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Contemporary Christian Music: Where Rock Meets Religion

Jay R. Howard

Religion and rock music have long had a love/hate relationship. Rock music is often charged with being a perverter of America's youth and an underminer of Christian moral values. This fear of corruption is still evidenced today by the campaign led by Tipper Gore to put warning labels on rock recordings that contain "offensive" material. At times, Christians have cautiously accepted some rock music when artists have embraced religious themes and imagery, as in 1965, when the Byrds recorded Pete Seeger's paraphrase of Ecclesiastes 3, "Turn, Turn, Turn."

Occasionally songs with religious themes have had success on the pop charts. The Byrds' recording of "Turn, Turn, Turn" reached number one in 1965. That same year Elvis' "Crying in the Chapel" reached number 3. In 1971, Ocean's "Put Your Hand in the Hand" peaked at number 2. A gospel choir known as the Edwin Hawkins Singers recorded the two hundred year old hymn "O Happy Day," which peaked on the charts at number 4 in June of 1969. However, after the early seventies, songs mentioning Jesus or carrying religious themes made less and less frequent appearances on the pop charts (Baker).

Books on the subject of rock music have been in abundant supply on the shelves of Christian bookstores, books defending some rock music (Key and Rabey; Seay and Neely; Lawhead) and books attacking most rock music (Peters, Peters and Merrill; Larson). Television evangelists, such as Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart, have been outspoken in their denunciation of rock music.

In the midst of this controversial relationship between rock music and religious messages, and as a response to a feeling of being "locked out" of the secular music industry, there has been a burgeoning Christian recording industry using rock music, known as Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). CCM involves the pairing of a Gospel message or Christian worldview with popular forms of rock music. It is a phenomenon that first received attention during the late 1960s. In 1967, a band called People recorded an album that was to be titled, "We Need a Whole Lot More of Jesus and a Lot Less Rock and Roll." But Capitol Records, over the band's objections, changed the title to "I Love You." One of People's key singers and songwriters, Larry Norman, left the band in protest. The single "I Love You" became a top ten hit, while Norman went on to begin a solo career and a new realm of music, Christian Rock (Baker 33).

Recording artists, such as Amy Grant and the heavy metal band Stryper, have received much attention from the music industry and general public. There is also a large group of artists recording for Christian record companies (i.e., Word, Sparrow) who are being distributed to a primarily Christian audience through religious radio stations and religious bookstores. The objective of such artists is the presentation of a largely Protestant, evangelical message. Evangelization of the "lost" and the encouragement of the "saved" are the goals of the message.

CCM is representative of a large Christian subculture. The members of this subculture reject, to some degree, the values, morality and worldview of the larger society. Through the creation of their own institutions, such as a Christian music industry, members of the Christian subculture are challenging the dominant ideology of modern society. Therefore, it becomes unclear whether this is a subculture or a counterculture. For some it is a subculture sharing in the overall values of society, such as the priority of pursuing material prosperity. For others, who find their values in conflict with the larger society, it serves as a counterculture and a basis for resisting hegemonic dominance.

The CCM movement takes on added significance when one considers that social theorist Max Horkheimer felt that religion was one aspect of society that had redemptive possibilities (Horkheimer; Horkheimer and Adorno). He believed that religion might be able to challenge the closure of society via capitalist ideology. Theodor Adorno, fellow member of the Frankfurt School, also believes that the artistic realm offers the best hope of resisting the closure of society. CCM combines both of these sources of redemptive possibilities. But does CCM offer a challenge to the dominant capitalist ideology? Or does CCM merely serve, in pan, to legitimate the dominant ideology, as religion and culture have been so often accused?

Music and Society

The sociology of music is more about society than about music. It is based on the assumption that social reality is embodied in an individual's activities, musical and otherwise (Dasilva, Blasi and Dees). Music is one of the ways society becomes evident to its members. Something can be understood about a society, in this case the subculture of Protestant Evangelicals, by examining their music.

In general, popular music is for entertainment purposes. But it can be, and has been, listened to and recorded for other purposes. Popular music has been used to express religious, social and political messages. Music has repeatedly been taken up by social movements to express their viewpoints as society's underdogs. Music has the potential to contribute to the "conversion" of nonmembers to the movement's position, as well as to raise the morale and express the solidarity of the movement's participants. Portia A. Maulsby has shown that "Soul Music" served these functions during the U.S. civil rights movement. Punks in England have used their music to reject the dominant values of society and to express their views (Henry). Popular music of the 1960s is another example; in this case, radical lyrics become the daily fare of the capitalist owned media (Dasilva).

Popular music is also one way of expressing visions of a different type of society. Music has long reflected a longing for the future and lamented the fallen state of the present world. This is true of ancient hymns, of negro spirituals, of the gospel music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and of CCM. However, there are segments of CCM that, like the "New Evangelicals" (Quebedeaux), have rediscovered a Biblical mandate for social action in addition to a concern with more traditionally viewed spiritual matters (i.e., prayer, holiness). Such artists tend to play a musical style that is closer to punk and avant garde rock than the mainstream rock of CCM. Punk and avant garde art, in general, have been argued to react against both established theories and

techniques of art as well as against the larger society (Henry). CCM has expressed this rejection of society's norms in two primary ways. The first is the critique of modern society at large, pointing out the contradictions of modern society and rejecting its values and norms. The second approach is to challenge the Church itself to resist conformity to modern society and instead follow what the artists believe is more Biblically-based role for the Church in society.

Rejecting Modern Society

All challenges to modern capitalist society base their movements on claims of liberty, equality or fraternity and sorority (Gitlin). Capitalist society claims to offer all of these benefits, yet daily reality reveals they are lacking. Todd Gitlin has cited numerous contradictions of capitalist society. First, there is the constant urge to work hard, coupled with the proposition that true satisfaction is found in leisure. Second, there is an affirmation of authority and a contradictory affirmation of individualism and self-determination.

Among the CCM artists who have challenged the right of hierarchical authority in their music is Steve Taylor. Taylor sarcastically mimics conservative seminar conductor Bill Gothard and Gothard's "God's chain of command" notion in his song "I Manipulate":

'cause a good wife learns to cower
underneath the umbrella of power
from the cover of heaven's gate
I manipulate.

Rez, a heavy metal band, questions, in the song "Waitin' on Sundown," the right of the wealthy to buy up low income housing in Chicago for gentrification purposes, while making many of the inner city poor homeless:

his wallet's a weapon
corporation hit man
nothin's left when he's done.

While the dominant ideology of modern capitalist society has sanctioned consumer satisfaction as the premium definition of the "good life," CCM has contradicted it (Gitlin 265). The challenge is made in both lifestyle and music. Two prominent CCM bands, Rez and Servant, have lived in intentional communities, sharing a common purse with all community members. Jesus People U.S.A., of which Rez is a ministry, choose to live in the inner city of Chicago among the city's poorest residents, thereby defying the definition of life in the suburbs as the road to happiness. Servant, until the breakup of the community several years ago, was a part of the Highway Missionary Society, an intentional community in rural Oregon. Their choice of a rural residence also rejects the definition of the wealthy suburbs as the place to fulfill the American dream of material prosperity.

Examples of the rejection of material accumulation abound in CCM:

Mannequins on a shopping spree

Who cares if you like it

BUY IT! (Resurrection Band "Elevator Music")

•••

where east meets west in a maze or pleasure

why do we feel we can live forever?

cos' they've piped in music or religious nature (Amos)

The rejection of the drive to accumulate and the often accompanying call for a simple lifestyle represent a partial "dropping out" of the capitalist system. "Refuse to participate" is the message proclaimed.

Another approach to challenging society has been termed the "inversion of progress" theme (Bodinger-deUriarte). Several CCM artists have rejected the hegemonic ideal of advancing technology as being in the benefit of all and improving the general quality of life. Technology has been portrayed as a devastating force that stifles humanity:

Machines remind you

that you can be replaced. (Amos)

Though progress marches on,

Our troubles still grow strong. (Amos)

In challenging these basic premises of the dominant group's hegemony, CCM provides a space for potentially overcoming that dominance. The previously accepted, "common sense" view of the world is open to questioning. Change becomes a possibility.

Challenging the Church and Its Role in Society

The second approach to challenging hegemony through CCM involves the critique of the Church from the inside. This critique is offered not by groups or individuals totally hostile to the Church, but by people who are some of the most dedicated to the Church's mission in the world. These critiques are made by people who want to remain a part of the Church, but refuse to let the Church be anything less than, as it is defined in Matthew 5: 13, the "Salt of the Earth." CCM has attempted to keep the Church from ignoring issues such as Apartheid, the arms race, the disabled, the poor and justice for the Third World.

On Apartheid:

You sow pain then pain you will receive

In the rubble of shantys in your land

Zuid Afrikan. (Rez "Zuid")

On the arms race:

When the bombs begin to fall in the middle of the night

•••

Put a coat over your head and paint your windows white. (Wild "Paint")

On the disabled:

Minus limbs, minus movement, minus worth

So sorry, they say but they forget me. (Resurrection Band "Chair")

On the poor:

Little bitty beggars with the great big eyes

I turn the channel but to my surprise

They still press their faces to the window. (Amos)

On justice in the Third World:

•••

Spoke up for the powerless for the people in need

Oscar Romero they're coming for you (Hewitt "Oscar")

As is evident, irony and sarcasm are favorite tools for pointing out the contradictions inherent in the common sense understanding of the world. Another strategy is to place the familiar into unfamiliar contexts (Henry). For example, the punk CCM band Undercover took the over-one-hundred-year-old-hymn "Holy, Holy, Holy," a Protestant favorite, and recorded it in speed rock form. This illustrates CCM's position of being a part of the institutional church and yet radically critiquing it.

CCM has also sarcastically criticized the Church's activity, especially that of televangelists:

Give me a bullhorn

I'll help your kingdom come

I get all this and heaven when I'm done. (Amos)

It's too late for apologies

When trust has been betrayed. (Taylor "Fritz")

In addition, CCM has critiqued the Church's failure to meet the legitimate needs of society. The Church is accused of being so preoccupied with its own agenda that it misses the opportunity and responsibility to care for those in need around them. In the song "Dancing at the Policeman's Ball," Mark Heard compared the Church's separatism with police spending all their time at the Policeman's Ball, never confronting the world, nor serving their legitimate role in society:

Did I hear you say it is your aim

For every night to be just the same

•••

Dancing at the Policeman's Ball. (Heard "Dancing")

The aim is to get the Church to question itself, thus opening doors for radical change. By refusing to let the worldview of the Church be closed beyond questioning, avant garde CCM artists create cracks in the walls of societal hegemony. The taken-for-granted can be opened up for careful inspection.

Humility is another emphasis of CCM. Humility is needed along with a critical perspective if the Church is ever to question its own ideology or the nationalistic ideology of society.

But don't we cry alone

For the ashes and the dust

We've swept beneath the Holy throne. (Heard "We Believe")

Alongside the call for humility, there is an accompanying call for tolerance of diversity within the Church:

So now I see the whole design

My church is an assembly line. (Taylor "I Want")

Draw the line and claim divine protection

Slay the one who shows the most objection. (Heard "Everybody")

Humility and tolerance must go hand in hand if the Church is ever to effectively question itself and society. The arrogance of the Church has long kept it from asking questions of itself. The lack of questioning has made the Church often irrelevant to society.

Avant garde Contemporary Christian Music offers the potential for a radical critique of the Church and society. Avant garde artists are not the dominant group in terms of record sales and religious radio airplay, but they command a significant following among Christian youth. The annual Cornerstone Festival in the Chicago area draws thousands of Christian youth to four days of nonstop rock music, camping and teaching seminars. Many of the artists referred to in this work make regular appearances in front of fanatical crowds at Cornerstone. The seeds of radical critique are being planted among the youth of the Church. Only with time will it be seen if they take root in a significant way.

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