's God's timing.”

What do they tell themselves when the path gets hard? Dorla's answer was a sentence she addresses to herself. “I know for me, it's just be patient, Dorla. Just be patient. You have other things today you need to do.” A lot of people make it a goal to sit down and write every day, she said. “Well, that doesn't work for me.” If the Lord is in it, “He'll provide the path, and He'll provide the timing, and it'll all work out in the end. Just take it a day at a time.”

John's habit is to stay in motion. “I don't waste time. And I like to build furniture, I mean, I like the woodworking. So, if I'm not doing music, if I'm not on a tour, if I'm not writing or whatever, I'm going to be staying busy creating with woodwork.” That, he said, maximizes his time. “And as far as the musical part, the doors open, I walk through them, and I'm never bored.”

STILL ON THE ROAD

Are they going to be on tour, Salfen asked, and is there anything else to know?

John has a Christmas record out, he said, for “like, three or four years,” and this is the season for it. He is doing a Christmas special in Ohio, without naming a city or a date. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, he said, “this record is very appropriate for it.”

Then he came back to the band. “As you said, with the Petra records out now called Hope, and it's doing, actually, very well for a bunch of old guys that were supposed to disappear 20 years ago. So, I'm just very, very blessed to be part of it. The band is very excited to be back on the road again, and all over the world. I think we're probably, we play more outside this country than we do in. But it's where the doors open, and it's always a lot of fun to be able to do it.”

Earlier, Salfen had asked about a documentary. One project, they said, is still tied up. “When? We don't know. It's sort of locked up in financial guru stuff.” They have seen it. “It's actually very dedicated to Christ, which I love.” They did not give a title or a release date.

What is out now, John said, is a movie called *Beyond Belief*. “It's on Angel Network now.” It was in theaters for a short time, “as most, all the spirit-based movies are,” and then went to Angel. Official listings confirm the 2026 film, which features Petra's music and is endorsed by Hartman and Schlitt, had a theatrical date of August 28 and streams on Angel. “Seems to be doing real good, so I'm happy,” John said. “Like I said, I mean, there's a lot going on.”

Salfen thanked them for the music, the writing, and whatever comes next. John thanked him for staying with the interview “over the many times that were so hard for you to do.” Salfen called it an honor, and said he looked forward to seeing them in person soon.

“God bless,” he said. “God bless you, too,” came the reply. “Bye-bye.”

FIND JOHN AND DORLA SCHLITT

Petra: *Hope*, the band's first new studio album in more than 20 years, released digitally on January 5, 2026, through Girder Music, with CD and vinyl editions following. Official site: petraband.com

John Schlitt: Lead vocalist of Petra. Former lead singer of Head East. Solo album: *GO*.

Dorla Schlitt: *The Adventure of the Scarlet Thread: The Promise Fulfilled*.

Also discussed: *Beyond Belief* (2026), a film featuring Petra's music, in theaters August 28, 2026, and streaming on Angel.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.
