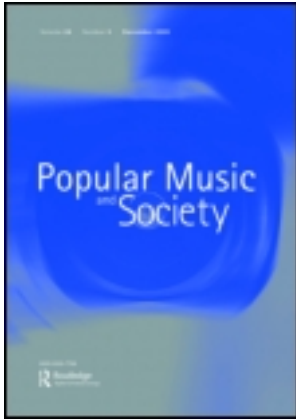


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Popular Music and Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpms20>

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Published online: 22 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: Nancy A. Schaefer (2012) “ Oh, You Didn't Think Just the Devil Writes Songs, Do Ya?” Music in American Evangelical Culture Today, *Popular Music and Society*, 35:1, 53-70, DOI: [10.1080/03007766.2010.538214](http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2010.538214)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2010.538214>

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# “Oh, You Didn’t Think Just the Devil Writes Songs, Do Ya?” Music in American Evangelical Culture Today

Nancy A. Schaefer

*This article explores the evangelical soundscape that has expanded beyond traditional church venues and camp meetings to penetrate mainstream popular culture. The author examines the role music plays within the evangelical subculture, focusing on the recruitment and retention of members. She argues that music is key in identity articulations among conservative evangelicals, who struggle to construct a distinctive religious identity in the face of religious-cultural pluralism and secularism.*

Christian music that touches hearts, changes lives!

(Bill Owens, evangelical author)

Music brought me to Jesus

(bumper sticker)

“What is the sacred?” Goethe asked. And he answered, “That which unites souls.”

(Hollier, Preface, *College of Sociology*)

## Introduction

Music is an intrinsic part of social reality for many people. Music inspires, persuades and entertains; it is also an enculturative device. Music is one way individuals learn about society. It is a vehicle of communication that has long played an important role in evangelical worship services as well as the Protestant ritual of revivalism. Today the evangelical soundscape has expanded beyond traditional church venues and camp meetings to penetrate mainstream commercial culture. The latest evangelical wave continues to generate new opportunities for experimentation in musical genres as well as technological innovation, which are used, among other things, for personal

edification and proselytizing purposes by born-again believers. The importance of music in American evangelicalism is evidenced partly by the time set aside for live performances (singing and instrumental) at movement events. Other indicators include the explosion of associated consumer goods (e.g. CDs, DVDs, advice books, music videos, etc.) as well as the presence and status of ‘music as ministry’ programs at evangelical institutions of higher education, and the rise of consultancy firms specializing in this music.

In this article I examine the role music plays within the evangelical subculture, focusing on the recruitment and retention of members, and look at attempts to construct a distinctive religious identity in the face of rising pluralism and secularism. For a better understanding concerning the place of music in worship and evangelism today, it is necessary first to consider briefly the historical background of Protestant revivalism and its strategic use of music.<sup>1</sup>

### **Music in Christian Worship and Evangelism Historically**

Music within the Judeo-Christian tradition stretches back to ancient Israel with Jubal’s commission (as the first musician) to make music in the ‘origin of skills’ myth found in Genesis (4: 20–22). King David famously danced before the Lord with “shouts and the sound of trumpets” (2 Samuel 6: 14–15) and in Psalms the devout were exhorted to “praise God with lute, harp, and singing” (100, 150). In Christian worship, music’s value was recognized early on: in *De Musica* Augustine of Hippo (354–430) approvingly defined music as “controlled variations of sound in the right way” (qtd in Knight 11). Communal singing among monks harkens back to Gregory I (540–604), credited with standardizing Latin chants.

By the 14th century, church music incorporated growing numbers of instruments and borrowed melodies from popular profane sources, moving away from Gregorian chant (Attali 15). Among the laity, congregational singing reaches back at least as far as Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. Besides encouraging collective participation, music was seen as a powerful weapon in the ongoing struggle against evil. Thinking about music’s role in religion, Luther wrote, “the devil flees before the sound of music almost as much as before the word of God” (qtd in Alford 70). Today evangelical song writers echo earlier church fathers: “[o]ur songs,” writes Graham Kendrick, “become the spiritual equivalents of rockets exploding with joy in heaven and wreaking havoc in hell” (qtd in Begbie 230).

### *Music’s Use in Professional Revivalism*

Once considered a spontaneous “surprising act of God” (as the firebrand Jonathan Edwards titled his 1737 book), revival meetings 100 years later morphed into carefully planned, orchestrated events thanks in large part to the efforts of men such as Charles G. Finney (1792–1875). As part of popular “unofficial” religion, professional mass evangelism was rooted in the earlier frontier camp-meeting tradition and bent on

rekindling Christian belief among the unchurched. Finney, notable for his authoritative “how-to” manual for aspiring revivalists, *Revivals of Religion* (1835), provided the ideological justification to devise methods designed to bring about powerful excitements and revivals of religion. “Men are so sluggish,” he wrote, “there are so many things to lead their minds off from religion and to oppose the influence of the gospel, that *it is necessary to raise an excitement among them*, till the tide rises so high as to sweep away the opposing obstacles” (9–10, emphasis added). After the Civil War, the “new measures” (meant to overcome humanity’s inborn apathy to religion) began to rely more and more on musical—coupled with dramaturgical—performance.

By the 1870s, urban revivalist Dwight L. Moody (1837–99) and his famous song leader Ira Sankey were the lead campaigners, using music as a vital ingredient at their services. Other evangelical entrepreneurs followed suit. Apart from music’s value in structuring services, the music—performed by soloists and special choir ensembles—also united the audience into a singing “congregation.” It was also commonly held that the music could pierce the resolve of even the toughest old sinners who would then accept the gospel (literally “good news”) message. Setting aside questions of aesthetics, music was simply functional or utilitarian, an expedient tool to “implant the gospel in the hearts of the people,” as Sankey once explained (qtd in Oliver 189).

By the turn of the 20th century, scores of evangelist-musician teams were scouring cities and small towns for lost souls. Some of the best known (after Moody and Sankey) were J. W. Chapman and Charles Alexander, Billy Sunday and Homer “Rodey” Rodeheaver and, by mid-century, Billy Graham and George Beverley Shea. These musicians favored gospel music, a hybrid form of religious folk and popular music originating in rural southern churches and carried by internal migrants to urban areas during the interwar period. Stemming from the spiritual-jubilee and folk hymnody traditions, gospel also drew from 19th-century camp-meeting songs, YMCA and Sunday school songs, and the hymns of composers Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. To the public, gospel songs soon became linked to urban revivalism, represented, for example, by Philip Bliss’s “Hold the Fort” and Ira Sankey’s “The Ninety and Nine” (Alford 70–71; Cusic 88). Borrowing the melodies and forms of popular marching tunes and “heart” songs from Tin Pan Alley, these composers resembled previous hymn writers, who used popular folk songs and catchy tunes in their compositions. Usually upbeat and lively or gushingly sentimental, gospel music was characterized by lyrics featuring testimonials coupled with an invitation to convert or re-commit to Christianity (Oliver; Southern).

### *Different Streams*

Interestingly, an important shift in professional revivalism occurred over the course of time. Rather than regaling audiences with “fire-and-brimstone” sermonizing as previous exhorters had done, both Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday—the leading campaigners of their respective eras—laced their meetings with benevolence and

sentimentality. They actively suppressed the kind of emotional spectacle commonly associated with camp-meeting revivalism (e.g. barking, shaking, weeping, fainting, shrieking, etc.) and discouraged fervent singing, inadvertently influencing the direction of “white” gospel for decades to come (Oliver). And, despite the fact that black and white musicians and composers borrowed freely from one another, “black” gospel came to be characterized by discernible and different musical and performance styles (Cusic). Appearing at about the same time as ragtime, blues, and jazz, black gospel incorporated expressive elements found in African-American music more generally, including syncopated body rhythms, call-response patterns, and improvisation (Lincoln and Mamiya). In fact, the “Father of Gospel” music, Thomas Dorsey, is credited with fusing blues and jazz elements with Christian lyrics to create gospel songs.

This distinction regarding gospel music styles is unsurprising given the social arrangements of the period. As historian James Goff explains, gospel music reflects “the segregation that pervaded the region [the South], and indeed much of the nation, at the time . . . . Since southern churches were segregated, it followed that gospel music in the South would be segregated as well” (738). Yet it turns out that the picture is more complicated than such statements imply. Music was one domain in which ethnic-racial boundaries were often vaulted by musicians and composers, who inspired and borrowed from one another. Dorsey himself preeminently embodies the complexities concerning gospel’s “black” and “white” roots. When he was a child in Georgia he once attended a Billy Sunday revival on “Colored Night,” where he sang in the choir. The experience made a lasting impression and, when he later moved to Chicago, he ushered in the “Thomas Dorsey” era there (Southern). These kinds of examples suggest that musical and performance styles arise from socio-historical contexts which put a stamp on them and therefore should not be ignored or downplayed (Longhurst).

Although drawing a strict line between white and black gospel is problematic, the distinction nevertheless remains important today in terms of the strategies used by evangelicals to win and retain converts through musical performances and products. Indeed, these strategies involving music have moved beyond live revival events to affect church services as well as the Christian music industry.<sup>2</sup>

### **Contemporary Scene**

Since Moody’s heyday, professional revivalism has changed in some respects, but the stated evangelical mission to reach the unsaved remains intact. Historically embedded in America’s specially anointed status as a “city upon a hill,” revivalism today is characterized by “technophilia,” a virtually boundless, unshakable faith in modern communication technologies eagerly embraced to further the conversionist cause. New audiovisual technologies are used in various ways: for example, song lyrics (along with platform activities) are displayed on big-screen TVs or projected onto walls or televised on monitors mounted at strategic points within church buildings.<sup>3</sup>

Preachers, singers, and musicians use remote microphones, and performances are recorded and then posted on Internet websites afterward.

Developments in contemporary revivalism are closely yoked to what is happening more generally under the evangelical umbrella<sup>4</sup> of American conservative Protestantism. Following trends suggested by the church growth movement, many churches now devote as much as 40% of their services to musical performance, experimenting with “blended” worship styles of traditional and contemporary forms, including dance and drama (Owens). Sometimes musical styles are segregated by distinct services that cater to specific musical tastes (e.g. “traditional” vs. “contemporary”). However, in blended worship, traditional hymns are sung side-by-side with contemporary songs played on electric lead, rhythm, and bass guitars, drums, and synthesizer.

Next to these developments within the churches themselves are those involving the wider evangelical music scene. Aficionados more recently note a new wave of gospel music as Christian artists and song writers continue to experiment with keys and arrangements, combining gospel elements with other genres, such as rock, country, rap, alternative, reggae, and jazz. Today’s gospel music embraces a dizzying array of styles that can make classification confusing and problematic (Goff 726). Nevertheless, based largely on historical development, it is possible to identify three broad currents in gospel music today: black gospel, southern gospel, and contemporary Christian music (CCM). These distinctions are important when considering the specific recruitment tactics for individual target audiences and therefore warrant a closer look.

### *Black Gospel*

From the classic period of Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson in the 1930s and 1940s, black gospel music has moved beyond traditional church and revival-meeting venues to enjoy crossover success in mainstream popular culture from the 1960s up to the present day. With musical offspring including soul and R&B, gospel has become enormously popular among black and white audiences alike, growing more sophisticated in the process. During live performances, instrumental and vocal flourishes such as delayed entry and *melisma* (singing three notes or more for each written note) are encouraged and welcomed, with singers and musicians going beyond the printed musical notation.

Today modern gospel choirs include male voices, electronic and percussion instruments, synthesizers—even violins, flutes, or a full-blown orchestra on occasion. Vocalists use a range of techniques, although full-voiced singing with wide-open mouths remains popular. Common elements include improvisation, flattened “bent notes” or “blue tones,” and a deliberately coarsened or strained sound (that sounds “natural”). Female singers accentuate low-register notes and males, falsetto, while vocal counterpoint is still common. Soloists use ornamentation (e.g. moans, growls, shouts, or falsetto) and are able to change the quality of their voices during a song in line with changes in tempo. Popular too are embellishments of pitch, syncopation, and text. Pauses are filled in with extra words (spoken or sung) interpolated into lines

or between stock phrases such as “Yes, Lord” and “Help me, Jesus.” Piano or organ music can also be used for the same reason, as in the blues style. Another essential performance element is body-rhythm accents: hand-clapping, thigh-slapping, body swaying, and foot tapping (Boyer; Oliver).

### *Southern Gospel*

“Southern gospel” is a term commonly used to identify music that has a country sound, combining traditional barbershop harmonies with country music. From its roots in 19th-century singing conventions and shape-note songbook publishing—steeped in rural religion—its appeal is strongest in the South, although today southern gospel enjoys nationwide popularity. This genre is characterized by multi-part harmonies, duets, and trios, but especially male quartets singing four-part harmonies accompanied on piano. The traditional four-part harmony styling uses the high tenor and low bass parts to frame the song, while the middle parts (melody or lead and baritone harmony) provide the balance (Cusic; Goff).

Today many people still associate southern gospel with close three- or four-part harmonies performed by male quartets or family groups accompanied by piano, guitar, or other stringed instruments. In reality, however, the music encompasses a wider range, including the “amplified country band . . . a singing convention assembly of 300 voices . . . [as well as] a simple brother duet harmony framed by mandolin and guitar” (Wolfe 1013). Likewise music industry scholar Don Cusic, in his seminal study *The Sound of Light: A History of Gospel Music*, notes that gospel groups today use both female and male vocalists who perform as “solo acts, family acts, duets and trios, all supported with full productions of guitar, bass, drums, keyboards and other instruments on their recordings” (149). Moreover, the melodies used in southern gospel increasingly sound like those popularized in “worldly” (secular) songs; consequently, southern gospel can have a “confusing stylistic identity,” according to country music historian Charles K. Wolfe (1013), because the Christian lyrics overlay various vernacular music styles.

Another aspect of the music to consider is its constituency, which in this case remains “overwhelmingly white” (hence the appellation “white gospel” that is sometimes used). Unlike black gospel, which has won wider appeal among multi-ethnic audiences, southern gospel music—with a few notable exceptions—remains “predominantly a white phenomenon” (Goff 726).

### *Contemporary Christian Music (CCM)*

The distinction between southern gospel and contemporary Christian music (CCM) can also seem bewildering, but similar to the way that southern gospel is related to country music, CCM is related to rock music. Leaving behind the vestiges of rural southern religion, the roots of CCM are found on the west coast, arising from the Jesus Movement among disaffected hippies (“Jesus freaks”) during the 1960s and



1970s. In seeking an alternative to secular rock music,<sup>5</sup> evangelicals borrowed rock and folk musical forms and added Christian lyrics to create “Jesus Music,” the forerunner of CCM (Romanowski; Howard). The practice of combining rock music with Bible-based lyrics seemed like a *non sequitur* to many churchgoers at the time (not unlike the critical reception of jazz and blues styling in Dorsey’s music among middle-class black churches), but the practice proved wildly successful among young people. As Cusic makes clear, within the music industry, “‘Gospop’—high energy music with a moral message played by musicians with a mission . . . reverberated with the message, ‘Let it rock!’” (199). Among these constituents, a reconstituted Jesus was considered “hip and happening,” unlike the outdated (traditional) models of formal organized religion followed by their parents’ generation. Christianity it seemed had become as much about life-style as about a system of beliefs (Luhr 104; Beaujon).

Unlike traditional gospel music audiences, the musicians and executives involved in creating and disseminating CCM specifically targeted white evangelical youth and young adults between the ages of 12 and 35 for marketing purposes. According to communication scholar William Romanowski, this meant that “[t]he powerful impersonal forces of marketing and demographics, rather than musical tradition or religious perspective, had come to largely define the Christian music industry” (110–11).

CCM’s reach has grown tremendously thanks partly to the nationally televised Dove Awards, CCM’s alternative to the Grammy Awards. Moreover, the music has come a long way from the Jesus rock of groups like Petra and the “Gospop” of performers such as Amy Grant; CCM has grown to encompass other subgenres such as Christian heavy metal, for example—another seeming contradiction in terms. Some of today’s largest record companies have bought lucrative Christian labels, while specialty companies such as Hosanna-Integrity continue to produce and distribute millions of recordings by celebrity singers and musicians. Up from sales of roughly 20 million albums in 1984, the Christian music industry could boast sales exceeding 50 million by 2003, with nearly 500 bands under contract with major record labels.

Today CCM incorporates most genres of mainstream popular music, including punk, folk, dance pop, rap, rock, reggae, and heavy metal. By 2006, Americans were spending upwards of \$720 million on Christian recordings, according to the Gospel Music Association. Counting ticket sales and merchandise, the Christian music industry soared to \$1 billion dollars (not counting illegal downloads), by 2005 outselling both classical and jazz (Sandler; Luhr). These sales have been achieved in large part due to Christian music’s crossover into the mainstream; after Petra and Grant, a steady drum beat continued with Stryper in the 1980s, Jars of Clay and DC Talk in the 1990s, and P.O.D. in 2000. Today’s top bands include Flyleaf, Switchfoot, and Relient K, to name but a few (Radosh 153).

### Functional Art: Music in Evangelicalism

Today’s revival meetings (sometimes called “conventions” or “conferences” by organizers) selectively retain certain core elements of historical revivalism while



embracing change and novelty, adopting and adapting electric amplification and other new instrumental technologies and performance forms. Revival meetings nowadays employ state-of-the-art electronics and blended performances that include traditional hymns side-by-side with contemporary songs. Live bands play electric guitars, organ synthesizers, and drums, using high-quality PA sound systems, while audio-video directors and technicians record the event for broadcasting and merchandising purposes later on.

At live performances, music is used to bookend and structure the service (just as in Moody's day). Meetings routinely kick off with rousing up-tempo "sing-alongs" lasting anywhere from thirty to sixty minutes, to "warm up" the audience. Conversely, quiet, calming songs are used to inspire conversions at the end, when the invitation to come forward is given. The music also helps to construct an atmosphere of transcendence of everyday reality and can assist in the creation of emotional-spiritual states.

Music in worship and evangelism also functions as a therapeutic tool to relieve emotional burdens temporarily; in this sense, it can play a significant socio-psychological role. Congregational singing also unites audiences and helps to break down walls of alienation, while building a sense of community ("we feeling")—even if only for a short time. In a more general sense, revival meetings temporarily create "free space" (e.g. collective liminality)<sup>6</sup> for the mediation and celebration of shared socio-cultural-religious identities (Schaefer). Musical preference is not only a source of collective identity—music likewise serves as an outlet for individual expression.

As a well-known strategy to attract new members, those who join choirs or special music ensembles can derive self-esteem and a boost in confidence from participating in these activities. Musical preference can also serve to project a social image to the wider community, as sociologist George H. Lewis points out. And, for young people, studies suggest that musical preferences are "patterned and meaningful, a powerful cultural signal that is cue to much more than rhythms, melodies, and the lyrics of the songs themselves" (Lewis 38–39). The same holds true for evangelical youth. As Roland Barthes asserts, "music is that which at once receives a personal adjective" (qtd in Lewis).

The physical pleasure connected with bodily movements and dancing is another aspect to consider; as Nietzsche says, "We listen to music with our muscles" (qtd in Sacks xi). Indeed, the pounding dance rhythms associated with black gospel music can aid in the attainment of euphoric states or even peak experiences (Pratt 63). Audiences may also be moved by some singers in pleasurable ways through the physical effect their voices have on hearers. Brian Longhurst, summarizing Barthes, explains that some singers bring forth pleasurable feelings in audiences ranging from *plaisir*, "structured pleasures and feelings," to *jouissance*, "something like the pleasure of orgasm" (173). Apparently St Augustine once warned against pleasurable church music: namely, that it was sinful to enjoy music for its own sake while missing its spiritual significance (Hustad 17).<sup>7</sup>

To organizers and proselytizing born-again believers, aesthetic forms and performance styles appear secondary, however. The primary consideration instead

is the music's instrumental value in recruiting and retaining members, a view evident in key movement literature. Advice manual writers—many associated with the church growth movement—frequently underscore music's versatility as a multi-purpose tool. Donald Hustad, a musician and former member of Billy Graham's evangelistic team, is representative of this viewpoint, calling church music "functional art" (14–40). Another evangelical enthusiast, Bill Owens, stresses the "magnetic" pull of music in attracting the unchurched. He points to survey findings that show that "[e]xpressive music—music that touches the heart—is the number one most effective tool to attract baby boomers" (Owens 19–20, emphasis added). Music apparently trumps preaching style, pastor-as-role-model, the religious experiential dimension—even denominational heritage—if Owens's findings are a reliable gauge.

Since it is considered a highly successful bait to attract unbelievers, proponents naturally expend much time and energy trying to discover the "right" music for target audiences. These efforts suggest a pragmatic, trial-and-error approach to niche marketing in order to determine "what works." Typical of this literature is Sally Morgenthaler's book *Worship Evangelism* instructing readers on the best ways to evaluate a song's recruitment potential: "Does the song 'grab' people? Is it hard to forget? If so, it's no accident," she explains. "Attractive songs are the result of intentional effort and creative excellence on the part of the songwriter(s), both lyrically and musically" (214, emphasis in original). How-to manual writers contend that "[m]usical sounds common to the secular world are effective in 'pre-evangelizing' the uncommitted" (Hustad 202). Encouraged to look to the secular world for inspiration, songwriters appropriate popular musical styles and then add a religious patina by affixing Christian lyrics.

Additionally, music is considered a vital tool in the fight to keep members. This helps to explain the reason why so much effort is focused on identifying and catering to the pre-existing musical tastes of particular audiences. Bill Owens, mentioned earlier, writes that southern gospel music is the most popular among [white] baby boomer audiences in the South, Midwest, and rural communities, while "multicultural" audiences of the same cohort prefer contemporary black gospel and spirituals "[because] . . . [t]hey grew up listening to the Motown sound of the Temptations, the Four Tops, the Supremes, and other talented groups" (48).<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Rick Warren—best-selling author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* (2003) who gave the invocation at Barack Obama's presidential inauguration—tells aspiring evangelists that "music is the most important factor in determining your evangelistic target, even more than preaching style . . . . [W]hen you choose your music, you are determining exactly who you are going to reach and who you are not going to reach" (qtd in Hunter 151). He claims that he can accurately predict any church's composition just by knowing what musical style is performed there—not an idle boast, it seems. There are other self-styled experts who make similar claims.

The evidence suggests that much of the experimentation surrounding music is driven by a pragmatic desire to evangelize, or, to put it bluntly, to raise headcounts, as evangelicals themselves admit (Morgenthaler 18). It turns out that music is key, not only to boomers but perhaps even more so to their children, GenXers ('baby busters' born between 1961 and 1981) and grandchildren, Millennials (GenYers). Writing

about Christian heavy metal, historian Eileen Luhr contends that musical experimentation is an attempt “to reconcile young people to religious institutions and practices through the appeal of youth culture that offers an intense religious experience, personal salvation [and a] strict moral code” (118). Music, it seems, is a unifying medium for today’s evangelical youth. Romanowski goes farther, calling CCM “religious propaganda—designed to persuade” (110).

Musical arrangers and entrepreneurs within the evangelical subculture tend to ignore the roots and associations of particular musical styles. Such is the case, for example, with R&B or rock and roll with their “evil” connotations as “devil’s music,” or reggae, a product of Rastafarianism (traditionally hostile to Christianity and vice versa), or gangsta rap, associated with (West coast) violent gang activity and misogyny. Today’s evangelicals tend to de-historicize musical styles, which they consider neutral in terms of cultural baggage. What matters for them most of all—as William James famously put it—is our “susceptibility to music” (Sacks xii).

### Discussion

One fruitful way to think about the evangelical subculture at issue is from the perspective of “lived religion” (*la religion vécue*),<sup>9</sup> that is, how religion and spirituality are practiced and experienced by ordinary people in their everyday lives. Lived (“popular” or “unofficial”) religion contrasts with “official” or “elite” religion as reflected in doctrines represented by official spokespersons. As sociologist Meredith McGuire explains, this conceptualization is well attuned to a sociological analysis that focuses on “a subjectively grounded place for religious experience and expression,” yet moves beyond the merely subjective (or individual-psychological) domain. It examines how people construct their religious life-world jointly, “often sharing experiences of that intersubjective reality” (McGuire 12). Contemporary conservative evangelicals’ religious practices derive partly from popular religious currents that developed from frontier revivalism. Today many US churches reflect deeply embedded popular religious traditions characterized by emotionalism, physical experience of divine power, etc. Thus popular religiosity is intimately connected with church religiosity among many American Protestants. Moreover, evangelicals have been the movers and shakers in popularizing religion, and music has been a key element in their efforts. Critics, however, charge that such efforts to popularize Christianity distort or compromise the traditional message.

Here one finds a general consensus about the value of music in worship and evangelism, although the issue of musical styles is heavily contested and remains a major source of controversy among born-again believers (Hustad xii). Evangelical churches have been embroiled since the 1960s over the adoption of contemporary popular musical styles and the inclusion of non-traditional instruments in services—dubbed the “30-years war” by one pundit (Kauffman 20). Once, during a live performance, evangelical musician Phil Driscoll defended the practice of appropriating popular styles, saying “God has called me to declare to the world that His

music is not a cheap prototype of the world's music." He later asked the audience, "How many of y'all know that God writes songs? Oh, you didn't think just the devil writes songs, do ya?" (22).

There are critics among evangelicals, however, who charge that this move represents gospel's appropriation by the pop music industry and the triumph of commercial interests. Theoretically, of course, it could be both; commercialization by the music industry does not rule out spreading religious messages to a wider audience. Some religionists do concede that the line between "entertainment" and "worship" is increasingly blurred, and this is nothing new as it happens (Seidenspinner). Historians usually credit Billy Sunday (1862–1935) with moving revivalism squarely into the realm of professional entertainment due to his vaudeville-style performances (although in Christianity theatrical devices were used much earlier, in medieval morality plays, for example). American religion historian R. Laurence Moore argues that revivals and camp meetings in the antebellum period were actually the "first large-scale popular entertainments" in the United States. These events made religion "fun and exciting," a point often missed by outside observers (45). This trend dovetails with a more general one in US society towards a "culture of performance" revolving around celebrities and entertainment (Gabler; van Elteren).

Don Cusic highlights what is at issue in the clash of values among the constituencies concerned: "Should the role of a gospel artist be to entertain an audience or should it be to minister the gospel? Is the gospel artist really a 'Minister' or an 'Entertainer' who is a Christian?" (189). In fact, the thorny issue about the role of entertainment in evangelism and worship is perhaps best embodied in the problems experienced by the Willow Creek Community Church (outside Chicago). In addition to traditional worship services, the church runs "seeker services," which are described as "pre-evangelistic entertainment, a highly captivating 'infomercial'" for Christianity (Morgenthaler 44). The seeker services continue to outstrip regular worship attendance by a ratio of about three to one respectively; apparently new converts fail to make the transition over to more traditional worship services because they like the highly entertaining seeker services better, as church leaders admit (Morgenthaler 44–45). Critics such as Romanowski point to the "confusing mixture of consumerism, evangelism and entertainment" engulfing the contemporary Christian music industry as well.

Of course, the practice of appropriating secular forms for sacred music is nothing new. Writing about the influence of blues and jazz in gospel music, religion scholar Joseph Washington's general observation about secular forms dressed in "spiritual garb" (78) remains apt. It seems fair to suggest that aesthetic styles—whatever their origins or associations—may be pressed into the service of evangelical agendas if they are popular enough. Indeed, "pick and mix" pragmatism prevails among these believers; what matter to them are the lyrics (Romanowski 114). But even their assertion about lyrics is sometimes open to debate. For instance, in so-called "message" songs, overtly religious or Bible-based lyrics are dropped altogether and replaced with wording that can be

decoded in various ways. One example is Take 6's gospelized cover of Michael McDonald's (of Doobie Brothers fame) "Takin' it to the Streets".

Modernists within the religious community explain that they are attempting to make church music more relevant, to bring it up to date (Eskridge). Music is likewise perceived as effective bait to attract unbelievers, and using available musical styles a legitimate means to a laudable end: "Why should the devil have all the good music?" they ask. They insist that the movement of gospel music outside traditional religious venues represents an attempt to reconquer secular domains, to sacralize the wider society, and to "go global." Traditionalists vehemently disagree, insisting that the demarcation between the "sacred" and "profane" be observed and respected.

Upon closer inspection it is not surprising that these debates about music have been so intense; as Frith reminds us, "Our reception of music, our expectations from it, are not inherent in the music itself" (96–97). He argues that we can make value judgments about music only after we learn what to listen to and how to listen for it; in other words, if we have the necessary "cultural capital" at our disposal. Intriguingly, even with similar stocks of cultural capital, individuals do not necessarily extract the same meaning from a piece of music. This point is superbly illustrated in E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. In one scene the protagonist, Helen Schlegel, is at a concert along with her brother and sister listening to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Helen, the unabashed romantic, imagines "heroes and shipwrecks," her older sister Margaret "can only see the music," while younger brother Tibby expertly follows along holding "the full score open on his knee" (587).

Evangelicals do stand out in their efforts to translate the Christian message into the vernacular of US popular culture, yet the extent to which these tactics succeed remains an open—and hotly contested—question. The co-option and imitation of secular styles arguably represents a competitive and commercial response to the secular music that conservative Christians rail against. By creating religious variants of popular musical styles, born-again believers can enjoy profane "worldly" styles without guilt. This seems to suggest that revival music has more to do with the retention of believers—"baby boomers" and their offspring, GenXers and Millennials—than with recruitment. Music-based evangelism in revival settings clearly carries rewards, but it also runs risks, if church membership and regular attendance are the main goals. For instance, the practice of viewing or listening to Christian mass media (television or radio) now surpasses church attendance and may even supplant it altogether, according to a 2005 survey conducted by pollster George Barna. He explains that "[f]or some people, these media complement their church experience [but] for others, a combination of these media forms a significant portion of their faith experience" (qtd in Radosh 10). At the time of this writing there is little to indicate that this strategy will be abandoned any time soon, most likely because of a more compelling function: the creation and maintenance of an evangelical identity. There are several dynamics that fuel the need for conservative evangelicals to foster and sustain a distinct collective identity and movement.

*America's Changing Religious Landscape*

One of the most important aspects regarding the rise of evangelicalism in the United States concerns the contemporary religious landscape, which has changed dramatically over the last forty years. Beginning with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act Reform Act in 1965, which overturned the quota system, in place since the 1920s, that had given preferential status to people from Western and Northern European countries, the new policy was based on family reunification. It opened the way for large-scale immigration from Asian and Latin American countries—the so-called “new immigration.” As a result, religious diversity expanded exponentially, according to Diana Eck, Harvard professor and Director of the Pluralism Project. She explains: “people from all over the world came to America and have become citizens. With them have come the religious traditions of the world—Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Zoroastrian, African, and Afro-Caribbean” (1). Today there are more Muslim Americans than Episcopalians or Presbyterians [Presbyterian Church USA]. There are also roughly as many Muslims as Jews (around six million) and upwards of four million Buddhists in America; in fact, Los Angeles is purportedly “the most complex Buddhist city in the world” with a representative population stretching across the Asian Buddhist world from Sri Lanka all the way to Korea (Eck 2–3).

During the same period, the more liberal “mainline” Protestant churches—which tend to affiliate with the National Council of Churches (NCC)—were hemorrhaging members; the worst hit include the Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, Presbyterian Church USA, United Methodist Church, and United Church of Christ. In general, these are long-established denominations that are predominantly white, affluent, and ecumenical in orientation. In contrast, the numbers of evangelicals are not only holding steady, but growing. Critical of the NCC, conservative evangelicals outnumber their more liberal brethren in the ecumenical fold. The conservative evangelical movement today is three-pronged, consisting of denominations such as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, independent churches, and conservatives within the mainline denominations (Ostling 19).

This trend seems partly to contradict the predictions about the demise of religious institutions associated with the general process of secularization. As the late Oxford scholar Bryan Wilson has argued, regarding religion, secularization has been the most distinctive feature of advanced western societies in the last century. In those societies, “the belief (conscious or unconscious)” that “humans control their own destiny, and that society (including all its sub-systems from the family to the state) is a product of human organization and not a God-given structure” has become widespread. It informs much of people’s thinking, their relationships and everyday role performances and social interactions. It is “the very foundation of their corporate endeavors,” a taken-for-granted principle that undergirds the political, economic, judicial, and scientific institutions and organizations involved (Wilson 66).

This does not imply that religion will disappear altogether, but that it will recede to the private sphere of individual and family life in advanced societies. At the personal



level, religion can even flourish, but social institutions such as education, politics, and the economy operate their own sets of norms that can be independent of the guiding hand of religion. Compared to Western Europe, the United States continues to maintain higher church attendance rates for a number of reasons; among others, regular observance has been linked to American social attitudes about patriotism—so-called civil religion.

In the 1980s, evangelicalism was gaining ground while more liberal mainstream churches were losing members. A 1986 Gallup poll found 32% of those surveyed identified themselves as “born-again” or “evangelical.” Conservative Christians built an impressive infrastructure to sustain a thriving subculture, including schools, colleges and universities, and missionary agencies, alongside other parachurch organizations, such as the National Religious Broadcasters, as well as an extensive (alternative) media network. By the early 1990s evangelicals owned and operated three TV networks and hundreds of TV stations, more than a thousand radio stations, a billion-dollar book publishing industry with nearly 100 publishers sold through thousands of book stores, not to mention a rising music industry catering to a range of tastes. By 1993, contemporary Christian music was launched on its very own cable TV channel, called “Z Music Television” (Gow). Evangelicals were also quick to seize the opportunities offered by the Internet to propagate their gospel message.

Currently evangelical or born-again Americans are roughly 44% of adults—about 86 million people—according to a 2006 Gallup survey. They constitute a major market, according to Andy Butcher, editor of *Christian Retailing* magazine (Radosh 11). In addition to books, music CDs, and DVDs, Christian retailing—so called “Jesus junk,” an unofficial industry term—covers a range of products, including jewelry, key rings, coffee mugs, T-shirts, bumper stickers, and mouse pads (McDannell, Radosh). By 2002, the Christian entertainment industry (publishing, music, and other producers of Christian-themed consumer goods) was generating yearly revenue of \$4.2 billion. For evangelicals, these goods help to create opportunities to forge “shared identities” among these customers who buy the same goods and are audiences for the same messages. Moreover, CCM’s celebrity musicians and performers have replaced televangelists as the “rock stars” among GenXers and Millennial fans in the evangelical orbit (Powell).

Christian music appears to be a major component in the construction of individual and collective evangelical identity. This music and its associated cultural goods and artifacts are instrumental in reinforcing existing beliefs and worldviews, supporting, promoting, and sustaining the evangelical subculture, which is constantly under pressure from other forces such as secularism and religious-cultural pluralism. As André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Frantani (7) underline, although a spiritual rebirth (“born-again”) conversion experience involves the individual breaking with his or her past life, actually *being* born again is a lifelong existential undertaking, not a fixed state achieved once and for all. Consequently for these believers, cultural products such as music CDs and live music performances can help reinforce and maintain existing religious beliefs in a hostile environment. Believers’ self-professed efforts to “sacralize”



the wider society are part of an overarching strategy used to counter the rising tide of pluralism and secularism in contemporary US society.

From an external perspective, however, the popularizing of religion in terms of a more ordinary or mundane orientation of religion in everyday life leads to what Thomas Luckmann referred to as “internal secularization,” pointing to the “radical inner change in American church religion . . . . [T]oday the secular ideas of the American Dream pervade church religion” (36). Peter Berger likewise once argued that US churches were “becoming highly secularized themselves” (108), a view he has since backed away from. This issue remains the subject of an ongoing debate among sociologists of religion that is outside the scope of this article but constitutes a captivating question for future investigation.

Naturally, evangelicals themselves do not see their efforts in this distanced, sociological way. But there can be little doubt that the production, dissemination, and consumption of popular Christian music fills a particular niche in the evangelical marketplace, providing music with doctrinal sanction among a constituency that denies itself secular versions of the same musical genres. This does not mean that every listener subscribes to the religious views expressed in the songs. As cultural studies theorists have long made clear, audiences may decode texts in a variety of ways that are ultimately outside the control of producers. So, for some consumers, listening to CCM or southern or black gospel music, live or on CD or DVD, is a means to create sacred space, to commune with God together with like-minded believers. To others, it may be little more than good dance music that regularly appears on pop-chart hit parades. Like hymns, this music works to dissolve boundaries and create community, yet it also marks off insiders from outsiders. Songs can generate passionate loyalties and loud opposition, both unifying and polarizing at the same time. The music can also help to create transnational affinities, a sense of common purpose in the mission to evangelize the world or a shared musical taste culture across borders that is not necessarily religious in character.

## **Conclusion**

Music continues to play a crucial role in contemporary evangelistic efforts. In their quest to reach the unchurched, revivalists recognize the appeal of music, experimenting with mixtures of contemporary and traditional musical types and forms. They insist that music is a primary proselytizing tool, a view expressed in the bumper sticker “Music brought me to Jesus” (Cox 139). But the extent to which musical enjoyment translates into bona fide conversions as manifested in long-term, committed, participatory church membership is another matter altogether. As numerous empirical studies indicate, most participants at these types of live events are already believers; in reality, “conversion” at revival settings corresponds more closely to confirmation or first communion rituals in Catholicism and some other Christian traditions (Bruce 117). Moreover, in terms of the music, the relative weight of various functions differs among separate groups and individuals at revivals, while the performance styles also resonate differently among various constituencies. Yet

generally, practices such as listening to the music link material aspects of those people's lives to spirituality in one way or another.

This leads us to an intriguing paradox: In seeking to articulate their religious identity through the appropriation of contemporary musical styles, evangelicals' preferred choice of music more and more resembles the secular variants it emulates. The irony is that the more these religious believers attempt to carve out and maintain an evangelical "oasis" in what they experience as a secular, multi-faith "desert" through such musical practices, the more they seem likely to lose their distinctiveness as a religious collectivity. The available space does not permit a further exploration of these complexities here, but one thing remains clear: For many believers, this music remains an integral part of their religion as "lived."

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Gary Burns and the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

### Notes

- [1] The distinction is often made between worship and evangelism by conservative evangelicals, but this is actually difficult to sustain in a revival setting. Organizers and participants consider some activities such as singing as both worshipful (directed to God) and evangelical (aimed at the unchurched in their midst).
- [2] It is problematic to draw a strictly linear, causal link between revivalism and worship because some churches selectively appropriated techniques borrowed from professional revivalism and vice versa.
- [3] Hymnals interfere with free movement during worship and are seen by many as archaic.
- [4] Evangelicals emphasize evangelism and a personal relationship with Jesus. They adopt various degrees of biblical literalism and underline the inerrancy of Scripture. Fundamentalists are the more militant stream within American evangelicalism. Another stream, Pentecostal-charismatics, share certain core beliefs as evangelicals such as the need for a born-again experience and the inerrancy of the Bible, but they emphasize spiritual gifts (e.g. speaking in tongues, healing, prophecy, etc.).
- [5] On the other hand, Craig Moshier argues that rock and roll music was strongly influenced by Pentecostal music and worship style—both directly and indirectly. For a compelling discussion, see Moshier (95–112).
- [6] Collective liminality concerns "an intense community spirit, a feeling of great social solidarity, equality, and togetherness. People experiencing liminality together form a community of equals . . . . Religious groups often use liminal characteristics to set themselves off from others . . . . Liminal features may also signal the sacredness of persons, settings, and events by setting them off as extraordinary—outside normal social space and regular time" (Kottak 389).
- [7] Of course, music can also have the opposite, deleterious effect, producing physical discomfort—even pain—as I once learned at my peril. During a neo-Pentecostal revival service in London, England—which I attended as a participant observer—the headline performer's amplified trumpet playing was so loud (due to a badly set up PA sound system) that his music actually drove people out of the auditorium.
- [8] Apparently classical and traditional church music remains the preserve of the highly educated and those aged 55 and older.
- [9] Originating from the *Annales* School tradition in history, *expérience vécue* refers to the layer of historical-societal reality that includes cultural-mental aspects.

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