(RE)SOUNDING PASSION:  
LISTENING TO AMERICAN EVANGELICAL WORSHIP MUSIC, 1997–2015

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation is an ethnographic and phenomenological analysis of evangelical “praise and worship music,” a pop-styled liturgical music that has experienced a meteoric rise among American evangelicals in recent years. I specifically center my analysis on one of the influential evangelical media networks on the planet: the Passion Conferences (also known as Passion268 or the 268 Generation). Fundamentally, this dissertation is concerned with the ways in which the material culture of praise and worship music—specifically the video and audio recordings, songbooks, and supplementary prose materials—is mobilized into larger discourses of meaning and identity within evangelical communities of practice.

By using a variety of ethnographic and phenomenological methodologies, I examine how mass-mediated worship music functions as a primary theological discourse, provides strong sites of affiliation in a post-denominational context, shapes worshippers’ embodied self-understandings, and interfaces with the complex web of late-capitalist market structures. Throughout the dissertation, I attempt to move the study of congregational music-making away from the notion that religious belief is primarily propositional or even “rational” and towards an examination of how belief consists in the affective, lived experiences of the religious practice. Religious music is instrumental in shaping “belief,” not merely through its
ability to preserve theological texts, but also in its ability to accomplish specific and essential theological work through communal experiences of sound.

My concern with experiences in and around practicing Christian communities leads me to adopt an ethnographic stance in which practitioners’ experiences with religious music-making are placed front and center. The centrality of religion within the human experience as well as its importance in political and social structuring means that my research deals with music as it functions at the most personally and culturally significant junctures of human identity formation. By understanding how Christian communities are always worshipping with everything in their sensory toolkit, my work offers new ways of understanding embodied religious experience as well as the formations of community and identity that congregational music-making provides to so many.
To my parents, Janet and Kal, and the many teachers over the years who taught me that the world is a complicated and beautiful place that is always worth exploring.
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As much as people might want them to be, dissertations are not solitary pursuits of the mind. In fact, the moments that they are most solitary and most purely mental were the most difficult moments of this project for me. The pages that follow are the result of myriad great friendships and collaborations, so I’d like to acknowledge just a few of those people who helped me push this project to completion:

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INTRODUCTION — (Re)sounding Passion

“NewHope pumps throbbing bass, thumping percussion, physical vibrations, and contemporary church music into their neighbors’ homes.”¹ At first glance, this quote might seem like an advertisement for a Christian church trying to pitch itself to a younger or hipper demographic. On the “What to Expect” page of the Durham, North Carolina church’s website, NewHope asserts itself as “intentionally user-friendly for everyone regardless of their background” and specifies that worship services communicate their “scripture driven” messages by “including interesting ideas from contemporary culture, events, songs, or movies.”² Thus, the mentions of throbbing bass, thumping percussion, physical vibrations, and contemporary music might be designed to index the tropes of a nightclub or music venue in order to create a less-imposing environment for those who might be uncomfortable or unfamiliar with church.

In reality, however, the above quote is the first complaint in a 2013 civil lawsuit filed against NewHope Church. A group of nine homeowners from the nearby Hills at Southpoint subdivision complained that the loud music emanating from NewHope’s sanctuary on Sunday mornings was “akin to a rock concert.” They claimed that the noise was disrupting their sleep patterns, exceeding the 60-decibel limit mandated by the City of Durham’s noise

¹ Dr. Ashley Merritt et. al. vs. New Hope Church. File No. 13 CVS 1807 (Durham County NC Superior Court, 11 February 2013), http://dig.abclocal.go.com/wtvd/docs/021513_New_Hope_motion.pdf

ordinances, and decreasing the property values of homes in the subdivision by as much as $50,000. While NewHope expressed regret for disturbing their neighbors, spokesmen for the church consistently averred that any noise people might have heard was simply a part of the normal Sunday worship routine and that the church was fully within their legal rights. The case was eventually tossed out by a Durham judge and an appeal initiated by the Durham District Attorney’s office was settled out of court.

This example of NewHope and their neighborly disagreement captures many of the complexities I hope to examine in this dissertation. First, it demonstrates that pop- and rock-styled worship music is now the musical *lingua franca* of the evangelical church. Even as recently as the early 1990s, the adoption of “praise and worship music” was a hotly contested topic in most churches, often creating a generational dividing-line within congregations. These tensions were part of a protracted series of fierce internal struggles within evangelicalism that came to be called the “worship wars.” However, by the early 2000s, the “praise and worship” movement had cut across every institutional and demographic dividing line, finding acceptance in more than three-fourths of American Protestant churches on a weekly basis. The throbbing bass, thumping percussion, and physical vibrations lamented by neighbors are simply part of a normal Sunday morning for most evangelicals, particularly those that find themselves in a “megachurch” like NewHope.

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Secondly, it signifies the importance of these popular music sounds to the religious identities and experiences of churchgoers. In worship services and other church gatherings, evangelical belief is frequently negotiated through experiences and metaphors of sound. At the 2013 Passion Conference, an evangelical mega-event in Atlanta, Georgia, Passion founder and lead pastor Louie Giglio clearly demonstrated the common connection made between sonic and spiritual intensities. Using an eerily similar turn of phrase to the simultaneous disputes taking place in the Durham court system, Giglio explained that he really wanted those gathered in the Georgia Dome to raise the volume high enough to “wake up the neighbors.” Because of the close connections between sound and theology which will be demonstrated throughout this dissertation, participating in instances of high-intensity musical sound provides worshippers with the opportunity to perform and experience their own individual levels of spiritual sincerity. In this way, music is responsible for shaping the theological beliefs of participants as well as their embodied religious self-understandings.

Third, the “noise pollution” claims at the center of homeowner lawsuit acknowledges the difficulties of placing a clear boundary around the sounds of the evangelical church. These sounds often flow out of the defined property borders, influencing surrounding spaces and occasionally creating confrontations between opposing sides. These sounds are carried outside the bounds of the church by musicians, whose livelihood is often dependent upon realizing these sounds in commercially-released recordings, by parishioners, who practice personal devotion along with mass-mediated worship recordings, and by official church broadcast, as in the case of NewHope, which offers its services as a podcast and a live webcast. In this blurring of boundaries, praise and worship music often opens up a space for
the contention of sacred and secular or public and private realms that is staged in sound. In this dissertation, I attempt to describe these intersections and uncover the ways that praise and worship music makes meaning for those worshippers who ritually engage it.

Key Terms

Before proceeding further, I want to provide a bit more background about three terms that are essential to my dissertation: “praise and worship,” “evangelicalism,” and the “Passion Conference.”

“Praise and Worship”

Contemporary evangelical Christian praise and worship music (henceforth simply “praise and worship”) is one of the most oft-evoked and heavily-contested markers of evangelical Protestantism in the United States. Within the evangelical community, its most vocal advocates herald praise and worship and its meteoric rise since the 1960s as nothing less than the rebirth of Western Christianity, citing its unique ability to attract and excite an entirely new generation of “lost sheep” into the Christian fold. On the other hand, its most virulent critics condemn praise and worship as dangerous or blatantly heretical, believing that the rock-inspired musical style and lyrics drawn from the misguided teenage sensuality of popular culture provide a feeble and treacherous theological grounding. Regardless of which side of the debate people find themselves on, their conversations demonstrate clearly that this music generates meaning in very powerful and specific ways.
Broadly defined, the term “praise and worship” is used to refer to a body of Christian congregational music which draws musical and textual influences from mainstream Western popular styles, such as folk, rock, and country. Beginning in the late 1960s, the “Jesus Movement” movement married the social ethics of the hippie subculture with a fundamentalist understanding of Christian theology and began producing new simplified congregational worship music with the musical and lyrical directness of folk revivalists. Throughout the 1970s, this music was developed and popularized by campus ministries and youth-oriented parachurch organizations, eventually finding a strong foothold within the institutional church. During the 1980s and early years of the 1990s, the “worship wars,” centered on a question of the inherent spirituality or moral neutrality of specific musical forms. Opponents of the newer popularly-inspired music argued that the form of “rock and roll” was not morally neutral and therefore was incapable of conveying a Christian message. But proponents of the music saw no moral content inherent within its form, arguing for its potential use as a powerful tool of Christian evangelism.

Since its victory in the bitter worship wars, “praise and worship” has enjoyed remarkable ascendancy and has quickly become a multi-million dollar industry. By the middle of the 1990s, praise and worship music was firmly and broadly ensconced in American evangelical practice, boasting a roster of recognizable performers and songwriters, claiming an ever larger segment of the music industry writ-large, and receiving enough widespread adoption to merit the creation of its own performing rights organization, Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), which monitors weekly church performances. But in addition to its adoption in churches for congregational singing, praise
and worship music has also become one of the most popular subsets of the Christian recording industry, selling more than 4 million records per year since 2003.\(^5\)

In her dissertation on the subject, ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls identified three spheres in which praise and worship is generally encountered: concert, conference or parachurch event, and weekly worship service.\(^6\) Though I will deal with each of these three contexts, I will also add a fourth sphere: recordings. Recordings occupy distinctive space within the musical world of praise and worship because of their complex relationship to the live performances in each of these three contexts. Recordings are produced and distributed through the same channels as secular music, though they carry certain sonic markers of difference that sacralize them in the minds of initiates. In addition to being consumed and experienced by fans of the music, they are often employed as texts for the transmission of these songs between and within religious communities. Further complicating the relationship between live performances and recordings are the recordings of live events such as the concert, conference, and weekly services identified above. Though these recordings of live events are often meant to reproduce the sacred space of worship for the worshippers that consume them, they are also sites of musical invention and variation which inform developing performance practice in local communities.

“Evangelical”


The Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals identifies at least three definitions of the term “evangelical” in its modern usage, to mean (1) Christians who affirm the several key doctrines and practical emphases of “evangelical religion,”7 (2) an organic group of movements and Christian religious traditions, including everything from Mennonites to Southern Baptists, or (3) the self-ascribed label for a religio-political coalition that arose during the Second World War.8 While organicism is certainly a key component of the modern evangelical movement, the first and third definitions of the term are more crucial for my purposes in this project. The third definition allows for the congregationalist freedom and self-definition which have always been a hallmark of evangelicalism, while the first definition is essential for members of the movement to legitimate the delineations made between themselves and other Christian groups.

In many instances, “evangelical Protestantism” is contrasted with “mainline Protestantism,” a divide that cuts across many established denominational or organizational lines. The distinction between these two branches arose during the debates between modernists and fundamentalists in the early decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most prominent public manifestation of the fundamentalist/modernist debates occurred during the legal proceedings of The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes, more commonly referred to as the “Scopes Monkey Trial,” during the summer of 1925. The trial centered on the ability of a high school science teacher named John Scopes to teach the

7 In much of his work on the subject, historian David Bebbington has utilized this approach, identifying four central theological tenets of “evangelicalism” as a movement: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism.

theory of evolution in his classroom, but quickly became a proxy-war for the broader fundamentalist/modernist debates thanks to the high-profile of Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan as the defending and prosecuting attorneys respectively. The fundamentalists would go on to become “evangelicals” by the middle of the century, while the modernists would become “mainliners.” Thus in America, mainline churches tend to be more politically and theologically liberal while evangelicals tend to be more conservative.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I have also chosen to use the terms “evangelical” and “evangelicalism” in lowercase, despite the fact that many evangelical Christians (and some dictionaries) choose to capitalize the term. I do this to underscore the fact that “evangelical” cannot be identified with a particular set of official denominations or institutions such as Orthodox, Catholic, or Baptist. Instead, “evangelical” is a general orientation or viewpoint like “conservative.”

“Passion Conference”

Founded in 1997, the Passion Conference, also known as Passion268 or the 268 Generation, has rapidly become one of the most influential Christian media networks on the planet. The Passion Conference hosts a yearly series of mega-events that draw tens of thousands of young adults at every stop. These events provide a four-day experience of sermons and lectures from prominent Christian leaders, breakout sessions on pressing issues, and arena-rock-styled worship events for its 18- to 25-year-old attendees. And since 2007,

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9 There is a smaller group of politically and religiously conservative Christians who still identify themselves with the “fundamentalist” label as a way of distinguishing themselves from the perceived compromise and centrism of the broader evangelical community.
Passion’s influence has gone global; in just over seven years, they have staged fifty-two large-scale events in thirty different cities in twenty-two countries. The events of the Passion Conference serve as one of the most prominent sources of praise and worship music for many evangelicals today, acting as a sort of trade show where worship leaders and parishioners alike can go to hear the newest music.

But perhaps even more important than these conference-style events are Passion’s frequent media releases through its record label and its publishing arm. A steady stream of CD, DVD, and book releases throughout the year has helped to transform these weekend-long events designed for college students into a powerful media network that plays a role in the religious practices of millions. By utilizing their live web stream, extensive online media content, and recordings from their sixstepsrecords label, musical performances from the Passion Conference reverberate beyond the walls of the event itself and become situated in a variety of local and personal worship practices. These recorded performances help to create an aural lexicon of “authentic” worship which is largely reified through references to mediated sonic experience.

Passion is also an important example of a “parachurch” organization. Parachurch groups are Christian organizations that work outside of and across existing denominational boundaries, often to connect Christians around a particular issue or identity. These organizations have been particularly crucial in the polity of evangelicals, since evangelicalism isn’t tied exclusively to any one institutional affiliation, but rather emerges from a network of ecumenical relationships. Peter Greer and Chris Horst explain that the etymology of the word is a key to understanding the function of these organizations. “Para,
parachurch’s prefix, is Greek for ‘alongside’ or ‘beside.’ The purpose of the parachurch organization is to come alongside, to support, the local church.”¹⁰ However, in this dissertation, I argue that parachurch organizations such as the Passion Conference are beginning to take on the affiliating functions that denominations have historically filled. When one purchases a ticket to a Passion event, a copy of one of their recordings, or simply logs on to their YouTube channel, one is buying into a network of post-denominational affiliation that includes a set of beliefs, believers, and ways of believing.

In this way, even those who are not directly involved with the events or media products of Passion Conference events occupy a sort of post-Passion space which is inevitably and irrevocably shaped by Passion’s influence. The mediatized forms of experience that are deployed at Passion events and contained in Passion audio/video recordings entrain a spiritual and musical habitus that is not fully reducible to any account of the forms themselves. Involvement with Passion includes modes of writing, listening to, and experiencing music, amounting to something more like a sonic way of being in the world rather than a neatly-bounded set of musical products. Here, “Passion” becomes a kind of shorthand for a whole complex of persons, places, and things that allow believers to position themselves within a religious cultural field.

Methodologies

Methodologically, this dissertation is first and foremost grounded in the practice of ethnomusicology, both as a fieldwork method and as a core conception of how music

operates on peoples, places, and cultural objects. Even when I engage with historical methodologies or musical analysis, my primary aim is to bring about a more complex picture of the ways that my ethnographic subjects construct meaning through music. Throughout, I adopt an ethnographic stance in which practitioners’ experiences with religious music-making are placed front and center—even if they are challenged or nuanced by further analysis. The centrality of religion within the human experience as well as its importance in political and social structuring means that my research deals with music as it functions at some of the most personally- and culturally-significant junctures of human identity formation.

Fieldwork for this project took place in a number of locations. I attended the 2013 Passion Conference in Atlanta, Georgia as well as the Greenville, North Carolina stop on Passion’s 2013 “Let the Future Begin” Tour. At the Passion event in Atlanta, I stayed with a student group from my undergraduate alma mater that was organized by a pastor friend of mine. I was also placed into a Passion “family group” which I met with regularly for the duration of the event. Because of my frequent contact with them throughout the event and in follow-up interviews, participants from these two groups feature most prominently in my account of Passion in this dissertation. I also attended Sunday morning services and interviewed worship leaders at a number of local communities in the Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina area. In particular, I prioritized congregations who were (1) drawing more than 3,000 participants on an average Sunday, (2) organized around multiple church campuses that are connected through live broadcast or pre-recorded media, and (3) participating in the praise and worship scene by producing commercial recordings of their
own. The churches at which I spent the most time are The Summit Church, Crossroads Fellowship, Providence Baptist Church, and NewHope Church. Further avenues of ethnographic engagement included interacting with worship leaders through online forums and social networking sites like WorshipTheRock and WorshipTutorials.

In particular, my ethnomusicological approach has been inspired by the “critical phenomenology” model outlined by Harris Berger. Berger emphasizes a deeply experiential approach to fieldwork, arguing that “what is primary for human research is the lived reality of meaning, not some ideally rich universe of cultural objects.”11 Berger also encourages scholars to trust their informants not only with the ability to articulate the particularities of their own situations, but also to be able to engage critically with scholarly views of their activities and situations. In this way, Berger observed that scholars are able to pay particular attention to “the ethics of voice in fieldwork” as well as demonstrate “a sensitivity to the role of power in expressive culture.”12

One aspect of engaging in this “ethics of voice” in my fieldwork conversations has involved acknowledging my own personal familiarity with many of the repertories and evangelical institutions examined in this dissertation. As the son of a Southern Baptist preacher and someone who played music in the style on semi-regular basis until I reached college, I had plenty of opportunities to hear, play, and participate in praise and worship music throughout my formative years. My father started a “contemporary” worship service at

11 Harris M. Berger, Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 123.

our Knoxville, Tennessee church during the late 1980s and some of my earliest memories are of standing on a chair so I could switch the overhead transparencies containing lyrics to praise and worship songs. Towards the end of high school, I began to drift away from this particular strand of music as I decided that I wanted to be a composer. My growing love of works by Vincent Persichetti, Iannis Xenakis, George Crumb, and Paul Hindemith seemed to preclude my continued participation in the pop-styled musical traditions of praise and worship. In college, I attended a much more liturgically-traditional mainline church before I started dating and eventually married a Roman Catholic. Although I am no longer a part of any communities that value this particular tradition of Christian music, I do still consider myself a member of the Christian faith and I am a regular participant in a small Mennonite congregation in Durham.

My second semester in graduate school, I took a course on “Music and Religion” with a visiting professor at UNC. For this course, I wrote a paper on Christian rock—something I hadn’t thought about in quite some time, but which kept entering my mind as it related to our course readings. Through this project, I first encountered scholarly literature that attempted to describe the experiences of praise and worship music with which I had grown up. I found myself engaged by this literature and decided to undertake a master’s thesis on music-making in the Calvinist Reformation. After completing my thesis project, I became interested in applying some of the ideas about music and theology or musical affiliation to contemporary, popular music contexts. However, when I started looking at the praise and worship music that was most vibrant in the lives of current participants—including many of the undergraduate students who populated my classroom—I discovered that I didn’t quite
recognize it. Obviously, I expected the repertory to have changed in the decade or so that I had been away from the style, but it seemed as through the entire context for praise and worship’s production and consumption had changed, something I didn’t expect and which didn’t seem to be accounted for anywhere in the scholarly literature on the subject. This project, as well as the numerous individual conversations it contains, were framed by my desire to understand how and why these changes took place.

Another way that I engage in this “ethics of voice,” in addition to engaging in dialogic relationships with my fieldwork subjects, is to engage with works of contemporary theologians like James K.A. Smith and Pete Ward. In his work, Smith provides a powerful language for the articulation of nonverbal sites of theological formation, while Ward focuses on the power of the “Christian culture industry” to direct the theological flow of the media-saturated, postmodern conglomerate of believers that he provocatively calls the “liquid church.” These theologians help to articulate the underlying beliefs and assumptions that often frame the production and consumption of praise and worship music from an evangelical perspective. Thus, theologians like these are important to my project not only as thoughtful secondary sources which reflect on contemporary worship phenomena, but also as thinkers who came up in fieldwork conversations as essential to how worship musicians understood their own places within the evangelical landscape.

In addition to ethnomusicology, I have also been interested in those scholars working in the field of liturgical studies. Following the work of Lawrence Hoffman, I am especially interested in establishing an understanding of how ritual performances of praise and worship are rendered meaningful in the lives of participants, often in ways that extend or exceed the
bounds of ritual itself. Some of the ideas from liturgical studies are also indebted to performance studies, particularly Richard Schechner’s idea of “transformance.” Through his portmanteau of “performance” and “transformation,” Schechner explores the ways that ritualized performance is able to effect personal and social transformation from one status, identity, or situation to another. Schechner also demonstrates the slippage between the categories of “performance” and “ritual.” These ideas help to conceptualize the act of “worship” as an isolatable segment of human life without discounting the extensive extra-liturgical effects that such experiences inevitably have.

I will also draw on sociological analyses of popular music, such as those by Sarah Thornton and Simon Frith. Popular music scholar Simon Frith has observed that the shared resources of popular music give people a venue for managing the relationship between public and private emotional expression. He remarks that popular love songs are important because they “give shape and voice to emotions that otherwise cannot be expressed without embarrassment or incoherence.” Similarly, I argue that praise and worship music gives its participants the necessary resources to successfully navigate between public and private or individual and communal modes of religious engagement. Sociologist Sarah Thornton argues that authenticity in popular music is almost always grounded in the felt realities of ritual, especially in our media-saturated culture where reproductions and simulacra are constantly

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available for access. By engaging with these and more sociological studies of popular music, I hope to be able place the practices of praise and worship music within the broader context of American popular song.

Chapter Summaries

In the first chapter, I survey the history of evangelical “praise and worship” music from its roots in the Jesus people movement of the 1960s to its worldwide success in the major label releases of the 2010s. This survey, like the dissertation as a whole, focuses on developments within the United States, although important trends in the United Kingdom and Australia will be considered as necessary. Special attention will be paid to six trends that the forty-year history of “praise and worship” music makes manifest: (1) the conscious efforts by churches and other Christian organizations to remake the act of “worship” as a site of subcultural identity, (2) the development of the “worship apparatus”, (3) the erosion of Protestant denominational identity, (4) a gradual shift towards more subjective and reflexive song types, (5) the “genrefication” of worship music as a defined musical sound, and (6) the conceptual shift from “recording as songbook” to “recording as worship.” This historical overview also provides an opportunity for me to lay the groundwork for many of the terms and conundrums that feature large in the remainder of the dissertation.

The second chapter explores the ways the experience of music-making in evangelical communities functions as a powerful and primary theological tool in the formation of believers. First, I examine the ways in which praise and worship artists interact with

traditional forms of Protestant hymnody by “updating” classic hymns in the praise and worship style. By examining such hymn performances in closer detail, I can zero in on the power of song’s materiality most effectively. Second, I use this groundwork to examine the theological work being done by un-texted or minimally texted praise and worship performances, as limit-cases to more linguistically oriented models of worship analysis. Third, I provide a more specific application of this non-verbal theology by examining the song “God of this City,” written by Belfast-based Christian band Bluetree and popularized by Passion worship leader Chris Tomlin as the anthemic theme song for Passion’s 2007–08 world tour and the title of its 2008 CD release. Both the song itself and the nearly ubiquitous story of its creation that is often used to frame performances typify the ways that musical parameters are often used to encircle or stand in for theological categories.

Chapter three looks at the ways that praise and worship music constructs an understanding of the body for its fan-worshippers, primarily by evoking tensions between the categories of “worship” and “performance.” The goal of music in an evangelical setting is almost always to achieve “true worship,” which is usually defined as an unmediated encounter with God. If worship is the ideal, “performance” is the scapegoat, instantly carrying with it connotations of pretense or artifice. I argue that the materials associated with “worship”—whether songs, musicians, or resources—are ultimately meant to serve as vanishing mediators between fan-worshippers and the divine, as well as between fans and the artists or recordings which help to codify their understandings of authentic worship. In this way, Passion not only facilitates encounters that provide worshippers with an understanding
of their own bodies, they also conscript these bodies into a larger narrative of relationships with other bodies.

In chapter four, I argue that many of the meaningful gestures in praise and worship music come from a syncretic melding of beliefs and practices from mainstream popular music and evangelical Christianity. I argue that there are musical and visual gestures imbedded within the practice of worship music that are unintelligible without understanding the ways in which they already function in more “mainstream” rock and pop performance. These gestures are “baptized” into Christian praise and worship music, but their meaning is inextricably bound up with musical vocabulary and modes of fan engagement that are always-already syncretically linked to other popular music subcultures. I examine a number of these gestures in closer detail and examine the processes by which they come to be ritualized into Christian worship. I also argue for the importance of recordings in the religious practices of individual fan-worshippers. Engaging with recordings allows moments of worship to be internally predictable and yet externally motivated, privately experienced and yet publicly shared, fixed in a particular moment and yet infinitely repeatable.

Major Themes

Many of the most important themes of this study are actually suggested by the large number of ways to parse the title, “(Re)Sounding Passion.” First and foremost, this is a dissertation about “sound.” Many scholars and even practitioners seem to argue that worship music is responsible for shaping evangelical belief primarily through its ability to preserve or present theological texts. But throughout this dissertation, I demonstrate the ways that
musical sound provides the space and vocabulary for musicians and fan-worshippers to construct, contest, and reify the boundaries of their religious experience, even in ways that challenge or exceed the bounds of officially-sanctioned “orthodoxy.” I argue that music is able to accomplish specific and essential theological work by facilitating communal experiences of sound. Because of the intertwined nature of music and theology within the evangelical communities I examine, it is also essential for musicians and fan-worshippers that the music with which they worship be Biblically “sound.” Much of the neo-Calvinist theology which permeates contemporary American evangelicalism includes a doctrine called the “regulative principle of worship,” in which God specifically regulates the types of worship that are appropriate to him through directives in his Scriptures. Worship that is not Biblically “sound” in this way runs the risk of being simply noise or, perhaps even worse, falling on deaf ears.

But the sounds made in worship gatherings are not restricted to these specific musical occasions. Songs, performance practices, and production techniques cultivated at an event like the Passion Conference “resound” beyond the walls of these events as they are adopted by local communities or incorporated into individual devotional practices. Even though the Passion events are strictly limited in attendance to 18- to 25-year-olds, these musical sounds also resound among communities that are not able to attend Passion gatherings. And these resounding sounds are not simply carried by reputation or memory, rather they are “re-sounded” through the use of recordings and performances by local church bands in weekly worship gatherings. Through these repeated performances, fan-worshippers are able to re-sound their experiences at Passion, one of the largest and most important events on the yearly
evangelical calendar. Many evangelical youth undertake a pilgrimage to Passion each winter and see it as almost wholly formative of their religious identity. This is because Passion isn’t just an event, but rather a movement that describes itself in global and generational terms. With the help of its prominent recording label, sixstepsrecords, Passion also constitutes a powerful media network which pushes these songs around the world. These official recordings from their label as well as content on their website and YouTube channel provides fan-worshippers with an opportunity to literally re-sound their experiences and reinforces the power of Passion as a global brand.

Finally, those evangelicals who affiliate themselves with the Passion organization—whether through attending events, understanding themselves as part of their transnational “movement,” or consuming products from their media network—do so “passionately,” both with passionate dedication and in a way that prioritizes passionate emotional engagement as the primary site of religious meaning-making. The passion of those affiliated with the Passion organization is fueled by yet another sense of the word “passion,” namely the Passion of Christ. The death and resurrection of Christ is perhaps the most significant source of religious inspiration for evangelicals, giving meaning to nearly all of the activities undertaken by the people discussed in this dissertation.

Undergirding nearly all of the analyses in this dissertation is a notion of “intensity,” taken from the works of philosopher Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, “intensity” describes the dynamic movement of power around a rhizomatic assemblage. Because the rhizome inherently resists the top-down structures of the arboreal system, power is distributed through

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the flow of intensity rather than through a fixed hierarchical arrangement. Intensity manifests itself in several distinct ways over the course of the four chapters below. Sonic or aesthetic intensity is often one of the most important “sensational forms” used to organize and sanction access to divine power. Pastors and musicians consistently conflate high levels of sound volume or density with high levels of spiritual sincerity, creating a powerful link between experiences of sound and experiences of God in the world.

Connections between musical power and expressions of divine power mean that musical sound is a key part of the broader political economy of evangelicalism. Particularly in chapter three, I explore the ways that music functions as a “vanishing mediator” of divine contact, valuable only insofar as it erases the material circumstances of its realization. The skill of the musicians, the bodies of the performers, and even the songs themselves “vanish” as the act of worship creates a transparent and seemingly unmediated encounter between parishioners and the divine. But because this mediating function is intended to be unmarked, it is inevitably bound up in discourses of privilege. Spaces in which the individual bodies of musicians and worshippers are effaced by divine presence also inevitably reinscribe the white, male body as normative. Thus, the unmarked category of “worship”—as opposed to the problematic category of “performance”—organizes aesthetic intensity into political power which assimilates non-white and non-male bodies into an eschatological community defined in the soundscapes of the evangelical West.


The communal negotiations of aesthetic/political intensity involved in musical sound also provide opportunities for believers negotiate their religious relationships with each other, providing strong sites of affiliation in the post-denominational context of late capitalism. In the same way that the vanishing mediators of worship reify a dominant subject position within the evangelical community (i.e. straight, white, cis-gendered males), they also provide a center around which the sonic affinities of the evangelical subculture turn. With the gradual death of Protestant denominations and the increasing importance of parachurch organizations like Passion, patterns of consumption come to express affiliations that have traditionally been a part of institutional church structures. So, rather than finding oneself part of a faith community through connections to an archdiocese or a general conference, believers in this post-denominational world often find themselves connected by participation within the material culture of evangelical Christianity, in particular, their patterns of consuming music. Through their web stream, extensive online media content, and recordings, musical moments from the Passion Conference help to create a phenomenological lexicon of “authentic” worship that is largely reified in the form of sonic experience. In this way, the sounds of internationally-disseminated Christian worship culture to forge ad hoc and semantically malleable networks of post-denominational connection.

The chapters that follow examine the ways that the mass-mediated worship music emanating from the Passion Conference functions as a primary theological discourse, provides strong sites of affiliation in a post-denominational context, shapes worshippers’ embodied self-understandings, and interfaces with the complex web of late-capitalist market structures. In particular, I examine the ways that the material culture of praise and worship
music—specifically the video and audio recordings and web-based resources related to sixstepsrecords artists—is mobilized into larger discourses of meaning and identity within evangelical communities of practice. By using the media releases from Passion and their related artists as a jumping off point, I uncover the broader religious and cultural implications of praise and worship music for the millions of believers worldwide who interact with it on a weekly or even daily basis.
CHAPTER ONE — From the Jesus Movement to the 268 Generation

On New Year’s Day 2013, I filed into the lower deck of the Georgia Dome along with more than 65,000 young evangelical Christians from all 50 states and 54 different countries. Another 70,000 were following the events from home on the live web-stream. We were all there to attend a weekend-long event known as the Passion Conference, which happens in Atlanta each January. In a promotional video for this event, Passion founder and pastor Louie Giglio explains,

There’s no doubt if you walk through the door of the Georgia Dome for Passion 2013 that you are going to know that God is doing something extraordinary in this generation. He is waking people up…So there’s only one place you want to be on January 1, 2013 and that is in Atlanta, Georgia, inside the Georgia Dome with tens of thousands of other people just like you as we lift up the name of Jesus.¹

Although they were founded only 15 years ago, the Passion Conference, also known as “Passion268,” has rapidly become one of the most influential Christian media networks on the planet. Passion events like the one Giglio describes in Atlanta occur regularly all over the world, drawing similarly staggering numbers in Kiev, Tokyo, São Paulo, and Kampala. Their 2007–08 world tour held events in twenty-six cities on all six inhabited continents, attracting tens of thousands of students at each stop, despite the fact that attendance is strictly limited to the 18- to 25-year-olds. Together, these young people constitute the “268 Generation,” a reference to Isaiah 26:8 which Passion takes as their mission statement. The verse reads “For

your name and renown are the desire of our souls.” Conferences provide a four-day experience of sermons and lectures from prominent Christian leaders, breakout sessions on pressing issues, and arena-rock-styled worship lead by platinum-selling Christian recording artists.

But even more significant than these conference-style events are Passion’s frequent media releases through its very successful record label sixstepsrecords and its publishing arm, which publishes songbooks and prose works by their recording artists as well as pastors and speakers from the events. A steady stream of CD, YouTube, and book releases throughout the year has helped to transform these weekend-long events designed for college-aged students into a powerful media network that plays a role in the religious practices of millions. Passion is very explicit about its aspirations for a strong presence beyond the walls of its events, stating on their website:

Passion exists to glorify God by uniting students in worship, prayer and justice for spiritual awakening in this generation…Passion is more than music. More than events. Passion is a generation living for His name. The wave is growing into a global awakening. Join the movement.2

It is clear from the statement above that the Passion “movement” has its eyes far beyond the narrow 18–25 year old demographic, aiming to create a “global awakening” by tapping into a generational consciousness among Gen-Xers and Millennials. In the same way that the post-World War II youth culture’s love affair with rock ‘n roll had clear implications outside of the teenage community, Passion’s 268 generation hopes to tap into an evangelical youth culture to create a sea change within global Christianity.

But the generational language that the organization uses so frequently to describe its mission is not new. In 1971, famous evangelical leader Billy Graham published *The Jesus Generation*, in which he put forward a very similar viewpoint:

I have become convinced that the “Jesus Revolution” is making a profound impact on the youth of America and shows signs of spreading to other countries. One thing is certain: Jesus Christ can no longer be ignored! Our generation cannot escape him...The movement, thus far, centers in Jesus. It may be the answer to the prayers of millions of Christians who have been praying for a spiritual awakening.3

This phenomenon, often called the “Jesus Movement,” married the beliefs of old-time evangelical religion to the youthful energy and media-savvy of the 1960s counterculture. It introduced contemporary rock- and pop-styled music to white, evangelical religious practice, created the new space of “youth ministry,” and signaled a major shift in the role of Protestant denominations within the American religious landscape. Graham and Giglio both believed that a “great spiritual awakening” was taking place among the young people of America.4

In this chapter, I trace the developments that helped to transform Graham’s Jesus Generation into Giglio’s 268 Generation by considering the intervening decades. This survey, like the dissertation as a whole, focuses on developments within the United States, although parallel trends in the United Kingdom and Australia will also be mentioned. Special attention will be paid to six trends that the forty-year history of “praise and worship” music makes manifest: (1) the conscious efforts by churches and other Christian organizations to remake the act of “worship” as a site of subcultural identity, (2) the development of the “worship

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4 Both Graham and Giglio’s use of language about “awakening” also clearly connects these two movements with American revivalisms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.
apparatus”, (3) the erosion of Protestant denominational identity, (4) a gradual shift towards more subjective and reflexive song types, (5) the “genrefication” of worship music as a defined musical sound, and (6) the conceptual shift from “recording as songbook” to “recording as worship.” This historical overview will also provide an opportunity to lay the groundwork for many of the terms and conundrums that feature prominently in the remainder of the dissertation.

Hippie Fundamentalists

The Jesus Movement was a loosely affiliated group of young evangelical Christians who began in California during the 1960s. “Jesus People” or “Jesus Freaks,” as the participants came to be known, shared much in common with the broader hippie subculture, including hanging out in coffee shops and communal living arrangements as well as their styles of dress, speaking, and music. In fact, many journalists and cultural commentators at the time simply identified the Jesus People as a nominally Christian branch of the broader hippie movement. But despite their similar look to outsiders, the Jesus People also strongly rejected many of the more socially-progressive currents and values that characterized the broader 1960s counterculture. Many of the earliest Jesus people were “reformed” hippies

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6 There is, perhaps, some truth to this assertion. One of the earliest Jesus People communities was the House of Acts, formed by self-identified hippies Ted and Liz Wise in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in 1967. At the House of Acts, evangelicalism coexisted comfortably with experimental drug use, something which caused a fair amount of friction within the early years of the movement. As they explained, if they found Jesus while high, how could they have a conversation with prospective converts without at least sharing a joint? See Larry Eskridge, *God's Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
who joined the movement as a way of reacting against the perceived excesses of the counterculture in Haight-Ashbury or on the Sunset Strip. As many youth of the time explained, they were through getting high on drugs, since they were now “getting high on Jesus.”

Scholars and critics have often struggled to assimilate the seemingly liberal image of the movement with the fiercely entrenched conservatism of their theology and politics. However, this does not constitute the paradox that so many observers seem to believe it might. As historian Robert Ellwood has demonstrated, there were a great many commonalities between the hippies and the “old time religion” of evangelicalism. The evangelical emphasis on the subjective experience of conversion, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the personal relationship that one cultivated with the divine closely paralleled hippie fascination with drug-induced experience and the pursuit of the high. Other similarities included a shared emphasis on community music-making, the importance/idealization of the rural past, separatist outsider leanings, belief in the supernatural, tendencies toward anti-intellectualism, and a suspicion of history. Additionally, a growing pessimism pervaded the counterculture as the hippie dream devolved in the late 1960s. At this point, Ellwood argues, the apocalyptic dimension of evangelicalism provided a particularly convincing explanation of contemporary events that resonated with many disillusioned hippies.

One of the most important texts from the early years of the Jesus Movement was The

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Late Great Planet Earth, written by Southern California campus minister Hal Lindsay in 1970. In the book, Lindsay connected biblical prophecies about the end times and the Dispensationalist theology of John Nelson Darby with current events like the Cold War, the restoration of Israel, and the threat of nuclear annihilation. Lindsay’s book went on to become the best-selling non-fiction book of the 1970s and sold nearly 30 million copies in less than two decades.9 By indexing together a language of Christian apocalypse with broader socio-political fears about mutually assured destruction, Lindsay’s book provided a theological context for the encounter between hippie politics and Christian fundamentalism. The events of the Vietnam Conflict or the Six-Day War were indeed signs of the times and proof-positive that the world was headed down a dangerous path.10 Though they might have disagreed on the specifics or their meaning, both hippies and Christian fundamentalists could agree that an impending catastrophe might very likely end human life as we know it.

In addition to the cultural and practical similarities between hippies and evangelicals, it is a false dichotomy to think of communities as either flexible and inclusive or rigid and exclusive. As theologian Doug Pagitt has observed, all expressions of Christianity (and of religion more broadly) are necessarily characterized by a marriage of flexibility and inflexibility.11 In other words, it is very infrequently the case that one Christian tradition is purely “flexible” and another is purely “inflexible” with regard to their observance of

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10 Many religious historians have observed the myriad connections between the importance of prophetic or eschatological language in American evangelicalism and the apocalyptic scenarios of the Cold War. See Angela M. Lahr, Millennial Dreams and Apocalyptic Nightmares: The Cold War Origins of Political Evangelicalism (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007).

Rather, Christian communities are always making decisions about which aspects of religious life will be the most regulated and which will be the most open-ended. Pagitt proposes four “ages” of American Christianity—Agrarian, Industrial, Information, and Inventive. These “ages” are not meant to describe a strict chronological development as much as a series of different concurrent historical paradigms of engagement between Christian communities and the broader culture. And within each of these paradigms, Pagitt identifies different models of fostering and sustaining Christian communities that combine flexibility and rigidity in different ways.

At least since the 1960s, American evangelicalism has operated primarily using an “Information Age” model, meaning that the most important function of church communities is to communicate Christian “information” by whatever means necessary. This focus on information as distinct or separable from the medium through which such information is transmitted gives a paradigm for governing the decisions of these communities. Information Age Christianity tends to be supremely inflexible on issues of doctrine—particularly atonement and soteriology—as well as biblical hermeneutics because these represent the core “information” that religion is designed to communicate. Evangelicals, however, are much more willing to be flexible with respect to liturgy and sacramental practice, both of which are seen to constitute a more-or-less transparent medium in which Christian “information” might be imbedded. It is the tensions embedded in this “Information Age” model which helped to drive the debates during the “worship wars” described below. This model also helps to

12 There are, of course, extremes on either end of this spectrum, but these are largely exceptions that prove the rule I observe here.
explain how so many of the most theologically conservative churches are also some of the largest and most media-savvy.

**Evangelical Youth Culture**

Christian scholar, musician, and pastor Terry York has described the “Jesus Movement” as a time when people took their faith “from the forts to the front,” eschewing the comfort and safety of the institutional church for the missional “fronts” of the counterculture. This mass exodus of young people from traditional church participation during the 1960s caused a panic among church leaders who felt as though they were losing young people to the “culture war” created by the rise of the counterculture. But of course, the movement of people to the missional “front” did not spell the death of the institutional church fort, but rather the development of a new type of institutional church. One such “fort” was Calvary Chapel, a non-denominational charismatic congregation in Costa Mesa, California. Chuck Fromm, a central figure in the early days of Calvary Chapel and later president of their Maranatha! Music Company, wrote:

> [The Jesus People’s] acceptance of this newly discovered truth was made easier by the fact that at Calvary Chapel, they could do so without cutting their hair and abandoning their beloved rock music. They were not only allowed to keep their rock music, the songs that they wrote and shared to express their newfound faith were accepted by the entire church, and their singers were given authority to minister to the congregation.¹⁴

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¹⁴ Charles Fromm, “Textual Communities and New Song in the Multimedia Age: The Routinization of Charisma in the Jesus Movement” (Ph.D. diss, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, 2006), 168.
In this quote, one can see the Information Age model I mentioned above. When discussing the evangelical doctrine of the movement, Fromm simply uses the word “truth.” This is not an open-ended or flexible category of engagement. But because these newly converted Jesus People had come to know the “truth” theologically, Calvary Chapel was happy to be flexible on less essential issues like musical style and personal appearance.

Much of this “flexibility” within evangelicalism during the early 1970s was explained internally as a sort of stopgap measure to attract the wayward countercultural youth of the 1960s. Church leaders were so concerned with the perceived hemorrhaging of young people from their congregations during the preceding years that they were looking for any way to reconnect with the increasingly “lost” generation. Even prominent evangelical leaders like Billy Graham began to incorporate the language and imagery of the counterculture into the public ministries in an attempt to build a bridge between the evangelical establishment and the Jesus Movement. In a speech at the University of California in Berkeley, Graham urged students to stop experimenting with sex, pot, and LSD, saying “Why not experiment with Christ? He’s an experience.”15 Similarly, at a Kansas City Crusade he played on Timothy Leary’s famous psychedelic slogan, saying “Tune in to God, then turn on...drop out-of the materialistic world. The experience of Jesus Christ is the greatest trip you can take.”16

At the same time that Graham was mounting these campaigns, he was also going through a series of very public struggles with his own son, Franklin, who had dropped out of school, been in and out of legal trouble, and was struggling with drug addiction. Graham’s


16 “Graham Urges Youth to Act,” Kansas City Times, 12 September 1967
pursuit of his own wayward countercultural son allowed him to cultivate a powerful image as the concerned parent on behalf of so many other concerned parents in America. As religious historian Larry Eskridge explains,

On a personal level, Graham's struggles at home with his rebellious teenage son during the late 1960s and early 1970s—a battle being played out in many American families—would cast the evangelist in the role of the loving, patient father of the prodigal…Indeed, Graham saw in the Jesus Movement a cadre of young prodigals who—rejecting the counterculture—had metaphorically come home to their parents' America via the bridge of an old American tradition: evangelical religion.¹⁷

Graham’s efforts to reach out to the counterculture reached a fever pitch at Explo ’72, a massive evangelical event held in Dallas, Texas June 12–17, 1972. Colloquially referred to as “Godstock,” Explo ’72 was organized by Campus Crusade for Christ and designed to bring young evangelicals together for a week of training, study, and prayer. Each day of the event ended with a mass rally at the Cotton Bowl stadium in Dallas which featured well-known evangelical speakers, including Graham. It is estimated that the event attracted more than 75,000 people, almost all of which were young, white evangelicals.¹⁸ On the final day of the event, the organizers from Campus Crusade put together a day-long music festival which featured musicians from the burgeoning Jesus music scene including Larry Norman, Love Song, and Randy Matthews alongside black gospel artists like Andrae Crouch and Willa Dorsey as well as recent Jesus People converts like Kris Kristofferson and Johnny Cash. This final day festival, which was held on an open tract of land just north of downtown, attracted


more than 150,000 people and portions of this event were recorded and released on the 1972 album *Jesus Sound Explosion*.¹⁹

In addition to providing a tremendous amount of publicity for the Jesus Movement, Explo ’72 is perhaps most significant because of its role in cementing a connection between the converted hippies of the Jesus People with the more straight-laced evangelical youth who populated parachurch groups like Campus Crusade.

Graham’s support of the Jesus Movement, although not singular, carried with it a valuable imprimatur that no other evangelical leader could match. The fact that America’s leading evangelist could tolerate the movement's hippie eccentricities undoubtedly eased its acceptance in many evangelical quarters. Moreover, Graham's approval contributed a sense of legitimization for those evangelicals—heads of parachurch organizations, local youth workers, and the young people themselves—who eagerly adapted the styles, symbols, music, and rhetoric of the Jesus Movement to their own purposes. In supporting this uniquely evangelical spin on youth culture, Graham and the [Billy Graham Evangelical Association]'s efforts to legitimate the Jesus Movement were yet another example of evangelicalism's uncanny ability to harness popular forces and movements for the furtherance of its mission.²⁰

The Jesus Movement, which had begun as a largely regional West Coast phenomenon, had been building national momentum for more than a year at that point, particularly following the appearance of “The Jesus Revolution” on the cover of *Time Magazine* during the summer of 1971.²¹ The evangelical legitimation provided by Campus Crusade and Graham combined with the countercultural credibility of artists like Larry Norman and Kris Kristofferson interlaced the movement within the already expanding evangelical fabric of the country. Graham and others took the energy and vibrancy of the youth-led counterculture and

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connected it to the fervent practice of the Christian faith which was on the rise in other parts of the culture.

**The Rise of the Religious Right and the Birth of CCM**

Explo ’72 is also credited by music critic John J. Thompson as the birth of the Christian recording industry. By the mid-1970s, major record labels began to take notice of the growing market for Christian music and started getting involved in its production and distribution. Word Records, the largest Christian label of the time, was bought by ABC Records in 1974 and thus began much more extensive nationwide distribution. Similarly, independent Christian label, Song Bird Records, was subsumed by MCA Records beginning in 1979, who took over production and distribution for the small company. Another major label in the burgeoning Christian music movement, Sparrow Records, chose to maintain its autonomy from the industry in terms of ownership, but still relied heavily on MCA and its resources for nationwide distribution and marketing. CBS Records, eager to keep up with the radical growth of the industry, opened its own gospel label, called Priority Records, in 1981. By the beginning of the 1980s, Christian popular music was grossing $100 million dollars a year and was the fifth-largest-selling category of music, outselling both classical and jazz.

In 1976, America elected its first self-professed “born-again” evangelical Christian to the White House in Jimmy Carter. Carter’s presidency was a tumultuous one, partially because he was a Democrat during a time when a new political alliance known as the

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“Religious Right” was aligning evangelical faith with the political ideologies of the Republican party. Jerry Falwell, a prominent televangelist and pastor from Virginia, began lamenting what he perceived as the decay of America’s moral fiber and embarked on a series of nationwide preaching tours in 1976 and 1977. His experiences on these tours put him in contact with like-minded pastors who suggested that Falwell use his growing notoriety in the evangelical community to create an ecclesial organization that would disseminate a conservative Christian worldview to the increasingly secular public through political engagement. In 1979, Falwell along with several other notable pastors founded the Moral Majority, which would become one of the most influential organizations in the Religious Right movement. The increasing support for conservative grassroots organizations like the Moral Majority is most clearly seen in the elections of 1980. In addition to Reagan winning the White House in a landslide over the incumbent Carter, Republicans also captured a majority of seats in the Senate for the first time since 1952. The influence of the Religious Right on this dramatic shift in politics is unquestionable and the increasing dialogue around Christian issues in the public sphere was a direct result of this political climate.

In music, this foregrounding of Christian culture in the American mainstream can be seen through the expansive phenomenon of “Christian crossover” during the same time period. Arguably the most famous and most controversial artist to cross into Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) was Bob Dylan. With the release of Slow Train Coming in August 1979, Dylan began his Christian period, which would include three albums stretching to the release of Infidels in October 1983. In addition to creating music with explicitly Christian

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lyrics and subject matter, the notoriously private Dylan granted an interview with the Los Angeles Times where he spoke freely about his new faith. Other artists including Donna Summers, Phil Driscoll and members of many of the biggest bands of the seventies, including The Eagles, The Byrds, Kansas and Earth, Wind and Fire were also crossing from the mainstream into the Christian music industry during the early 1980s.

In addition to artists crossing into CCM, the early 1980s saw the first CCM artists gaining mainstream notoriety and having singles crossover from the CCM charts to the mainstream. The most successful of these new artists was Amy Grant, who’s 1982 album *Age to Age* was the first Christian album to be certified platinum, selling a million copies in just two years. In addition to notoriety, *Age to Age* earned Grant the Grammy Award for Best Female Gospel Performance in 1983. Her follow-up album, *Straight Ahead*, in 1984 spawned her first single to crossover to the Billboard 200 and won her another Grammy for Best Female Gospel Performance. Despite this previous success, nothing prepared her for the reception of her 1985 release, *Unguarded*, which spawned three crossover singles, won Grant her third Grammy award and went platinum in just over a year. One single of this album, the song “Find a Way,” reached No. 7 on the Billboard Adult Contemporary chart and No. 29 on the Billboard Hot 100 in August 1985.

During this period of heavy crossover, the broader industry began to take notice of the tremendous money-making power of CCM. In 1980, Billboard began hosting an annual International Gospel Music Conference, which brought together Christian musicians, critics,

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and record executives were eager to tap into this burgeoning market. Addressing the crowd at the second annual conference in December 1981, M. Richard Asher, the deputy president of CBS Records, said:

Let me answer the obvious questions first, about why CBS (through its new Priority label) is getting into gospel. I won’t pretend that we’re here because of some new burst of religious faith. We’re here purely and simply because we’re excited about gospel’s potential to sell records—to become a significant part of the mix of music we offer to the public. This is an area in which I must tread carefully because many of you are in this business for a very specific reason: to spread the message of Christianity around the world. To that extent, you’re really a bridge between religious and secular worlds. And this is a bridge we do not really have anywhere else in the industry.27

Comments like those from Asher understandably troubled Christian music’s artists and fans. While the secular music industry was providing opportunities for increased visibility and wider distribution of music many Christians considered a powerful tool for evangelism, it also required artists to hand over control of their products to people that they perceived to be wholly unsympathetic to their religious or spiritual concerns.

This situation raised yet another concern with many evangelicals. If CCM was being produced and distributed by the same industry executives that distributed mainstream popular music, what differentiated CCM? How could Christians use the same music to express the transcendent, timeless truths of their faith that was simultaneously being used to glorify sexual promiscuity and drug abuse? Many books and pamphlets were released in the

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mid-1980s warning evangelicals of the dangers that popular music presented to Christians.28 Others defended the use of popular music within Christian culture by arguing for its pragmatic use as a powerful tool of both evangelism and personal devotion for a new generation of believers.29 These arguments about the utility of popular music in the Christian life would eventually help to fuel the “worship wars,” which I consider in more detail later in this chapter.

**The Remaking of “Worship”**

At the same time as Christian popular music was building itself into a multi-million dollar industry in the halls of major record labels, it was also developing into a weekly practice inside the walls of American churches. From the very beginning, community music-making, including group singing and writing new songs, was essential to the religious gatherings of the Jesus Movement. Influenced by the growing importance of the American folk music revival, the “Jesus people” began producing new simplified congregational music with the musical and lyrical directness of mainstream folk artists.30 Because of the strong presence of the hippie subculture along with the increasing prevalence of Pentecostalism following the Azuza Street revivals in Los Angeles, Southern California proved to be an

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28 Perhaps obviously some of the objections contemporary music were rooted in a pervasively racial discourse. It was believed that rock and roll employed primitive rhythms from Africa that were associated with violent sexuality and pagan religious practice. See Richard Peck, *Rock: Making Musical Choices* (Greenville, SC: Bob Jones University Press, 1985).


especially fertile ground for this new “Jesus music.” Calvary Chapel quickly became the epicenter for the movement, boasting a roster of early Jesus music pioneers like Larry Norman, Love Song, Chuck Girard, The Way, and Children of the Day. By early 1971, Calvary Chapel began its own publishing arm, Maranatha! Music, which released songbooks and recordings of newly composed songs by Calvary Chapel artists.

In addition to the music of the 1960s folk revival, evangelicals also looked to Roman Catholic “folk masses” that began developing after the Second Vatican Council in 1962. The Second Vatican Council restructured the practice of the mass to allow much more flexibility from parish to parish about how the mass parts were administered. One of the most significant changes to result from these reforms was that parishioners were suddenly able to hear the mass in their own vernacular languages rather than in the Vulgate Latin, which had been standard since the Counter-Reformation. This sudden freedom to explore vernacular language also lead to the incorporation of vernacular music into the mass, and for many American teenagers, this meant incorporating varieties of American vernacular music that were popular within the counterculture:

Folk masses could take many forms, but they often included, in addition to folk music, priests in casual clothing; communal, circular seating; worship in people’s houses, rather than in churches; and popular instruments like the guitar, fiddle, or flute, rather than just organ and choir. These masses still included the traditional elements…In the folk masses, however, guitar music became especially commonplace, bringing the fuel of the protest rally to the church nave.


32 Cusic, The Sound of Light, 274–75.

This musical blueprint, which began emerging from Catholic musicians and publishers in the years following Vatican II, as well as the democratic ethos that underpinned it was also present within the Jesus Movement.

During this same time, there was also an explosion of Christian-themed musicals and “rock operas,” most notably Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* and Stephen Schwarz’s *Godspell*, both of which premiered in 1971. These musicals contributed to the expanding repertory of Jesus music, providing songs that were often sung communally at Jesus People gatherings. But they were also important because of the ways that they helped believers reimagine the person of Jesus in the contemporary social context. In *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Judas is chased across the desert by three tanks and King Herod asks if Jesus is capable of walking across his swimming pool. In *Godspell*, Jesus and his followers splash around in a Central Park fountain instead of the Jordan River and the Pharisees and Sadducees are transformed into NYPD officers. Historian Stephen J. Nichols has noted that both of these musicals and their resultant films are important cultural artifacts because of the ways that “they both represent and contribute…to cultural attitudes about Christ.”

He also notes that in each case, Jesus looks like he would be right at home in the 1970s counterculture. Theologian and historian Pete Ward has argued that Christian musicals of


35 Through a series of case studies, Nichols explores the evolution of Christianity in American culture from the seventeenth through the early twenty-first centuries. Nichols’ study is dominated by the changing figure of Jesus and questions how each generation of Americans has reduced him to whatever best fits their needs. The book demonstrates how Jesus has proved to be a malleable figure in American culture and politics, from Jefferson’s moral-exemplar Jesus to the manly Jesus of Billy Sunday, or from a trivialized Precious Moments Jesus to Focus on the Family's Republican Jesus. Nichols’s critique of these perspectives argues that Jesus is more complex than a slogan or plaything and should be recognized as a figure whose identity, especially in America, is bound up in a thick web of interpretation and appropriation.
the 1970s also “encouraged the link between recording, music publishing, large-scale events and tours, and charismatic worship.” While the songs from musicals were used less frequently than music from other sources during evangelical worship gatherings, these musicals and their accompanying media events were instrumental in providing a theological imagination and tangible production model to accompany the Jesus Movement’s ambitions of musical revival.

During the late 1970s—right around the time of the prominent “crossover” I mentioned above—there began to grow a distinction within the Jesus Music community between “praise choruses” and so-called “message music.” Lyrically and musically, these two styles differentiated themselves primarily by complexity and style of address. Message songs were often more lyrically complex, more closely resembling contemporaneous popular music and exploring Christian ideas from a largely third person perspective. Praise choruses, on the other hand, were simple and often written with first person language, capturing the personal experiences of a worshipper. “Message music” would eventually migrate to Nashville and become CCM, while the “praise choruses” of Maranatha! largely stayed in Southern California and developed into what would eventually be called “praise and worship” music. In 1979, Maranatha! explicitly narrowed its focus to “praise music” when it declined to renew the contracts of its few remaining “message music” artists.

Because of the ways that worship music was easily adapting and accommodating itself to the musical culture of the day, many of the new “worship” institutions followed that path.

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37 Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 76–77.
Christian organizations started organizing large concert-type events of “worship” music. By drawing on the energy of mainstream festivals of the period like Woodstock or Monterey Pop, these events provided some of the most high profile exposure for Christian music during the 1970s. Explo ’72 was perhaps the most prominent example during this time period, but in addition to these one-off events, evangelicals were also creating recurring music “festivals” which provided space for Christians and Christian musicians to gather on a regular basis.38

One of the earliest examples of this type of recurring festival event is the Ichthus Festival, which was founded by Dr. Bob Lyon, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. For Lyon and his students, the Ichthus Festival was intended to be a direct Christian response to the success of the Woodstock Festival from the previous year. Lyon, a pacifist and progressive political activist, believed that showing the Christian commitment to “Three Days of Peace and Music” might help to demonstrate the connections he saw between the goals of the counterculture and those of evangelical Christianity. The first Ichthus Festival was staged during May 1970 at the Wilmore Campgrounds.39 Though it was originally intended to be a one-time event, the success of the first festival lead Lyon and others to organize another event during the summer of 1971 and eventually, the festival developed into an annual event. Over the years, Ichthus began to draw between 15,000 and 20,000 attendees for four days every June until the festival finally closed its doors after the 2012 event.40

38 For more information on the earliest festivals staged by the Jesus Movement, see Anne Eggebroten, “Jesus Festivals,” Christianity Today, 6 August 1971: 38–40


40 The Ichthus Festival has just announced that it will be teaming up with the Creation Festival (another Christian rock event) to resurrect the event during the summer of 2015. http://ichthusfestival.com
The Ichthus Festival also demonstrates powerfully how the category of “worship” was entwined with the music festival atmosphere of the event. Every evening at the Ichthus festival, a worship service would be held at the main stage amphitheater. These services consisted of a “worship session” with contemporary music followed by a keynote speaker. On the last day of the festival (usually Saturday), all stages, merchandise tents, and food vendors were temporarily closed for a festival-wide worship service. This service consisted of musical worship time followed by a keynote speaker and a celebration of the Eucharist. Placing the activity of “worshipping” along with popular music at the center of an event like Ichthus demonstrates its growing importance as a category of Christian experience.

At the same time that the category of “worship” was being supersized at Christian festivals and mega-events, it was also being miniaturized. Intimate and informal worship gatherings would often take place at coffee shops and including singing along to praise choruses with an acoustic guitar. During the last few years of the 1960s, the Jesus People had founded Christian coffee shops all over the West Coast and frequently used them as gathering places for worship and social activity that mirrored the ways that churches had functioned for previous generations of believers. Similarly in the UK, the “coffee shop” was a relatively recent import from the European continent, which provided a younger, hipper alternative to

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42 It is perhaps telling that Ichthus and Cornerstone (as well as other prominent Christian festivals) have begun shuttering their doors since the “worship awakening” hit its peak during 2010-2011. Events like Passion have come to replace the function of these massive worship gatherings, but without the pretense of being a “festival.” In fact, they don’t even seem to acknowledge that what they’re doing is related to “concert” or “festival” experience. Instead, the simply call it “worship.” They’re taking a different, and much more direct route, to appropriating the pop format into ritual practice.

traditional pubs or teahouses.44 As Monique Ingalls has observed, for many participants and observers, the “paradigmatic image of the Jesus Movement was a group of young people sitting in a circle, playing guitars and singing new devotional songs.”45 These coffeehouse gatherings allowed for the continuation of this Jesus Movement practice in a space that lent itself to involvement and appropriation by established church and parachurch organizations.

The diverse settings of massive festival gatherings and intimate coffee house shows illustrate three important points about the developing worship consciousness of the Jesus movement. First, “worship” was becoming the primary site of church engagement for many young evangelicals. Though the Jesus Movement had included popular music since the beginning, their external focus on evangelism and outreach meant that most of their gatherings were not focused on the largely internal activity of worship. However, in the early 1970s, evangelical churches in both the US and UK began to explore the phenomenon of “worship” as a new potential site of countercultural hipness, a distinct subcultural activity that included popular music.46 As a continuation of the Jesus Movement focus on evangelism, evangelicals also began to understand worship as something that could happen anywhere. It was no longer bound by the walls or even the closed community of the evangelical church. It was something that could be taken out into the world. Presenting worship as the face of the evangelical youth movement facilitated the easy incorporation of new members from worshipping at public events into private church settings.

45 Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 68.
46 Ward, Selling Worship, 50.
But most significantly, these events demonstrate the ways that worship became a category of experience that was increasingly indistinguishable from music. Even more specifically, worship became equivalent to singing along with pop-styled songs that featured acoustic guitar accompaniment. In the history of Christianity, “worship” had always encompassed a wide swath of activities, including but not limited to: taking the Eucharist, reading scripture, liturgical and devotional prayer, listening to a sermon or homily, giving of tithes and offerings to the church, etc. However, with the rise of more charismatic, pentecostal theologies during the 20th century, the category of worship within evangelicalism was reconfigured to focus more explicitly on cultivating and sustaining an individual experience of the divine rather than the execution of identical, discreet, liturgical elements each week.47 Increasingly, the idea of worship was being sonified, associated more and more closely and exclusively with musical sound.

Evangelical churches began hiring “worship leaders” or “worship pastors” to serve as songwriters, band leaders, and lead singers of music in the new contemporary praise and worship style. Churches started “worship teams,” which consisted of lay people who would form a band to accompany the worship leader at Sunday services. There was increasingly a move towards “block worship,” something drawn from Pentecostal practice whereby the worship band would play a large set or “block” of songs with little or no breaks in-between. This was significantly different from the traditional evangelical template that involved singing individual hymns which were bracketed and framed by scriptural exegesis from a

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pastor. Now, the musical “worship time” constituted its own section of the service in which the pastor would cede control to the worship leader and his or her worship team.

A Legal Brief

During this period, churches were also increasingly moving toward projecting the lyrics to songs onto a screen by printing lyric sheets onto transparencies and using overhead projectors. While this may seem like a somewhat superficial development in the technology of church participation, it carries with it several important ramifications. First of all, projecting the lyrics allowed for a much more rapid turnover of songs than a printed hymnal or songbook, which would often take years or decades for a new edition to make it through the denominational committees which oversee them. This meant that congregations became interested in always singing the newest and freshest songs that were coming out of Christian festivals, recordings, and publishers. These songs could be acquired by purchasing new song collections from Maranatha! or Integrity, but they were also distributed through more informal channels by parachurch campus organizations or at large-scale events like the festivals mentioned above. According to Terry York, these parachurch events helped to form the bridge between the Jesus Movement ideas and more “mainstream” evangelical churches in the United States. York describes a three-step passage of new worship songs going from parachurch youth rally to denominational rally to local church:

Parachurch youth gatherings, large or small, rallies and Bible studies, included times of “worship.” Youth-generated music, instruments, perspectives, and energy, and freedom from the adults and trappings of the [church] characterized these worship experiences…In many cases, the youth ministers accepted the challenge of matching, in their local congregational setting, the
environment and energy of the parachurch and regional denominational rallies. Larger congregations were often able to more closely replicate the parachurch events.\footnote{York, America’s Worship Wars, 29; In my fieldwork, the idea that larger congregations were able to “more closely replicate” the feelings of these parachurch events was something that came up over and over again. Many people commented on the ways that they felt the Passion Conference had driven them to find larger, more media-savvy churches that could more accurately reproduce the production they had experienced at Passion. More about this in chapter three.}

These informal networks of distribution allowed for rapid and widespread dissemination of new worship songs, but they also presented a challenge to the nascent Christian music industry.

In 1976, a high profile lawsuit was filed involving the Archdiocese of Chicago and an Los Angeles-based publisher named F.E.L. Publications Ltd., under the leadership of church musician Dennis Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick was seeking $3.2 million dollars in damages on the claim that the archdiocese had unlawfully copied and distributed lyrics and lead sheets for songs on which he was the copyright holder. The songs involved in the dispute were primarily parts of folk masses that Fitzpatrick had written while working for the Archdiocese during the late 1960s. Fitzpatrick won nearly $3.2 million in damages from the archdiocese in 1984, but then lost $3 million of that total as a result of a ruling by the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago the next year.\footnote{William Grady, “Publisher Won’t End Battle Over Hymns,” Chicago Tribune, 13 June 1990. \url{http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-06-13/news/9002180039_1_publishers-copyrights-religious-music}.}

The implications of this lawsuit were broad enough—and the dollar figure attached to the initial ruling in Fitzpatrick’s favor was sizable enough—to scare many church musicians. Many of the practices on which the contemporary worship music rested—copying music sheets for amateur musicians each Sunday, creating new arrangements of popular songs,
projecting lyrics on a screen—needed to be legally protected in order for church musicians to continue functioning as they had. So Howard Rachinski, music minister for a large evangelical church called Bible Temple in Portland, Oregon, began to develop a “permission of use” concept, whereby churches could obtain blanket permission for specific copying activities, which he labeled as “non-commercial.” In January 1988, Rachinski merged his efforts with the UK organization, Christian Music Association (CMA) to form CCLI. CCLI now represents over 3,000 publishers and serves more than 200,000 churches as the primary copyright organization for worship music in the world.50

Singing To Jesus

A move toward projecting the lyrics also helped to liberate worshippers’ bodies to move during group singing. Since they were no longer holding hymnals, worshippers were free to close their eyes and raise their hands above their head in a more fervent performance of piety. This “hands-free” approach also meant that many youth-oriented songs began to incorporate hand or body motions that accompanied the lyrical content of songs. Motions would often be disseminated through and associated with one or more parachurch groups or events, providing an additional parameter of knowledge that could be specific to “insider” populations within churches. But these movements also signaled an important change in the...

50 “About CCLI,” CCLI [http://us.ccli.com/about/]; It is worth noting that it is the Religious Services Exemption, not a license from CCLI, that protects the rights of churches to perform copyrighted material in their worship gatherings. In an interview with Abbie Stancato, Paul Herman, Marketing Manager of CCLI, explained that the basic CCLI only covers “copying”—which includes projecting or printing out the lyrics or melodies to songs held in copyright by the publishers it represents—and does not “deal with performance rights per se.” See Paul Herman interview with Abbie Stancato. “What Is CCLI And The Basic Church Copyright License…” Rocking God’s House. 16 July 2013. [http://rockingodshouse.com/ccli-the-basic-church-copyright-license-does-your-church-suffer-from-youtube-syndrome/].
approach to writing lyrics for worship songs. The lyrics of “praise choruses,” which had already been ensconced in a rhetoric of “folk simplicity,” were even further simplified. For one, it was more difficult to project large, complicated blocks of text through a projector, but additionally, the simpler, more repetitive forms were more conducive to additional layers of engagement through bodily movement. The heavy strophic forms of traditional Protestant hymnody simply required too much attention to allow for either of these.

Furthermore, the 1970s and early 1980s saw an important shift in the language used in worship songs. John Wimber, a former pastor at Calvary Chapel and one of the founding pastors of the Vineyard Church movement, emphasized “intimacy” in worship in the early 1980s and thus songs began to incorporate images from romantic and sexual love. He encapsulated this change in his own songwriting by saying: “These are not songs about Jesus, they are songs to Jesus: intimate and personal.” Songs offered to Jesus mean that they are frequently phrased in the second person, with “You” as the most common form of divine address. In his 2008 book Selling Worship, Pete Ward said of songs from this period:

In the lyrics of these songs we can detect a shift from an emphasis upon teaching doctrine to songs which are meant to be used as a vehicle for a more experiential charismatic worship. Central to this new emphasis was a fresh understanding of the church as a body gathered to receive the [Holy] Spirit… This experience of the Spirit in worship begins to replace the previous focus on the experience of conversion. Thus the songs turn the gaze from what has

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51 Ingalls, “Awesome in This Place,” 57-59.

52 Wimber quoted in Songs of the Vineyard, back page.

53 Martyn Percy has illustrated the connections between a capitalized “You” and the idea of “Lord” or “God” in creating a worship ideology that connects a sensuous love (“You”) to sovereign power (“Lord”). More exploration of this in chapter two. See Martyn Percy, “Sweet Rapture: Subliminal Eroticism in Contemporary Charismatic Worship.” in Theology and Sexuality 6 (1997): 71–106.
happened to believers to what is now happening as the church gathers as a body to worship.\textsuperscript{54}

Historian Lionel Adey has identified three different types of Christian songs, which help to distinguish some of the changes that occurred during the so-called “worship turn” of the 1970s and 1980s.\textsuperscript{55} Below, I will illustrate his three types, objective, subjective, and reflexive, by using song examples released by Maranatha! Music during this period.

Objective songs try to lay out theological concepts or recount Biblical events for didactic purposes. A good example of an “objective” song from this period is “Seek Ye First,” written by Karen Lafferty and included on the first Maranatha! \textit{Praise Album} in 1974.

\begin{verbatim}
VERSE 1
Seek ye first the kingdom of God
And His righteousness
And all these things
Shall be added unto you
Allelu, alleluia

VERSE 2
Man shall not live by bread alone
But by ev'ry word
That proceeds
From the mouth of God
Allelu, alleluia

VERSE 3
Ask and it shall be given unto you
Seek and ye shall find
Knock and the door shall be
Opened unto you
Allelu, alleluia
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{54} Ward, \textit{Selling Worship}, 121–22.

The lyrics of this song are taken almost directly from scripture with the intent of teaching a biblical lesson. Objective songs such as this one are spiritually significant to believers because of their ability to encode theological truths within a musical package. As one worship leader with whom I spoke succinctly put it, “songs are sermons that people actually remember.”

While they still employ explicitly Biblical themes, subjective songs are typically focused on implications within the ongoing religious life of the worshippers. A good example of a subjective song might be “Christ In Me,” written by Gary Garcia and included on the second Maranatha! Praise Album in 1976.

CHORUS
Christ in me is to live
To die is to gain
Christ in me is to live
To die is to gain

VERSE
He's my King He's my song
He's my life and He's my joy
He's my strength He's my sword
He's my peace He's my Lord

For Adey, one of the defining characteristics of the “subjective song” is the way that the individual biography of the worshipper and the larger Christian story become essentially indistinguishable. Here, the chorus provides a clear scriptural reference while the verse text allows the worshipper to project that Biblical truth into their own life. The subjective power

56 In this case, each of the verses are direct quotes from Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. The first verse is taken from Matthew 6:33 (which is sometimes listed as the subtitle of the song), the second verse from Matthew 4:4, and the third verse from Matthew 7:7.

57 Jonathan Welch, interview with author, 30 September 2012.

58 The lyrics are taken from the words of the Apostle Paul in Philippians 1:21.
of the song is its ability to demonstrate that the God speaking to the Apostle Paul in the first century AD and the God speaking to worshippers in the present moment are in fact one and the same.

Both objective and subjective songs have been integrally apart of American evangelical hymnody for centuries. Particularly during the Third Great Awakening of the late nineteenth century, the pietistic subjective songs became almost equally represented in the hymnbooks and sonic imaginaries of American evangelicals. The potentially unique contribution of the praise and worship movement has been the significant number of “reflexive” songs that have become part of the regular rotation. Reflexive songs are songs whose main focus is on the act of worship itself. Because of this reflexivity, the songs are often shorter and more repetitive, allowing for the meanings of the song to feedback into the worship experience and vice-versa. A good example of a reflexive song from this period might be “Let’s Forget About Ourselves (We Have Come Into This House)” which was written by Bruce T. Ballinger and included on the third Maranatha! Praise Album in 1979.

VERSE 1
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord and worship Him
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord and worship Him
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord and worship Him
Oh worship Him, Jesus Christ our Lord

VERSE 2
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord and praise His name
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord and praise His name
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord and praise His name
Oh praise His name, Jesus Christ our Lord

VERSE 3
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord, He’s coming soon
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord, He’s coming soon
Let’s forget about ourselves
And magnify the Lord, He’s coming soon
He is coming soon, Jesus Christ our Lord

In this song, the textual content of the song describes an experience that singing the song is itself meant to create. The song is reflexive, not only because it is a song about worship, but because its text is performative.

Within the larger arguments of this chapter, reflexive songs are significant in a number of ways. First, writing songs about worship further prioritized “worship” as one of the most important sites of engagement for young evangelicals. These songs help to teach the priority of worshipful engagement by scripting it into the experiences of the songs themselves. Second, the lyrics in reflexive songs are not objective theological propositions or even descriptions of subjective religious experience. In this way, reflexive songs are almost more akin to incantations than they are to traditional hymnody. The words of the songs actually have the operative power to bring about the reality being described. By singing about the need to “forget about ourselves” and “magnify the Lord,” the congregation is also enacting it. This recursive dynamic creates a different relationship between worshipper and song than do subjective or objective songs. The myriad ways that these songs are able to script a theological experience that expands and exceeds the texts on the page will be the subject of the next chapter. Finally, reflexive songs also help to reinforce the “sonification” of
worship mentioned above. If one’s reflection on and enactment of “worship” as a
congregation is always accomplished through pop-styled music, a natural sense of correlation
begins to develop between worship and the music being played and sung.

The Worship Apparatus

The move to a much more quickly shifting repertory, a much more experiential focus
in songwriting, and a much more explicitly musical understanding of “worship” all lead to
the development of what Pete Ward has called the “worship apparatus.” He talks about the
rise of what he calls “charismatic worship” in the United Kingdom and the ways that it gave
rise to an entire industry of professionals.

Charismatic worship is enabled by the existence of a complex network that
could be termed the worship apparatus. The worship apparatus includes
songwriters, recording studios, record companies, local church worship bands,
festivals, OHPs [overhead projectors], styles of singing, book publishers,
worship leaders, magazines, youth groups, and so on. Investment takes place
and is structured by this apparatus.59

In some ways, the worship apparatus represents the logical continuation and expansion of the
countercultural enthusiasm which had underpinned the Jesus Movement. If Christians could
take responsibility for the production of their own popular music by taking up the roles of
songwriter and/or recording artist, then it makes sense that other elements of that industry
might also be better served by Christian engagement. Christian record labels could produce
the Christian artists, who might then go on tour by contacting Christian tour managers and
booking agents. The shows could be produced by Christian sound and lighting companies,
hosted at Christian venues, and promoted in Christian magazines and on Christian radio. Like

so many other subcultural communities, evangelicals created a mirror of the popular music industry in which they could control the production and dissemination for themselves.

The rise of the worship apparatus means that along with “worship teams,” many churches also saw the rise of “tech teams,” which dealt with many of the production elements that accompanied the use of popular music. Eventually, with the rise of video production and computer-based graphics, even more people were required to carry out the Sunday morning production of worship. Companies too began discovering that “worship” was easily commodified through a variety of already existing industries. Christian publishers underwent a “worship turn” in which they focused their efforts on producing new “worship resources” in the form of songbooks and recordings. Catalogues and magazines selling guitars, sound equipment, video projectors, and other technical equipment began specifically targeting church musicians and tech teams with their advertising. Special products were also designed with worship production in mind. As projecting lyrics to songs and Biblical references moved from overhead transparencies to computer programs like Microsoft Powerpoint, a company called MediaComplete began producing a proprietary “Worship Presentation Software” which they called MediaShout. Robb Redman groups all these phenomena under the heading of “the great worship awakening,” which has transformed the American church over the last four decades.60

Musical Denominations

The rise of the worship apparatus was also due in part to the changing landscape of American churches during this period. With the combined effects of the Jesus Movement and the Religious Right during the 1970s, there was a tremendous amount of excitement about the possibilities for the future of the American church. One of the most important threads to emerge was the “Church Growth Movement,” which introduced two important concepts into the evangelical conversation in America. First, the Church Growth movement prioritized the growth in membership of a church as a primary bellwether of its spiritual health. This logic led, in great part, to the explosion of “megachurches,” which cast much larger nets than the community-oriented churches of previous generations and gathered thousands of worshippers into their sanctuaries every weekend. As churches grew larger and larger, the financial and logistic obstacles to large-scale pop-music events on a weekly basis began to evaporate. This not only affected the ability of churches to build and fill large auditoriums or afford the latest lighting, sound, and production equipment. It also meant that individual churches were able to attract high profile artists to lead these worship productions every Sunday morning. Artists were glad to draw a regular salary as “worship leaders” rather than trying to piece together a living through touring and publishing contracts, and churches were happy to provide money and resources which allowed the worship leaders to continue recording and songwriting. The growth of megachurches allowed for individual churches to reclaim some of the defining power within a Christian music industry that had increasingly been folded into the major label system.

The Church Growth movement also introduced the idea of “seeker-sensitivity” as a driving force of aesthetic and theological decision-making as well as internal church
“Seeker sensitive” churches tended to cast aside any elements of Christian practice that might unnecessarily offend or alienate outsiders in an effort to create the most welcoming possible environment.

Out the stained glass window went the somewhat formal 45-minute exegetical sermon, replaced by a shorter, story-based talk to address the “felt needs” of the congregants while reinforcing the premise that following Jesus would dramatically improve their quality of life. Contemporary worship had already found its way into the mainstream, but their new model nudged the church further toward a rock-concert feel. Finally, programs proliferated, with programs for nearly every demographic, from Mothers of Preschoolers to Red Glove Motorcycle Riders…The staff endeavored to create a wide on-ramp for folks who might ordinarily bypass the sanctuary in favor of Starbucks. (As an incentive, we provided fair-trade coffee and bagels each week.) Trained not to assume that everyone was on the same page politically or spiritually, we sought to have friendly, nuanced conversations with visitors.61

Sociologist Kimon Howland Sargeant has called seeker sensitivity “the postmodern denomination” and observes that upwards of 90 percent of the seeker church pastors he spoke to agreed that “the seeker sensitivity of a church today is more important than its denominational affiliation.”62

In an oft-cited article for the flagship evangelical Christian periodical Christianity Today, Michael Hamilton has described many of these developments in light of music’s role. American churchgoers no longer sort themselves out by denomination so much as by musical preference. Since the 1950s, denominational divisions have steadily become less important in American church life. We have the baby boom generation (of which I am a part) to thank for much of this. But at bottom we are all still sectarians; we still prefer to congregate with the likeminded. Our new sectarianism is a sectarianism of worship style. The new sectarian creeds are dogmas of music. Worship seminars are the seminaries of

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the new sectarianism; their directors are its theologians. The ministers of the new sectarianism are our church worship leaders...Forty years ago, this heightened sensitivity to the details of worship and music would have been unheard of, but now it is the norm. All over North America, worship has become contested ground.63

Hamilton identifies a number of things that I’ve already addressed, including (1) the conflation of worship and musical style, (2) the prioritization of worship as a category of Christian engagement, and (3) the growing of the “worship apparatus.” But he also points out the ways in which this debate over worship style has eroded distinctions between Protestant denominations.

In my experience as an evangelical teenager, there were three questions one asked when first meeting someone at a church conference, convention, youth camp or the like: (1) “What’s your name?” (2) “Where are you from?” and (3) “What kind of church do you go to?”—meaning, “to what Protestant denomination do you belong?” This final question isn’t quite as loaded as it might appear, since the phenomenon of evangelicalism isn’t tied exclusively to any one institutional affiliation, but rather emerges from a network of ecumenical relationships. The purpose of this question, in my experience, was less about determining one’s insider status and more about situating oneself within a field of historical affiliations—as well as providing an opportunity to crack one of a number of denominationally-appropriate jokes.

Perhaps because I was starkly aware of the fact that I had been out of the evangelical culture for so many years, when I was conducting my fieldwork at the Passion Conference, I found myself falling back on patterns of speech I learned as a teenager. What I discovered,

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however, was that the third of my standard questions no longer applied. Student after student
gave me blank stares before offering some sort of conciliatory response: “It’s just sort of a
church, I guess,” “We just teach what’s in the Bible,” or, for the most historically conscious
among them, “Well, my parents were Methodist.” Many of these students went on to explain
that they attended one of a growing number of evangelical churches which publicly eschew
denominational tags, opting instead for names like “NewHope Church,” “Crossroads
Fellowship,” or simply “The Summit.” Even though many of these churches ultimately
choose to affiliate with evangelical institutions such as the Southern Baptist Convention, they
choose to keep historical markers such as “Baptist,” “Evangelical,” or even “Church” out of
their names.

This is now part and parcel of a global trend. From international “mega-churches” to
the hyper-local house church movement, evangelicals are finding their faith communities
increasingly populated by a generation of post-denominational Christian believers. In
response to these believers’ aversions to institutional affiliation, many evangelical churches
have come to place particular importance on the idea of “branding,” using a variety of
market-driven strategies to publicly construct their sense of self. In this branding model,
patterns of consumption can come to express affiliations that have traditionally been a part of
denominations. So rather than finding oneself part of a faith community through connections
to an archdiocese or a general conference, believers in this post-denominational world often
find themselves connected by participation within the material culture of evangelical
Christianity, in particular, their patterns of consuming music. One is located within a
particular worshiping community in the same ways that one is located within a community of
Coke drinkers, Polo wearers, or Mac users, which makes these networks of affiliation both ad hoc and semantically malleable. Faith communities are using the sounds of internationally-disseminated Christian worship culture to forge new networks of post-denominational connection.

The Worship Wars

The “worship wars” of the 1980s and early 1990s have been more closely examined in numerous musicological, historical, and theological analyses of contemporary evangelicalism, but in short, the debates largely centered on a question of the inherent spirituality or moral neutrality of specific musical forms. Opponents of the newer popularly-inspired music argued that the form of “rock and roll” was not morally neutral and therefore was incapable of conveying a Christian message. But proponents of the music saw no moral content inherent within its form, arguing for its potential use as a powerful tool of Christian evangelism. Edward Plowman, an evangelical observer and defender of the praise and worship movement, explains, “Without a doubt, modern music is a strategic communication vehicle. For the Jesus music people the big issue is not rock itself (the Establishment’s hangup) but who is in the driver's seat—calling the tunes.”

In this sense, the ascendancy of “praise and worship” can be seen as a reaction against the “crossover” ethos of the previous decade, which was perceived by many to be

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surrendering the “driver’s seat” to the major labels that now controlled the Christian music industry. Artists like Amy Grant or dc Talk often achieved success on mainstream charts by deploying religious language that was vague enough to attain broader appeal. Within Christian circles, this is often referred to as the “God or a girl” phenomenon. If a song is sufficiently ambiguous that it could be about either God or a female romantic interest, it clearly contains the potential to crossover to the mainstream charts.66 Praise and worship represents an unambiguous and unapologetic return to a particularly Christian—or rather a particularly evangelical—religious language. I would also like to suggest that there might be an economic dimension to the reaction against “crossover.” The two most prominent praise and worship labels—Passion’s sixstepsrecords and Hillsong Music—are independent of the major mainstream labels, owned by explicitly Christian organizations.67 The move away from major label identification—even as these “independent” labels continue to utilize the marketing, production, and distribution resources of the major label system—can be seen as an effort to counteract the acquisition of nearly all Christian record labels by one of the “Big Four” during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The significant changes that led to the worship wars were also sparked by youth who outgrew the “youth specific” contemporary programming and were dissatisfied with the

66 The “God or a girl” phenomenon also works in the opposite direction, describing the ability of mainstream bands like U2, Live, Creed, or Mumford and Sons to gain a foothold in evangelical culture.

67 Hillsong, a Pentecostal church of more than 20,000 based in Sydney, Australia, was the first player on a truly global stage of praise and worship music. The 1994 smash hit “Shout to the Lord,” written by Hillsong worship leader Darlene Zschech, has been in the CCLI Top 25—which reports the frequency with which a song is performed in churches—without a break since its release almost 20 years ago. Although they produce nearly all their own material through their in-house record label and publishing arm, the church’s “youth band” Hillsong United, fronted by Joel Houston, has been increasingly featured at Passion events in recent years and their performance from 2010 Passion Conference in Atlanta appeared on sixstepsrecords’ compilation Passion: Awakening. Additionally, it is the global infrastructure of Hillsong Church—boasting large satellite campuses in London, Kiev, Cape Town, Stockholm, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam and Moscow—which has helped facilitate so much of the global presence that Passion has demonstrated since their first world tour in 2008.
traditional “adult” programming at their local churches. The rise of the Jesus People also correlates to the rise of “youth ministry” as a category of engagement for the North American church. Terry York has observed that

> It would soon be discovered that when the children of the [church] outgrew the youth choir, youth choir tours, and youth worship services, they would not out-grow their love of the repertory nor of the freshness and freedom they had encountered in these worship and worship-esque events…They would not forget the experience of finding worship “outside” and bringing it in. They would not forget the larger experience of worshiping with Christians of other denominations. Indeed, they would not forget non-denominational Christianity.⁶⁸

Youth ministry had been designed by churches during the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way to attract and retain the young people that were disassociating themselves from the church in large numbers. Youth events provided spaces within the church for the pushing of boundaries and the renegotiation of established norms. However, once these young people grew into their thirties and began to bring their own children into the church, they found that the adult places within the church that they had abandoned a decade before were largely unchanged.

One of the most indelible marks that these youth events would leave on participants is actually their musical ontology. Monique Ingalls expands on York’s observations by adding:

> Neither would they forget the Jesus Movement’s way of relating Christianity to contemporary culture: arguing for the inclusion of popular musical styles in worship by unmooring musical style from its social and cultural contexts, attempting to remove the associational “baggage” from the music. The idea that music was simply a vehicle or tool for promoting the Christian message; that musical style was not an integral part of the evangelical tradition; and that

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⁶⁸ York, *America’s Worship Wars*, 29
the timeless Christian message not only could, but should, be paired with contemporary cultural styles.\textsuperscript{69}

In the next two chapters, I will explore how this form/content distinction breaks down, but the idea of music as “vehicle” or “tool” that transparently carries substantive theological “content” is one of the most significant musical claims to emerge from the worship wars and has serious implications for the movement of intensity within evangelicalism.

The Genrefication of Worship

As the advocates of praise and worship emerged from the worship wars with the upper hand, it became clear that this attitude of neutrality towards musical forms had become what Ingalls describes as a “core tenet of evangelical musical ontology: that music, in and of itself, is a morally neutral carrier of the Christian message.”\textsuperscript{70} Ingalls posits that the result of this rhetoric of ontological neutrality is the sudden permissibility of nearly any musical style within the context of evangelical worship. If musical “styles” or “forms” are inherently devoid of moral or spiritual content, then one need simply fill them with Christian texts in order to make them appropriate for Christian use. This logic of neutrality represents one important strand of reactions to the worship wars, whereby every imaginable genre suddenly spawned a Christian counterpart: Christian hip-hop, Christian metal, Christian punk, et cetera.

\textsuperscript{69} Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 72.

On the flipside, however, praise and worship itself has become increasingly enmeshed in the recording industry’s genre system. Simultaneously with its increasing use in churches for congregational singing, praise and worship music also became one of the most popular subsets of the Christian recording industry, representing approximately 10% of the total Christian market share since 2003.\textsuperscript{71} And as with any genre trafficking in the millions units per year, the artists who rose to the top of the charts tended to be the most widely palatable. In general, these artists followed a standard 4- or 5-piece band format with the leader on acoustic guitar, accompanied by an electric lead guitar, electric bass, piano or keyboard, and drum set. Stylistically, they tended to mimic a softer rock/adult contemporary sound with a basic, four-chord harmonic palate. So, as worship music was slowing gaining theological momentum on the grounds of musical-stylistic neutrality, it was also forging a strong stylistic identity for itself through record sales and radio play. Thus, this trend does not represent the opening up of multiple new genre possibilities, but rather the establishment of a new musical orthodoxy which attempts to erase its own lineage. The rhetoric of ontological neutrality that emerges from the worship wars actually creates a climate that is allergic to \textit{any} strong markers of genre or style identity other than the presumably “neutral” pop-rock style of praise and worship music that emerged in the mid-1990s.\textsuperscript{72} The result of this is that “worship,” as a category of music-making, has a sound. That is to say, because of the establishment of normative stylistic markers within praise and worship as a genre, the activity of worship actually has its own sonic signature.


\textsuperscript{72}There are a few artists within the worship scene who incorporate elements of other musical styles, most prominently David Crowder and Michael Gungor, but these are largely exceptions to the rule.
“Worship music” is now a clearly identifiable genre of music on Christian radio and a designated section of Christian record stores and digital music outlets. This is not, however, a unique or unprecedented process of “genrefication” that Christian worship music has undergone. Rather, I would like to suggest that any process of genrefication is based on the transformation of social relationships into sonic signifiers. In *Genre in Popular Music*, media studies scholar Fabian Holt describes two different aspects of the development and basic operations of genres: “collectivities” and “conventions.”

Holt argues that genres are seeded within discursive and social networks whose connections are established through social and historical moments in which affiliations are articulated. These “collectivities,” as Holt characterizes them, come to position themselves as “core subjects and insiders of the genre” and eventually give rise to an additional group of the “specialized subjects that have given direction to the larger network.”

As these “specialized subjects” start to agglomerate, they begin to articulate a center around which the genre community is organized. This center/periphery dynamic is further reinforced as the most dedicated fans and musicians in these genre communities begin to articulate a canon of recordings. Holt observes that

> The commercial phonogram, a core object in popular music since the 1920s, has essential features for genre formation: it is regulated, fixed, repeatable, and sold by category. Recordings have constituted the musical “texts” of translocal canons.

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74 Ibid., 21.

75 Ibid., 27.
This growing body of recordings help to establish a set of “conventions” which organize processes of communication and signification within the network and define the sonic parameters or boundaries of the network for outsiders. This relatively stable body of genre-signifying sounds, particularly the sonic markers he calls “codes,” then most frequently become the primary location for the construction and contestation of a particular genre definition.\textsuperscript{76}

By way of example, let’s perform a thought experiment. Suppose a friend and I found ourselves at a party in the Bronx in the summer of 1978. There is a live DJ providing music for dancing by manipulating vinyl records to play the same crucial breaks over and over again. Upon leaving the party, my friend turns to me and asks “Was the person providing music at that party a hip-hop artist?” In order to answer that question, I would have to appeal to the social network or “collectivity” in which that particular event was embedded. What block was our party on? Who else was in attendance? What was the specific social location of the artist performing? Were people engaging the music by dancing or listening in ways that are characteristic of the hip-hop community? All of these questions attempt to figure out whether or not the musical performance we attended was located within the web of social relationships known as “hip-hop.” Imagine now the same scenario playing out fifteen or twenty years later. Confronted with the same problem, conversations would now center on a set of sonic conventions derived from a developing canon of recordings which help to define

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 22–23; Holt also recognizes that this “[sonic] approach must be supplemented by hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches in order to understand generic categories in the totality of musical experience” (23). These hermeneutic and phenomenological approaches will form the backbone of my next two chapters.
the genre in the public sphere. “Did it sound like hip-hop music?” If so, there’s a good chance that it was.

A similar thought experiment provides insight into the development of praise and worship music over the last four decades. When considering a worship album made in the 1970s, one might be confronted with a barrage of questions about the social network in which the recording was made. One would need to determine who was making the music and for whom in order to understand whether or not it fit within the network of social relationships known as “worship.” Within the contemporary worship music scene, however, I argue that this is no longer strictly the case. Instead, one’s curiosity might be appropriately satisfied by simply asking whether or not a particular recording or performance conforms to sonic conventions most associated with contemporary worship. Contemporary worship music is no longer simply a social network; rather, it is constituted by a stable set of sounds.

The limitations and opportunities of this genre definition was something that came up in a number of conversations I had with worship leaders during my fieldwork. Eric Campbell, former worship pastor at First Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina commented on the frustration he had experienced in using recordings as part of his worship planning and rehearsal process. He noted that he would send recordings to his musicians for Sunday but wouldn’t always follow the recordings exactly, preferring to create his own arrangements. He found the reaction of his musicians frustrating because of their reluctance to follow his lead. “Contemporary musicians want to follow recordings exactly,” he said. “If you stray from a recorded arrangement, people think it's inauthentic.”

In another interview, Eric Campbell, interview with author, 23 August 2012.
a younger group of worship leaders from around the Raleigh-Durham area more or less shared this sentiment, but expanded it to include their congregations. They lamented that so many members of their churches came to services expecting a “curated experience” similar to the live worship recordings they were frequently consuming in their personal worship lives. Mike Passaro, a worship leader at one of the satellite campuses of a local megachurch called The Summit said, “The generation under us only knows Passion and arenas full of people. For them, to worship means lights and sounds.” One worship leader even suggested that people sometimes tried to feign a certain type of overly-demonstrative spirituality because they wanted to “look like people do in [worship music] videos.”

Other worship leaders felt, however, that the ubiquity of worship recordings was actually an asset to the work that they do in their local churches. Jeff Crawford, worship leader at The Gathering Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, commented that worship recordings had been instrumental to developing a sense of “worship” in his congregation. Jeff, who is also a recording technician and owner of a local recording studio, talked about the role that producing his own worship recordings had on defining the identity of his relatively new congregation. Initially, his “church didn’t sing very well,” but producing an album of the most central congregational music “taught the congregation how to sing.” In addition to the musical benefits at Sunday services, the production of album helped the church to develop a sense of itself as a community. Jeff, along with other worship leaders with whom I spoke, commented that worship recordings provided a sort of sonic “business

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78 Mike Passaro, interview with author, 19 September 2012.

79 Jeff Crawford, interview with author, 15 August 2013.
card” for their community, allowing congregants to have a clear sense of the community and easily communicate it to friends. Jeremy Porras, worship pastor at Crossroads Fellowship in Raleigh, North Carolina, also commented that worship recordings could provide an extension of the connections that the church was attempting to foster on Sunday mornings. He told me that “God inhabits the praise of his people, so if you’re having a worship experience while listening to a recording in your car, God is there.”\textsuperscript{80} In both the positive and negative assessments of the genrefication of worship, there seems to be a consensus that recordings are increasingly normative for the religious experiences of parishioners and that the ways these recordings function feeds back into the planning for Sunday worship services.\textsuperscript{81}

Another way to explain the ways that worship music has become entwined with the sonic conventions of genre would be to say that worship music begins as “occasional music” and then becomes solidified into a reproducible commodity thanks to the power of mass media.\textsuperscript{82} Marcia Herndon defines “a musical occasion” as

a cultural performance in which music has a role. That is, the musical occasion is an isolatable segment of human behavior, such as a wedding, a funeral, a circumcision, or a paid performance in conjunction with a social, political, or religious event.\textsuperscript{83}

\textsuperscript{80} Jeremy Porras, interview with author, 17 August 2012.

\textsuperscript{81} This type of feedback is very similar to what Mark Katz describes as a “phonograph effect,” in which performance practice is altered by the strictures or limitations of recording technology. More in chapter three. See Mark Katz. Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 9.

\textsuperscript{82} In some ways, the process of genre formation discussed above closely resembles Hebdige’s discussion of “the commodity form of incorporation.” More information on this in chapter four. See Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1979), 92–99.

The idea that an occasion constitutes an “isolatable segment” speaks to the importance of ritual time as a distinct and sacred space. Not only are so many worship events like the Passion Conference “isolatable” because they involve people traveling away from their homes and experiencing the music in relative darkness and anonymity, the resulting live recordings of these events are an even further distillation of this isolated experience. The vast majority of live worship albums are presented with seamless audience applause linking each track, construing the series of performances on the record as a cohesive “occasion” in and of themselves—and creating the “curated experience” lamented by worship leaders above.

Herndon goes on to expand her definition of the “musical occasion,” remarking that it is “an encapsulated expression of the shared cognitive forms and values of a society, which includes not only the music itself but also the totality of associated behavior and underlying concepts.” Herndon observes that in the ritual context of a musical occasion, music is often standing in for a whole complex of meaning-making that becomes difficult to distinguish from “the totality of associated behavior and underlying concepts.” The “occasion” not only opens up isolatable chunks of ritual time, it also opens up space for the negotiation of shared beliefs and practices. These uniquely ritual or occasional understandings of space/time and the ways that they participate in the structuring of religious subjects will comprise the primary focus of the next three chapters.

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84 Ibid., 340.

85 The idea of a “musical event” as implemented by Martha Davis helps to expand these underlying social functions mentioned by Herndon, as well as the plurality of specialized roles that each of the participants play in its enactment of a musical-religious festival. While Davis’ study centers on the Fiesta de Cruz in San Juan, Puerto Rico, many of her methodologies for interrogating the function of symbolism in religious performances, the tensions between sacred and secular in public life, and the the social organization involved in the preparation and presentation of religious events are productive when applied to an event like the Passion Conference. See Martha Davis, “The Social Organization of a Musical Event: The Fiesta de Cruz in San Juan, Puerto Rico,” *Ethnomusicology* 16, no. 1 (1972): 38–62.
Worshipping On Record

The “live” recordings that populate the worship landscape are particularly bound up in discourses of occasion or event. Performance studies researcher Philip Auslander also deals with the function of recordings in relationship to and conflict with live performances in his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. In addition to “classic liveness” which consists in the physical and temporal co-presence of performers and audience, he also identifies myriad forms of mediated liveness whether broadcast over television, recorded on an album, or distributed through the internet. Auslander’s work brings into focus the importance of “live” recordings, which are crucial to so many popular music discourses.

In the case of live recordings, the audience shares neither a temporal frame nor a physical location with the performers, but experiences the performance later and usually in a different place than it first occurred. The liveness of the experience of listening to or watching the recording is primarily affective: live recordings allow the listener a sense of participating in a specific performance and a vicarious relationship to the audience for that performance not accessible through studio productions.  

The connection that Auslander makes between participation, relationship, and liveness perfectly captures the ways that praise and worship recordings are used to create communities of practice. This commodification of the worship “experience”—through the increasing availability of CD, DVD, and YouTube recordings of worship artists—has led to a redefinition of worship as a matter of individual consumer choice. One elects to be part of a particular translocal worship experience through the act of consuming particular cultural products that contain infinitely-repeatable community events. The community that is created

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is thus primarily a virtual one, born out of like-minded consumption rather than physical or temporal proximity.

Musicologist Anna Nekola has noted the ways that more recent commercial strategies surrounding worship music evince a changing relationship between the material culture of evangelical worship and its consumers. When commercially produced recordings of praise and worship music first surfaced in the early 1970s, they were closely associated with songbook publication, providing a sonic “blueprint” for local performances of the songs in liturgical settings. During the 1970s and 1980s, there were at least four different types of recording packages produced by the Christian recording industry: (1) Pedagogical recordings associated with specific song books and designed to teach the songs to congregations or worship leaders, (2) Live albums from events meant to market both the worship experience and the “brand” of the event itself, (3) Studio albums meant for radio play, and (4) Compilation albums. Most frequently, recordings fell into the first category, especially those from Maranatha! and Vineyard that I have mentioned throughout this chapter. A recording would come packaged with a songbook and it was seen to serve largely the same function. One could listen to the recording or read the songs out of the songbook in order to learn the songs and then perform them for a congregation. The “worship” in that scenario took place when a worship leader decided to present the materials in the songbook or recording to their congregation, not within the songbook or recording itself.

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88 Ward, Selling Worship, 78-79.

More recently, however—particularly in light of worship as a codified genre—companies have begun advertising worship recordings under the idea that the recording itself contains the worship experience in all of its irreducibility. Nekola has observed that during the late 1990s and early 2000s, marketing campaigns for praise and worship music began promising a dual transformation of (profane) space and (autonomous) self through the power of music…Advertisements for Praise and Worship recordings in the magazine *Worship Leader* previously presented recordings as tools for congregational worship leaders; now they began to market the recordings as also and additionally for personal use.  


91 Ibid.

Rather than selling a musical tool to put into use with your own congregation of worshippers, recordings are selling “worship” to individual consumers who put it to use themselves. She also notes that these changes were not simply a change in marketed strategy, but rather “both reflected and helped solidify a particular understanding of ‘worship’ as an increasingly individual (rather than corporate) act achieved via material products and technology.”  

Nekola’s observation about the changing function of recordings interfaces with a tension in contemporary evangelicalism between individuals and institutions. She notes that praise and worship albums increasingly contain songs that are not designed for worship as a group activity but rather are more musically suited for individual listening due to their sonic relationship to mainstream popular music. Nekola argues that this is part of a much larger trend, noting that
The spread of charismatic Christian belief and practice in the late twentieth century has further shifted ecclesiastical authority from religious institutions to individuals...the consumption of popular “worship” music, in its many musical forms and through the different technologies available for personal listening and viewing, plays a central role in the creation of a “worship lifestyle” and thus in the ongoing struggle over the meaning and purpose of “worship” itself.\textsuperscript{92}

For Nekola, the idea of a “worship lifestyle” is essential to the function of praise and worship music in contemporary evangelical culture. This viewpoint allows for an understanding of “the way in which categories like ‘worship’ are not ontological, but rather emerge out of the active sense-making that occurs when people apply descriptive discourses to cultural texts.”\textsuperscript{93}

Worship, in this sense, refers not only to a set of cultural objects produced by Christian culture, but also to the process of decoding those objects. The worship apparatus not only includes a group of producers and cultural texts that make the activity of worship possible, it also includes the active meaning-making of religious subjects in the process of decoding those texts.\textsuperscript{94}

The 268 Generation

It is into this context that the Passion Conference was born. In 1985, Passion founder Louie Giglio began Choice Ministries at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Giglio chose to focus on college campuses because he was troubled by statistics that showed only 20 percent of American college students described themselves as “born again.”\textsuperscript{95} The ministry grew

\textsuperscript{92} Nekola, “Between This World and the Next,” 366.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 368.
\textsuperscript{94} Ward, \textit{Selling Worship}, 195.
quickly on campus and by the early 1990s, a Bible study led by Giglio was attended by 1,400 of Baylor’s 11,000. In 1995, Giglio describes seeing a vision of a massive gathering of college students from all over the world worshipping God. He founded the Passion organization later that year and less than two years later, in January 1997, he partnered with college ministers from across the country to host the first Passion Conference event in Austin, Texas. This first event drew around 2,000 students, mostly from around the state of Texas.

At this first event, the worship band was led by a young worship leader named Chris Tomlin. Even by the first Passion event in 1997, Tomlin was somewhat of a staple of the regional Christian conference circuit by that point, particularly in and around his alma mater of Texas A&M. In a personal anecdote included in her dissertation, Monique Ingalls remembers seeing Tomlin lead worship at a Christian camp in northwest Arkansas during the summer of 1997. Even then, she notes that Tomlin was active on the church camp circuit and particularly impressive to her sixteen-year-old ears.\textsuperscript{96} While on the regional touring circuit, Tomlin was also leading worship at The Woodlands United Methodist Church, a large congregation in the northern suburbs of Houston.

After the success of the first gathering, Giglio began hosting a regular Passion event each January, typically beginning the event on January 1st. While this time was picked to help accommodate the semester calendar of the college students he hoped to attract, it also helped to provide a sense of added significance to the event. Students started each year by experiencing the spiritual renewal of the Passion gatherings. For the first ten years of

\textsuperscript{96} Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 34–35.
Passion’s existence they tended to host two gatherings per year: one around New Year’s Day under the “Passion” moniker and then one later in the spring semester (usually April or May) under an alternate moniker of “OneDay” or “Thirsty.” Within just three years, Passion had already exploded in terms of attendance and reach. In May 2000, the Passion OneDay event in Memphis, Tennessee was attended by more than 40,000 students from all over the country.\textsuperscript{97}

In addition to providing a space for these large-scale gatherings, Passion was also envisioned from the beginning as a company that could provide media resources to individuals and to churches. Giglio and his wife Shelley recorded and independently released recordings of the music from Passion beginning with the very first event in 1997. In 2000, they formed their own record company, sixstepsrecords, as part of EMI’s Christian Music Group. Along with the audio releases, sixstepsrecords also put out songbooks with chord charts and lead sheets as well as DVDs of musical performances and Giglio’s sermons from Passion events. Furthermore, Giglio began regularly writing and publishing prose works with Multnomah Publishing, an evangelical imprint from Penguin Random House Publishers. These works would later be republished under the Passion name and sold almost exclusively through Passion’s 268 Store.

In 2000, Giglio and his wife Shelley founded sixstepsrecords to release live recordings from their Passion events. During its first eighteen months, the label slowly expanded to include studio recordings from Tomlin as well as two other Texas-based artists, David Crowder and Charlie Hall. Tomlin’s first two recordings in 2001 and 2002 did

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 32.
reasonably well, spawning a large number of songs which would land with North American congregations, but his third release was a worldwide sensation. In addition to winning five GMA Dove Awards—three for Song, Worship Song, and Worship Album of the Year and two for Tomlin as Artist and Male Vocalist of Year—2004’s *Arriving* also achieved multi-platinum status, a first for a worship album.

In addition to (or perhaps because of) his tremendous success, Tomlin has been the most central figure in the musical movement of Passion. Since 1997, Tomlin has participated in nearly every Passion event, headlining almost every stop of their world tours and leading worship at the newly planted Passion City Church in Atlanta. Now with eight full-length records, six Grammy nominations, two Billboard Music Awards, twenty-one GMA Dove Awards, an ASCAP Songwriter of the Year award, two platinum and four gold albums to his credit, and nineteen top ten hits on the Billboard Hot Christian Songs chart, Chris Tomlin is unarguably the most successful “praise and worship” artist in the world. Perhaps even more significant, however, is the number of singles that Tomlin has placed on the on the CCLI charts, which, unlike normal pop charts, are based on the number of times a song is played in CCLI member churches over a six month period.

One song off *Arriving*, “How Great Is Our God,” has been on the chart almost continuously for the last ten years. This fact led Eric Marrapodi and Tom Foreman from CNN to call Tomlin the “king of the sing-along.”

“We would say that Chris is the most prolific songwriter in the United States now, in this past decade,” said Howard Rachinski, CEO of Christian Copyright Licensing International, the company that tracks what music is used in churches around the world. In 2012, CCLI paid out $40 million to artists and musicians, and Tomlin got a healthy slice of that pie. Churches around the
world used 128 songs he wrote or co-wrote last year, Rachinski said. CCLI estimates that every Sunday in the United States, between 60,000 and 120,000 churches are singing Tomlin’s songs. By extrapolating that data, Rachinski says, “our best guess would be in the United States on any given Sunday, 20 to 30 million people would be singing Chris Tomlin's songs.” In their last two reporting periods, Tomlin had the No. 1 most-sung song and five of the top 25…For perspective, consider Tomlin’s musical success against one secular counterpart. In 2012, Katy Perry's record sales dwarfed Tomlin’s, but Billboard reported her songs were played 1.4 million times on the radio. Using CCLI’s low-end calculation, Tomlin’s songs were played 3.12 million times in churches.98

The volume and ubiquity of Passion’s media products have helped to transform weekend-long events designed for college-aged students into a powerful media network that plays a role in the religious practices of millions.99

Writing about the 2007 conference, Collin Hansen observed,

Based on the success of songs performed at previous Passion conferences, “Shine” [a new song by sixstepsrecords artist Matt Redman] may soon become one of the evangelical church's most beloved songs. And it may be another reason this conference, like those before it going back 10 years, will set churches on fire. Passion has not just shaped evangelical worship music, but a generation of American evangelicals. In the last few years, Christianity Today has reported on various trends among younger evangelicals—from new monastics to hip emergents to throwback Calvinists. Passion incorporates elements from each. None has yet marked the broader evangelical movement like Passion.100

And since 2007, Passion’s influence has gone global. During the first ten years of Passion (1997–2007), the organization put on thirteen events in three different states (Texas, Georgia,


99 The escalation of college-aged involvement in recent years is also inevitably related to the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, founded in 2004, which was initially designed for college students. At Passion events now, use of social media is ubiquitous, with appropriately hashtagged posts and photographs appearing on large public display screens around the Passion campus.

100 Hansen, “Passion Takes It Higher,” 29.
and Tennessee). In the eight years since 2007, Passion has staged fifty-two large-scale events in thirty different cities in twenty-two countries on six continents. And in 2013, Passion initiated the “Let The Future Begin” tour, which brings smaller scale events with Passion musicians and speakers to 15–20 cities per year. But despite the larger reach of its events, Passion is relying more than ever on people engaging through its media channels. At Passion 2013, the largest event in Passion history so far, nearly 65,000 people gathered in the Georgia Dome in Atlanta, but more than 170,000 people from more than 130 countries watched the event through its live web stream. Taylor Dodgen, a 21-year-old sophomore at Baylor University and worship leader for his church’s college ministry, commented in Christianity Today, “In some ways, Passion has put the words that people are going to say to God into the mouths of an entire generation.”101

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight several of the most important historical threads that contribute to the historical moment in which the Passion Conference arrived. For the majority of the Passion participants that I spoke with, the phenomenon I have described in this chapter coincides with the church upbringing of their parents’ generation and therefore constitute a sort of conceptual background against which they have discovered and defined themselves as religious subjects. Some of these developments, including the rise of the worship apparatus or the creation of CCLI, provide an economic and material framework for the existence of the worship music industry. Others, including the genrefication of worship

101 Ibid., 30.
and the conception of the recording as worship itself, structure individual engagement with praise and worship recordings. Still others, such as the rise of “worship” as a category of engagement and the use of reflexive song types, have created a theological vocabulary through which musicians and worshippers articulate their relationships to the world, to the divine, and to each other. The majority of these historical contingencies are simply taken for granted by musicians and worshippers, but they provide an essential foundation as they come to understand their place within the musical-religious system of meaning that surrounds praise and worship production and consumption.

With these developments in mind, the remaining chapters of this dissertation are concerned with the ways songs, performances, and worship recordings associated with the Passion Conference are mobilized into larger discourses of meaning and identity. Even though Passion is connected to a long history of twentieth-century evangelical engagement, as we have seen, it is perhaps uniquely poised for this sort of study. While the Jesus Movement constituted, for Billy Graham, the latest flowering of nineteenth century revivalism in America, Passion’s media network is able to connect geographically disparate believers from around the world. The idea of a “268 Generation” facilitates the connections made between those gathered at a football stadium in Atlanta and those gathered at a soccer stadium in Uganda or the Philippines, particularly when coupled with the idea of “renown” as it appears in Isaiah 26:8: “For your name and renown are the desire of our souls.”

In its most common use by Passion organizers and spokespersons, “renown” can be taken to mean something like “market share” or “brand recognition,” which provides a
Biblical grounding for Passion’s wide-reaching sonic presence.\textsuperscript{102} The international media networks which allow for such slippage between the gathered and global communities make Passion a particularly interesting case study. In the ensuing chapters, I use a variety of ethnographic and phenomenological methodologies to examine the ways that mass-mediated worship music functions as a primary theological discourse, shapes worshippers’ own embodied self-understandings, and syncretically interfaces with the systems of meaning-making that characterize contemporary popular music.

\textsuperscript{102} While some English translations of this verse use the word “renown,” a much more common translation seems “remembrance” or “memory.” The particular phrasing that appears on all of Passion’s branded materials seems to be a paraphrase drawing on a few different translations, though largely conforms to the New International Version.
CHAPTER TWO — Worship Music as Vernacular Theology

A row of weathered church pews is a common enough setting for a spiritual experience, but what if those pews sit in the Ryman Auditorium, one of Nashville, Tennessee’s most famous concert venues, and the occasion is not a Sunday church service but a Tuesday evening rock concert? Several of my friends and I discovered the answer to this question during a 2006 concert by the Icelandic rock band Sigur Rós. A fan review by Robert William de los Rios which the band published on their website immediately following the show accurately captures our experience. De los Rios thanked the band profusely for playing his favorite song, “Untitled #6” from their 2004 album ( ), saying:

> 4 songs into a set and already i felt as if i could leave the venue happy by what i had already heard. i was in a state of ecstasy my friends. ( ) is one of the two most important albums in my life and playing #6 live, playing it live in front of me so it can touch my heart with pure love was one of the highlights of my life.¹

Whether it was the sweeping harmonies of Sigur Rós’ signature sound or the religious vestiges which pervade the Ryman Auditorium space, my friends who attended the show—many of whom self-identified as evangelical Christians—consistently described it as a spiritual experience first, and a musical experience second.

Of course, our experience at the Ryman was not especially unusual. Accounts of concerts as sacred experiences have become nearly standard in popular music scholarship and criticism. In her landmark 1991 study of heavy metal music, Deena Weinstein argued that concert experiences in heavy metal function as important subcultural rituals that unveil a sacred reality. Weinstein borrows the term “hierophany” from religious historian Mircea Eliade to describe the ways that concerts are “experienced as sacred, in contrast to the profane, everyday world.” For Eliade, “hierophany” describes “the act of manifestation of the sacred…the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural ‘profane’ world.”

As I explored in the first chapter, there is a long history of evangelical youth investing themselves in the sacred dimensions of popular music culture. But accounts of this sacred experience within “praise and worship” music have been historically conditioned by an understanding of music that seeks to divide musical “form” from lyrical “content” in problematic and unsustainable ways. In order to validate rock ‘n’ roll as a potentially Christian enterprise, its proponents had to demonstrate that the music was “a morally neutral carrier of the Christian message.” The rhetorical strategy of musical neutrality, which opened the door for popular music in the churches, also limited the so-called “spiritual”

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4 This effect is further bolstered by the fact that, for the 18- to 25-year olds that populate the Passion Conference’s “268 generation,” going to a concert is already a spiritual experience, an idea which I will explore more fully in the next chapter.

content of Christian pop music to the lyrics. Music could function as little more than a container, capable of making theological texts more or less palatable to the fan-worshippers’ ears but incapable of having any theological significance in its own right.  

This explicit connection between the spiritual content of music and its text is what makes Sigur Rós such a telling case. Since the band is from Iceland, the majority of its songs are written in Icelandic, a language which none of my friends who attended the concert—and very few members of their international fan-base—actually understand. Even more telling, however, is the band’s frequent use of an entirely fictional language called “Hopelandic” (or “Vonlenska” in Icelandic) which is intentionally devoid of any semantic content. In the “frequently asked questions” section of the band’s website, they explain that Hopelandic is “not an actual language by definition (no vocabulary, grammar, etc.), it’s rather a form of gibberish vocals that fits to the music and acts as another instrument.” Their 2002 album, called simply (), is sung entirely in Hopelandic, as is nearly one-third of their 2005 follow-up, Takk…. Sigur Ros’ use of Hopelandic forces one to consider what it might mean to have a spiritual experience with music that not only conveys its textual meaning in a language that one does not understand, but in a language that actively resists semantic meaning altogether.

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6 I borrow the term “fan-worshipper” from ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls. The term captures how notions of spiritual practice—that is, “worship”—interact with paradigms of popular music “fandom,” including the purchase of records and concert tickets, as well as the consumption of interviews, YouTube clips, and other informal media related to the “worship artists” considered here. See Monique Ingalls, “Worship on the Web: Building Online Religious Community through Christian Devotional Music Videos” (paper presented at a joint annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Society for Ethnomusicology, and Society for Music Theory, New Orleans, LA, November 1–4, 2012).

However, if one considers Hopelandic as a sacramental language—akin to Hebrew, Arabic, Yorùbá, or Sanskrit—one could begin to see what Jeffers Engelhardt and Philip Bohlman have noted, that “the sound of [religious language] independent of signifying content, conveys meaning and power, and…is efficacious as sound.”8 This is clearly true for Sigur Rós fans, as is evidenced by a passage from later in Robert William de los Rios’ review. Commenting on lead singer Jonsi’s performance of “Untitled #8,” also from the album (), he writes

whether he knows what he’s saying, or he just uses his voice as an instrument for this song is a mystery to me, but that has done nothing but elevate this song to the highest possible musical level in my mind…the guy sitting next to me told me after that it was the greatest performance of any song he had ever heard in his entire life.9

The power of Hopelandic lyrics to make spiritual meaning for Sigur Rós fans does not lie in its ability to construct logically-compelling units of semantic meaning, but rather in its ability to construct a sacred, hierophanous space in sound.10

Although the music I consider in this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, is written in English with mostly semantically-coherent texts, I argue that the spiritual experiences that occur in evangelical worship music—like those described by Sigur Rós fans


9 de los Rios, “ryman auditorium”

10“Hopelandic” might be seen in close relationship to the Pentecostal Christian practice of glossolalia or “speaking in tongues.” The practice, which is described in the New Testament, typically occurs when a person is inspired by the Holy Spirit to begin ecstatically vocalizing in a new or “heavenly” language, usually in ways that lack any readily comprehended meaning, even to the speaker herself. In his 2010 monograph Thinking in Tongues, philosopher James K.A. Smith uses glossolalia as an example of the ways that modern linguistic philosophies fail to capture the profundity of religious experience, because of their fetishistic focus on establishing workable relationships between signs, signifiers, and signifieds. See James K. A. Smith. Thinking in Tongues: Pentecostal Contributions to Christian Philosophy (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).
— involve an understanding of sacred experience that operates beyond or behind the linguistic utterances of ritual. If religious music plays a role in shaping religious belief, it is not primarily through its ability to preserve theological texts, but rather through its ability to convey theology through sound. Even when music conveys or contains textual elements, it is not reducible to those elements, and thus any analysis of religious or liturgical music must account for the theology that is being constructed at a sonic, non-verbal level.

Simply contending that lyrics are over-invested with meaning in musical analyses is, of course, not an observation that is restricted to the narrow field of praise and worship music. As Robert Walser has pointed out in the context of heavy metal, while critics and analysts are most frequently drawn to more “literate” modes of communication, “musicians and fans alike tend to respond primarily and most strongly to musical meanings” or what he calls “oral” modes of communication. Even when lyrics are used as a reference point for fans, they are often simply standing in for a whole complex of meaning-making processes that have their roots in the entire aural experience of the music.

Similarly, communication scholars Peter Christenson and Donald Roberts have demonstrated that most rock fans, particularly adolescents, place a very low value on lyrics and could not accurately recount the lyrics even of their favorite songs. Interestingly, their work on the reception of Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” after its association with Ronald Reagan’s 1984 reelection campaign demonstrates that even in cases where participants in the study could accurately recount the lyrics of the song, this did not positively

impact their chances of comprehending the song’s overall textual meanings. For example, their ability to remember and interpret lines about Springsteen’s “hometown jam” or his being sent off to “kill the yellow man” did not change their impression that this was somehow a “patriotic” song. Within Christian worship music, the stakes of lyrical interpretation are potentially higher—given that these songs purport to communicate sacred, eternal truths—but I believe the over-investment is similar.

To clarify, I am not suggesting that lyrics do not play a significant role in the construction and reception of praise and worship music. For proof of just how important lyrics can be, one need only examine the recent controversy surrounding songwriter John Mark McMillan’s hit single “How He Loves.” At one point in the song’s climatic bridge, McMillan uses a particularly evocative poetic image to describe the human-divine relationship, saying that “heaven meets earth like a sloppy, wet kiss.” A large number of people in the evangelical community objected to this image because they found it indecent or off-putting in the middle of a song directed towards God. The song was prominently covered by the David Crowder*Band on the 2010 Passion: Awakening album, where he changed the line in question to “heaven meets earth like an unforeseen kiss.” Many worship leaders lined up on both sides of this debate and argued over the theological and practical implications of each set of lyrics. As this particular case shows, music and lyrics in praise and worship are deeply conjoined in a dialectical relationship, but cases like the ones examined in this chapter force us to consider the unique role that music plays above and beyond its textual counterpart.

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Ethnomusicologist Jeff Todd Titon’s study of speech and song at Fellowship Independent Baptist Church in rural Virginia illustrates this complicated dialectical relationship well. Titon observed that many of the white fundamentalist congregants identified the words as the most important element of their favorite hymns, even stating that they would be unable to worship if hymns were presented instrumentally. But alongside his statement that any hymns’ “affective potential is stored in the texts,” Titon also notes that “it is a short step from the hymns’ affect to the intent behind them…Authenticity in singing involves not only the texts but also the performance.” The power of musical sound to create the desired effect is predicated upon two important criteria. First, the text of the hymn must be Biblically-based and second, it must be rendered faithfully and with sincerity by the the song leader or congregation. Titon observes that while church members “recognize conventional aesthetic standards, they subordinate them to heartfelt sincerity.” The assessment of the “faithfulness” or “sincerity” of a particular interpretation, however, is based on a complex set of internal musical codes, involving tempi, stylistic decisions, and basic musical competency. Despite the clear importance of the texts to the members of Fellowship Independent Baptist Church, it is also apparent that hymns carry a host of extra-linguistic associations which are essential to both the horizontal (intersubjective) and vertical (pietistic) function of a given performance.


14 Ibid., 254.

15 Ibid., 256.
In this chapter, I explore the ways that pop- and rock-styled worship music comes to function as vernacular theology for those in the Christian communities that engage it. After laying out some of the central methodological challenges and surveying some of the ways that scholars have attempted to deal with them, my argument unfolds through a series of interrelated case studies. I begin by examining the ways that the musical “repackaging” of older Protestant hymns actively rewrites the theology communicated in their performance, even in cases where the traditional text and melody are largely unaltered. Then, I consider completely textless moments of praise and worship music-making in order to show the ways that this music locates its theological content at the level of collective musical experience. Finally, I turn to a debate over the song “God of This City,” which demonstrates the ways that evangelical conversations about music so often involve and encircle vigorous debates about theology, in particular the role of divine/human agency and eschatology. Through these interdependent examples, I will demonstrate the theological significance of music as sound in American evangelicalism as well as sketch out a phenomenological paradigm to account for the sonic content of religious-liturgical music.

**Hymnody and *Homo Liturgicus***

In dealing with religious experience scholars are immediately confronted with the inability of language to capture the depth and complexity of belief. For many (if not all) religious participants and practitioners, “belief” is not primarily propositional or even rational, but instead consists in the affective, lived experiences of religious practice. In 2009, philosopher James K.A. Smith published *Desiring the Kingdom*, the first of a three-volume
set on what he calls “cultural liturgies.” In this volume, Smith lays the groundwork for his broader project, demonstrating how a phenomenological approach necessitates a total rethinking of received categories of Christian “knowledge.” In an affront to Descartes and Christian “worldview” thinking alike, Smith argues that human beings are not primarily “thinking things,” but rather are most fundamentally affective, “liturgical” creatures: driven by desire rather than convincing syllogistic argument. Whereas traditional notions of “worldview” and “belief” require the accurate internalization of propositional knowledge for proper transmission and dispersal, desires are trained and inculcated by what Smith calls “liturgies.” For Smith,

liturgies or worship practices are rituals of ultimate concern that are formative of our identity—they both reflect what matters to us and shape what matters to us. They also inculcate particular visions of the good life through affective, precognitive means, and do so in a way that trumps other ritual formations.

Smith’s aim throughout the book is to diagnose the unexamined pedagogies that inhabit Christian practice, poking and prodding the lived experience itself as a source of theological significance.

My hope is that the shift of focus from ideas to practices, from beliefs to liturgy will function as a methodological jolt that gets us into a position to see cultural practices and institutions in ways we’ve never seen them before…It’s precisely because the liturgical nature of cultural practices is so insidious that we need to do the hard work of unveiling it as such.

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17 Ibid., 93.

18 Ibid., 92–93.
The implications of such a shift would be drastic and far-reaching. A truly “liturgical” approach to religious music would envisage the act of music-making as a site where people negotiate their deepest beliefs and commitments—what philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich called “ultimate concerns”—often in ways that operate beyond the boundaries of written or spoken language.\(^\text{19}\) Reading Christian sacred music as a “liturgy” in Smith’s sense, an enacted formative ritual rather than a static “text,” offers new ways of understanding embodied experience and the formation of identity and community that have extensive ramifications for the study of religious music.

Similar arguments have been advanced by theologians who deal with music much more explicitly, particularly Don Saliers and Jeremy Begbie.\(^\text{20}\) Curiously, despite the clear support that non-verbal expression would seem to receive in Saliers’ or Begbie’s articulate critiques, there is still a dearth of serious theological engagement with praise and worship music. Certainly this neglect is due in part to a lack of familiarity with the repertory and its rock-inspired musical grammar. Often, however, the authors who would seem predisposed to give “praise and worship” its most generous treatment mount virulent arguments against it, on the largely untenable ground that it is musically or theologically inferior to traditional hymnody and thus unworthy of attention. Even Smith himself has been fiercely critical of the praise and worship movement, penning a now infamous “Open Letter to Praise Bands” for


\(^{20}\) Saliers is particularly helpful here: “[The] knitting of an embodied theology happens whenever Christian congregations sing, even though they do so in a great variety of ways from one culture to another…Indeed, the church’s theology was embodied in its liturgical and singing practices before more formal theology developed. Hymn singing, far from being an ornament or decoration to Christian worship and the life of faith, is intrinsic to worship and faith experience.” See Don E. Saliers, “Singing Our Lives.” In *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, edited by Dorothy C. Bass, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997): 179–93.
his personal blog in February 2012. In it, Smith questions many formal aspects of praise and worship’s rock-inspired performance practice, including front and center placement of the band, improvisation or displays of skill on the part of musicians, and “that weird sort of sensory deprivation that happens from sensory overload, when the pounding of the bass on our chest and the wash of music over the crowd leaves us with the rush of a certain aural vertigo.” Smith decries these features as evidence of the competing “secular liturgies” which are ultimately misshaping the goals of Christian worship.

Taking Smith’s own observations from Desiring The Kingdom to their logical conclusion, however, it would seem that one must explore the ways in which musical sound—what Smith calls “the materiality of song”—is implicated in these negative assessments. Identifying the modes of performance in modern praise and worship music as musically or theologically problematic in comparison to those of Western classical music or traditional Protestant hymnody is once again an exercise of the rational cogito that scholars like Smith have spilled so much ink trying to decenter. If one is to embrace a more affective understanding of religious belief, this model must be brought to its logical conclusion. That is to say, if one is interested in opening up a phenomenological component of Christian formation, it cannot be reduced to simply one more territory in which to plant the flags of Reformed orthodoxy. On the contrary, a liturgical approach of the type suggested by Smith would seem to challenge, or at least dramatically reframe, the very notion of orthodoxy.

Musicologist Karol Berger has observed that much of music’s power as an art form lies in its ability to “make us aware of how it feels to want something without [actually] showing us the

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objects we want."22 I argue that this is precisely the religious function of praise and worship music for its myriad fan-worshippers, facilitating the real-time shaping of desire, rather than constructing desirable objects for subsequent mental scrutiny. Praise and worship music is offering its listeners compelling theological content, but that content is intimately bound up with their personal experiences of musical sound.

Of course, this dynamic is not exclusive to contemporary white evangelical contexts. Glenn Hinson has similarly noted the ways in which religious language in African American churches “draw[s] belief, knowledge, and experience into a single referential field, linking the three in a way that proclaims their intrinsic accord.”23 Hinson strongly emphasizes that it is not belief that gives shape to experience, but rather experience that “gives belief its very shape.”24 He notes that while the public “telling” of religious experiences or “testimonies” was quite common (and sometimes even required) in the worship services that he observed, detailed descriptions of actual subjective encounters are quite rare. Even in a genre of religious life that focuses on faithful narrative renditions of past events, “all one can do is talk around the experience, struggling to convey meaning through metaphor and connotation.”25

Even in the less explicitly religious environment of Sacred Harp convention singing, Kiri Miller observed the ways that the mere act of singing together “continually points to the

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24 Ibid., 7

25 Ibid., 17
failures of speech.” In discussing the diverse attendants of Sacred Harp conventions, Miller observes that “a group of people with sharply different political ideologies can occupy the same space because singing keeps them from talking and talking reminds them of how different they feel when they’re singing.” As in so many musical encounters, it is precisely the inexactitude of group singing over against group speech—and thus its ability to simultaneously accommodate such a variety of individual interpretations—that allows for the creation of a sense of community in the first place.

Trance as Ritual Phenomena

Ethnomusicologists have dealt with these immersive ritual phenomena for years, usually under the rubric of “trance,” the most influential of which was Gilbert Rouget’s *Music and Trance.* The majority of Rouget’s examples come from his long-term field work among the Dahomey people of Benin, who practice what he calls “identificatory trance,” in which one or more persons are seen to take on the identities of divine beings. This type of spirit possession ritual is also common to a variety of Afro-Caribbean religious traditions, including the religious practices of the Yorùbá people and the Caribbean practice of Santería.

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27 Ibid.

28 Despite the clear importance of “group singing” as a mode of communal engagement in Sacred Harp, the tradition is significantly different from praise and worship music because of the fact that its participants understand it as a primarily literate (rather than oral) musical tradition. This creates a very different relationship between the act of singing and the musical “work” as understood by participants. I will explore this idea more fully at the end of chapter four.

By contrast, Rouget characterizes Islam, Christianity, and Judaism as “non-identificatory trance,” in which participants experience communion with or illumination by the divine but do not channel or imitate the divine being.

Rouget’s work sparked widespread interest in issues of music and trance, but it also created a series of enduring and problematic distinctions which he established as part of his universalist, structuralist project. Particularly difficult to accommodate in a study of evangelical Christians has been his distinction between “trance” and “ecstasy.” “Trance,” he argued, is a social experience characterized by movement, noise, and sensory overstimulation, whereas “ecstasy” occurs privately through largely silent meditation and solitude. Although Rouget acknowledged that “trance and ecstasy may both be practiced, albeit with in the context of different rituals, by the same individual within the same religious faith,” the frequently solitary function of recorded music within evangelical Christianity complicates this binary.30

Live group performances of praise and worship at the Passion Conferences would seem to clearly adhere to Rouget’s definition of trance, but the role of recordings in devotional practice is less clear. The practice of worship along with recordings could be understood as what Rouget calls “conduced trance,” in which the act of embodied listening (rather than active performance) brings about the trance consciousness. But individual or solitary practice with sound recordings is not properly “ecstatic” in Rouget’s sense. Undoubtedly, there is something of an imagined or imaginary sociality to these recordings, but they are most typically utilized by solitary individuals in private rituals that do not

30 Ibid., 11.
include the sorts of movement or interaction typical of “trance” and do not include the silence or reservation of “ecstasy.” \(^{31}\) The technological mediation involved in recordings presents another challenge when applying the idea of “trance” to the practices of American evangelical Christians—or to practices of popular music more generally. Theories of “trancing,” because of their rightful focus on embodied practice, tend to rely on a strong sense of physical presence to account for their constituted effects. The intensity or efficacy of any particular trancing experience is frequently predicated on one’s proximity to musicians, musical sources and thus ultimately, to the invisible realm of divine beings.

My approach to the ecstatic theological dimensions of praise and worship music is informed by the idea of a “habitus of listening,” taken from ethnomusicologist Judith Becker and the idea of “sensational forms” developed by cultural anthropologists Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips. Becker has taken the ethnomusicological discussion of music and trance into more technologically-complicated musical contexts, including the hi-fi stereo listeners which give her 2004 book *Deep Listeners* its title. In dialogue with phenomenology and cognitive science, Becker explores the connections between trancing in religious rituals and accounts of Western music aficionados who claim to experience transcendence or unusually heightened emotional responses to high-fidelity recorded music coming through their headphones or home stereos. \(^{32}\) Through this unlikely comparison (as well as a host of

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\(^{31}\) Rouget’s observation that trance music “speak[s], on the musical level, the language of the everyday,” (*Music and Trance*, 95) links closely with ideas of “habitus of listening” I examine below.

\(^{32}\) Becker’s observation of the connection between transcendence and hi-fi technology seems to also index historian David Nye’s concept of the technological sublime. Nye claims that that human pursuit of the sublime or transcendent, which used to be primarily sought in the natural world or through religious experience, has become increasingly technologized. See David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Boston: MIT Press, 1994).
historical and ethnographic case studies from around the world), Becker begins to sketch the relationships between trancing and what she calls a “habitus of listening.” Becker draws on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of the “habitus,” which Bourdieu describes as systems of durable, transposable dispositions…that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.33

In short, as Becker puts it, “habitus is an embodied pattern of action and reaction.”34 Becker sees ritual trancing as a part of this habitus complex, acquired as a “learned bodily behavior acted out within a culturally pregiven religious narrative.”35 Becker observes that trancing behaviors are embedded within cosmological—and often theological—understandings of the self, even as those self-understandings are reified by engaging in trancing behaviors.36 That is to say that trancing is always part of a broader, structured understanding of the way that sound acts in the world. The term “habitus of listening” attempts to describe this inclination, a disposition to listen with a particular type of focus, to expect to experience particular kinds of emotion, to move with certain stylized gestures, and to interpret the meaning of the sounds and one’s emotional responses to the musical event in somewhat (never totally) predictable ways.37


35 Ibid., 42.

36 Becker argues that the embodied self-understanding put forward by trancing has perhaps been marginalized in the West because of the way that it challenges some of the basic assumptions of Western subjectivity. By allowing trance experience to push back against Western notions of the bounded, unitary, Cartesian consciousness, Becker speculates about the broader implications of “trance consciousness” as a series of liminal spaces within our everyday reality.

37 Ibid., 71.
The habitus of listening is a socially-constructed script which includes ways of engaging with musical sound. The whole of this dissertation is, in some sense, concerned with uncovering and describing this particular script and the ways it shapes the lives of those who engage it.

Describing the reception of worship at the Passion Conference as a “habitus of listening” helps to highlight some of the core arguments of my analysis. First, habitus of listening describe embodied experiences which involve more than strict musical analysis or lyrical comprehension. Embodied listening not only accounts for the sounds themselves, but also for the ways that these sounds are made to construct a series of bodily circumstances involving mental, physical, and emotional states. Becker observes that “even more than modes of looking, modes of listening implicate not only structures of knowledge and beliefs but also intimate notions of personhood and identity.” In this context, listening becomes a full-body experience, but is embodied in such a way that the habitus seems completely “natural” to initiated listeners.

Second, habitus of listening are socially constructed. This means that there is no naive listener who simply takes in the sounds around them. We must always consider the temporal and spatial situatedness of the hearer when analyzing phenomenon of music. Even the Western myth of autonomous contemplation, what Becker calls the “laboratory listener,” is trained through a social process of enculturation in which the silence, stillness, and undivided attention are established as embodied pathways to musical understanding. By participating in

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38 Ibid., 70. This comment is remarkably similar to Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler’s observation in *Composing for the Films* that “acoustical perception preserves comparably more traits of long bygone, pre-individualistic collectivities than optical perception.” While this “archaic” quality of sound means that it has been less fully co-opted by late capitalism, it also means that sound, “because of its essentially amorphous nature, lends itself to deliberate misuse for ideological purposes.” See Theodor Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Composing for the Films* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 20–22.
a community of interpretation, listeners gradually come to understand what to listen for—that is, which musical parameters are emotionally and semantically meaningful within a given performance—and how to direct their bodies towards these specific ends.39

Finally, habitus of listening are patterned, trained by repetition, and thus capable of effecting repeated and repeatable responses through a series of relatively stable forms. This means that our analyses of musical reception can not only account for repeated patterns in the construction of musical texts (more on this below) but also repeated patterns in the reception of those texts by communities of listeners. This “repeatability” important for fan-worshippers because it enables them to more easily navigate the roadmaps of worship songs, which are so often based on the denial or fulfillment of listener expectations. This also allows worshippers to consistently locate and engage with those recordings or artists that fulfill their spiritual desires. The habitus creates generally predictable listening responses to common stimuli even if individual listeners are not “predictable” in the same sense.

If Becker’s notion of a “habitus of listening” helps to describe the embodied social circumstances that are present within a community of listeners, then the notion of “sensational form” helps to capture the organizational logic that is present at the level of the musical performance/text itself. Sensational forms help to describe how praise and worship music uses commonly-held formal structures to organize access to the divine at the level of sensory experience. Meyer and Verrips describe sensational forms as

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those religious forms that organize encounters between human beings and the
divine, as well as with each other, and make individual religious experience
intersect with transmitted, shared forms…We understand these forms as
relatively fixed, authorized modes of invoking and organizing access to the
transcendental, thereby creating and sustaining links between believers in the
context of particular religious regimes.40

For Meyer and Verrips, the most central forms of religious life are phenomenological and
aesthetic, operating at the level of sensory experience in order to bring about religious
formation. Sensational forms construct a set of specific sense-based modalities through
which access to the divine is authorized and controlled.

In the case of praise and worship music, this not only includes the privileging of
music as uniquely suited to the task of “worship,” but also the use of specific musical
techniques in the processes of composition and performance. The specific levels of musical
density, volume, and textual complexity give fan-worshippers a sense of which songs—and
which parts of which songs—are most immediately conducive to spiritual experience.
Sensational forms also help to construct the boundaries around particular communities by
consistently affirming a commonly-held religious-aesthetic style. Not only does community
music-making, especially group singing, generate sensory feelings of togetherness, it also
gives concrete expression to a shared religious identity. This sense of shared identity that is
embedded in aesthetic material culture allows religious communities to negotiate their
experiences of the divine in a variety of public and private spaces as well as with a variety of
religious and non-religious interlocutors.

40 Birgit Meyer and Jojada Verrips, “Aesthetics,” in *Key Words in Religion, Media, and Culture*, edited by David
Morgan (London: Routledge, 2008), 27.
Throughout the rest of the chapter, use “habitus of listening” and “sensational form” in tandem to describe the ways that artists, congregations, pastors, and individual fan-worshippers negotiate the complex intersections of music and religious experience. As the act of worship has become increasingly inscribed in the sounds of musical performances, the formation of praise and worship music’s fan-worshippers has centered on inculcating a particularly evangelical mode of listening. However the specific shapes of praise and worship music-making as well as the ways they direct and endorse modes of bodily engagement are strongly dependent upon gestures drawn from other styles of popular music. In many ways, a meaningful worship experience at the Passion Conference requires each individual worshipper’s familiarity with and inculcation into one of a number of listening habitus associated with Western popular music. Through the strategic deployment of sensational forms, these habitus undergo a process of what Deena Weinstein has called “transvaluation,” in which patterned objects, symbols, or experiences from one religious or cultural value system are re-articulated into a new hierarchy of meaning.\footnote{Weinstein, \textit{Heavy Metal}, 262–63; These transvaluations will be the topic of chapter four.} While I understand that these entrained modes of listening andrepeatable forms of interpretation are related, I generally use “habitus of listening” to refer to the embodied experiences on the side of the fan-worshippers and “sensational forms” to refer to the construction of performances, recordings, or musical texts to interact with these habitus in more-or-less predictable ways.

\textit{“Updated” Hymns for the 268 Generation}
“At a glance, this reverent collection may not break new ground in hymnology, but it does add a new twist to the lyrically and theologically starved modern worship scene.”

In a review of the 2004 Passion release *Hymns Ancient and Modern* for the magazine *Christianity Today*, Andree Farias opened with a kind of backhanded compliment, which clearly demonstrates some of the most frequent criticisms leveled at the contemporary Christian worship music scene. Time and time again, critics of this repertory portray it as musically vapid—that is, not capable of breaking “new ground in hymnology”—as well as “lyrically and theologically starved.” While many of Passion’s CD releases would certainly be subject to a reviewer like Farias’s barbs, *Hymns Ancient and Modern* is saved from a similar fate by merit of its engagement with a more theologically-sophisticated tradition of Protestant hymnody. The album is a compilation of live performances and features Passion’s impressive stable of artists “updating” well-known Protestant hymns by rendering them in the contemporary praise and worship idiom. This strategy has worked so well for Passion that they have continued to produce at least one “updated” hymn on nearly every album released since. The language of “updating” hymns—or “hymns-made-new” as the sixstepsrecords website advertises—seems to be central to the aim of these performances. The official description for *Hymns Ancient and Modern* begins by stating that “worship melodies change with the times…but the lyrics remain the same.”

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43 The tracks on *Hymns Ancient and Modern* were all recorded at an April 2003 event called “Thirsty,” hosted by Passion Conferences at Northpoint Community Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

be innovative or groundbreaking performances—rather, they thrive on their ability to evoke the old in a more easily accessible, more relevant packaging.

Fan reviews of the album, as well as sixstepsrecords official promotional materials, clearly demonstrate this form/content duality. Unfortunately, there is scant official reception of the album from mainstream publications or critics due to both the niche market to which the record was sold and the relative youth of the Passion movement at the time. Instead, reviews are to be found primarily on fan blogs, worship leader forums, or from the reviews sections of online retailers. Here, I choose to examine a few short reviews from retail giant Amazon.com. When *Hymns Ancient and Modern* was released in 2004, Amazon was already well-established as an online retailer, so the customer reviews provide a chronicle of nearly eight years of ongoing reception, whereas any interaction with a forum or fan blog would have been limited to a single burst of activity at the album’s release and would have garnered participation from a much smaller sample of reviewers.

Many of these fan interactions would seem to reinforce the neutrality or innocence of hymn “updates” put forward by the artists. “S. Peek” praised the album’s ability to “combine the best of both worlds - the depth of the old hymns with a contemporary sound.” Reviewer “AG” commented, “Love the messages of the old hymns and the music of today. Put them both together for a great CD.” One user who identifies as “Bboy,” offered the most succinct review along these lines, saying simply, “Buy it. If you appreciate the theology of ancient


hymns but like a more up-beat worship then this is the perfect album for you.” In nearly every review, dualistic distinctions can be found between the musical “form” and textual “content” of the given musical selections. Reviewer “Bboy” explicitly equates music with “worship” and text with “theology.” Even in negative assessments of the music, this form/content divide is present. Amazon user Stephen Wise—who gave the album only one star and called it “just plain awful”—decried it, saying that “instead of being about the content of great hymns, it seems that this album, like a lot of contemporary music, its about the musicians and their performance.” For Wise, the flashiness of the modern rock-influenced musical performance distracted from the “true” textual-theological content of the great hymns. Other reviewers, such as K. Freeman, clearly felt the need to respond to such criticisms, averring that the new presentation of the hymns did not disturb their content: “I’m hoping this begins a movement to bring back these meaningful hymns to places of worship. If the passion that their great lyrics evokes stands out more with a bit of guitar, all the better!!”

Obviously, a repackaging of old material cannot be as straightforward or transparently neutral as sixstepsrecords makes it seem. The process of musical “updating” also necessitates a great deal of theological re-imagination. By initially focusing attention on “updated” hymns, I will focus on the effects of these songs’ musical components with the most


specificity. Because the artists are explicitly not changing the texts of these traditional songs, these examples will allow us to explore the ways that artists intentionally or unintentionally re-imagine the theological implications of a particular hymn by changing the musical setting.50

“I Stand Amazed In The Presence” (often simply “I Stand Amazed”) was written in 1905 with music and lyrics by Charles H. Gabriel. A prolific gospel songwriter, Gabriel wrote the tunes to well-known songs such as “His Eye is On the Sparrow” and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”51 The text for “I Stand Amazed” is a pietistic first-person rehearsal of the final hours of Jesus’s life, moving from Gethsemane to Calvary before culminating in an evocation of the eschaton.52 Throughout his performance, Passion worship leader Chris Tomlin stays fairly close to Gabriel’s music and text until the midpoint of the final verse, when Tomlin executes a sort of false ending. After the first two phrases—“When with the ransomed in glory, his face I at last shall see”—Tomlin brings the band to a total stop, seemingly closing the song on this expectant image of heaven-to-come. After an eruption of applause, however, Tomlin restarts the band, singing the second half of the final verse

50 Though the possibility of this sort of analysis would seem to be suggested by Brian Wren’s notion of “nonverbal theology” and the idea that hymns are capable of actually “doing theology,” unfortunately his analyses simply shift the focus from literal readings of hymn texts to more figurative readings. See Brian A. Wren. Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 352–53.


52 As other scholars have observed, evangelicals tend to conflate two theological distinct meanings of the term “eschaton,” referring to both the (present) heavenly community and the community at the end of time, particularly as depicted in the book of Revelation. I reflect that conflation here, using the term to stand in for any discussion of the “afterlife” in which people directly commune with the Divine.
through a tremendous build which reaches a climax with two final statements of the chorus at
the loudest volume thus far. The lyrics and musical form are outlined below:

When with the ransomed in glory
   His face I at last shall see
---stop / applause break---
'Twill be my joy through the ages
   To sing of His love for me
---continue to chorus---

Tomlin’s decision to split the final verse, pausing on this clear evocation of the
eschaton, is a powerful demonstration of the ways in which musical and textual elements of
praise and worship performance inform each other. The strong textual reference to heaven is
essential to give his fan-worshippers an interpretive lens through which to understand their
experience. The overwhelming sensation of singing with more than twenty-thousand fellow
believers—particularly in the final chorus when Tomlin’s voice drops out, allowing the fan-
worshippers to hear each other more fully—is rendered more intelligible by reference to
another supposedly overwhelming experience, namely the chorus of heaven. The text to the
second half of the final verse—“It will be my joy through the ages to sing of his love for
me”—coupled with Tomlin’s exhortation to the congregation to sing during the final chorus
makes explicit the connection between the act of singing and eschatological hope. If the
congregants will eventually sing with the ransomed in glory, their singing in the present is
not simply a corporate act of worship directed at a worthy creator God, but is, rather, a literal
foretaste of heaven. Furthermore, the decision to define “heaven” experientially by
grounding it in the phenomenological excess of group singing causes the word, even when
divorced from contexts of corporate worship, to take its referent from exactly this type of experiential overload.

Ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls has discussed the importance of eschatological discourse in worship contexts at the Passion Conference. Ingalls observes that many of the conference’s participants interpreted corporate singing as “the sound of heaven,” relying on both the eschatological language of the songs themselves as well as framing devices provided by worship leaders or speakers. By drawing together the importance of the eschaton in evangelical theology and experience of taking part in a vast gathering of Christian believers, “music enables evangelical conference attendees to experience their beliefs about the afterlife by enfolding them in the ‘sound of heaven’.” In circumstances such as these, the effects of music and text are not easily separated. The phenomenological experiences are rendered spiritually meaningful through textual referents that are in turn grounded back into experience. This semantic circularity in the act of congregational singing is essential to understanding the power of praise and worship music from a phenomenological perspective. Here, the learned biblical narrative and sensory experience become entwined, where the experience of worship is used to interpret the central themes of evangelical theology, and vice versa.

But beyond the imagined/imaginary social dimensions of group singing, evangelical worship events like the Passion Conference also foreground the overriding importance of

53 Ingalls, “Singing Heaven Down to Earth.”
54 Ibid., 263.
55 Ibid., 264.
Pastors and conference speakers constantly conflate high levels of sound volume or density with high levels of spiritual intensity or sincerity. During the opening session of the 2013 conference, Passion founder Louie Giglio encouraged those assembled to increase the volume of their engagement in order to demonstrate a higher level of spiritual commitment.

Well, I know it’s raining outside and I know you traveled a long way. Some of you have been in the van too long, but I really think we’ve got to lift up a shout to get this thing going. I think we’ve got to somehow bring up the volume in here! Following this statement, the arena erupted with noise. Congregants clapped their hands and shouted, the worship leaders played loudly on their guitars, and vocalists sang ecstatic flourishes into the microphones. Even those vocalists whose microphones weren’t turned on engaged in a fervent pantomime of sound: throwing their heads back, bringing the microphones close, and allowing their upper bodies to writhe with the sound as it began to boil over. As he continued his introduction, Giglio reminded the crowd that the Georgia Dome which they were currently occupying was used for a post-season college football game the previous evening. Giglio commented with a significant amount of pride “I think we’ve already got, like, way more volume going on here than the whole Chick-fil-a Bowl did the whole night long.”

Ingalls captures the significance of these songs in the formation of evangelical identity by placing Benedict Anderson’s idea of an “imagined community” in dialogue with literary scholar Philip Wegner’s notion of an “imaginary community.” While Anderson’s work is able to describe the use of music-making to imagine a geographically disparate group through the power of mass media, the addition of Wegner stresses the importance of eschatological considerations as well. More on this in the next chapter.


Ibid.
Volume-based games or competitions are a fairly standard feature of rock and pop concerts. Most often, artists ask the audience to respond with applause or a shout to a variety of different suggestions and then determines a “winner” based on the volume of the response. This is used to determine which song to play next, which section of the crowd is “most ready” for the performance, or which city on the tour is most excited about seeing the particular band. These same sorts of games are played between worship leaders and the gathered community of the Passion Conference, but in this context, the responses are imbued with a great deal more spiritual significance. When worship leaders or pastors ask their congregations to “lift up a shout” as Giglio did at Passion, they are asking fan-worshippers to perform and experience their own individual levels of spiritual sincerity. Also, if it is understood that if the shouting is somehow uniquely for God, then the enthusiasm with which one shouts is a direct reflection of God’s might in that particular moment.

Praise and worship artists draw on the already-established habitus of listening from popular music which values the parameter of volume as expressive of genuine emotion or enthusiasm—that is, spiritual and sonic “intensity” are part of the same political economy. For philosopher Gilles Deleuze, “intensity” describes the dynamic movement of power around a rhizomatic assemblage. Because the rhizome inherently resists the top-down structures of the arboreal system, power is distributed through the flow of intensity rather than through a fixed hierarchical arrangement. Here, the sonic intensity of the crowd which


results from this entrained response serves as a sensational form which is used to organize and sanction experiences of divine intensity, which is part of a broader political economy of embodiment. Here, we see sound becoming theology becoming body politics becoming sound in very real and tangible ways.

This emphasis on sonic intensity and its ability to organize theological concepts of power is the driving force behind Tomlin’s evocation of the eschaton in “I Stand Amazed In The Presence.” The David Crowder*Band’s performance of “Doxology” demonstrates a much more radical engagement with affective intensity to remake theology at the level of musical form. The verses known simply as “the Doxology” to many Protestants have been sung since at least the seventeenth century when English cleric Thomas Ken penned the hymn “Awake, my soul” from which they are taken. Most frequently the four lines of text are set to the “Old 100th,” a well-known tune written by Loys Bourgeois for Calvin’s Genevan psalters.

Praise God, from Whom all blessings flow
Praise Him, all creatures here below
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

In traditional performances, these four lines of text are sung through once and are closed with a simple plagal cadence on the word “Amen.” The David Crowder*Band’s performance of “Doxology” from Hymns Ancient and Modern, however, extends the usually single iteration of the text into a nearly five-minute pop-inspired song. In Crowder’s version, the “Amen” is stated four times after each statement of the traditional doxology text, functioning as a
“chorus” to the doxology’s “verse” and recasting the normally strophic hymn in a more contemporary verse-chorus form.

There are many theologically significant changes at play in Crowder’s performance. First, the introduction of the repetition inherent in a verse-refrain structure complicates traditional readings of the doxology as simply a statement of belief. The implication would seem to be that the statements of the doxology are not propositional beliefs that are asserted once—punctuating those assertions with a communal “Amen”—but rather that the congregation enters into a process of continual assertion. Crowder suggests this with his encouragement to the congregation to “join the angels” during the song. Rather than being a statement of faith that originates in and is validated by communal participation, Crowder’s doxology originates in and is validated by the disembodied, eternal singing of the angels, which is always-already in progress.

Similarly, the word “Amen” undergoes a musical and theological re-imagination due to its numerous repetitions and the alteration of the traditionally plagal “Amen” cadence. Typically, the strong closing cadence provides an opportunity for communal assent to the propositions contained in the doxology, drawing musically on the traditional meanings of the word Amen as “so be it” or “truly, it is so.” Crowder’s performance, however, replaces the strength of the plagal cadence with the tonic chord in first inversion moving to the sub-dominant. The band continues this vacillation until the end of the chorus, which lands on a dominant before returning to a root position tonic at the beginning of the next “verse.” Even though Crowder maintains the gesture of the “Amen cadence” and deploys the same two chords, the simple change in the bass and reversing the order of the two chords creates a
completely different musical climate, providing a degree of instability and drive that allows for Crowder’s expansion of the simple tune into a pop anthem.

Despite his evocations of the more traditional definitions with shouts of “so be it Lord” and “it’s true,” the expanded form of Crowder’s “Amen” indicates a sort of tonal and theological openness when compared with its traditional counterpart. It would seem that rather than simply affirming the truth of the propositions articulated in the doxology, the chorus of “Amens” challenges the congregation to participate in their eternal enunciation, which is at once certain and incomplete. In this case, it is not the promises of the text, but rather the very act of singing together with one’s fellow believers that reifies both certainty and expectation. As in the performance of “I Stand Amazed,” the overwhelming experience of worship confirms the reality of the eschaton while at the same time demonstrating the inadequacies of human experience to properly engage with it. In short, these two simple changes—the introduction of repetition and the alteration of the final cadence—effectively remake the Doxology with an entirely different theological function. Rather than providing space for the communal articulation and assent to orthodox beliefs, much like a statement of the creeds would do, the doxology now provides an experiential grounding for eschatological hope, one of the central tenets of Evangelical spirituality.

**Form vs. Roadmap**

Both of the characteristics identified above—the ability of “updated” hymns to ground traditional religious language in the phenomenological excess of group singing and the role of repetitive rock-based formal structures to shift the site of agency from human to
Divine—can be seen clearly in dozens of other Passion hymn performances. One such performance, and an enduring favorite among Passion devotees, is Kristian Stanfill’s version of “Jesus Paid It All” from the 2006 Passion live recording, *Everything Glorious*. “Jesus Paid It All” is a Third Great Awakening gospel song, written in 1865 by two Methodist choir members, Elvina Hall and John Grape. Stanfill adds two important elements in his otherwise straightforward B Major rendition of the hymn. First, he adds an instrumental riff that roughly follows the musical contours of the verse material and comes directly after each statement of the chorus. Second, he adds a bridge, which consists of two lines of text, “Oh, praise the One who paid my debt / And raised this life up from the dead,” and uses the material from the opening instrumental riff as its accompaniment. The addition of these two lines is not enough to significantly change the theological sense of the text, but his use of the bridge as a structural musical feature of his performance unveils the new theology at work.

Stanfill’s new bridge begins after the second verse-chorus pairing, about three minutes into the five-and-a-half minute performance. The bridge begins with a pounding full-band rhythm of even quarter notes over a strong tonic pedal. The band slowly increases in volume over two times through the bridge material, then, immediately before the third time through the bridge (around 3:30 on the recording), the riff returns and the volume reaches its climax. In addition to a dramatic increase in volume at this crucial moment during the build—nearly six decibels by my measure—the texture also changes, moving from the pounding rhythmic diminutions of the build back to the floating feeling associated with the opening

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61 The practice of adding a bridge or tag section which “updating” hymns is a common practice for Passion artists and can be seen in Chris Tomlin’s version of “Amazing Grace” from *Passion: God of This City* and Charlie Hall’s version of “Nothing But the Blood” from *Passion: How Great Is Our God*. 
riff. The moment of musical climax elicits a huge reaction from the gathered congregation, who move from singing to shouting along with the lyrics as they fervently press their hands towards heaven.

This type of build and climax is one of the most important structural features of praise and worship performances and perhaps the only purely formal characteristic of the music that is frequently evoked among worshippers. In live performances and on recordings, worshippers often use size metaphors to refer to their favorite part of the song, which is almost always “the part where it just gets huge.” Worship leaders are sensitive to this dynamic, carefully planning out its execution by “roadmapping” a particular song to build in certain ways.

Worship leaders and band members use the word “roadmap” to refer to the overarching musical trajectory of a piece that is realized in performance. For worship leaders, “form” typically pertains to the individual pieces of a particular song, including verse, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge, tag, etc. These constituent sections are drawn from a careful listening a song’s recording or from an official chord chart published by the band or on one of a number of worship music websites. The word “form,” however, does not refer to the ways that these individual sections get deployed in actual performances. Although the form of a piece implies certain performance conventions—one would never put the pre-chorus after the chorus or begin with the tag, for example—the actual order and duration of each section is determined by the individual worship leader.

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Taylor Nixon, interview with the author, 3 January 2013.
The “roadmap” not only includes instructions about ordering and/or repeating individual sections of the piece, but also about the relative “size” of the song at each moment. For example, a roadmap might instruct a player to play verse 2, pre-chorus and then chorus, but it would also specify that the song should be medium volume with a clean guitar sound in the verse, build through the pre-chorus with some sort of pulsating rhythm on the downbeats, and then land on the chorus with high volume and the full complement of distortion. Roadmaps are rarely written down and never included on the officially-released chord charts that bands provide to local leaders. They are established verbally by a band in practice, but they usually make at least passing reference to a particular recorded instantiation of the song. Because players are almost always provided with both chord charts and musical recordings by the worship leader, the particular performance chosen by a leader is essential to quickly establish the roadmap for the song.

But despite all this planning, the roadmap is always structurally open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. It must be provided in order to ensure that the musicians are on the same page during the performance, but it is frequently adapted in actual worship situations to reflect the spiritual climate of the particular congregation. Like any good musician, the worship leader is sensitive to the needs of each audience and makes split-second determinations about musical direction that are largely based on the levels of physical and emotional engagement with the music among the gathered community.

Climactic moments like the one in “Jesus Paid It All” are significant musically, because of the way that they help articulate the roadmap of the song, but they are also significant physically, marking a heightened form of bodily engagement from fan-
worshippers, and spiritually.⁶³ Because of the intense physical/spiritual experience they facilitate, these moments are frequently cited by fan-worshippers as their favorites. Even more than songwriting, roadmapping is the central compositional practice for most worship leaders, taking the majority of their creative energy and often giving a particular worship band its signature sound. Within praise and worship music, there is a surprisingly small repertoire of songs written by a relatively small group of songwriters. The most frequently performed songs in local churches are reported biannually on the Top 25 list from Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI). Between the creation of CCLI in 1989 and February 2013, only 100 songs ever appeared on the Top 25 list, with many of them remaining on the list for a decade or more.⁶⁴ Because worship leaders are playing, singing, and recording such a limited body of the most widespread popular songs, roadmapping is the way in which artists differentiate themselves from one another. For many of the mega-church music leaders with whom I spoke, the desire to sonically fix a roadmap for a popular song was featured prominently in their own recordings. The primary reason for a local church to release their own recorded version of these songs is to provide congregants and church musicians with a quick sonic reference point for their particular roadmap of the song. Similar to fans of jazz, praise and worship audiences are not always concerned with which songs their worship band plays, but rather with how they choose to chart their way through the familiar changes and melodic contours of the standard repertory.

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⁶³ This is directly connected to the conflation of volume and sonic density with spiritual intensity or sincerity, mentioned above.

In “Jesus Paid It All,” the newly composed bridge allows Stanfill to musically effect the roadmap and climax of the song. The addition of this bridge highlights something important about praise and worship performance that distinguishes it from previous Protestant traditions. As I mentioned before, the bridge does not contribute significantly to the textual meaning of the song. The language of the bridge is taken directly from verses and choruses—including the language of “debt” and the image of Christ’s resurrection—and it does not substantially modernize the text’s pervasive nineteenth-century pietism. Instead, this new section is added to the song because of the musical possibilities it opens. The bridge allows the worship leader to roadmap a praise and worship climax into a traditional hymn formal structure. This highlights the difference between the performance practices of traditional Protestant hymnody and praise and worship music. Traditional Protestant hymnody uses the verse-chorus format as a formal end to communicate theological content, while praise and worship songs tend to use the verse-chorus format as a formal means to achieve a certain musical trajectory. This experiential shape, which is the end goal of praise and worship music, is embedded at the higher structural level of “roadmap.”

Perhaps the closest musical analogue to the type of climax embedded in the roadmaps of praise and worship music is the phenomenon of “the drop” in electronic dance music (EDM). Worship leaders will even occasionally refer to these moments as “the stop,” referring to the stop-time that often accompanies praise and worship climaxes. But the similarities are much deeper than mere terminology. In the introduction to his 2006 book

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65 More about this in Chapter Four.
Unlocking the Groove, music theorist Mark Butler describes the following scene from the 2001 Detroit Electronic Music Festival.

[DJ Stacey] Pullen cuts the bass drum out. The audience turns to him expectantly, awaiting its return. For one measure, and then another, he builds their anticipation, using the mixing board to distort the sounds that remain. As the energy level increases, he gauges their response. A third measure passes by, and a fourth, and then—with an instantaneous flick of the wrist—he brings the beat back in all its forceful glory. As one the crowd raises their fists in the air and screams with joy.⁶⁶

In EDM, as well as other beat-based musical styles, this moment of the bass’s return is frequently called “the drop.” The drop serves a variety of important functions. First, it’s a formal cue that marks a new section of the song, usually resulting from a process of building tension over some sort of musical and/or textual vamp. Second, it is the moment that fans/fan-worshippers intensely anticipate, the phenomenological “payoff” so to speak, and artists/worship leaders structure songs to strategically manipulate this expectation. In this capacity, the climax music is designed to elicit a more intense embodied response from the audience/congregation. People may have been dancing or had their hands raised before, but at this particular moment that embodied action goes into overdrive.

From a phenomenological perspective, the idea of expectation that is connected to the drop is particularly crucial. Many of the decisions that a worship leader makes, both in the songwriting process as well as the roadmapping of a particular performance, are designed to heighten the expectation of this particular moment. So, in addition to being the loudest or most sonically dense moment of the performance, the drop might also be the first time that a

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song has landed on a tonic at the beginning of a harmonic rotation, or the first time that one hears the chorus. Again, the combination of an entrained habitus of listening, the loud sing-along associated almost equally with popular music concerts and evangelical Christian hymnody, combined with the evocation of a sensational form in which volume equals divine power helps to further reinforce the connections between the embodied musical excitement of the moment and a particular type of evangelical spirituality.

There is also a great deal of vocal encouragement that surrounds these moments as well. In Hillsong United’s performance of “With Everything,” a track that will be discussed in more detail below, the leader shouts “From the front to the back, lets lift the roof off this place with a shout of praise!” Jeff Todd Titon has emphasized that religious language is not simply a specialized vocabulary that marks certain ideas as sacred, but it is also a performative style of speaking, chanting and singing that often blurs the traditional distinctions between these three means of vocal expression. Titon distinguishes between “the language itself” and “the performed word” to allow himself to properly interrogate these two distinct concepts.67

A similar division should and must permeate any description of the deployment of religious language at Passion. A common vocabulary is crucial to the Passion experience, with performers using explicitly coded words and phrases to create and reinforce religious identity. Additionally, musical performances draw on common “vocabulary” of evangelical experience by incorporating hymn tunes and texts throughout their newly composed worship songs. But the performative aspects of language in the presentation of praise and worship

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music at Passion are central to any understanding of its function. The spoken, sung, and often improvised guidance of the worship leader is essential to direct congregant experience of the music. Generally this guidance falls into (or between) three categories: (1) simplistic participatory directions, (2) pietistic elaboration on the song texts or related scripture references, or (3) ecstatic utterances meant to serve as guidance for the specific spiritual experience of the individual congregants and create an atmosphere of worship within the space.

**Worshipping “With Everything”**

The Australian worship band Hillsong United has risen to worldwide prominence in the praise and worship world since their debut in 1999. In less than fifteen years, the band has released thirteen full-length records (ten live recordings three studio albums), five of which have peaked at number one on the U.S. Billboard Christian Albums chart. Since 2002, the band has been led by Joel Houston—oldest son of Hillsong Church founders Brian and Bobbie Houston—who also writes the majority of their songs. Within the praise and worship community, Houston’s songs have a reputation for their complicated formal structures that are uniquely well-suited to fluid roadmapping and climax-building. Often charts for Hillsong United tunes sprawl across two pages to accommodate the multiple bridges, tags, pre-choruses, post-choruses, and outros that are so indicative of their style.

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69 This is especially true of the ways that Houston and the other Hillsong writers use vocal register in their songwriting. Hillsong writers consistently ensure that climactic sections on “oh” or “whoa” lie in comfortable unisex vocal ranges. Similarly, the bridge sections which build to these climaxes are frequently constructed such that they can be can be flipped up an octave at the section builds toward the climax.
Hillsong United’s consistent departure from a simple verse-chorus format does not, however, deter many local churches from playing their songs on a weekly basis. Worship leaders particularly vaunt Hillsong United’s ability to “build a song like no other band out there.” Their fluid formal approach demonstrates the primacy of the roadmap as the organizational principle in praise and worship music and their songs are designed and recorded with these large-scale roadmaps in mind.

On the evening of January 4, 2010, Hillsong United took the stage in front of nearly 20,000 attendees to the Passion Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Towards the end of their set, the band led the crowd in singing “With Everything,” a song written by Houston. Over the course of four minutes, the band slowly built up to an ear-splitting climax, when suddenly the lyrics of the song completely disappeared. Instead of a text, the band and worshippers all began to chant a simple diatonic melody loop on “oh.” This moment was almost immediately captured and disseminated by numerous YouTube users, including “Richi Thomas,” who appears to have been seated in the upper deck of Philips Arena on that January evening. In the comments section for Thomas’s video, as well as many others like it, fans and attendees of Passion 2010 comment on this particular climax, often linking to specific timecodes in order to direct others to this same moment of the song: “1:42 was like a big punch in the face.!! :-) Amazing,” “Try pausing it at 1:46, it’s just like having a glimpse of God's Glorious Light,” or simply, “1:42..... wow!” This final comment is particularly interesting because of the response it generated from the video’s creator. User “liveyourlife17” was the first to link

70 Drew Wilmesherr, interview with the author, 4 January 2013

specifically to this moment of the video and Thomas responded to her by saying “Yeah I
came it was coming...wanted to capture it!”

As brief as it is, this comment exchange manages to perfectly encapsulate the two
primary arguments of this chapter. First, that moments of the highest spiritual intensity and
musical significance in praise and worship music are often the result of specific sonic
gestures rather than clear textual referents. As I was speaking with Matthew, a 24-year-old
Passion attendee from Tennessee, he quickly raised this moment as one of his personal
favorites. I mentioned that I wasn’t familiar with this particular performance of the song from
the 2010 Passion event, and he responded:

> You’ve got to check out that song. That was my first time at Passion and the
> first time I ever heard Hillsong [United] play. I just couldn’t believe how
> powerful God was in that moment. I still think about that experience every
> time I listen to [the recording]. I just remember everyone going totally crazy
> when they hit the “ohs.”

The textual nature of theology as a discipline and the significance of “worship” as a
theological category within contemporary evangelicalism has led to an over-investment in
lyrics that is not reflected in the piety of most evangelical believers. In this as well as many
other performances of “With Everything” by Hillsong United, the wordless diatonic melody
initiated at this climax actually continues for another five minutes without the text ever
returning; in fact, the song reaches a second climax with the same musical shape, but without
any need for a textual verse/refrain structure. Instead, these climaxes are effected by

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72 Matthew Ellis, interview with the author, 2 January 2013.
embodied experiences of listening which are constructed in and through specific communities of practice.\textsuperscript{73}

The second point I have argued throughout this chapter is that these textless musical experiences are enmeshed within a set of established forms that are understood by parishioners and worship leaders. YouTube user Richi Thomas claims that he captured this particular moment of the song on video because he “knew it was coming,” even during the initial performance. This knowledge is undoubtedly related to Thomas’s familiarity with other recordings of the song and with other songs by Hillsong United, but also to the entrained musical conventions of certain forms of post-1980 popular music that allow him to predict that a significant musical climax is imminent. Increasing volume, rising vocal register, and rhythmic diminution undoubtedly serve as important musical cues to signal the upcoming climax in the song. But even more than signaling the shape of a particular performance, these parameters actually instruct fan-worshippers when and how to invest themselves in the spiritual content of a song. Just as with EDM fans and “the drop,” a real-time negotiation of deferring and fulfilling expectations is a core part of both the habitus of listening and the sensational forms of performance.

In this way, Passion not only privileges sound, specifically musical sound, as the vehicle for divine encounter, it also constructs a relatively stable set of sonic gestures through which these encounters are most often negotiated. Specific levels of musical density, volume, and textual complexity give worshippers a sense of which songs—and which parts of which

\textsuperscript{73} This particular style of climax also has a corollary in the recent rock phenomenon of “terminally climactic forms.” See Brad Osborn. “Subverting the Verse–Chorus Paradigm: Terminally Climactic Forms in Recent Rock.” \textit{Music Theory Spectrum} 35 (Spring 2013): 23–47.
songs—are most conducive to spiritual experience. Often times, the most spiritually meaningful moments at Passion are those which combine the highest levels of musical intensity with the lowest levels of textual complexity, with some songs eschewing the use of any text at all in favor of singing on vocables like “oh” or “whoa.” Peter, a 23-year-old Passion attendee and worship leader from Tampa, Florida, commented

“Burning in My Soul” was my favorite song at Passion 2013. I felt the chorus packed a lot of power and emotion without having actually said very much. It’s praise to God more through our emotions then by actually verbally declaring it. The “whoa” part has so many layers to it as well. I feel it is more than simply a placeholder. It is what I imagine an angelic choir might sound like when singing. There is a little dissonance and mystery in the tone which gives a sense of reverence (within myself); as if I were in the presence of God and I am humbled and amazed at Him at the same time. The crescendo builds in a way that is very captivating as well. It’s like an exclamation point sitting in the heart of the song. It’s a lively song, which is what I love singing and experiencing at Passion.74

Peter’s comments articulate a number of crucial things. First of all, he reiterates the sentiment that true worship happens uniquely at the level of sensational form, here explicitly excluding textual paradigms of theological understanding in favor of a musically-constructed experience of emotion. Second, his explanation of this sensory experience is intimately dependent on a theological understanding of the world that includes a personal relationship with God as well as angelic choirs. Third, he identifies a specific portion of the song which triggered this experience this particularly well, namely the chorus which includes the passage on “whoa”—a moment of textless singing. This also coincided with “the crescendo,” which brings together a number of sonic parameters to define the most spiritually potent portion of the song. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly for this dissertation, is that Peter identifies

74 Peter Schmoling, e-mail to author, 9 January 2013.
this complex of sensory and spiritual parameters as something uniquely associated with the Passion Conferences. This was a widely-shared sentiment among Passion attendees, which is ultimately bound up with a variety of factors including pilgrimage and place, but which most often comes to be attached to descriptions of the music itself.

**God of This City**

Thus far in the chapter, I have examined individual moments from praise and worship performances to help illustrate the importance of music as a theological discourse. I now turn my attention to the song, “God of This City,” which will allow for the examination of the larger theological context in which these conversations take place. The transatlantic travel of this song and the differences between its two most prominent recordings encircle a robust theological debate about prophecy, mission, and agency that is mediated through a musical proxy and mediatized through YouTube videos, blog entries, and commercial audio recordings. By closely examining the key differences between Chris Tomlin and Bluetree’s respective versions of “God of This City,” we can see the ways that interactions around mass-mediated worship music provide opportunities for American evangelicals to demonstrate, construct and contest their theological narratives, even in contrast to other groups of Christians.

In the summer of 2006, Belfast-based Christian worship band Bluetree traveled to Pattaya, Thailand to participate in “Pattaya Praise,” an event put on by the evangelical

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75 For more information, see Joshua Kalin Busman, “‘Yet to Come’ or ‘Still to Be Done’?: Evangelical Worship and the Power of Prophetic Songs,” In *Singing a New Song: Christian Congregational Music Making and Community in a Mediated Age*, edited by Tom Wagner and Anna Nekola (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2015).
Christian missionary organization Youth With A Mission. Pattaya, a beachfront community about 100 miles southeast of Bangkok, was chosen as the site for this yearly event because of concerns with the central role that the city plays in the Thai sex tourism industry. Nella Davidse, founder of the Tamar Center in Pattaya, which works to find women a way out of prostitution, says of the yearly Pattaya Praise event: “We want to invite Christians from all over the world to come and sow seeds of God into the city through worship and prayer.”

On their third or fourth day in Pattaya, Bluetree received an invitation to play a two-hour engagement at The Climax Bar, a popular meet-up spot for prostitutes and their clients in the center of town. The band somewhat cautiously accepted the invitation and invited some of their fellow participants in Pattaya Praise to come along. Although they were booked to play for two hours, they quickly ran out of material, having played every worship song they knew in less than half-an-hour. Then, suddenly—and by means that will be explored more fully below—the band began to play a new song. This song, eventually titled “God of This City,” was inspired by the depravity of the location and contained a message specifically for the bar’s clientele. The chorus makes a series of bold claims about God’s redemptive power, declaring “Greater things have yet to come” and “Greater things are still to be done in this city.”

In February 2009, Aaron Boyd, Bluetree’s lead singer and songwriter, posted a series of three videos to YouTube. The videos—which included an acoustic performance of “God of This City”, a short “story behind the song” interview with Boyd and a guitar tutorial video in which Boyd explains how to play the song—were designed to coincide with Bluetree’s

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major-label debut, which would be released less than a week later. Boyd ends the tutorial video with a curiously strong assertion of the band’s authorship of the song:

> So that’s the way that I like to play it. I know that you can play it with the major chords…[demonstrates]…but I kinda wanted to stay true to how, when it was birthed in that bar, still stay on the same feel and be true to that. So that’s “God of This City”, *Bluetree style.*

When making this video, Boyd was well aware that online tutorial videos such as these are one of the primary ways that evangelical church musicians learn to play songs from this repertory. But Boyd was also aware that there was another version of his song “with the major chords” already in circulation among evangelical musicians. These videos were not just designed to promote a potential hit for Bluetree, but also to reclaim a song of theirs that had already achieved success for the multi-platinum, Grammy Award-winning worship leader Chris Tomlin.

Bluetree first recorded “God of This City” for their 2007 independent UK album *Greater Things.* The contents of *Greater Things* were re-released by the Nashville-based Lucid Artist label in March 2009 under the title *God of This City.* However, in the interval between these two releases, the song was recorded by Chris Tomlin, a worship leader and recording artist associated with the Passion Conference. Tomlin first heard “God of This City” while sharing the bill with Bluetree at a 2006 worship event in their native Belfast. Tomlin recalls being “blown away” by the words and melody of the song and the “fresh” perspective that it brought to the worship scene: “Immediately, I felt like this was the song for what’s going on with the Passion movement right now, as far as doing a world tour and

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going to all these different cities.” After hearing the song in Belfast, Tomlin quickly secured the rights from Bluetree and “God of This City” became the anthemic theme for the Passion Conference’s 2007–08 world tour and the lead single off their 2008 live album entitled Passion: God of This City. After the release of this Passion recording, “God of This City” was quickly embraced throughout the evangelical world, spawning no less than fifty different cover versions in the six years since its release.

Tomlin’s version of the song is much better known to most American evangelicals than Bluetree’s in part because of Passion’s global influence. The rapid incorporation of Passion’s songs into the repertoires of individual congregations means that particular recordings of songs often become normative, not just through album sales or radio play, but also by serving as the urtext for the majority of weekly performances in local churches. This helps to explain the somewhat limited impact of Bluetree’s version of “God of This City,” despite the relative commercial success that the US re-release of their album enjoyed. By the time Bluetree’s studio recording was re-released in early 2009, many churches had been performing the song in worship services for over a year, using official and unofficial versions of Tomlin’s Passion performance as their template. In fact, the popularity of Passion’s 2008

78 Chris Tomlin. “‘God of This City.’ Interview with Chris Tomlin by Brenton Brown.” YouTube video, 9:54. Posted by ‘NewSongCafe’, 4 June 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o1PFh8FAbtQ.

79 There have also been several successful translations of the song into languages other than English, most prominent among them ‘Dios De Esta Ciudad’ by the Miami-based Spanish-language worship band Blest.

80 It is also worth noting that Tomlin released a second, studio version of “God of This City” on his 2009 album Hello Love. However, the already ubiquitous presence of his live Passion recording means that this studio version has been significantly less important in shaping the sounds of local church performance (for similar reasons to the limited impact of Bluetree’s version).
album featuring the song is probably largely responsible for the Lucid Artist reissue of Bluetree for the US market.

Bluetree and Tomlin relate the unique and much-publicized origin story that accompanies the song in strikingly different ways. In an interview with *Worship Musician* magazine, Pete Kernoghan, Bluetree’s DJ and electronic whiz, explained his experience in Climax Bar when the song was born:

> We did every worship song we knew in the first 20 minutes, and were like, ‘What do we do now?’ So, we went into a time of free worship, and began singing some riffs over the city. It talks in the Bible about the ‘now’ Word of God. That’s what those lyrics were, the now Word of God. We started singing, ‘You're the Lord of this place, You’re the King of these people, You're God of this city, and greater things are yet to come and greater things are still to be done here’ … The essence of it is: we didn’t have that song when we went into that bar, and when we came out, we did. Everyone has a different take on the whole ‘prophetic’ thing, but that was definitely prophetic.81

In his telling of the story, Kernoghan seems somewhat ambivalent about the role of the divine in the song’s creation. By his account, the song was born out of a session in which the band simply started “riffing,” Elsewhere, Boyd described how the band likes using loops, provided by Kernoghan, in their set up and “without going into the band dynamics, slowly this groove emerged” as they were playing over the loop.82 Bluetree’s creation of a new song through a time of (relatively) free improvisation grounds the song’s origin myth in a well-worn trope of popular music rather than a religious intervention. Whether the song was created from within

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the band members, from a God beyond them, or somewhere in between doesn’t seem nearly as important as the imperative for truth-telling that guides Bluetree’s narrative. God may have chosen to honor the speech of the song, but the ultimate power of the story seems to stem from the fact that they were willing and able to speak truth to power, confronting the problem of prostitution that the Pattaya Praise event was specifically designed to address.

By contrast, Chris Tomlin’s version of the story relates divine intervention as the essential moment of the creative process. To coincide with the release of his studio album *Hello Love*, Tomlin recorded a five-minute video in which he tells the story of how he came to hear “God of This City” in Belfast as well as how Bluetree came to write the song in Pattaya:

> So, there’s a power once you hear the song. Every time I play the song for someone they’re like, ‘Man, there’s something about that song.’ Well here’s probably why there’s something about that song. These guys Bluetree – the way it was written is they were in Pattaya, Thailand. And he said, Aaron the lead singer, in the middle of the set, he said, that song just came. God just gave them the song, it was just kind of a prophetic song that came out of them. Now can you imagine? Just coming out of them, never have heard this song before, God’s just breathing it out of them. And singing it in that brothel, in that bar that night, what a powerful thing. And now, to see how that song wasn’t just for that moment, but that song is a light in all these places, in all these cities – to sing over every city.

Tomlin emphasizes not only the spontaneity and externality of the song’s creation, but also the essential role that these qualities contribute to the intensity the song has for its listeners.\(^\text{84}\)

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\(^\text{84}\) Tomlin’s many stops, starts, and run-ons, which I have tried to transcribe fairly exactly above, further emphasize the evangelical commitment to “spiritual extemporaneity” as a performative value. This is a story that Tomlin has told hundreds of times, so his rambling, seemingly imprecise way of speaking is almost surely not a result of a lack of preparation. Rather, the impression that he’s always open and extemporizing, similar to Bluetree’s willingness to have the Holy Spirit speak through them in song, is essential to the public demonstration of evangelical piety.
In his narrative, the power that he and others experience within the song is a direct result of its proximity to a particularly potent moment of divine intervention. Thus Boyd, Kernoghan, and the other members of Bluetree were not agents or actors on that fateful night but rather served as vessels for divine action and sites for divine agency. Although the idea that God was responsible for the song’s creation is a fairly common trope in Christian worship music, understanding it thus seems to present a stance that Boyd’s version of the story would challenge, or at the very least complicate.85

Perhaps the most telling difference between these two narratives is their divergent use of the word “prophetic,” conditioned by the religious narratives indicative of their respective denominational affiliations: Tomlin’s neo-Calvinist strain of American evangelicalism and Bluetree’s charismatic strain of Northern Irish pentecostalism. At Passion, prominent speakers like John Piper, Mark Driscoll, and even Passion’s founder Louie Giglio have made it fashionable among young evangelicals to espouse neo-Calvinist doctrines about God’s sovereignty and human predestination which limit or entirely eliminate the role of free will in religious life. At a worship event for one such neo-Calvinist church in which I did fieldwork, the pastor even went so far as to remark, “Worship isn’t something you do, it’s something that happens to you in the presence of God.”86 Even the activity of “worship,” which drives

85 Liturgical historian Lester Ruth has noted that 29 of the 44 praise and worship songs for which he could find background stories—out of the 72 Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) songs considered in the 2007 volume Message in the Music—were claimed to be ‘spontaneously composed’ or ‘God given.’ This is undoubtedly central for so many worship artists because of the ways in which it minimizes the band and their creative process, which are always in danger of clouding the transparency of ‘worship’ as a medium for divine encounter. See Lester Ruth, “How Great Is Our God: The Trinity in contemporary Christian worship music,” in The Message in the Music: Studying Contemporary Praise & Worship (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007): 29–42

86 JD Greear, Sermon, Jesus In My Place Record Release Show, The Summit Church, Brier Creek Campus, North Venue Auditorium, 29 April 2012.
hundreds of thousands to gather every year for Passion events, is something that occurs beyond the cusp of human agency. From this perspective, “God of This City” provides no impetus for the congregants to act in the face of the circumstances that the song or its origin story present. In fact, even Bluetree must have been incapable of action, relying on divine intervention to write the song in the first place. As Tomlin suggests in his narrative of the song’s origin, the responsibility for Christians is to “sing [the song] over every city,” not in the hopes of converting or changing the circumstances, but rather in the assurance that these statements are always-already the case and completely out of our hands. For Tomlin, the “prophetic” dimension of the song does not drive its listeners out into the brokenness of the world but rather up and over it to the blessed assurances of God’s divine plan.

Aaron Boyd strongly critiques this tendency within the Passion crowd at the end of an article he wrote about “God of This City” prior to the re-release of their recording, outlining a more charismatic-pentecostal understanding of the “prophetic”:

What I believe shouldn’t happen is this: “God of This City” should not become just another Evangelical anthem that we sing to make ourselves feel good. It must do more than just please our ears or give us goose-bumps; it has to propel us out…Search for “God of This City” on YouTube and you’ll see that so many cities and towns around the world have used the song to help bring into focus the needs around them. But I don’t think that the song is there to be used as some kind of tool to ‘claim’ a city…We could sit and beg God to change India, Pattaya, Cambodia or whatever other oppressive situation you could mention, but I don’t think that’s the point: I don’t think it’s up to us to

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87 The colonialist overtones of the strong connection made here between mission or evangelism and South East Asia is apparent in this statement as well as in many of the other statements by both Boyd and Tomlin. The issue of racial/ethnic dynamics as it relates to the colonializing “mission” of the Passion Conference will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.
twist God’s arm into fighting injustice, I think it’s up to us to get on and fight it ourselves.\textsuperscript{88}

For Boyd, the song is meant to achieve a transformation both in the music and in the material circumstances into which the song is sounded. But it accomplishes this specifically by empowering believers to act on God’s behalf. Boyd believes that believers ought to use the song to empower each other to fight injustices in their own communities. In his explanation, Boyd explicitly mentions the ubiquity of the American interpretation of the song on media outlets like YouTube and expresses his understanding that the song should do more. Boyd has commented that it was precisely this type of misreading of Christianity that lead to the formation of Bluetree in the first place.\textsuperscript{89}

I was frustrated with the idea that worship is only to do with your heart. I don’t really agree with that. It’s bigger than just your heart attitude towards something. Like the idea that music can be secondary and as long as you love Jesus, that’s fine! I don’t think that’s right.\textsuperscript{90}

While this more active idea of “worship” or “prophecy” makes perfect theological sense within the Northern Irish charismatic tradition from which Bluetree comes, within the context of the Passion Conferences—and the context of American evangelicalism more broadly—the idea that the work of God in the world is “up to us” would be prideful at best and heretical at worst. Though the power of “prophecy” is within the symbolic inventory for

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\textsuperscript{89} The band started at a campus of Christian Fellowship Church, a charismatic congregation in the Strandtown sector of Belfast.
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\textsuperscript{90} Rimmer, “Bluetree.”
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both Boyd and Tomlin, their divergent interpretive contexts render the song’s origin story very differently in their respective religious narratives.

**Sound(ing) Theology**

The conflicting notions of prophecy at work in the song’s origin story and reception illuminate deep divisions between Bluetree and Tomlin and demonstrate how new media outlets like YouTube provide space for the contestation of these multiple religious narratives. But these religious differences are also played out in the sounds of the songs themselves. In Bluetree’s version of the song, the verse and chorus constitute different harmonic spaces, with the verse centered on A minor and the chorus on the relative major of C. In fact, there are no C major chords at all in the verse or pre-chorus and no A minor chords in the chorus (except for the very last word of the chorus, where the song returns to the verse music). For Boyd, this movement from A minor to C major between the verse and chorus is the most significant musical feature of the song. In his 2009 ‘story behind the song’ video, Boyd explicitly mentions the significance of this chord change saying: “[The song] came out of this loop that started to play, a real minor, downbeat loop, and it just majored up into this anthem of the night.”

For Boyd, the act of “majoring up” serves as a sensational form that contains the song’s message of hope emerging from depravity. In the tutorial video, where Boyd explains

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to evangelical worship leaders how to play the song, he connects this musical gesture to the song’s message even more strongly.

It’s a really, really simple song. There are only 3 or 4 chords and it’s in the key of C, but the relative minor of that key is A minor. The verse is really simple: A minor and F. The bridge is really, really simple: just an A minor down to a G and then down to an F. And then, when you get to the big chorus that’s filled with hope, it’s reflected like that in the music, so that’s when you get the big C’s.92

Boyd explains that the A minor harmonization of the verse is designed to withhold the bright C major sonority from the congregation until “the big chorus that’s filled with hope.” Boyd even pauses at this moment in his tutorial to really drive home the first C major chord on the word ‘city’ in order to make this point as explicitly as he can. And not only is this C major the first tonic chord that the audience has heard, it is also the first and only sonority in the song that isn’t occluded by 7ths and 9ths in Boyd’s guitar voicing. When explaining the chords of the song to his tutorial audience, Boyd specifically illustrates how these voicings give the C major chord an extra brilliance that is crucially connected to the song’s meaning.

In the dark circumstances of the song’s origin, the hopeful message of the chorus did not simply spring from the band straight away, but was rather achieved by traveling through the “minor loop” with which the song begins. The sensational form of the song is one of struggle and transformation, which aligns closely with Bluetree’s narrative about the song’s origin and ultimate purpose. This is not strictly a song of hope, but rather a song about the ways in which hope can be born out of difficult circumstances.

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Boyd’s purpose in the song, to imagine an alternative to the difficult status quo, closely parallels the function of music that ethnomusicologist Alejandro Madrid has observed among Nor-tec musicians in Tijuana, Mexico. Madrid argues that since the locality of Tijuana is so essential to any understanding of Nor-tec, musicians often use the music as a way to “reterritorialize” the city. Madrid borrows the language of “reterritorialization” from the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari to describe “a moment when the cultural meaning of given spaces is changed (even for a brief period of time) by their novel uses.” In this case, Tijuana, a city which is typically associated with seedy, backward entertainments directed at the lowest classes—the most obvious being the infamous “donkey show” which Madrid references throughout the chapter—is re-imagined as a vibrant center of modern cultural production. In this process, “Nor-tec is a virtuality that…rewrites Tijuana, its traditions and its stereotypes according to current experiences in order to validate the present.” “God of This City” attempts to achieve similar goals of “reterritorialization” by re-imagining the city of Pattaya, not as a hub of prostitution, but as a place where God is at work.

With the message and musical sounds of the song so deeply entwined in his explanation, Boyd seems to challenge the legitimacy of any other version of the song, particularly one which would eliminate the key gesture of “majoring up.” But this is precisely what Tomlin’s version does. He replaces the A minor verses with C major ones, creating a harmonic symmetry between the verse, prechorus, and chorus. Rather than oscillating between A minor and F major, as in Bluetree’s version, Tomlin’s verses employ a

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fairly standard praise and worship progression moving from C major down to F major (I-V\(^6\)-vi-IV). Additionally, all three sections of the song now contain a C major chord, which de-centers the importance of the lone, climactic C major chord in the chorus. Not only is the chorus climax now simply one of many instances of C major in the song, it isn’t even the most structurally significant occurrence of the chord.

While a substitution of the tonic chord for the submediant isn’t musically atypical, it does seem to change the theological tenor of the song. As Ingalls noted, corporate singing at the Passion Conferences is almost always framed as a foretaste of heaven.\(^95\) This perhaps make sense of why Tomlin shifts the harmonization of the song to remove the A minor loop. If singing is meant to provide a sensational form of heaven, it would seem that there is little-to-no room for the still-earthbound reflections of the minor mode loop which begins Bluetree’s version. According to Boyd, the minor-mode of the verses is explicitly designed to contrast the hope and ecstasy of the chorus. In this case, the clichéd music industry platitude, “don’t bore us, get to the chorus,” takes on a decidedly theological urgency. In skipping directly to the majored-up harmonization, Tomlin is not interested in capturing the difficulties of worldly circumstances that we are presumably powerless to change, but rather attempts to present a sensational form for the personal and cosmic release that inevitably accompanies the in-breaking of heavenly reality. If the harmonic choices in Bluetree’s version were

\(^95\) Ingalls, “Singing Heaven Down to Earth.”
grounded in the representation of struggle and transformation, Tomlin’s harmonies are blessed assurance.96

In other words, it is the same reterritorializing function that is so central to Boyd’s understanding of the song that also allows Tomlin to use the song “claim a city” in the face of Boyd’s objections. Unlike Nor-tec’s Tijuana, the “city” in “God of This City” is not explicitly identified in the song’s lyrics, making the potential for reterritorialization all the more malleable. On Passion’s 2007 world tour and through their subsequent CD release, eschatological reterritorialization was applied to the geographies of Kiev, Tokyo, São Paulo, London, and Atlanta, among many others. Alejandro Madrid also observes an eschatological “future-orientation” in Nor-tec music. At one point he observes that from the perspective of many musicians, “there is no Tijuana; Tijuana is what is coming, a city that lives in the imagination.”97 Boyd’s imagination may open up this alternative future with the gesture of reterritorialization, but Tomlin takes it to its logical conclusion.

Boyd mounts his argument against Tomlin’s harmonization in the tutorial video in “originalist” terms that are bound to be particularly convincing to his American evangelical audience. “When we were in the bar, there was a specific feel to the song, so on the album, we wanted to keep that like that and we’ve kept the verse really minor.”98 Of course, Boyd is fully aware of the ways in which the origin myth of “God of This City” is completely bound up in the success of the song and even in the burgeoning brand that Bluetree has created in

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96 One might also see the differences between Bluetree’s and Tomlin’s versions as different priorities of understanding the musical work. Bluetree places their emphasis on the musical expression of their compositional ideas, while Tomlin seems focused on the musical experience of divine power.

97 Madrid, Nor-tec Rifa!, 136.

98 Boyd. “Bluetree How To Play God Of This City.”
the worship music marketplace. He attempts to reclaim his band’s authorship of the song, but realizes that to do so too forcefully would violate the religious narrative of his evangelical audience. Because of this, Boyd doesn’t attempt to revise or retell the origin story, but rather implies that if his audience is interested in taking the story seriously, they should prefer the original version of the song. Boyd’s logic seems to be that if God actually did write the song, it would be important to play it the way God wrote it.

In addition to their divergent harmonies, Tomlin and Bluetree also present very different sonic spaces on their respective recordings. On nearly all Passion recordings, the “live” sound of the band and the sounds of the crowd reacting along with the worship leader are absolutely essential to the soundscape. By foregrounding the sounds of the gathered community singing along, Tomlin invites even those engaging with the recording to engage in community formation through group singing. The shape of the recording is driven by the swelling volume of the band filling the arena-sized space and the audible rise and fall of the crowd’s energy. As we saw through his telling of the origin story, the most meaningful aspects of “God of This City” for Tomlin come from the act of singing the song together over our cities and hearing the community of believers doing the same. The song ends with a thunderous C-major chord from the lightly-distorted guitars and an eruption of applause that further solidifies the song’s message about triumph over circumstance and the certain providence that God provides.

By contrast, Bluetree’s is an intricately-layered studio recording peppered with a variety of different electronic textures. It’s no accident that the band recorded this album in
the same Dublin studio made famous by the band U2. The ways that they deal with the expansive sonic space of the recording as well as their approach to the song’s form—which clocks in at more than seven minutes compared with Tomlin’s five—are self-consciously reminiscent of albums like U2 1987 classic *The Joshua Tree*. Here, the recording is driven by the harmonic and textural tension between the verses and chorus, which Boyd identified as the central feature of the song. Additionally, the song concludes with a two-minute instrumental outro which consists entirely of permutations of the minor-mode verse material. By the time the song finally ends on a quiet A minor chord, the listener finds themselves almost unavoidably considering the “call to action” that the song presents. The song may have demonstrated the possibility of God’s intervention in the world, but now “it’s up to us to get on and fight it ourselves.”

Embedded within Boyd and Tomlin’s distinct sensational forms and religious narratives, it’s interesting to see how even the exact same verse lyrics might take on completely different meanings.

You’re the God of this city, You’re the King of these people
You’re the Lord of this nation, You are
You’re the light in this darkness, You’re the hope to the hopeless
You’re the peace to the restless, You are

In Bluetree’s case, the verse text seems to be presented in direct opposition to the current state of affairs, represented by the tension between the hopeful statements and the minor-mode musical content of the verses. For Boyd, it seems, the text is aspirational.

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99 Guitarist Rick Bleakley, Bluetree’s self-professed “studio geek,” described the experience of recording at Windmill Lane as a ‘God-ordained appointment’ and expressed his excitement at “standing in the place where all those U2 albums were made.” Rimmer, “Bluetree.”

100 Boyd, “Bluetree: Story Beyond the Song,” *TitleTrakk.com*.
widening circle of God’s influence—from “city” to “nation” and eventually to “people”—
establishes a yearning for fulfillment that is so desperate, it eventually breaks off mid-
sentence with “You are.” For Tomlin, however, these statements in the verse seem to be
escalating syllogistic statements of theology. Rather than breaking off mid-sentence out of
desperation, Tomlin seems to run out of space into which to expand his circle, eventually
devolving into a simple equation of God with existence itself, saying “You are.” Even the
exact same text serves to construct radically different theological narratives because of
sensational forms that accompany it and the habitus of listening that dictate its understanding.

These two mass-mediated recordings and their reception on blogs and video-sharing
sites like YouTube are designed to construct and reinforce the narratives of their respective
religious communities. The central question in comparing these two treatments of the song is
the role of human and divine agency. If, as Boyd seems to suggest, the key feature of “God of
This City” is the way in which it demonstrates the act of redemption through the musical
gesture of ‘majoring up,’ then it would appear that Tomlin’s version has its redemption
preloaded. So we must ask, what is the difference between a version of the song that attempts
to represent the dialectic process of redemption versus a version which seems to always-
already occupy this redemptive space? For Bluetree, “God of This City” provides a
sensational form which grounds the beginning point of Christian eschatology, the realization
that the status quo is not the final word. The song is intended to provide a new perspective on
the situation at hand in order to empower believers to act with boldness in the face of
seemingly desperate circumstances. For Tomlin, on the other hand, the song provides a
sensational form to the endpoint of eschatology, giving a literal foretaste of heaven and
asking the gathered congregants to imagine how good the release from our world’s ills will be.\textsuperscript{101} From Boyd’s perspective, then, Tomlin’s setting represents a shortcut which abdicates the responsibilities demanded of believers in the present moment and misunderstands the human component of God’s ultimate plan, while from Tomlin’s perspective, Boyd has failed to properly understand the sovereignty of God, getting caught in the details and missing the blissful fulfillment of God’s promises.

By closely examining the ways in which religious narratives come to be constructed, demonstrated and contested in media such as sound recordings and YouTube videos, scholars may begin to think beyond and between the religious texts and propositional beliefs that have dominated the academic study of theology. If religious music plays a role in shaping belief, it is not primarily through its ability to preserve theological texts, but rather through its ability to convey theology through sound. In their effort to reclaim the song from Tomlin, Bluetree not only offers a new way to play “God of This City” “but a new way to understand the call that this song might place on the lives of those who choose to sing it. The tension between Tomlin and Bluetree is perhaps most eloquently captured by the tension between the two lines of the chorus itself. Is the certainty of things “yet to come” in conflict with all the things that are “still to be done”? And perhaps more importantly, who is coming and what is there to do?

\textsuperscript{101} This is also related to the strong generational consciousness into which Passion taps through its age delimitation of attendees as well as the prevalent use of generational language in its gatherings and promotional materials. Passion often calls its membership ‘the 268 generation’ and strictly limits attendance to 18 to 25-year-olds. In this way, Passion could be seen to suggest that what it means to experience heaven is identical with what it means to attend an arena-rock-styled concert in your late teens and early twenties. This idea is explored much more fully in chapter one.
Conclusion

In each of the examples in this chapter, we see that “praise and worship” music allows evangelical fan-worshippers to construct, contest, and reify the boundaries of official orthodox belief. By using Meyer and Verrips’ notion of “sensational forms” and Becker’s notion of “habitus of listening,” I hope to move the study of congregational music away from the notion that religious belief is primarily propositional or even rational and towards an examination of how belief consists in the affective, lived experiences of the religious practice. Understanding how contemporary evangelicals worship “with everything” in their sensory toolkit offers us new ways of understanding embodied religious experience as well as the formations of community and identity that Christian congregational music provides to so many.

But the theological understandings embedded within the sensational forms and habitus of listening do not simply impact the vertical relationships between individual parishioners and the divine. These theologies also have significant implications for the ways that parishioners understand and negotiate their own bodies. The next chapter will explore the ways in which these theological paradigms also include specific constructions of the body as well as how these theological bodies are brought into relationships with other believers through musical sound.
CHAPTER THREE — Engaging the Worshipping Body

During the summer of 2012, I found myself engaged in a conversation with several worship leaders who had been part of a recent recording project in the Raleigh-Durham area of central North Carolina. Daniel Renstrom, then worship leader for Raleigh’s Providence Baptist Church, began discussing the various theological sources or inspirations for lyrics on the album and remarked that he and his team “really nitpick lyrics” because of their importance as a theological text. All three worship leaders at the table recognized the power and importance of the music they wrote to shape the theology of the communities they served. In fact, each commented that their most frequent songwriting inspiration was to address a theological need or to fill a deficiency within their specific community. When I asked how important the lyrics were to their congregations, Patrick Downing, lead guitarist for On The Incarnation and worship leader from Raleigh’s Oak City Church, quickly interjected:

“We sing this stuff for a reason. If we didn’t want people to really get into it, we’d just read the Psalms. The singing is important. It works on the emotions, but they are very wary of the word “emotional.” To the congregation, music is still a little bit like magic.”

This sparked a flurry of conversation around the table. Both Dan and Mike reluctantly agreed with Pat’s observations, using this as an opportunity to lament some of the effects of the

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1 Daniel Renstrom, Patrick Downing, and Mike Passaro, interview with author, 19 September 2012.

2 Ibid.
praise and worship boom. Dan said, “There are aspects of the Christian life you can have in your ear, but not all God has for you.” Mike commented on the dangerous theological precedents he felt were set by some of the production elements associated with praise and worship. “Singing with the lights down means we’re uncomfortable being with each other, and having constant keyboard fills means we’re uncomfortable with silence.” It seemed as though each of the three leaders was just as eager to lament the current state of the “worship industry” as they were to talk about the exciting things happening in and around their own congregations.

In praise and worship music, there is a near-constant tension between ideals of “true worship” and “just performing.” The goal of music in a church or parachurch setting is to achieve “true worship,” usually defined as an unmediated encounter with God. “Performance,” on the other hand, carries with it connotations of pretense or artifice; as ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls has observed, evangelical worship leaders are constantly on guard against accusations of “performing” during services. Throughout her dissertation on praise and worship artists, Ingalls uses the Derridean phrase “performance under erasure,” styling the word with strikethrough lettering (“performance”), to indicate the ways in which this category is actively undermined by those who invoke it. Similarly, fan-worshippers invest themselves in “worship” as the appropriate outcome of musical encounters. In explaining why the band Jesus Culture was his favorite at Passion 2013, Josh, a 22-year-old

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3 This tension is similar to one outlined by ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino between “presentational” and “participatory” music-making. See Thomas Turino. Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

4 Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 196–98.

5 Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 202.
attending attendee from Tennessee, explained that “it did not feel as if it were a concert when they performed but more of a worship atmosphere that I really appreciate.”6 Performance might be appropriate in praise and worship’s sister genre of CCM, but it has no place in the practice of music during a worship service.7


All of these saints, and countless others like them, use the word “perform” to suggest spiritual theatricality. Often cloaking the term in verbal italics, or prefacing it with a disparaging “just” (as in “they weren’t real; they were just performing”), they speak of “performance” as the enactment of a put-on role for the purpose of “entertaining” an audience…To perform is thus to pretend. And to pretend, Rev. Harris suggests, is to be insincere. “When you’re saved,” he continues, “the whole thing changes…[Then] it’s not performing. It’s not acting. It’s being sincere.” Saints say that sincerity destroys the pretense of “performance.” Because when singers are sincere, when they are living the life that they sing about, they don’t need to perform. They don’t need to “put anything on.” Their sincerity—their authenticity—will carry the message.8

As Hinson and Ingalls describe in their respective contexts, many artists use a strategy of disavowal to legitimate their music-making as “worship,” erasing the “performance” category in order to highlight the ultimate aim of their actions.

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6 Josh Ellis, email to author, 10 January 2013.

7 The performance/worship divide also has some very pressing legal ramifications thanks to the Religious Services Exemption in US Copyright Law, which states that “performance of a nondramatic literary or musical work or of a dramatico-musical work of a religious nature, or display of a work, in the course of services at a place of worship or other religious assembly” does not constitute a violation of copyright. While the law clearly states that this exemption is dependent upon the works in question being used “in the course of services at a place of worship,” the article has traditionally had a fairly broad definition of “religious assembly,” long being used to cover gatherings which occur in “non-religious” venues such as auditoriums, stadiums or theaters. But while the Religious Services Exemption includes “worship” in any venue it might occur, it excludes activities at a place of worship that are for social, educational, fund-raising or entertainment purposes. As long a musical presentation is “worship,” everything is on the legal up-and-up, but as soon as it capsizes into performance, ASCAP and BMI come a-knocking.

8 Hinson, Fire in My Bones, 237.
The topic of bodies and their role in worship experiences has been especially striking from an ethnographic perspective because of the distinct lack of discussion about it in so many of my interactions with worship leaders and fan-worshippers. In the previous chapter, I explored the ways in which praise and worship music serves as an opportunity for vernacular theology, both for worship musicians and for their congregants. But in their comments at lunch that day, each of the worship leaders seemed to acknowledge that there was a divide between the intentional theology that was being crafted into the lyrics and music by songwriters and the personal, emotional experiences of their congregations.

In this chapter, I consider the ways that praise and worship music entrains and constructs a certain understanding of the body for its fan-worshippers, primarily through evocations of this performance/worship divide. In order to distinguish communal worship gatherings from other types of devotional practice, worship leaders will frequently refer to these church or parachurch worship events as “corporate worship,” indicating that these are times when the church body comes together with the purpose of worshipping. This collective sense of worship is important and is the focus of the end of this chapter, but first, I explore another sense of the word, namely the ways that Passion’s sounded worship operates at the level of individual bodies or “corpora.” I then consider these individual bodies in a “corporate” or collective context, documenting the ways in which worship music provides a sense of connectedness for its participants. Both of these topics lead to a discussion of Passion Conference as an internationally active “corporation,” which occupies a portion of the next chapter. In each of these cases, I uncover the ways that the tensions between
“performance” and “worship” construct the modes of bodily engagement undertaken by musicians and fan-worshippers.

Passion(ate) Acoustemology

At Passion, music is not only the most frequent communal activity—occupying more than three hours on each of the conference’s four days—it is also one of the most fundamental. As I examined in the last chapter, evangelical belief is consistently negotiated through experiences and metaphors of musical sound. And by utilizing their live web stream, extensive online media content, and recordings, musical performances from the Passion Conference reverberate beyond the walls of these events themselves and become situated in a variety of local and personal worship practices. These performances help to create a phenomenological lexicon of “authentic” worship that is largely reified in the form of sonic experience. For instance, Elizabeth, a 25-year-old Passion attendee from Indiana, said:

I think that many times I find it hard to put my feelings into words and don’t always know how to express myself in the best way. I feel that being able to worship through music allows me to express some of these feelings. It is a way for me to grow in my relationship with Christ and open up my heart to Him... When I listen to worship music it just opens my heart and lets the love of Jesus flood into me.9

For Elizabeth, as for a host of Passion attendees, music is essential to facilitating divine encounters because it operates at the level of bodily feeling and experience in a way that text does not and because it provides a bounded, repeatable way to do so.10

9 Elizabeth Brady, interview with author, 3 January 2013.

10 I cover both of these points—the importance of embodied habitus of listening and the repeatability of sensational forms—in much greater detail in the previous chapter.
The shared identities embedded within Passion’s events and media releases are often one of the primary ways that young evangelical attendees come to understand themselves within a broader religious context. Jessica, a 21-year-old Passion attendee from Georgia, told me,

I was born and raised in the Catholic Church until Passion 2012 when my whole view on worship was changed. Passion introduced me to a completely new style of spiritual music, a style that I love listening to! To me music is very significant in my life; it always has been…but ever since I have started listening to music like what is performed at Passion, I feel closer to God every time.11

In Jessica’s case, a move into Passion’s “completely new style of spiritual music” was also a move out of her existing religious structure of Roman Catholicism.12 Jessica described to me how she had chosen to leave the Catholic Church that her parents attended in order to attend a non-denominational evangelical church with worship more similar to what she found at Passion. During this difficult transition, her piety was sustained beyond the boundaries of Passion events thanks to the support of its sixstepsrecords recordings.

But Passion is not only an event or media network that facilitates worship on a grand scale. It is also an event that dictates the shape of worship in local churches. The big Passion events serve as a kind of trade show where songwriters signed to its sixstepsrecords label plug their songs and local worship leaders look for new material. More than sixty percent of the songs performed at the main Passion 2013 event in Atlanta, Georgia, for instance, were

11 Jessica Long, e-mail to author, 16 January 2013.

12 In conversations with event-goers, I heard a surprising number of stories that paralleled Jessica’s move from Roman Catholicism into what they considered the more vibrant faith represented by the Passion Conference. In nearly every instance, a person would describe “knowing about” Jesus from his or her Catholic background, but never truly “knowing” Him before attending a worship event at Passion. This is evidence of a much deeper issue between Protestants and Catholics in the United States that speaks to the divide between theological “knowledge” and embodied experience with which this dissertation is broadly concerned.
new releases; artists premiere the songs at these events each year because they know that local church leaders are paying attention. Within hours of an event’s close, performances captured on cellphone cameras or through Passion’s own video web stream are posted to YouTube and transcribed by worship leaders all over the world. This new catalogue of songs is further solidified on Passion’s yearly live album, typically recorded at a big Passion event each January and released each March.

When asked about the likelihood that he would use one or more songs from the Passion 2013 live album at his local church in the coming year, Drew, a 25-year-old worship leader from Nashville, Tennessee, commented, “I will most likely have the whole album charted with chords before the end of the first day I get it.”13 The rapid incorporation of Passion’s songs into the repertoires of individual congregations entwines Passion’s musical markers with those of local, weekly church experience. As the songs begin to be played in the worship gatherings of local churches, those members of the congregation who attended the Passion event experience its songs as a sounded memory of their time in the Georgia Dome, while those who did not attend the event quickly learn the songs as well as their associations with Passion from fellow congregants. Then, if other members of the congregation attend a Passion event in the future, the event already bears the marks of their local church experience, which further perpetuates this cycle of association.14 Even though the main


Passion event may only occur once per year, the Passion brand weaves itself into local church experience, creating a stable and consistent marker of evangelical identity.

But Passion has an wider impact than even its ability to dictate the repertoire and roadmaps of evangelical worship performance in the United States. Through its events and recordings, Passion dictates the shape and even definition of “worship” itself for many musicians and fan-worshippers. Everything from a band’s membership, the artists’ visual self-presentation, their instruments and sound gear, and the specific video and light effects are noted and emulated by those responsible for producing worship services in local churches. Passion scripts an entire way of approaching worship and worship production that is then emulated by evangelical communities all over the world. In this way, even songs that are not part of the explicit Passion repertoire are still deeply enmeshed in the media network that Passion creates. In my conversation with Drew, he seemed to assess the impact of Passion on his own worship leading less as a body of resources than as a style or school of thought:

By the time I was old enough to understand what music really was and could it be in my life, I had been listening to Passion albums for a few years. This output of music really molded my style as a musician, songwriter, and worship leader, so the worship services I craft now are extremely similar to what you see at Passion conferences and Passion City Church [in Atlanta]…I think I have all the previous Passion conference albums as well as the albums of the individual artists on the sixsteps[records] label…I have learned a great deal about writing church music from these examples. Outside of a professional arena, these albums have sort of helped shape my tradition of worship and how I relate to God.15

15 Ibid.
The mediatized forms of experience that are deployed at Passion events and contained in Passion audio/video recordings entrain a certain spiritual and musical habitus that is not fully reducible to any account of the forms themselves. If Passion has a “style,” as both Jessica and Drew both suggest, it is clearly not something that can be exclusively tied to those recordings officially released through Passion’s media channels. The Passion “style” also includes ways of writing, listening to, and experiencing music that amount to a sonic way of being in the world rather than a neatly bounded set of musical products. Involvement in Passion events and with Passion recordings more closely resembles what ethnomusicologist Steven Feld has called an “acoustemology.” In creating a portmanteau of “acoustic” and “epistemology,” Feld calls attention to the ways that experiences and interpretations of sound are essentially bound up with the ways that we understand the world and ourselves. For Drew, as for many evangelical musicians, the sounds of Passion have fundamentally shaped the ways that he knows and experiences himself as a religious subject.

**Narratives of the Self**

As I argued throughout the last chapter, prioritizing sensory experience and the body as sites of meaning-making pushes the theological conversation beyond the traditional realms of text and propositional belief. But phenomenological examinations of religious practice tend to prioritize “live” religious gatherings in their analyses. Even when scholars consider

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media products like recordings or YouTube videos, these products are believed to be accessories to or records of a live religious gathering rather than as artifacts that create meanings on their own terms. But increasingly, mediated or mediatized contexts constitute the primary sources for the religious experiences of most parishioners. In *Religion in the Media Age*, Stewart Hoover observes that media often provides the building blocks for what he calls “plausible narratives of the self,” through which religious persons come to understand themselves as part of a particular religious life-world. These self-narratives offer two resources to religious believers: (1) a “symbolic inventory” of raw material out of which to continually (re)fashion a narrative of themselves as religious subjects and (2) an “interpretive context” in which to make sense of the self-narrative they’ve constructed. By examining these narratives closely, we find evidence of the ways that individuals negotiate with [media] symbols and resources, what they think of them, how they use them, and how they construct world of meaning of out them. They can also tell us how those resources are articulated, understood, and used by particular people in particular locations.

The self-narratives that surround interactions with music at Passion help to construct specific notions of emotion and the body because of the ways that they privilege music as a site for sacred experience. Performance studies scholar Jill Stevenson has argued that musical sets in megachurch worship are primarily included at the beginning of worship gatherings because

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19 Ibid., 95.
of their capacity for “activating the bodies of congregants by situating them within a
sensually overwhelming and highly energized encounter.”

Many of the parameters of experience activated by these media encounters, however,
are uncommon or even explicitly excluded from evangelical reflection. Hoover argues, in
fact, that one of the primary functions of media is to present

a particularly fertile source of symbolic resources expressed through modes of
religious experience that have been “repressed” by clerical authority over the
course of the mid-to-late twentieth century. These modes include “the visual,”
the body, objects, ritual, music, and “experience” itself.

Because of their repression, these modes of expression are often undertheorized within the
religious traditions themselves, but will show up as an integral part of the religious narratives
of the self constructed by believers. As parishioners use new forms of media to explore these
until-recently-repressed modes of religious expression, scholars should pay particular
attention to the ways that these resources are included in practitioners’ self-narratives of
religious identity. In the series of case studies below, I look at a few places where these
modes of experience manifest themselves most clearly in evangelical worship music.

The Heart of Worship

In the late 1990s, future sixstepsrecords artist Matt Redman found himself
temporarily released from his job as worship leader at Soul Survivor church in Watford,
England. For six weeks, the pastor decided to eliminate the sound system, as well as Redman


\[^{21}\text{Hoover, \textit{Religion in the Media Age}, 279 [emphasis in original].}\]
and his band, in favor of purely *a cappella* singing. Redman remembers that the idea behind this exercise was to recapture something that had been absent from their recent worship gatherings.

There was a dynamic missing, so the pastor did a pretty brave thing. He decided to get rid of the sound system and band for a season, and we gathered together with just our voices. His point was that we’d lost our way in worship, and the way to get back to the heart would be to strip everything away.

In 1999, Redman released a song entitled “The Heart of Worship,” which was based on his experiences during and after this six-week experiment. Redman’s song spent almost 10 years on the CCLI Top 25 list and has spawned no less than 80 cover versions since its release.

According to the song, the goal of worship music in general, and worship leaders in particular, is not to *provide* anything to the congregation, but rather to “strip away” the dangerous pretenses of performance.

**VERSE 1**

*When the music fades*

*And all is stripped away*

*And I simply come.*

*Longing just to bring*

*Something that’s of worth*

*That will bless Your heart.*

**PRECHORUS**

*I’ll bring You more than a song,*

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22 This “experiment” undoubtedly connects to the radical simplification of worship practices including the whitewashing of church walls and dismantling of church pipe organs undertaken by figures like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli during the Protestant Reformation.


24 One reason for this song’s incredible popularity is, perhaps, the way that it deals so explicitly with the performance/worship problem. The seeming irony of putting such a forceful disavowal of music in the form of a song may actually be understood as part of the “safety valve” strategy outlined below in reference to the David Crowder*Band.*
For a song in itself
Is not what You have required.
You search much deeper within,
Through the way things appear,
You’re looking into my heart.

CHORUS
I’m coming back to the heart of worship
And it’s all about You, it’s all about You, Jesus.
I’m sorry, Lord, for the thing I’ve made it
When it’s all about You, it’s all about You, Jesus.

With the seemingly contradictory opening line, Redman begins the song by expressing his distaste for the artifice that even music itself provides to the act of worship. He further reinforces this performance/worship divide with his discussion of “a song” in the pre-chorus. “Song,” here, is a container in which worship might be placed rather than a form of worship on its own. The gesture of song is rendered meaningless without being supported by the proper contents of one’s heart. The chorus, then, provides a solution to the problem. The “heart of worship” is a total, undivided focus on Jesus, with or without the artifice that music provides. Worship is about one’s bodily and mental state rather than the vehicle through which one achieves it. In this way, the performance/worship divide is essential to evangelical self-understandings of the body, which are, in turn, essential to reifying the performance/worship divide. Redman’s lyrics encapsulates some of the ways that this is most commonly contested within evangelicalism.

On the forums of WorshipTheRock, a social media platform for worship leaders, this performance/worship problem is an all-too-common topic of conversation. In March 2011, a UK-based worship leader named Jordan Neudorf began a thread called “Worship De-railed”
in which she expressed her frustration with how technically challenging many worship songs had become. She asked:

Am I the only one who’s noticed a shift in popular “worship”? I’m finding it increasingly more difficult to find congregation appropriate songs. By that I mean simple choruses that can be quickly and easily learned without requiring extensive musical training or an impeccable memory to keep up with the four verses, 10 line chorus, pre-chorus, bridge and tag. It seems to me that many of the most popular worship groups have turned worship into a performance, not a personal experience with God. I’d like to know how other churches and worship leaders are dealing with this.25

In her comments, Neudorf establishes a clear break between worship and performance. Performance is equated with musical complexity while worship is associated with “a personal experience with God.” Her post spawned over eight pages of responses, many of them simply affirming that they had personally worried about this same issue (or lamenting the number of times that this exact conversation had been raised previously on the site).

The primary response of the online community was to encourage Neudorf to find a balance between musical interest and accessibility that would be right for her congregation. The desire to strike a balance of this kind is something that has been present in Christian practice at least since the Protestant Reformation. Andreas Karlstadt, theologian and teacher to Martin Luther, claimed that music, like other iconic representations in worship, ran the risk of distracting participants from the true worship of God alone. But he framed his argument in a way that specifically implicates skill as a potential detriment to musical worship. He reasoned that if we are to present music to God as part of our worship, we would clearly want this music to be of the highest order. And yet such excellence would require the performer to

concentrate so fully on the execution of the music that God would no longer be the focus.²⁶ In short, a musical presentation that might be good enough to count as “worship” is thus always in danger of negating its ability to count as properly “worshipful.” As laid out by Karlstadt—and internalized within certain parts of the Protestant tradition—the relationship between performance and worship is dialectical.

This raises the question: how are the “most popular worship groups,” which Neudorf derides as the source of her problem, accommodated in light of this skill/sincerity dialectic? Many on the sixstepsrecords label are Grammy-award-winning and multi-platinum selling artists and they are certainly all professionally-compensated and highly-skilled performing musicians. In part, these artists are assimilated through a discourse of “talent” rather than one of “skill” or “virtuosity.” Discussing someone like Chris Tomlin as “skilled” or “virtuosic” might seem to imply that his exceptional ability resulted from his own personal effort or determination. Discussing Tomlin as “talented,” however, places the origin of his skill with his creator. Despite all the hard work that Tomlin undoubtedly puts in, he is talented because God made him that way.

Artists like Tomlin are also able to disavow their unique skill because of a counterintuitive authority afforded by the skill itself. In a 2013 CCM Magazine feature called “Chris Tomlin: He's No Hero,” magazine editor Caroline Lusk perfectly illustrates this trope. When asked about his most recent record, Burning Lights, Tomlin explained:

I think people might think I have a special connection to God, I’m no hero. Obviously King David was out watching over his sheep, singing and pouring

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out to God long before he’s given a platform. And even when you have it, you’re still just a shepherd boy, singing a song to God. To the people reading this, you are the burning lights. I’m hoping to sing over the people a song that will lift them up. There’s something special about music.  

In this statement, one can clearly see Tomlin’s attempt to minimize his own involvement in the stratospheric fame and success he has enjoyed, even if he tries to do so by comparing himself to the most famous songsmith in the Judeo-Christian tradition. His album, *Burning Lights*, was the number one best selling album in the US the week it was released—due in no small part to its availability for exclusive pre-order at Passion 2013—but Tomlin clearly wants to deflect any attention back to God.

Perhaps even more telling, however, is the way that the author responds to Tomlin’s assertions. Immediately following his deferential statements, Lusk continues:

And who better to make such a statement than one of the most sung songwriters in the world, which Time Magazine asserted in 2006. But it’s not the numbers or accolades or awards that drives Chris. Rather, it’s his unshakable belief in the power of song to give our hearts the words of praise that navigates his world—from the songs he writes and sings to the artists he works with.

For Lusk, it is precisely Tomlin’s status as a world renowned musician, and one acknowledged by mainstream press like Time Magazine, that gives him the credibility to renounce himself as uniquely gifted. Whatever the outside world might perceive as “skill,” Lusk and Tomlin quickly naturalize as the workings of the divine. In the final lines of her

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28 The broader incorporation of a “fame” or “celebrity” discourse within the Passion organization will be taken up in the next chapter.

29 Lusk, “Chris Tomlin: He’s No Hero”
profile, Lusk makes this equation clear when she observes that “Tomlin may not be a hero by his standard, but for sure, he is in great pursuit of the mightiest hero of all.” Tomlin’s uniqueness, if it exists at all, is not in his own power, but in his desire to seek a higher power.

These disavowal strategies are undertaken by worship leaders in local churches as well. After a host of responses to Neudorf’s inquiry, one WorshipTheRock user ventured a “devil’s advocate” counterargument suggesting that preparing thoroughly was the most respectful and “worshipful” thing one could do. Neudorf responded to his objection by saying:

I am what one could call a “highly trained musician” and played classical piano for many years earning honours with the Royal Conservatory of Music. However, when I’m leading worship, singing and playing, I don’t have the time to think about a G#m7sus chord. I need to be able to just play.  

And in another post from just a few minutes later, she continued:

I like the simple stuff. If a member of the congregation can grasp a song the first or second time we sing it, odds are that they are going to be able to remember it throughout the week. It’s the simple songs like “Jesus Loves Me” that stick with us forever and they become a part of our life’s worship.

In some sense, the argument she is making would not work the same way if she was not a trained musician. It is precisely because she has already undergone formal musical training that she can now disavow its usefulness in the worship context and advocate for the embrace of “the simple stuff.”

Since 2009, my father has served as the pastor of King’s Cross, a non-denominational church in Tullahoma, Tennessee, and he has commented on this same type of dialectical


31 Ibid.
relationship to skill or expertise in the sphere of preaching. He has remarked that his congregation clearly expects him to come to the issues in his sermons as a type of expert, with knowledge of other theologians’ opinions, Biblical commentaries, and perhaps even the particulars of the original Greek or Hebrew texts. He is not, however, expected to use any of this expertise to validate his reading of the text within the context of a sermon. As with musical expertise above, it is precisely his knowledge of these sources that allows him to cast them aside and provide his congregation with the pragmatic life application which typically grounds his presentation of the text. Like Tomlin or Neudorf above, it seems that his expertise lies in an ability to “strip away,” providing an unmediated encounter between the congregation and the divine with the biblical text serving as a mediator.

**Vanishing Mediators**

The push and pull between trying to create something worthy of God and trying to surrender oneself leads to a middle space that is perhaps more conducive to worshipping than either of the two extremes. As another WorshipTheRock user named Carl Carlson explained in response to Neudorf’s question:

> Our worship team is sometimes guilty of playing a new song that is difficult to learn. And if the congregation finds it tough to learn they tend to quit worshipping due to the effort focused on learning the song. (Same concept applies to instrumental solos ... is the congregation still praising the Lord, or are they admiring your talent?). Song selection is really quite important, as well as the arrangement. I like to keep in mind why is there a worship team instead of just a stereo .... we are there as a tool of the Spirit to bring the congregation into a worshipful experience with God.\(^{32}\)

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In this post, Carl seems to demonstrate clearly how the performance/worship dialectic works. He suggests that there is a tipping point of musical complexity past which “worship” might capsize back into “performance.” If the congregation is expending too much mental or bodily effort trying to learn or accurately sing the song, they might quit worshipping. The job of the worship leader then is to find a balance in this relationship. Unlike the stereo, which indiscriminately reproduces the sounds on recordings, the worship leader is supposed to be more sensitive to the needs of their community and to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Thus, Carl identifies the primary function of worship music and musicians: they are to function as “a tool of the Spirit to bring the congregation into a worshipful experience with God.” I argue that worship bands and the songs they sing serve as “vanishing mediators” between their congregations to the divine.

The concept of a “vanishing mediator” is an idea that originates in the dialectical thought of G.W.F. Hegel, but has been brought to prominence in recent years by the work of Marxist thinkers Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek. Both Jameson and Žižek use the term “vanishing mediator” to describe a person, idea, or institution that transforms one social order into another and immediately disappears once the transformation is completed. In fact, the transformation of one sociality into another is often predicated upon the disappearance of the mediator. As Jameson puts it, the vanishing mediator “permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms…[it] serves in its turn as a kind of overall bracket or framework within which change takes place and which can be dismantled and
removed when its usefulness is over.”  

In the essay in which he coined the term, Jameson uses the example of Protestantism mediating between feudalism and capitalism. He argues that Protestantism was the “catalytic agent” for universalizing the foundational “work ethic” necessary for capitalism to take root in feudal society. But with the rise of capitalism, Protestantism “vanished” as an explicit part of the social order, being reabsorbed into the capitalism as just one of many religions in the open marketplace. Even though Protestantism provides the ideological material necessary for capitalism to emerge, any explicit or exclusive connection between Protestantism and capitalism would have precluded its ability to be accepted as feudalism’s replacement. In short, the foundational role of Protestantism is predicated on its ability to vanish, allowing capitalism to occupy center stage for itself.

I argue that songs and musicians in praise and worship music serve as vanishing mediators in precisely this way, occupying a catalytic position between their congregations and the divine which is most effectively achieved by their erasure. In fact, the opening words of Redman’s “Heart of Worship” seem to explicitly name this vanishing mediator function. In true instances of worship, “music fades” as one is ushered into the presence of God. Thus, a good musical performance or recording actually strips itself away, leaving only a fully transparent connection point between fan-worshippers and the divine. At the end of the second evening session at Passion 2013, Giglio extended an altar call, inviting people to commit their lives to God. As the worship gathering drew to a close, he made a final emotional appeal by saying: “There is no music playing. There is no mood or tone. There’s nothing standing between you and the cross of Christ. There are no formulas. There are no

gimmicks. There isn’t even any music playing.”

Here, Giglio frames music as a “gimmick” which positions itself between believers and “the cross of Christ.” By calling attention to the absence of a musical underscore in this moment, Giglio unmasks the function that music is intended to play in the moments when it is present. Music is valuable only insofar as it is immediately effaced by the presence of God.

In his study of transcendence and African American gospel music, Glenn Hinson has observed that verbal descriptions of transcendent worship experiences are actually exceedingly rare. Often at the center of these narratives is a missing link, an aporia which marks the moment of divine encounter.

Testimonies and conversion accounts tend to chronicle the events leading up to and away from this moment; as narratives of action and sequence, these plotted accounts testify to the purposeful movement of God’s will…The language is direct and sensuous, drawing listeners into the union of narrative identity. But at the recounted moment of encounter, when spirit and Spirit meet, the words fall strangely silent….The paramount experience thus remains undescribed.

This recognition of an inability or even unwillingness to speak in the face of God’s ultimate transcendence has been a feature of the Christian tradition since its inception through “apophatic” theology or “negative” theology. This mindset is reflected in the comments of one worship leader who told me, “Even if I wrote thousands of songs, it wouldn’t begin to touch on all of the things there are to say about God.”

The quantitative and qualitative


35 Hinson, Fire in My Bones, 17.

36 In addition to the inadequacy of description to capture the power and complexity of these encounters, Hinson also mentions a common concern with “differentiating between fervent enthusiasm and the ministrations of the Spirit.” Another reason why it might be helpful to leave these transcendent experiences undescribed is to delineate them from experiences of intense emotion which, while difficult to articulate perhaps, do not completely exceed the descriptive possibilities of language. See Hinson, Fire in My Bones, 23.
otherness of God points to the inadequacy of any language to describe God. Welch also commented that the lights, music, and production at his megachurch’s Sunday gatherings were designed to help communicate the “otherworldliness” of God to his congregation. These encounters are not left undescribed because they aren’t important to worshippers’ understandings or experiences of themselves as religious people. Rather, the lack of descriptive engagement with these moments is precisely because they exceed the resources of semantic meaning and therefore must be talked around or hinted at rather than being tackled head on.

The predominantly white evangelical parishioners with whom I did my fieldwork would not place nearly as high a premium on experiences of “the Spirit” as the black Pentecostals in Hinson’s work, but I found that a similar pattern characterized discussions of the spiritual or religious work accomplished by worship music as a vanishing mediator. When asked about the role that Passion recordings and media products played in her personal religious practice, Jessica, the former Roman Catholic Passion attendee I discussed above, told me, “The Passion CDs play a huge role in my life. Every time I feel down or am struggling over something, I turn my CDs up loud and sing until I can talk to God about whatever is going on in my life at that moment.”

This response seems to take the form that Hinson described above. Jessica evocatively describes the lead up to her experience, “feeling down” or “struggling,” as well as the aftermath, “I can talk to God about whatever is going on.” The moment of transformation, however, is left largely undescribed. The word that seems to appear between the lead-up and aftermath, right in the heart of this transformational

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37 Jessica Long, interview with author, 3 January 2013.
space in Jessica’s description, is “sing,” which shows the importance of music in the lives of so many Passion attendees. Jessica is able to transform her “struggling” feeling into a divine encounter by engaging in singing. But the singing itself seems to disappear from view; the important moment of the story is her renewed relationship with God, not the music itself.

Several WorshipTheRock users mentioned their struggles with maintaining proper engagement from a congregation while teaching new songs. Focusing on the act of learning a new song seems to tip the balance heavily in favor of musical complexity/difficulty and render the mediating function of songs more opaque. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the Passion Conference functions as a clearinghouse for new material, allowing artists on the sixstepsrecords label to promote their newest recordings and compositions. But Passion organizers are quick to evoke the language of vanishing mediation here as well, reminding people that the process of learning these new songs is quickly eclipsed by the arrival of the divine. After one of the opening worship sets that contained a particularly large number of new songs, Louie Giglio jokingly asked the crowd. “We do all these new songs, but it feels like we already know them. How do you do that? God must be involved in that.”38 Giglio explains the seeming ease and enthusiasm with which the crowd was engaging in the new songs as evidence of God’s direct intervention in that worship set. Even though the debut and publicizing of new songs is a core part of Passion’s identity as an organization, their success in doing so is measured by the speed with which these songs recede into the background of attendees awareness. One gets the sense that if an attendee didn’t notice that any of the songs at Passion were new—or even if one didn’t notice that there were any songs at Passion at all

—this wouldn’t be a failure of songwriting imagination or invention. Rather, it would be evidence that the artists were doing their jobs with the most aplomb.  

“Resources” for Worship Musicians

One can further see the tendency of worship musicians and fan-worshippers to place songs, musical performances, and even their own bodies under erasure through the growing body of “musical resources” designed for worship leaders. “Resources” is a somewhat euphemistic term used in praise and worship circles which helps to embed the production and consumption of commercial recordings and within a tradition of church publishing and curriculum development rather than within the popular music industry. During the second day of Passion 2013, Louie Giglio pointed out to attendees that Passion’s 268 Store would be open during their afternoon break if they would like to do some shopping. He was quick to add, however that “the 268 store is not about commerce, it’s about resourcing you.”

Almost all of the Raleigh and Durham-based worship leaders with whom I spoke were reluctant to describe their commercial recordings as “records” or “albums,” preferring instead to use the word “resources.” Similarly, when I spoke with Jonathan Welch, worship coordinator at The Summit Church in Raleigh, he corrected my use of the word “record” to describe their recent recording project, _Jesus In My Place_. When I asked him about the reception of that project, he didn’t talk “sales” or “market share,” but enthusiastically noted

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39 This “vanishing mediator” function of new songs is also reminiscent of Bernice Johnson Reagon’s comment that the function of a song in the African American context is often to place a gathered group “in singing.” The song is merely a tool that enables the coordination of group singing, rather than a result in and of itself. See in particular the interview with Bernice Johnson Reagon by Bill Moyers, “The Songs Are Free: Bernice Johnson Reagon and African-American Music,” television broadcast, PBS, 1992.

40 Louie Giglio, “Second Afternoon Session” (speech, Passion 2013, Atlanta, GA, 2 January 2013).
that that “several other churches had started using the resources.” With the growth of the worship apparatus which I described in my first chapter, the word “resources” has also come to refer to a host of products which are marketed to worship musicians. Below, I examine one particular purveyor of these resource commodities and how they are used to navigate the performance/worship divide. I argue that many of these resources are designed to help worship musicians create professional sounding results while erasing themselves as embodied performers.

WorshipTutorials was created by Durham, North Carolina-based worship leader Brian Wahl in 2008. As of early 2015, WorshipTutorials engages more than 70,000 subscribers through his website, YouTube channel, social media presence, and email subscription list. In 2013, Wahl began producing a resource called “Pads,” which essentially consist of twenty-minute-long ambient sound files in all twenty-four major and minor keys. When visiting the WorshipTutorials site, “Pads” are one of the most heavily advertised resources. Information about them appears as part of a rotating group of ads in the middle of the homepage as well as in a static top and side menu bar on nearly every page of the website. On his website, Wahl explains the new product thusly:

Pads create instant emotion and atmosphere in any environment, and they can completely transform your worship sets and create awesome transitions. In most modern worship music, you can hear an atmospheric ambient texture that sits underneath everything. It gives the music a sense of depth and weight and it helps glue everything together. With Pads, you can have that sound present in all your songs and other service elements with a tap of a button… When you finish a song, let the pads continue. Let them play during prayer moments. Bring them in towards the end of a moving sermon or talk. Crossfade between pads in different keys for smooth transitions from a song

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41 Jonathan Welch, interview with author, 30 September 2012.
in one key to a song in another key. During your worship sets, you can have a music bed that never stops playing which makes for a much more cohesive worship experience.42

Since the gap between every song is an opportunity to remind everyone that there’s a band performing, these transitions need to be as seamless as possible. The Pads serve to disembody the worship performers, making them seem like organic features of the room’s ambient soundscape.

The effect of keyboard-based pads to “glue everything together” in a transparent way is something that Wahl mentioned to me in an interview even before he began developing the “Pads” as a resource.43 In addition to running WorshipTutorials, Wahl also serves as the worship leader for NewHope Church, a non-denominational mega-church based in Durham, North Carolina. But on Sunday mornings, Wahl does not worship with NewHope’s founding pastor Benji Kelley or the 3,000 attendees at the main worship space in Durham. Instead, Wahl and his band are over 30 miles away at a much smaller building in the rural suburb of Garner. In addition to their central campus, NewHope also operates three “satellite campuses” in the Raleigh-Durham area as well as another location in Columbia, South Carolina. This “multisite” or “multicampus” arrangement is becoming increasingly common for so-called “mega-church” communities; The Summit Church and Crossroads Fellowship, two other churches I attended and whose worship staff I interviewed as part of my fieldwork, also operate using this multisite model.


43 Brian Wahl, interview with author, 16 November 2012.
In much of their branding, NewHope describes itself as “one church, multiple locations,” a common strategy for multisite churches. On their website “Welcome” page, designed to communicate the organization of the church to outsiders, they go on to explain:

The beauty of being multisite is that it allows us to replicate the NewHope experience throughout the Carolinas. As a result of technology, we are able to launch new campuses, thus enabling people the convenience of shorter driving distances, a smaller church experience, and greater impact for the Gospel of Jesus Christ!44

In some ways, this multisite arrangement can be seen as a technological balancing act between the two extremes of worship development I discussed in connection with the Jesus Movement in chapter one. Receiving the “NewHope experience” of music and preaching gives attendees the full impact of the mediatized concert-style event, while the smaller satellite location provides all social advantages of intimate coffee-shop-style gatherings.

But the challenge of these multisite set-ups comes when trying to avoid the creation of highly-atomized individual communities to the detriment of the overall church brand. Pastors and worship leaders spend a great deal of time thinking about how to creatively use media to connect them. In all of the multisite arrangements I examined, each of the campuses has its own worship band, but all of the campuses listen to the same sermon, usually preached by the lead pastor at the central campus.45 In some cases, the sermon is broadcast live, as at NewHope, while in others, like the Summit, it is filmed and distributed to the


45 The priority placed on the continuity of the sermon between campuses seems to reinforce Pagitt’s “Information Age model” of evangelicalism which I mentioned in chapter one. See Doug Pagitt. Church in the Inventive Age (Minneapolis, MN: Sparkhouse Press, 2010), 21–24.
satellite campuses via DVD or digital video files. Jonathan Welch, the multisite worship coordinator at The Summit, told me that a large part of his job is to help maintain the “one-church-ness” across each of the sites. He does this by making sure that skilled worship leaders and volunteer musicians are present in each of the satellite church bands and by standardizing worship repertoire at each of the campuses. Despite the different group of musicians, the set-lists between campuses are identical each Sunday morning.

NewHope doesn’t standardize worship set-lists across campuses, which allows the campus-based worship leaders to choose songs that best suit them and their congregations. It may seem like this freedom would be beneficial to those campus worship leaders to make the experience at each campus unique, but it actually created an interesting problem for Wahl. As the pastor reached the final emotional moments of his sermon, the keyboard player at the home campus would inevitably begin a quiet pad underscore to increase the emotional impact of the pastor’s words. Immediately following the end of the sermon, however, the worship band typically plays a final song or two to close out the service. Therefore, the band must find a way to move the congregation’s attention from the pastor and the home campus’s keyboard player on the screen back to the worship band situated in the space at the satellite campus. Wahl explained that he was able to solve this issue by playing his final song in the same key as the final song at NewHope’s home campus and by fading in a canned pad sound which matched this key. The pad helped to create a seamless sonic bridge between the broadcast content from the home campus back into the live content at Wahl’s satellite campus

46 The Summit actually added a Saturday night service, so that they could film Pastor JD Greear’s sermon the night before, making it easier to distribute it to the satellite campuses for Sunday morning.

47 Brian Wahl, interview with author, 16 November 2012.
in Garner. It was the process of developing these pad sounds for his own use that led to the development of “Pads” as a resource for WorshipTutorials.

The use of pads to logistically “glue everything together” and assure that transition moments between worship elements—and even between worship locations—are “seamless” helps to reinforce my analysis of worship music as a vanishing mediator. But these resources also help the worship gathering to more closely conform to the sounds of a professionally-produced live worship album. When Wahl comments that you can hear this pad texture “in most modern worship music,” one can presume that he’s talking about the sound of modern worship recordings and large-scale concert-type gatherings like Passion. And now, one can gain all the “depth,” “weight” and “cohesion” of the worship albums you love “with a tap of a button.” Worship musicians are further disembodied by being made to resemble the background sounds which accompany parishioners in their solitary devotional practices.

The narrative depth and cohesion of their musical underscore is also something that Passion makes an integral part of their self-presentation. Not only are their recordings crossfaded and volume-matched with applause and pad sounds between tracks to make each recording seem like a continuous worship experience, but their live events are often sequenced and cohesively produced like a recording. On the first night of the event, we were asked to split into groups for an activity that Passion calls “triangle prayer.” In a triangle prayer, people are asked to gather in groups of three and form a triangle in which each person prays for the other two. Louie Giglio then guided these groups of three through a prayer

exercise in which people were asked to pray for each other’s past, present, and future. A non-stop keyboard pad underscore continued the whole time that Giglio guided the Georgia Dome full of people through this exercise. At a Passion tour event in Greenville, North Carolina, the narrative shape of the sermon was very closely dictated by a keyboard pad underscore, which closely followed or even dictated the emotional trajectories of the pastor’s words.

Rather than using a canned pad sound, this type of underscore is accomplished at Passion by a live keyboard player responding to events in the space. And while people are clearly fond of the WorshipTutorials pads, a common question arises in the comment sections of nearly every WorshipTutorial webpage, SoundCloud link, or YouTube video in which Wahl describes the Pads resource: how can I create these pad sounds using a live keyboard player? Wahl responds quickly to the majority of questions he receives, but this one remains consistently unanswered. Just recently, Wahl responded to this inquiry by stating that he had used various inputs, including Apple’s Logic software and “ambient electric guitar swells,” but was “currently not releasing the specific settings I used to make the Pads.” While Wahl obviously has an interest in protecting his intellectual property and source of income, I believe that this comment, as well as other “tutorial” resources on his website, demonstrates how the performance/worship divide conditions an understanding of the body through discourses surrounding musical skill.

Navigating Musical Skill

When speaking with musicians during my fieldwork, I often started with a fairly standard opening question about how they came to their careers as musicians and how this related to their personal “faith journeys” as Christians. In the lunch meeting I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Dan was the first to answer. But just as he started to speak, the other two artists at the table, both frequent collaborators of Dan’s, started laughing. Dan explained that when he was hired to lead worship at Providence Baptist Church, an evangelical mega-church of about 3,000 in Raleigh, he hadn’t ever actually played the guitar. Instead, Dan described how he had felt a calling to lead worship and had decided to apply for the position despite the fact that he could not yet competently play an instrument. After accepting the job leading worship for Providence’s college ministry, he approached his friend Mike—also there at lunch—who taught him some basics on the guitar. These rudimentary skills, along with his divine calling, were apparently more than enough to get Dan started.

One might be tempted to view narratives like this with skepticism. On one hand, the story seems implausible; it seems unlikely that a true musical novice would be given such responsibility. Alternately, a church’s willingness to hire someone without the necessary skill-set can be taken as evidence of the poor quality of Christian worship music. Yet throughout my fieldwork, numerous musicians told me some version of this story. After finding themselves in a position where they felt God was calling them into “worship,” they stepped into a role of musical leadership in spite of—or in some cases, because of—a near-total lack of musical facility. This desire to erase their own agency might well grow out of an

50 Daniel Renstrom, Patrick Downing, and Mike Passaro, interview with author, 19 September 2012.
anxiety endemic of the neo-Calvinist theology that permeates so much of evangelicalism at the moment. Not only is musical skill not a requirement of musical engagement for many evangelicals, but it actually constitutes a potential obstacle to true musicality.

True to the name, one of the main resources that WorshipTutorials provides are guitar-based musical “tutorials.” These tutorials fall primarily into three categories. The first is a repository of guitar lessons that teach basic guitar technique. These videos begin with an “introduction” which shows viewers how to hold the guitar and the names of the strings as well as how to read a chord diagram like those they provide on the site. From there, the videos expand under several headings to teach new chords, strum patterns, finger picking techniques, and scales to use in lead guitar lines. The second category is a series of gear demonstrations for guitars, pedals, amplifiers, and microphones that are particularly relevant to the worship musician.

One piece of guitar technology which Wahl seems to focus an inordinate amount of attention on is the capo. In the few years that his site has been up, Wahl has created five different tutorial videos and a printed “reference sheet” explaining the use and selection of capos for worship. This focus seems to reveal at least two distinct aspects of the anxieties I’m attempting to describe in this chapter. First, it makes the guitar an easier technology to navigate without overdeveloping skill. Many worship leaders learn the primary chords in the key of G major and then simply capo to transpose into other keys. But along with this added ease for players, this also contributes to a codified “worship sound” that is tied to the way that chords are voice on the guitar. In fact, a particular set of simplified guitar chords in the

51 I spoke about this theological orientation in much more detail towards the end of the previous chapter.
key of G major have been come so normative for the “worship sound” that one can even find these chord voicings parodied in various forums and YouTube videos.52

The third, and by far the most popular category, is a series of tutorials that are specifically designed to teach musicians how to play and sing some of the most popular contemporary worship songs. As of early 2015, Wahl has created just over a hundred of these song-specific tutorial pages. To see how these work, I’d like to more closely consider the “Resource Page” for Chris Tomlin’s 2013 song “Whom Shall I Fear (God of Angel Armies).”53 Most tutorial pages consist of four distinct parts. First, Wahl plays through the song on acoustic guitar; second, he teaches the song on acoustic guitar by slowly playing through each section of the song and narrating the chord changes with accompanying visual chord charts. These two resources are offered to website or YouTube visitors free of charge. The third resource is a “Chord Chart kit,” which includes both Nashville Number charts and lyric charts in various keys—in this case A, B, C, D, E, and G—and as of April 2015 sells for $1.99. With the fourth resource, “Worship Tutorials Studios,” Wahl creates professionally-recorded multi-track backing tracks for worship leaders to use while performing the song. These downloadable multi-track packages include (1) individual “stem” files for each instrument in the mix54; (2) a full stereo mix file; (3) click and cue tracks; and (4) a “click

52 See in particular, Blimey Cow, “Messy Mondays: How to Write a Worship Song (In 5 Minutes or Less),” 3 February 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhYuA0Cz8ls.


54 In digital audio and film production, a “stem” is used to refer to a mono or stereo submix of audio tracks. In this case, the “stems” refer to mixes of individual instruments which may themselves consist of multiple microphone, overdub, and/or effect layers. See Mitch Gallagher, The Music Tech Dictionary: A Glossary of Audio-Related Terms and Technologies. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2009), 202
split file” which includes the click and cue tracks panned to the left and the full instrumental mix panned to the right.

Although the resources provided by WorshipTutorials are nominally “tutorial,” they seem less straightforwardly so when considered in tandem with these multi-track recordings. The purpose of a musical tutorial would presumably be to create sufficient musical knowledge/skill such that a player could independently execute a previously unknown song. But at WorshipTutorials, the video performances of songs on the website are always Wahl and his acoustic guitar playing along with the backing tracks. And Wahl also states explicitly that the backing tracks he created were designed to emulate Tomlin’s commercial recording as closely as possible. While a guitar player might benefit from using these resources to learn the song, the resources do nothing for developing the capacity of a band to actually duplicate the sounds embedded in the tutorials. A worship leader playing acoustic guitar would still need the backing tracks in order to realize the song as they had learned it. These tutorial resources actually create a total dependence upon the resources rather than building the capacity for independence.

And there are now a host of software programs that serve a similar purpose to WorshipTutorials multi-track accompaniments. “FlyWorship” claims to revitalize one’s passion for the worship experience by instantly providing professional-sounding results. A featured testimonial on their website from UK worship leader Mark Bryan claims:

55 Of course, playing along with commercial recordings is an important mode of musical training among amateurs, but the effect of these tracks is different than that. But to make the “playing along with recordings” analogy work in this case, one would have to imagine playing along with a favorite Beatles record in front of an audience as part of the house band of a local Beatles fan club with someone whispering the unfolding song forms in one’s ear.
Just practicing with Fly has revived a tired and somewhat weary worship leader! With unlimited possible arrangements, songs we’ve sung for years take on a fresh new feel. And to instantly transform from a single acoustic guitar to a full, rounded band sound has helped create an atmosphere in our church where people can really draw closer to God. The result: a renewed passion for worship…  

Another similar product called “Worship Band In Hand” provides tracks that can be manipulated from the company’s proprietary tablet-based app. In this case, the designers assert that having multi-track accompaniments eliminates the stress associated with the complicated “practice sessions” and “replacement musicians,” allowing the worship leader to focus on the most important aspects of the job.

If your worship team or youth group has new musicians, Worship Band in Hand can help develop your team into a dynamic force of worship that sounds like a professional band… instead of complicating your life, you’ll save loads of time with shorter practice sessions and less time searching for player replacements. If someone can’t make it to the service, just unmute that Band Track to have Worship Band in Hand fill-in for the musician. And, since the app is so easy to use, you won't have to spend all your time figuring it out. You can focus on what's important: Worship.

In both of these cases, the prerecorded “band in a box” is presented as a disembodied solution to an embodied problem. These resources provide a more professional-sounding result, which is connected with more dynamic and passionate worship, but without needing to bother with an embodied band of musicians. These products erase anxieties about musical

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57 When discussing the worship apparatus in the first chapter, I mentioned the MediaComplete corporation, which began producing the MediaShout software as a worship alternative to presentation softwares like Microsoft’s Powerpoint or Apple’s Keynote. MediaComplete is the same company that now makes “Worship Band In Hand.”

skill or performance by erasing the need for either one. They allow worship leaders to truly “worship,” serving the same vanishing mediator function for them that the worship leader serves for the congregation.

**Performance Anxiety**

The praise and worship subculture is not entirely unique in its anxieties about “performance” or “skill” among musicians. Within a wide variety of popular music subcultures, there exists a fraught relationship between obvious technical facility and emotional sincerity. One can imagine, for instance, that conservatory training would be seen as an impediment to punk rock’s insistence on raw emotional expression. Media studies scholar Roy Shuker has observed that punk musicians and fans frequently associate musical skill with a “glibness” that is incompatible with authenticity. He goes on to observe that “the frequently alleged musical incompetence of punk bands, however, was largely a myth, often fueled by the band themselves.” 59 In punk, as in worship music, disavowal of skill among musicians is an essential part of the mythology for performers and fans alike. Both communities share a concern with the potential of musical skill to cloud or impair sincerity or emotional directness.

Furthermore, punk has an ethical commitment to amateurism that is often born out of a critique of capitalism. To avoid “selling out,” punk musicians must continue to make music as amateurs rather than leveraging their musical skill for financial gain. While worship musicians and punk musicians are unlikely to share the same critiques of capitalism, I

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suggested in the last chapter that the rise of worship music can be seen as a reaction against the “crossover” ethos of previous decades. Similar to the fear of “selling out” among punk musicians, the crossover phenomenon was perceived by many evangelicals to be surrendering the important pulpit of Christian music to the major labels and market forces who now controlled the Christian music industry. The two most prominent producers of worship recordings of the last twenty years, Passion’s sixstepsrecords and the Australian Hillsong Music, are independent labels owned by church or parachurch organizations.

There is also a strong commitment to amateurism in local churches. The majority of worship musicians, particularly those not in a “worship leader” role, are not compensated for their services. Worship leaders, particularly those working in the service of smaller or younger congregations, also regularly serve in a purely volunteer basis, but even in those cases where a leader is paid, this compensation is rarely enough to allow worship leading to be their only employment. In the extraordinarily expansive and well-funded Hillsong Church network, Tom Wagner has observed that many of the full-time worship leaders are not actually compensated for any of the “performance aspects” of their jobs such as singing, writing songs, or playing guitar for worship gatherings. Rather, they are paid for other activities such as providing pastoral care, carrying out administrative duties, and training other members of their worship team. In return, they offer their skills as performers on a volunteer basis. In this way, they can maintain a literal amateur status even while drawing a paycheck from their church.

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But punk’s ethical insistence on amateurism is matched by an aesthetics of “amateurishness.” Punk musicians are not encouraged to cultivate traditional or conspicuous skill on their instruments or in their voices because looking and sounding like amateurs is a positive aesthetic value in punk communities. Despite the fact that worship music is primarily performed by a network of amateur and semi-professional musicians, these amateurs are not afforded the “amateurish” aesthetics of punk. Rather, worship musicians are expected to perform precisely and competently, so as not to distract their congregations from the activity of worship. If the songs being performed are simply a vanishing mediator between the congregation and the divine, then it makes sense that they would need to be as transparent as possible, unclouded by sloppy or insensitive playing. And alongside rendering the music with sufficient transparency, worship bands are also expected to reproduce or represent the sounds of the professional praise and worship recordings that parishioners have come to know and love.

**Phonograph Affects**

The mere existence of large-scale professional productions like Passion is one driving force in the creation of resources like those produced by WorshipTutorials; but another is certainly the growing importance of recordings in the personal piety of so many evangelicals. In my fieldwork, several people explained that attending the Passion Conference and purchasing the associated recordings had actually impaired their ability to truly “worship” at their smaller home churches. As one Passion attendee described it to me:
I attend a fairly small church and we do have a band that does an amazing job, but I don’t think that they could ever hold a candle to Passion. Our staging is done on a much smaller scale and we work with what we have available with the talent of volunteers within the church and the funds available. I do have the privilege of working on the worship team as a lighting operator so I am able to see what happens behind the scenes of our little operation and can’t even imagine how much goes into putting on Passion 2013. I feel like there are some stylistic things that are similar in the way in which the songs are played and sung; however, I think that the style comes a lot from how the crowd is responding and 200 people is going to be quite different from 60,000-plus people.61

She went on to explain that this disconnect between the production she found at Passion and that of her home church had actually led her to rely even more heavily on recordings in her personal religious practice. Others with whom I spoke explained how they had left their small churches to find larger, more media-savvy churches that could more accurately reproduce the specific and high-production standard for worship that they had experienced at Passion.62

The existence of resources like those provided by WorshipTutorials is essential in allowing amateur bands in local churches to sound like the professionally produced recordings that are indelibly a part of the lexicon of “authentic” worship. This impact of recordings on local performance is similar to what Mark Katz has described as “phonograph effects,” in which the distinctive attributes of recorded music begin to shape live performance

61 Brady, interview with author, 3 January 2013.

62 These stories and others like them also seem to lend credence to the work of James K. Wellman on the potent psychological effects of mega-church attendance. Wellman and his team in the Comparative Religion Program at the University of Washington found that mega-church attendance, particularly during musical worship times, functioned as a powerful “oxytocin cocktail” in the brains of attendees that closely resembled the addictive properties and effects of some narcotics. See James K. Wellman Jr., Katie E. Corcoran, and Kate Stockly-Meyerdirk. “‘God is like a Drug...’: Explaining Interaction Ritual Chains in American Megachurches,” Sociological Forum 29, no. 3 (September 2014): 650–72.
practice. In particular, Katz points out that the repeatability of recorded sound significantly alters listener expectations for live performances. “Sounding like the recording” is clearly a sonic ideal for many worship leaders because of the ways that recordings feature so prominently in the worship lives of their congregants. As I explored in the first chapter, “worship” has come to be associated with an ever-more-specific set of sonic markers as it solidifies itself as a “genre” within the popular music industry. And if “worship” is largely reified by reference to sonic experience, then it makes sense that Passion recordings would be at the heart of many of these referents. In the same way that worship leaders are asked to serve as vanishing mediators between their congregations and the Holy Spirit, it seems they are also asked to mediate between fan-worshippers and their favorite artists.

The function of worship recording in this context is also an excellent example of what literary scholar Elizabeth Outka has called the “commodified authentic.” For Outka, in late capitalism, it is not only important that material culture be “authentic”—that is, tied to some genuine pre-industrial practice—but also that it be commodified and readily available in the marketplace. The benefit of the “commodified authentic” is the way in which it allows consumers to participate in “authentic” material culture without actually having social access to that culture. For example, I am capable of participating in a “commodified authentic” form of Native American basket-weaving simply by going to World Market or Pottery Barn and without having to make any actual social connections with Native American basket-weavers.

63 Mark Katz, Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 8–47.

Similarly, mass-produced instances of “authentic” worship give listeners access to a community of worshippers that isn’t socially available—namely one that consists of 65,000 members and a host of professional musicians. Resources like those provided by WorshipTutorials continue this chain of “commodified authenticity” by allowing amateur bands to purchase a commodity which helps them sound like the professionally-produced recordings that comprise the lexicon of “authentic” worship for their congregants.

Given their purpose to outsource or downplay the role of musical skill, the name WorshipTutorials might ultimately seem counterintuitive, since it seems as though the site is more-or-less shirking the “tutorials” part of its name. However, I would like to suggest that the “worship” in the name is not meant to refer to a musical genre—like MetalTutorials or JazzTutorials—but rather to the activity that the website is trying to teach—as if the name of the website were CookingTutorials. These are not lessons on “how to play worship” music, but rather on “how to worship.” Networks of amateur music-making are an essential mode of production and consumption which help fan-worshippers to locate themselves within local and trans-local communities of affiliation. But thinking about networks of peer-to-peer pedagogy and amateur music-making reveal that, so often, people are using their bodies, their voices and their instruments to negotiate a space other than music itself. So perhaps, given the neo-Calvinist theology of contemporary evangelicalism, it makes sense that worship pedagogy would involve learning to follow the movements of something external to one’s self. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Raleigh-based pastor JD Greear commented that,
“worship isn’t something you do, it’s something that happens to you.” So, perhaps it makes sense, in this case, that the tutorial happens to you rather than the other way around.

Releasing the Safety Valve

David Crowder*Band (DC*B), another prominent worship band signed to sixstepsrecords, presents a very different and singular approach to the performance/worship divide. Instead of attempting to erase performance, DC*B places certain performative elements front and center through a calculated use of sound, lighting, and instrumentation in both live and recorded contexts. However, by legitimating “performance” as its own distinct musical space, the group avoids the “performance problem” precisely by emphasizing its divide from worship rather than trying to erase it. By calling attention to the moments when mediation is present, they make all the more striking the moments when these terms of mediation seem to vanish.

DC*B lead singer and songwriter David Crowder is known for constantly changing or reinventing songs from his catalog. Most notable is his inventive approach to instrumentation, whether accompanying himself with a Guitar Hero controller, for example, or singing duets with a reprogrammed Speak & Spell electronic children’s toy. In doing this, he foregrounds the most performative aspects of the music, often literally demonstrating to audiences his distinctive approach. During the band’s 2007 Remedy Tour, Crowder explained his Guitar Hero controller to an audience at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City.

65 JD Greear, Sermon, Jesus In My Place Record Release Show, The Summit Church, Brier Creek Campus, North Venue Auditorium, 29 April 2012.
This is our drummer, B-Wack... He’s taken your common, everyday Guitar Hero controller—some might say a toy—and he’s turned it into none other than a professional musical instrument. [plays loud, distorted guitar noise]… Actually, it’s just really the two buttons. I think anybody could probably play it. A little music theory real quick: an educational moment for us. This green button, this’ll be your one chord. [plays chord] Oh, that’s nice. And this’ll be your five chord. [plays chord] Necessary. And this’ll be your four chord. [plays chord] What more do you need New York? Three chords and the truth! [applause] Actually we got crazy and threw in the six. That’d be the blue button right there [plays chord].

In this explanation, not only does Crowder demonstrate to the audience how his Guitar Hero controller works, he also foregrounds the musical materials necessary to construct a song in the first place, getting a few self-deprecating laughs by exposing the simplicity of his own songwriting. In the following song, “Neverending,” the audience engages Crowder’s performance through stereotypical rock concert gestures, including jumping up and down and pumping their fists.

One would assume that such gestures towards performance would radically inhibit the audience’s ability to experience Crowder’s music as “worship.” Crowder has clearly unmasked himself as a performer and showed the audience the inner workings of the music they love. But to some extent, it is his explicit naming of these most performative aspects of praise and worship music that enables his audience to worship in the first place. Praise and worship “concerts” are often very confusing spaces for young evangelicals, many of whom are constantly on guard against corrupting “secular” influence. While many scholars have noted the increasing “concertizing” of the worship space—that is the ways in which concert idioms of light and sound production have been adopted into the church—less noted is the

reverse effect. Ethnomusicologist Maren Haynes has observed that among 18- to 25-year-olds, the concert space is becoming increasingly sacralized, with performances by indie bands such as Sigur Rós (discussed in chapter two) or Fleet Foxes just as frequently cited for the spiritual potency as their musical prowess. If concert attendance is already a sacred experience for so many young evangelicals, the lines demarcating a venue show by a worship band from any other concern can be disconcertingly blurry.

In this context, Crowder’s self-conscious performance acts as what Žižek calls a “safety-valve,” which he sees as endemic to so many ideological structures in late capitalism. As an example, Žižek observes that when employees gather at the pub after work to complain about their boss or the oppressive corporate culture, they often believe that their complaining is a subversive act, reclaiming power that has been denied them during the work day and ultimately undermining the boss’s authority. Yet as Žižek contends, this collective act of blowing off steam actually enables them to come back to work the next day. Without a safety-valve such as this, the workers might actually rise up against the oppressive work conditions. It is precisely because of these seeming violations of the social hierarchy that the hierarchy is able to continue unabated.

I suggest that something similar happens in Crowder’s public adoption of performance as a clearly delineated mode of engagement with his music. Because the

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67 More about this phenomenon in the next chapter.


moments when he is holding his Guitar Hero controller are so explicitly understood as performative, the congregation can rest easy that the moments in which he is holding an acoustic guitar are properly “worshipful.” Later episodes from the same Hammerstein Ballroom concert demonstrate this. As the imposing sonic parody of “rock ‘n’ roll” represented by the Guitar Hero controller is replaced by the more “neutral” pop-rock sound of the reverb-heavy electric guitar, those in the audience clearly get the message that this is a song conducive to worship. Rather than jumping around, clapping along, or pumping their fists as they did in the previous song, the audience responds here by lifting their hands and closing their eyes in reverence.

Throughout the DC*B’s output, worship is strengthened, not by the rejection of “performance” as a category of engagement but rather by the total embrace of it. DC*B records frequently invoke a jarring diversity of styles consisting of cover songs, sampled sounds, and new material. DC*B’s drastic changes in musical style are often accompanied by purposeful sonic gestures, such as the static of an old 78-rpm vinyl or jarring jump-cuts from one aural space to another, designed to foreground (1) a studied eclecticism with regard to cultural products such as music, movies, print media, and television; and (2) a conscious acknowledgement of the media in which these cultural products are inscribed.70 While Matt Redman felt that worship leaders needed to “strip away” all the unnecessary materials from their music, David Crowder clearly understands that he needs to build a wall first, so that as the crowd watches him tear it down, they can be assured of his sincerity. Rather than placing

“performance” under erasure, Crowder opens up spaces where “worship” may be placed under erasure, only to emerge again on the other side, even stronger than before.

Bodies of Christ

But, of course, discussions of the performance/worship divide and its implications for the worshipping body thus far do not even begin to discuss the particularities of embodied difference. Because of the ways in which worship constitutes an erasure of the self as an agent, worshippers are often not encouraged to think of themselves as embodied agents. Even those few worship leaders or fan-worshippers I spoke with who were able to articulate something of the way that music acted meaningfully on their bodies did not imagine that the experiences of other bodies might be different than theirs. In particular, during my fieldwork, I noticed a distinct difference in the ways that men and women were encouraged to carry their bodies during moments of “worship.” Scholars studying praise and worship music have noted that some members of the evangelical community use these terms—“praise” and “worship”—differentially to indicate two distinct realms of musical and spiritual performance.71 “Praise” music is generally uptempo and celebratory in lyrical tone. “Worship” music on the other hand is typically slower in tempo and more reverent and explicitly emotional in tone. While I did not come across people who used these two terms differentially in my field work, I did sense a consistent dynamic which differentiated these two types of music-making along gender lines.

71 Ingalls, “Awesome In This Place,” 84–96.
Theologian and historian Martyn Percy has argued that much of contemporary worship music rests upon a sophisticated use of sublimated eroticism in the language. Percy’s argument centers on the tension between two frequently used words in the tradition: an authoritative, omnipotent “Lord” and an intimate, personal “You.” The push and pull between these two signifiers creates an “orectic” space in which people fulfill their most basic appetites and desires. “The dominating power of the “Lord,” along with the intimate love of God (“You”) can be focused into a significance of romance and eroticism, which is highly orectic.”

Percy also argues that because of their submissive position within evangelical theology, women are more capable of embodying acts of “worship” that involve recognizing and submitting to intimacy with the divine. “Conflicting signals are effectively held together in the romantic genre, which women can often master far better than men.”

Percy also observes a consequent, and counterintuitive, type of empowerment that women can experience “through owning their own distinctive somatic religious experience.”

At Passion, as well as in the church worship services I observed, women tended to be more likely to lead the slower, more reverent “worship” songs than the uptempo, celebratory “praise” songs. This is not to say that male singers didn’t also sing more “worshipful” songs, but rather that on the occasions when women led, they led these songs almost exclusively. On the whole, women comprise a significantly smaller segment of the “worship leader”

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73 Ibid., 105.

74 Ibid., 105.

75 Ibid., 101.
population than men. Among the artists on sixstepsrecords, only one, Christy Nockels, is a woman, and her public identity as an artist is almost always tied to her relationship with her husband, primary songwriter, manager, and producer, Nathan Nockels. On the Passion albums between 2006 and 2014, only eleven of the ninety-one tracks were sung by women—nine of these by Nockels—and all but one of these female-led tracks were less than 70 BPM and clearly in this more explicitly “emotional” worship format.

The reasons for this are undoubtedly multiple. Many uptempo praise songs involve dancing or other physical displays from the worship leader that might be more fraught for a female body to negotiate. As Percy observes, although displays of physical affection are often central to charismatic religious celebrations, the sexual ethics these communities is “still configured though a literalistic reading of a selection of Scriptures.” Excited female bodies are perceived to be too sexually distracting or corrupting for the men in the congregation and would therefore be counterproductively non-transparent if used in worship. Additionally, women are more capable of portraying the kind of surrender and receptivity necessary for being the sites of divine action that are so often described in the lyrics and framing devices that surround the reflexive worship songs in question.

The one song Nockels contributed to Passion’s 2013 release Let the Future Begin was called “My Delight Is In You” and was co-written by Nockels and Chris Tomlin. The first verse, prechorus, and chorus of the song reads:

VERSE ONE:
My delight is in You, Lord
On Your Word I set my heart

76 Ibid., 101.
You are peace, You are calm for my restless soul
You light my way through the dark

PRECHORUS:
I want to know You even more
Holiness is my desire
Purify, burn in me
Come and make me clean
You refine me in Your fire

CHORUS:
Here I am, open arms
Draw me close to Your heart
You’re my life, You’re my refuge
My delight
My delight is in You

Particularly in the first verse, one can see the tension between the authoritative “Lord” and the personal “You” that Percy identified. During her performances of this song at Passion 2013, Nockels always represented the opening line of the chorus by extending her arms upward and bending slightly at the knees, a sort of prone posture intended to indicate openness and receptivity to the divine. This was an exceptionally common body posture for women and people of color on stage during these worship moments. There is also a lengthy section of the song in the middle where Nockels improvises vocal exhortations, something which male worship leaders are less likely to do. These ecstatic utterances, which usually involved riffing on certain lyrics of the song which dealt with God’s power or providence, further contribute to her on-stage persona. Nockels serves as a vessel for the movements of the Holy Spirit rather than as accomplished artist in her own right.

In addition to their diminished opportunities to lead the congregation as singers, it is also worth noting that female worship leaders rarely if ever play instruments as part of
gathered worship. This is also true for the exceedingly few musicians of color who are included in the Passion proceedings, and who are rarely, if ever, given the opportunity to lead a song with their voices. At the Passion 2013 event in the Georgia Dome, the stage was divided into two parts. In the middle of the room, there was a small circular stage that held four or five instrumentalists who were all white males. These musicians were, in essence, the backing band for every worship leader that played at Passion. They are primarily comprised of Nashville-based studio musicians who work frequently for sixstepsrecords. In a large ring extending out from this center stage, there stood an array of worship leaders. This ring contained all of the artists on Passion sixstepsrecords label—including Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman, Christy Nockels, David Crowder, Kristian Stanfill, Charlie Hall, Brett Younker—as well as other vocalists who had been involved with Passion tours or events in the past. Throughout the event, the leaders would rotate around the circle so that they could each face a different section of the stadium’s crowd during each of the weekend’s worship sessions. Somewhere near to their location on this ring stage, the male worship leaders would typically keep a guitar, which they would use periodically throughout the service.

As one might imagine, the sheer number of vocalists and instruments present on the stage would create quite a bit of sonic confusion if all the fifteen or twenty different singers and guitar players were all playing the same song at once. To maintain the slick, professional aesthetic for which Passion has come to be known, only a few microphones and instruments around the ring were turned on during any one song, organizing the arrangement around the

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77 Passion does not forbid female participation in the leadership of the organization. In fact, Louie Giglio’s wife Shelly has become a very public face of Passion in recent years. There are, however, certain aspects of the organization that are restricted to male leadership. For instance, the “family groups” into which we dispersed at the end of each evening’s gathering at Passion 2013 were exclusively and explicitly male-led.
voice (and sometimes acoustic guitar) of the worship leader for that particular song. The core band of musicians at the center of the stage were playing more or less continuously throughout the weekend, but those vocalists around the edges seemed largely to wait their turn to be featured in the spotlight.

Two things struck me about this arrangement. First, no female singers or singers of color ever played an instrument over the course of the four days. At the same time, no white, male leader ever made it through an entire worship session without picking up a guitar at some point. In her book *Music, Gender, Education*, Lucy Green uncovers the important associations between masculinity and technology which lie at the center of a variety of musical performance traditions in the West.78 Green observes that women are more frequently used as singers because of the ways that this conforms to gendered expectations about technology.

Within patriarchy, man is constructed as being in control of nature through the harnessing of technology, [with] woman as a part of the nature that man controls…The sight and sound of the woman singing therefore affirms the correctness of the fact of what is absent: the unsuitability of any serious and lasting connection between woman and instrument, woman and technology.79 Not only do Green’s observations help to explain why only the white, male worship leaders played instruments during Passion, they also help to explain the function of the instruments for the male worship leaders. Particularly during the female-led worship songs, male leaders would go and pick up their guitars, even if they did not intend to play them during the subsequent song. Visually and physically, the guitar seemed to function as a technological


79 Ibid., 28–29.
distancing mechanism to keep the male worship leaders from appearing out of control during the more emotional “worship” songs. As long as they were holding their guitars or maybe lightly playing along, they maintained a certain kind of mastery over the emotional musical experience that was unfolding.  

I also noticed how infrequently the microphones for female and worship leaders of color were actually turned on. These worship leaders were frequently displayed on the giant screens hung around the arena where they could be seen worshipping, but their sonic presence in the space was very limited. In the rare cases where the microphones were turned on, they often captured ecstatic flourishes or interjections around the main melodic material rather than a featured part. This relates to one of Green’s further observations about the female singer, that “because the musical sound-source of the woman singer is her body itself, her vocal display appears to remain locked within a self-referring cycle from body to femininity and back again.” The music at Passion events is closely tailored to match their recorded output, which, as I have mentioned, is almost exclusively white and male. Female bodies and bodies of color folded into this soundscape through their visual inclusion, but they are not allowed to impact the soundscape. The silent display of these othered bodies allows them to be properly converted: assimilated into the sonic lexicon of authentic worship.

Passion has traditionally had a complicated relationship to the few people of color who receive public notice within its organization. This is due in large part to a colonial

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80 For more information about how these gendered dynamics play out in specific aspects of a popular music subculture, see Matthew Bannister. *White Boys, White Noise: Masculinities and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock.* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006).

81 This study could be productively expanded by interviewing the sound engineers who work at Passion events.

82 Green, *Music, Gender, Education,* 53.
rhetoric embedded deep within the traditional Western Christian idea of “mission.” As religious historian Dana L. Robert observed:

More recently, following C.S. Song in theology and Edward Said in literary criticism, scholars have analyzed “orientalism” and missionary discourse as means by which the West sought to control the rest of the world by analyzing it and “naming” it according to Western categories. Missionary goals of religious conversion and social change, when functioning in a colonialist context, became a prime means of social control by expansionist powers of their nonwestern victims.\(^83\)

One can see some of this colonialist legacy in the focus on the developing world during Passion’s “God of This City” campaign that I mentioned in the last chapter and it has certainly characterized their on-going campaigns against human trafficking and sex trafficking which emerged from this emphasis. Even in framing the success of their worldwide events for an American audience, Passion organizers often speak in more or less explicitly colonialist terms. They speak of traveling to some of the “darkest” and “furthest” corners of the globe to bring the gospel to “those who need it most,” when practically, their efforts are more or less centered on Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

But this distinction between Western and non-Western bodies is also constructed through music at Passion events. In 2012, Chris Tomlin unveiled a new version of his song “How Great Is Our God,” which he labeled with the subtitle, “World Edition.” Tomlin unveiled this new version at the January 2012 Passion Conference in Atlanta and a recording of this performance later appeared as the opening track on his greatest hits compilation, *Chris Tomlin: The Essential Collection*. At Passion, Tomlin appeared center stage, flanked closely

on all sides by worship leaders from all over the world. These other leaders were all young men, similar in age and style of dress to Tomlin, with the exception of two female members of a Zulu choir at the rear of the stage. Tomlin began the first verse of the song in English before each of the worship leaders took a turn singing a small piece of the song in their native languages, including Hindi, Indonesian, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Zulu, and Afrikaans. After a final chorus, the song ends with a Chinese worship leader closing out the song in Mandarin.

Yet this was not the end of the performance. In a moment not captured on the album version, Louie Giglio appeared at the center of the stage and exhorted the gathered crowd into a time of prayer.

We’re going to sing it again in just a second, but before that we’re going to pray it over the nations. So just as loud as we’re singing, let’s just lift up a voice for the peoples of the earth. I think pretty much everybody in the house tonight’s got a nation on your heart, a people on your heart, and if you don’t, you need one. And I want us to lift up our prayers tonight for the peoples all over this world: those who know Jesus and are walking beside us from whatever place, city, village, town they’re in tonight, worshipping Jesus in the language of their heart…Every voice as loud as you can, let’s lift up the nations and the peoples of the earth tonight to the great God who’s above them all…Thank you that you’re God of the whole world and God of the nations tonight. All the people you have made will come and worship you. All the nations you have made will come and give glory to your name, Lord…

Each of the people gathered at Passion is expected to have a “nation on [their] heart,” meaning that they feel personally convicted by a responsibility to missionize that particular community. The mere idea that one would conceptualize the evangelistic project in

nationalist or ethnic terms seems to perpetuate many of the colonialist dynamics expressed by Robert above.

But perhaps even more significant is the way that he indexes an eschatological sense in which God subsumes these differences. He speaks of a future in which “all the nations you have made will come and give glory to [God’s] name” which frames the event’s transition back to song. After Giglio finished speaking, Tomlin and his multiethnic backing ensemble returned with the chorus of “How Great Is Our God,” but this time, every worship leader sang the words in unison in English. As I noted in the previous chapter, group singing at the Passion Conferences is almost always framed as a “foretaste of heaven.”85 But if this is the case, the implications to the ending of “How Great Is Our God: World Edition” are stark. The Christian community may be diffuse and diverse now, but at the moment of eschatological consummation, these differences will be assimilated into Westernized sameness. In moments like this, Passion not only provides a sensational form for worshippers’s own embodied self-understandings, they also conscript these bodies into a larger narrative of relation with other bodies.

Ethics of Style

Undoubtedly, one of the reasons why Passion is so frequently mentioned as a uniquely potent site for this spiritually-embodied self-understanding is the way that it foregrounds a particular notion of religious community, which brings me to my second sense of the word “corporate.” As Taylor, a 19-year-old Passion participant from Florida, succinctly

85 See Ingalls, “Singing Heaven Down to Earth.”
put it, “music unites me with my church body or whomever I happen to be worshipping with.”\textsuperscript{86} As music provides the materials for working out one’s own embodied relationship with the divine, it also provides a public forum for the negotiation of communal identities. In a near perfect echo of Simon Frith’s observations about popular music, Drew, the 25-year-old Passion attendee and worship leader observed that:

> There are some things that we need to say to God as a group, but words alone won’t suffice. Therefore, we sing. Music is that medium that reaches into a deeper part of ourselves to express something we want desperately to say, but without music would seem overexposed and vulnerable.\textsuperscript{87}

Music is important because of the ways that it allows bodies to bridge the public and private: negotiating identity processes using a shared vocabulary and coordinated in time with one another.

Perhaps the best way to understand the ways that praise and worship music constructs and contests notions of religious community is to use ethnomusicologist Timothy Rommen’s notion of “the ethics of style,” developed in his 2007 monograph \textit{Mek Some Noise}.\textsuperscript{88} Rommen studied the social functions of gospel music in Trinidad by examining the relationships between the public and private, or the self and other. One of the primary theoretical points at the heart of Rommen’s account is philosopher Jürgen Habermas’ distinction between “moral” and “ethical” discourses.\textsuperscript{89} For Habermas, “moral” decisions are

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{86} Taylor Nixon, “Passion Follow-Up Survey” e-mail to author, 10 January 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{87} Wilmesherr, interview with author, 4 January 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Timothy Rommen. \textit{“Mek Some Noise”: Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
\item \textsuperscript{89} Jürgen Habermas, \textit{Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy} (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).
\end{itemize}
made in private, and may or may not be defensible in the public “ethical” framework of one’s community. So, for instance, one might decide on a private “moral” aversion to the consumption of alcohol because of a belief that abstinence from alcohol is the best way to conduct one’s life, but this moral stance might not be “ethically” defensible as part of a community-wide standard of prohibition. Thus, one is constantly in need of checking one’s private sense of “good” against the communally defined sense of “right.”

For Rommen, music in Christian worship is significant because it provides a space for the negotiation between these public and private value systems. He postulates that

[This] model should be understood as giving descriptive shape to a cyclical relationship wherein the individual has access to two modes of divine encounter that feed back into each other. One of these is often referred to as devotional, or private, whereas the other is considered corporate and involves participation in congregational services.

Public and private experiences of worship are always informing each other in a reciprocal fashion. Rommen goes on to examine four of the most important genres in Trinidadian gospel—Gospel-peso, North American Gospel, Gospel Dancehall, and Jamoo—with regard to how they each reify, perform, and traverse boundaries of self/other, public/private, and personal/communal through musical practice. Quoting Simon Frith, Rommen argues that “music constructs our sense of identity through the direct experiences it offers of the body,

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90 In addition to Habermas, Rommen’s approach is also informed by the work of Charles Taylor. In Modern Social Imaginaries, Taylor sets out his idea of the “social imaginary,” a broad understanding of the way a given people imagine their collective social life. Retelling the history of Western modernity, Taylor traces the development of a distinct social imaginary. Taylor’s account of these cultural formations provides a fresh perspective on how to read the specifics of Western modernity: how we came to imagine society primarily as an economy for exchanging goods and services to promote mutual prosperity, how we began to imagine the public sphere as a metaphorical place for deliberation and discussion among strangers on issues of mutual concern, and how we invented the idea of a self-governing people capable of secular founding acts without recourse to transcendent principles. See Charles Taylor. Modern Social Imaginaries (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

91 Rommen, 157.
time, and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives." Rommen uses these broad categories of body, time, and sociability to organize his exploration of the ethics of style.

First, music helps to control or regulate participants’ experiences of their own bodies. Within worship, the body is a site of engagement with the divine. In her study of evangelical megachurches, performance studies scholar Jill Stevenson has noted

The sound of [praise and worship] songs, their liberal use of repetition, and the amplification provided by the sound system combine to produce a very physical worship experience. Spectators feel the service working its way into their bodies and are physically entrained by its infectious rhythms; the images of singers and other congregants on the screens further promote entrainment. As I mentioned in chapter one, choreographed motions or responses to specific lyrics are sometimes used to reinforce the explicitly bodily dimension of praise and worship songs, but one’s bodily experience of the music’s rhythms, volume/density swells, and even just the physical act of singing can be crucial in shaping the embodied self-understanding of fan-worshippers. This self-understanding is then further refined through categories like performance and worship as well as gender and race as demonstrated above. Even though so much of the neo-Calvinist theology that surrounds the Passion Conference seems to be designed to minimize individual agency and the importance of bodily experience, even these minimizations are established experientially in the body. One’s embodied experience of oneself as surrendering to the action of the divine is precisely the function that so many songs seem to script.

92 Simon Frith, quoted in Rommen, Mek Some Noise, 55.

93 Stevenson, Sensational Devotion, 196.
Second, music helps to shape worshippers’ experiences of time. This includes the “repetitions” that Stevenson mentioned above as well as the narrative shape that music gives to religious experience. As I pointed out the previous chapter, many of the decisions that a worship leader makes, both in the songwriting process as well as the roadmapping of a particular performance, are designed to heighten the expectation of a particular climax moment. Worship carries a further distinction of “ritual” time, which constitutes a continuous and distinct space from non-sacred time, and this ritual time is organized with respect to musical trajectories. As demonstrated by the prevalence of “pads” as a continuous underscore, music is used to create a cohesive and continuously evolving worship experience. This same music released later on recordings adds a further dimension to this by organizing time for worshippers in a predictable and repeatable way and connecting listeners to a real or imagined musical occasion that unfolded in time previously.

And third, music models a very particular approach to sociability. Community music-making, especially group singing, generates powerful feelings of togetherness and gives concrete expression to a shared religious identity. At its most powerful, music transforms individual experiences into group experiences by providing a sensational form which is shared by the entire gathered community. For instance, Elizabeth had this to say about her favorite musical moment at Passion 2013:

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94 Many of the songs performed at Passion are sectional rather than linear, meaning that verses, choruses, and other formal sections may constitute semantically distinct spaces. In particular, the band Jesus Culture, which was featured at Passion 2013, has developed a style of charismatic worship that involves moving freely between these sections, even sections taken from different independently released “songs.” This seems to be conceptually related to a move from the aboreal hymnbook to a more rhizomatic display software, akin to a PowerPoint presentation in which slides can be added, omitted, or reordered to suit the occasion. People with whom I spoke at the event consistently identified Jesus Culture as either “the next big thing in worship music” or “the worst thing to happen to worship music in a long time.”
My favorite musical moment was “One Thing Remains” by Jesus Culture. I think that this is my favorite musical moment because I was extremely moved by the events of the evening and this was just like a cherry on top. This is a well-known song by most that were in attendance so the sheer volume was amazing. It was also very cool to feel the presence of Jesus in the dome resting his hand on each and every one of us as well as seeing 60,000 plus people raising their hands in worship for the one and only Jesus Christ. It was a very moving moment.95

Here we see the ways that music allows Passion attendees to interface their individual experiences of divine presence—“the presence of Jesus…resting his hand on each and every one of us”—with an understanding that they are only one part of a much larger encounter with the divine—“seeing 60,000 plus people raising their hands in worship.” Stevenson has also noted this seemingly contradictory effect of music in worship, particularly when effected by multiple layers of technological mediation. “Although congregants are surrounded by many people in a vast space, the music enables each person to experience the service on a very personal, intimate, visceral level.”96

And the experience of community at Passion is not limited to those who are physically present in the arena. Ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls has noted the ways that music at the Passion Conference invokes two interrelated communities that expand beyond the boundaries of the events themselves.97 She uses Benedict Anderson’s notion of an imagined community to describe the ways in which the Passion crowd can be expanded to include geographically disparate believers connected through the power of Passion’s media

95 Elizabeth Brady, e-mail to author, 9 January 2013.

96 Stevenson, Sensational Devotion, 196.

97 Monique Ingalls. “Singing Heaven Down to Earth.”
network. But in addition to this imagined community, there is also an imaginary community of all believers: past, present, and future. The addition of Wegner’s ideas stresses the importance of utopian, eschatological considerations as well. For evangelicals, this means that the “imagined community” of a worldwide body of believers is constantly being informed by (and informing) an “imaginary community” of heavenly host which praise God at the end of time. As one attendee put it,

I relate to God through music, certainly, but there’s something about knowing that, in their popularity, these songs have mostly rocketed around the country or even the world and that these are the new hymns of the church. There are believers in South Africa, India, and China that sing these songs with the same enthusiasm as I do and we’re brought together despite being a world apart in our worship of God. And that is very encouraging.

The “global impact” of Passion’s music is constantly referenced in their gatherings through the use of video, audio, and frequent anecdotes drawn other Passion-branded events from around the world. For instance, in the months immediately prior to the January event in Atlanta, Passion held a series of massive gatherings in soccer stadiums throughout South Africa and Uganda. These African events were frequently referenced in sound, sight, and story throughout the weekend in Atlanta. The sense of Passion’s global impact is further reinforced by the strong generational language used to describe its attendees.

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100 Drew Wilmesherr, email to author, 9 January 2013.

Insider/ Outsider Dynamics

Because of the ways that musical style is embedded within the ethical conversations of their members, congregations must not only choose which styles will or will not be included in their times of worship, they are also often forced to articulate a rationale to their detractors. But, as I argued in chapter one, churches now divide themselves by musical style rather than denomination or community, creating a consumerist marketplace in which people can affiliate with a community based on the musical style they liked best. Sociologists Richard Cimino and Don Lattin identify this marketplace mentality as part of a broader erosion of centralization in the practice of religion.

In the past, spirituality was tied to a comprehensive belief system that valued intellectual agreement, authority, and tradition, along with personal faith experience. The modern emphasis on choice and the importance of the individual has often been translated into the view that beliefs and doctrine must be in sync with one’s life experiences.102

This allows the individual bodies of fan-worshippers to be the sites of negotiation for the insider/outsider dynamic of religious gatherings. And this dynamic is very similar to ones examined by other ethnomusicologists in other religious contexts. In her study of the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, Katherine Hagedorn has also established the ways that ritual music allows for the blurring of boundaries between “sacred” and “secular” as categories in favor of experienced, embodied realities of inside and out.103


Ethnomusicologist Thérèse Smith has observed a very similar dynamic within an African American Baptist church in Mississippi, arguing that the boundaries between insider and outsider are “dynamically established, permeable membranes rather than sharply demarcated lines” and that “issue[s] of identity, in-group versus out-group, us versus them, is played out in music.” Smith asserts that even the firmest dichotomies, such as that between “saint” and “sinner,” are open to contextual interpretation through practices of communal discernment, usually through the interpretation of Scripture. Practices of the church, especially those of corporate worship, are used to help negotiate these shifting boundaries, but in Smith’s opinion, it is gospel music that most fully occupies this liminal space, “[straddling] the gap between sacred and profane, religious and secular” due to its host of liturgical and extra-liturgical associations. Smith’s and Hagedorn’s observations further reinforce the importance of music as a site of contestation for the constantly shifting complex of Christian identity as well as the fundamental interconnectedness between the insider/outside and sacred/secular dichotomies.

Other churches, actually encourage some of these stylistic divides by offering their congregants what liturgical historian Bryan Spinks has called “the worship mall.” At one church that I attended in Raleigh, the typically wide range of consumer choice available in evangelicalism was available inside a single building on Sunday morning. Crossroads Fellowship, a congregation of approximately eight thousand occupying a 100,000 square foot


105 Ibid., 33.

former industrial complex on the north side of the city, offers three different worship venues at its main campus each Sunday. The main worship service occurs in the “Worship Center” and Jeremy Porras, the worship pastor, described the style of this service as “multi-cultural and multi-generational…including everything from opera to hip-hop.” The “Great Room” is “led by a smaller and generally younger music team with an acoustic vibe” and the “Chapel” offers “a blend of traditional hymns, choruses and current songs.” Even among this array of consumer choice, there is also a language of diversity, or what, in American evangelicalism, is typically called “blended worship.” Pastor Roddie, a Trinidadian pastor who Rommen worked with in his fieldwork called this musical middle ground a “demilitarized zone,” emphasizing the ways that it offers a space for those of varying sectarian musical commitments to join their bodies together in worship. This set up also allows for some of the advantages of the multisite worship experience I described with NewHope above, but without the inconvenience of actually having to operate multiple campuses in disparate locations.

**Conclusion**

The myriad discourses designed to protect and police the definition of “worship” within evangelical communities help to entrain musicians and fan-worshippers with an understanding of their bodies and how they relate to others. The materials of worship, such as

107 Jeremy Porras, interview with author, 17 August 2012.

108 Crossroads does also operate a satellite campus in the nearby suburb Wake Forest, but framed the experience of worship there in explicitly stylistic terms. Porras said that their Wake Forest worship band offered “a slightly edgier modern worship option” to the young families who populate the community.
songs, musicians, and resources, are ultimately meant to serve as vanishing mediators between fan-worshippers and the divine, even as they also mediate between fans and the artists or recordings which help to codify their understandings of authentic worship. But because this mediating function is intended to be unmarked, it is inevitably bound up in discourses of privilege. The unmarked category of “worship” also serves to assimilate non-white and non-male bodies into an eschatological community that is identified with the soundscapes of the contemporary evangelical West.

But Passion does not only serve as a site of individual and “corporate” formation of bodily understanding. The function of Passion as part of a popular music distribution network brings me to a third sense of the word “corporate,” namely the power of Passion as an international corporation. The market-based networks that allow for the frequent slippage between the individual fan-worshipper and the gathered or global Passion communities also comprise the meaningful vocabulary in which evangelicalism is articulated for the 268 Generation. This slippage and its syncretic relationship with broader discourses of popular music will be the primary focus of my final chapter.
CHAPTER FOUR — Worship Music as Popular Music

During the second night of Passion 2013, Chris Tomlin told the massive crowd that he was excited to introduce a new song from his then forthcoming album *Burning Lights*, which was available for exclusive pre-sale in the 268 Stores at this event. The song, called “God’s Great Dance Floor”—which we first encountered in chapter 2—was written by British worship leader and recording artist Martin Smith at the end of 2012 and would be the lead single off Tomlin’s album. The song begins with a syncopated synthesizer hook that is quickly supplemented by a pulsing sixteenth-note figure on the hi-hat and a funk-inspired rhythm guitar pattern. The verse lyrics speak of surrendering one’s own ambitions and returning to God:

I’m coming back to the start  
Where You found me  
I’m coming back to Your heart  
Now I surrender  
Take me  
This is all I can bring

With the arrival of the chorus, there is a slight increase in volume and sonic density, but it is largely a continuation of the same musical materials. The lyrics talk about God’s faithfulness to receive those willing to come back into His fold, presumably referring to the narrative voice in the verse lyrics:

You never stop loving us  
No matter how far we run  
You never give up on us
All the heavens shout
“Let the future begin!”

The final line of the chorus received an enthusiastic shout from the worship leaders and fan-worshippers in the arena. This chorus was a thematic high point for Passion 2013, with the final line giving the title to the 2013 Passion CD release, *Let the Future Begin*.

Following the chorus, a new section of music arrived, heralded by a change in the synthesizer pattern and a marked increase in volume. At the end of the chorus, the synthesizers kicked into high gear and the four-on-the-floor bass drum pattern disappeared. The snare backbeats on two and four were transformed into a pounding quarter-note figure that increased in intensity and quickened to a steady pulsing of eight- and eventually sixteenth-notes. Over the next eight bars, the music increased in volume, sonic density, and rhythmic activity. Finally, the new section—called variously “Bridge,” “Tag,” or “Chorus 2” depending on the musician creating the chart—arrived with a massive downbeat and a somewhat unexpected set of lyrics:

I feel alive, I come alive
I am alive on God’s great dance floor

After two times through this new section, the musical texture began to thin and the musicians returned to the spare groove that opened the song. At this point, Tomlin turned toward the audience, saying:

Alright everybody. We’re going to turn this dome into one massive dance floor! Are you ready? Everybody get loose. Come on, get free. Get a little bounce in your step now. Who’s ever next to you, help ’em out. Come on, you gotta feel it!
Tomlin asked each of the stadium’s sections how they were “feeling tonight,” eliciting a staggered wave of cheers before he finally asked if they were really “ready to dance.”

As the crowd shouted back in enthusiastic response, Tomlin turned to his band, saying simply “Build it, boys!” After another eight-bar build, the kick drum returned along with the opening hook and the crowd let out a deafening shout. At the moment of climax, the room erupted into a sonic, visual, and physical frenzy. The volume reached its loudest point, the laser lights and strobe effects increased in frequency and brightness, and the visual arabesques on the massive display screens went into overdrive. The leaders on stage and the fan-worshippers covering the stadium floor broke out in a sea of different dances, pulsing together to the beat. Even those constrained by their seats in the stands threw their hands in the air and jumped up and down in rhythm to the music. After eight measures, the chorus lyrics returned and people continued to dance in front of their stadium chairs as they sang along at the top of their lungs.

Many of the gestures of this particular song are drawn from the musical subculture of electronic dance music or EDM. In addition to the textual cues in the song’s lyrics and title, the song sonically evokes aspects of dance music with its four-on-the-floor beat, funk-derived guitar riff, synthesizer hook, and rhythmic diminution. Structurally, “God’s Great Dance Floor” follows the contours of EDM with respect to “the drop,” an important phenomenon in beat-based styles ranging from hip-hop to dubstep and something that I first mentioned in chapter two.¹ Even aspects of the visual design, lighting, and staging seem to borrow a gestural language that is heavily informed by dance music culture. A Christian co-

optation of EDM might seem surprising for any number of reasons, not least of which because Southern Baptists, the largest evangelical denomination in the US, still places dancing alongside alcohol as a dangerous sign of moral degradation.

**The Christian Alternative**

And yet, co-opting, adapting, and ritualizing elements of popular music has been the *modus operandi* of evangelical Christian recording artists for at least the last half century—if not significantly longer than that. Media scholar Eric Gormly argues that “evangelicals historically have appropriated the spectrum of forms of popular culture in America and in secular commercial practices for evangelizing vehicles” going back at least as far as the Second Great Awakenings of the eighteenth century. Gormly articulates the most common hermeneutic narrative of Christian popular music, that it represents a process of “set[ing] Christian lyrics to co-opted rock and folk musical forms.” Along with many other scholars of American evangelicalism, he observes that the Christian Music industry, which grew out

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2 Many scholars and critics will make references to the fact that Martin Luther or John and Charles Wesley adopted and adapted the popular drinking songs of their days into well-known hymns of the faith. While this may seem like a nice and reasonably coherent narrative—essentially justifying new or daring innovations by reminding us that everything was once an innovation—it seems to miss the fact that many of the most important early practitioners of early rock and roll were religious musicians from the black church. Thus, the move of rock and roll into evangelical Christianity cannot simply be a lateral move from “secular” to “sacred.” Rather, it is a complex series of negotiations which involve race, class, and gender, among other things.


4 Ibid., 254.
of the 1960s counterculture, was largely dependent on already-existing secular musical and stylistic formats.5

As I outlined earlier in the dissertation, the rise of this industry coincided with a series of musical and stylistic debates known colloquially as the “worship wars,” which unfolded in evangelical churches throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Opponents of newer pop-inspired “praise and worship” music argued that the very building blocks of rock ‘n’ roll came preloaded with a non-Christian morality, and therefore were fundamentally incapable of conveying a Christian message. Proponents, on the other hand, saw no moral content inherent within the forms and styles of popular music. As Monique Ingalls has noted, a “pervasive evangelical ideology of musical neutrality—that style does not matter—has emerged from a broader evangelical discourse known as the ‘worship wars,’ as one solution to disagreements over the use of contemporary (i.e., popular) cultural forms in worship.”6 This logic of “neutrality” helped to spawn the seemingly endless string of Christian sub-genres during the 1980s, and by the early 1990s, it was commonplace for Christian record labels to release complex flowcharts that showed mainstream popular music artists on one side and their approximate Christian counterparts on the other. As religious historian Randall Balmer observed in his study of the American evangelical subculture:


6 Ingalls, “Singing Heaven Down to Earth,” 265.
With few exceptions, [evangelical music of the 1980s and 1990s] was
derivative and predictable, reflecting a kind of “me, too” approach to secular
music. Countless evangelical groups aspired to mimic the folk music of Peter,
Paul, & Mary or the popular ballads of Simon and Garfunkel. Amy Grant and
Sandi Patty were the Belinda Carlisle and Barbra Streisand of evangelical
music, and as long as heavy metal remained part of the secular music
vernacular, several evangelical bands, like Petra, Stryper, Guardian, and
Whiteheart, sought to baptize that, too.⁷

By this metric, the thing that fundamentally sets “Christian Punk” or “Christian Metal” apart
from its mainstream secular counterparts is that mainstream punks sing about punk stuff for
punk audiences, mainstream metal bands sing about metal stuff for metal audiences, but
Christian punk and metal bands just sing about Jesus for other Christians.

It is perhaps this narrative of co-optation and appropriation that has led academic
studies of Christian popular music to focus almost exclusively on text as the site of religious
meaning-making. But, as we explored in chapters two and three, many of the most significant
moments in worship music occur behind or beyond the function of lyrics as semantic content.
Even when lyrics are used as a reference point for musicians or fan-worshippers to discuss
the ways that a particular song or moment of a song is meaningful to them, they are often
simply standing in for a complex of meaning-making processes that have their roots in the
entire aural experience of the music. I believe that we must understand the ways that
evangelicals are ritualizing popular music at more explicitly musical and formal levels, in
part, because neither the “neutrality” argument offered by evangelicals nor the narrative of
simple appropriation that is often posited by scholars and journalists can fully explicate
what’s going on in the “God’s Great Dance Floor” example.

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If one attempts to understand “God’s Great Dance Floor” as a straightforward copy of EDM—or Christian popular music more broadly as a copy of mainstream popular music—then the copy is undoubtedly poor. Chris Tomlin and his band do not musically or lyrically approximate contemporary EDM, not because they are “behind the times” or inferior musicians, but because they are not trying to. In fact, even the most self-consciously EDM-derived portions of the performance I mentioned above—including the central build-climax-drop format—have much more to do with the sonic dimensions of arena rockers like U2 or Bruce Springsteen than they do with rave culture. What is important here, however, are the ways in which the EDM drop is evoked—through the dance performances of worship leaders, the constant hyping of the crowd with “are you ready to dance?”, the “build it boys” comment that precedes the final climax, the visual laser-light and strobe effects, the ways in which official audio and video performances are edited together, etc.—despite the song’s somewhat tenuous sonic relationship to EDM. This seems to make clear that the subcultural system of meaning-making EDM provides is even more crucial to Christian artists than the sonic styles attached to those meanings.

Even without a strong aural connection between praise and worship and EDM performances, the rhetorical connection is still crucial to maintain. When the song was originally written and released by British worship leader and recording artist Martin Smith at the end of 2012, the title of the song was actually “Back to the Start.” The musical and lyrical structure of Smith’s version is almost entirely different from Tomlin’s, with the evocation of “God’s great dance floor” only appearing at the very end of the track’s five-minute gradual development. For the Passion version, Tomlin takes only the second half of the original,
diverting attention from Smith’s narrative of renewal and rebirth through God’s mercy and focusing instead on the “dance floor” as the site of God’s divine intervention.

Additionally, and for many of the reasons listed above, those within the evangelical tradition also struggle to accommodate “God’s Great Dance Floor” within a narrative of neutrality. In fact, suspicions about the non-neutrality of popular musical forms have helped to spawn a sort of backlash, primarily among the strongest neo-Calvinist voices in evangelicalism. Christian philosopher James K.A. Smith, whose ideas I explored in chapter two, has decried songs like “God’s Great Dance Floor” as evidence of the competing “secular liturgies” which are ultimately misshaping the goals of Christian worship. But Smith’s argument turns on an assumption of ignorance. Throughout his books and blog posts, Smith assumes that worship musicians and fan-worshippers are uncritically including aspects of popular music in their practices without ever reflecting upon their status as value-laden cultural objects in their own right.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger used the term “ready-to-hand” to describe objects that disclose themselves to the subject as equipment for a particular task. He points out that, for a carpenter, a hammer is not an abstract object which demands contemplation but rather the possibility of engaging in the activity of hammering. Especially when they are in use, tools of this sort become phenomenologically transparent. By contrast, Heidegger uses the term “present-at-hand” to describe those objects that are constituted through abstract, reflexive, or

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8 It is worth mentioning that there has always been a small, but not insignificant, population of American evangelicals, typically referred to as “fundamentalists,” who opposed the inclusion of Western popular styles into the Christian life full stop.

philosophical contemplation. They are thus phenomenologically removed from the settings of everyday equipmental practice and revealed as fully-fledged independent objects.¹⁰ For Smith, worship leaders and worshippers are mistaking these two categories for one other and unreflectively adopting styles of popular music that come embedded with their own ritual content. Perhaps because they are in possession of a hammer, they are mistaking everything for a nail.

**A Syncretic Solution**

When I spoke with Zac Hicks, recording artist and worship leader for Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, he was sympathetic to Smith’s claims, but argued that producers and consumers of worship music are ultimately savvier than Smith allows.¹¹ Our conversation that day quickly turned to the topic of Christian worship and electronic dance music. Just a few weeks before we met, I had adapted a conference paper of mine into a short piece for *Ethnomusicology Review*’s popular music blog outlining my syncretic hypothesis in relation to observations surrounding the Passion performances of “God’s Great Dance Floor.”¹² And just weeks before my blog post, Hicks had published an article in the web magazine *Liberate* entitled “Why EDM Sounds So Liberating” in which he explored some of the intimate formal connections between EDM and modern worship

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¹¹ Zac Hicks, interview with author, 7 August 2014.

¹² Joshua Kalin Busman, “‘God’s Great Dance Floor,’ Or Why You Don’t Need Ecstasy to Have an Ecstatic Good Time,” *Sounding Board* from *Ethnomusicology Review*, 14 July 2014, [http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/gods-great-dance-floor-or-why-you-dont-need-ecstasy-have-ecstatic-good-time](http://ethnomusicologyreview.ucla.edu/content/gods-great-dance-floor-or-why-you-dont-need-ecstasy-have-ecstatic-good-time)
music. Without knowledge of each other’s work, Hicks and I both made connections between EDM dancing and religious ecstasy, between the arrival of “the drop” and the arrival of the eschaton, between the narrative structures of worship and EDM sets, and between the function of worship leaders and DJs. But Hicks’s purpose in writing his piece was to help other evangelicals realize that EDM constituted an important theological and musical resource for contemporary churches.

In our conversation that day, as in his article, Hicks reiterated that his approach to popular culture was to “not theologize on the art but let the art theologize on us.” Contrary to Smith’s portrait above, Hicks paints the relationship between evangelicals and popular culture as one of dialogue and dynamic interchange. Worship musicians are not borrowing styles as “ready-to-hand” tools for outreach and evangelism or even as “present-at-hand” cultural forms that allow for savvy engagements with their fan-worshippers. Rather, artists such as Tomlin and Hicks are syncretically developing new pop/evangelical modes of musical engagement by placing the historically and socially-conditioned systems of meaning-making from both of these traditions in dialogue with each other. The musical and lyrical contours of popular music are not simply a source of new appealing “forms” in which to couch the “content” of religious orthodoxy; they are being used to intentionally shape the ways that believers come to know themselves as religious subjects.

In this chapter, I argue that the meaningful gestures and moments of praise and worship music can be understood as a syncretic melding of beliefs and practices from

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14 Ibid. [emphasis in original]
mainstream popular music and evangelical Christianity. I argue that there are musical and visual gestures imbedded within the practice of worship music that are unintelligible without understanding the ways in which they already function in more “mainstream” rock and pop performance. These gestures are “baptized” into Christian praise and worship music, but their meaning is inextricably bound up with musical vocabulary and modes of fan engagement that are always-already syncretically linked to other popular music subcultures.15 Even within its title, “God’s Great Dance Floor” contains the explication of an entire subcultural habitus alongside its evangelical ritualization. Drawing on religious studies, phenomenology, and subcultural theory, I argue that a syncretic relationship between popular music and evangelical praise and worship music operates at the ontological, aesthetic, and commercial levels, creating a dynamic and dialogic relationship between so-called “sacred” and “secular” sources.

While nearly all of the evangelical Christian informants, subjects, and ethnographic interlocutors that populate this dissertation responded generously to my syncretic analysis when I explained it in fieldwork conversations, they also understood that any acknowledgement of syncretism in their practices was a very serious charge indeed. Even when enthusiastically acknowledging the importance of secular music to their own work, worship leaders were quick to assimilate these influences under a Christian framework.

15 This syncretic connection is similar to what sociologist Deena Weinstein has called “transvaluation.” Weinstein’s notion is adapted from the “transvaluation of all values” proposed by Friedrich Nietzsche in his book The Antichrist. In her landmark study of heavy metal, Weinstein uses the term “transvaluation” to describe the ways that artists and fans appropriate images from other cultural spaces and rearticulating them into a new value system, resulting in differing or even antithetical meanings. One example of this might be the ways in which the fundamentalist Christian imagery of spiritual warfare (angels, demons, Satan, etc.) is used in heavy metal but with an opposite valence, in which Satan and the demons are protagonist rather than antagonist of the cosmic conflict. Weinstein observes that many subcultures transvalue markers of this sort in an effort to perform their own disenfranchisement. See Deena Weinstein, Heavy Metal: A Cultural Sociology (New York: Lexington Books, 1991).
While pastor Chris Breslin acknowledged the importance of several popular indie rock bands on their *Music from the Gathering Church* album, he quickly added, “If someone in Brooklyn doesn’t get it, that’s okay.” When putting together the *I Can See A Place* recording for Crossroads Fellowship, worship pastor Jeremy Porras admitted that he had been very interested in the music of Coldplay, even describing attending a Coldplay concert as “an important spiritual experience.” But he quickly added that this was because “all music glorifies God, because God created music.” Jonathan Welch at The Summit Church explained that with his *Jesus In My Place* recording, he pulled sounds and songwriting tips from mainstream bands because he really wanted to be accessible to outside culture. However, he reiterated that “what drives the process of making a record *in* the church is making a record *for* the church,” emphasizing the importance of making music that is specifically intended for evangelical insiders. In each case, there was a concern for maintaining the Christian subcultural as distinct from outside contaminants.

These anxieties from worship leaders about differentiating themselves from other popular musics are not exclusively subcultural; they are also related to the “double-consciousness” inherent in the Christian dictum to be “in the world, but not *of* the world.” While this double-consciousness is a problem that has challenged Christian communities for millennia—and one that grew to special prominence in the writings of the Reformers of the sixteenth century—most of the contemporary discussions within evangelicalism have been

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16 Chris Breslin, interview with author, 15 August 2013.

17 Jeremy Porras, interview with author, 17 August 2012.

18 Jonathan Welch, interview with author, 30 August 2012.
centered on the work of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr, specifically his 1951 magnum opus *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr’s five-fold typology of relationships between “Christ” and “culture” reignited debates about the role of popular culture in the life of the church, particularly as it related to the practice of Christian worship.

The most explicit exploration of this double-consciousness in the American Christian music scene can be found in Jay Howard and John Streck’s *Apostles of Rock*. Howard and Streck offer a three-fold typology (adapted from Niebuhr’s five-fold arrangement) to describe the work of CCM artists. According to their scheme, artists choose to be “separational,” “integrational,” or “transformational.” For “separational” artists, the sacred and secular are constantly locked in opposition to one another, and thus their music functions within a separate (though curiously parallel) world of “Christian” music rather than in the mainstream “secular” industry. An “integrational” stance takes the opposite view, seeing the sacred and secular spheres as fundamentally integrated, and artists working within this paradigm attempt to speak to the culture-at-large, seeking mainstream market exposure in order to reach the broadest possible audience. While separational and integrational positions focus on sacred and secular spaces respectively, the transformational focuses on the reconciliation of the two, in which the sacred and secular are in a dialectical tension that can be synthesized or “transformed” through artistic endeavor.¹⁹ I argue that this “transformational” model is the one that has come to dominate evangelicalism following the worship wars, rejecting both the outright rejection of the secular endemic to earlier instantiations of American evangelicalism and the crossover-savvy of the integrational approach. But finding the theological language

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to describe the ways that this synthesis or transformation synthesis is explicitly “Christian,” a major concern for praise and worship as a genre, is often difficult for evangelical musicians and fan-worshippers.

Anthropologists Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart have observed that more broadly within the study of religion, “syncretism” is too often a dirty word. For religious fundamentalists, syncretic formations signal a compromise of “true” or “pure” belief; they represent a sort of religious half-breed and an exercise in dangerous accommodationism. For post-colonial theorists, syncretism is largely discussed as a coping mechanism for those canny indigenous peoples who find a way to resist or subvert the universalizing religion of their oppressors. In both of these cases, saying that a religion is the result of a “syncretic” process is too often simply a way of saying that it was created on the wrong side of colonial expansion—whether that expansion is from Western invading forces or from the inescapable ubiquity of the free market under late capitalism. Syncretism is used to understand these beliefs and practices because they cannot be made to fit the established “orthodoxies” of a major world religion but neither do they constitute an act of religious creativity significant enough to constitute an entirely new system of meaning. Perhaps because of this “half-breed” status, concepts of syncretism have traditionally been used in the West to study the “marginal” religious expressions of Latin America, the Afro-Caribbean, and the native peoples of North America, among others.

However, following Shaw and Stewart, I do not intend any such pejorative connotation in my use of the word “syncretism.” Rather, I use the term to refer to the processes, politics, and discourses of religious synthesis, with an understanding that “all religions have composite origins and are continually reconstructed through ongoing processes of synthesis and erasure.” 21 In observing that evangelical Christian theology and practice in the United States bears the marks of syncretic involvement with mainstream popular music, I do not mean to suggest any degree of insincerity or inauthenticity on the part of the music’s devout practitioners. Rather, by describing evangelical worship music through a syncretic lens, I argue that evangelical musicians are cultivating and sustaining a multi-faceted dialogue with popular music which is intimately bound up with the ways that each is able to make meaning for its participants. 22

Worship Music as Subculture

The first key to understanding the ways that worship music and popular music are syncretically interdependent is to understand the ways that worship music functions as a “subculture.” Modern scholarly thought around issues of “subculture” began with the theorists of the Birmingham School of cultural studies in the 1970s. In 1977, Stuart Hall along with three colleagues from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, provided a lengthy introduction to these ideas in their essay “Subcultures, Cultures, and

21 Ibid., 6.

22 I believe that one could also find syncretic transfers going the opposite direction, in which evangelical piety is formative for modes of popular listening. Low-hanging fruit for this investigation might include reception of U2 or Mumford & Sons. See Ann Powers, “Mumford & Sons Preaches To Masses,” NPR Music, 27 September 2012, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/therecord/2012/09/27/161883725/mumford-sons-preaches-to-masses>.
Class.” Citing the post-war explosion of rock ’n’ roll, Hall and his colleagues emphasized the role of “youth culture” in the creation of subcultural identities. The role of “youth culture” and “generational consciousness” is certainly an important question for any consideration of praise and worship music, particularly in conjunction with an organization like the Passion Conferences, which strictly limits attendance at their events to 18- to 25-year-olds.

But the most important text in the understanding of “subculture” emerged from the Birmingham School just two years later, this time in a book-length study devoted exclusively to the subject. Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is considered by many to be the most important text in subcultural studies, and is certainly the most frequently cited in the contemporary literature, even thirty years after its publication. In my opinion, Hebdige’s most important contribution to the discussion of subculture is his thoroughly materialist method of analysis. Following the work of Stuart Hall before him, Hebdige reads popular culture as an inventory of signs that may be encoded and decoded by a variety of social actors, but he focuses extensively on the ways that these signs cohere in the material artifacts of subcultural production. Hebdige describes the variety of material artifacts subject to such an analysis with the blanket term “style.” Thus, subculture is accomplished through the valuation and re-valuation of specific objects of style. In my study of praise and worship music, I argue that the valuation of cultural objects like sound recordings and YouTube performances is essential for the creation and enforcement of notions of “authenticity” within worship practice.
In the first section of his study, Hebdige clearly lays out the ways he believes subculture functions: by creating alternative significations and possibilities for objects already employed in mainstream discourses of meaning.

The struggle between different discourses, different definitions and meanings within ideology is therefore always, at the same time, a struggle within signification: a struggle for possession of the sign which extends to even the most mundane areas of everyday life...commodities are indeed open to a double inflection: to ‘illegitimate’ as well as ‘legitimate’ uses. These ‘humble objects’ can be magically appropriated; ‘stolen’ by subordinate groups and made to carry ‘secret’ meanings: meanings which express, in code, a form of resistance to the order which guarantees their continued subordination. Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance.23

Following the neo-Marxist methods which characterized the Birmingham School more generally, Hebdige argued that subcultures are very often a productive form of resistance to the totalizing forces of capitalism. However, he observed that subcultures are rarely able to maintain their subversive quality for any sustained length of time. All subcultures that reach a certain level of public notoriety are inevitably re-appropriated by the capitalist marketplace, typically through one of two “forms”: the “commodity form” or the “ideology form.” In the commodity form, a subculture is incorporated by “the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects.”24 We have already seen this phenomenon within the praise and worship subculture through my discussion of genre formation in the first chapter.

In the ideology form, subcultural practices are normalized through “the ‘labelling’ and re-definition of deviant behavior by dominant groups.”25 Typically, this sort of re-


24 Ibid., 94.

25 Ibid., 94.
appropriation would stem from a subculture’s deviant social moors being reclassified as “normal” by mainstream public authorities such as the police, the media, or the judiciary. However, evangelicalism has not been labeled as “deviant” in the same ways as the skinheads, punks, and teddy boys discussed by Hebdige. In fact, evangelicals are, in some ways, the most overrepresented groups in public discourse. Randall Balmer commented that evangelicals have used a subcultural status
to camouflage their machinations but also appropriate the caché of minority status in a multicultural society. For evangelicals, this posture is disingenuous to be sure, but it is a strategy, they judge, that has worked for other groups in the latter decades of the twentieth century.26

While it is difficult to determine who “they” are in Balmer’s narrative—who, specifically, is doing the judging?—it does seem true that evangelicals have cultivated an internal sense of marginality that does not always seem to match their influence in American culture, especially since the rise of the Moral Majority at the end of the 1970s.27 Media and rhetoric scholar Christian Lundberg has explored the way discourses of marginality and victimization were essential to the evangelical reception of Mel Gibson’s 2004 film, The Passion of the Christ.

Though Gibson’s claim for an anti-Christian bias in Hollywood does not invoke a specific strand of Christianity, his framing of the relationship between the culture industry and Christians resonates with evangelical Christians, a subset of American Christianity that often understands itself to be


27 For more about the creation and maintenance of this narrative, see Heather Hendershot, Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
the losing party in a war for American culture against a configuration of secular humanists and the so-called liberal media and entertainment industry.\textsuperscript{28} Lundberg argues that the trope of “evangelicalism under siege” constitutes “a core element of the affective economy of evangelical publicness.”\textsuperscript{29} He defines a “public” as “both a mobile assemblage of associations mediated by common attention to a text, and an economy articulating pre-existing discourses, texts, investments, and identities in a regularized set of exchanges.”\textsuperscript{30} Evangelicals thus constitute and perpetuate their identities through “tropological economies” that accompany their public negotiation.

Perhaps because of its insistence on subcultural status even in the face of its broad acceptance within the mainstream culture, evangelicalism has found a way to convert the tensions between re-appropriation and subcultural identity into a source of religious vitality. Religious scholar Christian Smith has argued that:

> The American evangelical movement, by contrast [to other forms of American Christianity], has been relatively successful because it has managed to formulate and sustain a religious strategy that maintains both high tension with and high integration into mainstream American society simultaneously. Evangelical sensibilities allow neither complete disengagement from nor total assimilation into the dominant culture. This provokes a situation of sustained dissonance, if not outright conflict, between evangelical believers and the non evangelical world with which they—with tension—engage. And this fosters religious vitality.\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 390.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 388.

The formation and maintenance of worship music as part of this subcultural formation is dependent upon two interlocking processes I explore in more detail below. The first is a process of “authentication,” which creates credibility within the subculture and parallels the functions of other popular musics. The second is a process of “ritualization,” which allows parishioners and worshippers the opportunity to actively navigate the blurred boundaries between popular and worship musics.

**Authentication in the Middle Voice**

Authenticity is typically spoken of as if it were an essential trait of certain artists, genres, and performances; yet scholars and fans alike struggle to specify how authenticity actually exists in these entities in any meaningful way. Rather than ask what authenticity is—or even if authenticity is in any meaningful sense of the word—I believe it is more productive to ask what authenticity does within musical communities. I follow musicologist Allan Moore in his use of the term, “authentication,” to describe the processes by which authenticity is constructed or conferred in a particular context. Moore re-conceptualizes authenticity as a process through which meaning is ascribed to, rather than inscribed in, particular performances. This model, in which performances are not labeled as “authentic” but rather as “authenticated” by a particular community of listeners, productively shifts the conversation around authenticity from ontology to phenomenology, that is, from a

conversation about the nature of musical texts and artists to one about how they are
experienced within particular communities.\footnote{33}

Moore takes the central question of “authentication” to be a question of “who, rather
than what, is being authenticated.”\footnote{34} He attempts to specify “whether it is the performer
herself, the performer’s audience, or an (absent) other who is being authenticated” in a
particular performance.\footnote{35} Moore’s move to the “who” question, however, risks falling into
the same ontological trap that plagues the “what” question he rejects, namely the need for a
fixed entity that clearly contains or receives something called “authenticity.” I would rather
ask the question “how?”—that is, how do objects, performances, genres, and artists come to
be labeled as “authentic”? I would argue that the objects being authenticated are necessarily
fluid and that the authentication can be shared with or transferred to another performance,
artist, or genre. I seek to identify the sites at which the processes of authentication take place
and the means by which they accomplish “authenticity” as a result.\footnote{36}

My approach to authentication draws on Jacques Derrida’s concept of the “middle
voice.” Derrida observes that many ancient grammars—most prominently Greek and
Sanskrit—contained a grammatical position between the modern binary of “active” and

\footnote{33} In this way, my shifting of the conversation around “authenticity” is a re-performance of the move that
ethnomusicologist Harris Berger makes in his wonderful monograph on “stance.” Berger attempts to move
away from “identify[ing] particular formal techniques that everyone would agree play some role in the
evocation of meaning” towards an understanding of “stance” which he describes as “the valual qualities of the
relationship that a person has to a text, performance, practice, or item of expressive culture” (4–5). See Harris
M. Berger. Stance: Ideas About Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive. (Middletown, CT:
Wesleyan University Press, 2009).

\footnote{34} Moore, “Authenticity as authentication,” 209.

\footnote{35} Ibid., 220.

\footnote{36} While Moore suggests that a “shift from consideration of the intention of various originators towards the
activities of various perceivers” might be fruitful, he admits that it falls “outside the scope” of his project (221).
“passive” voices. Critical theorist Steve Martinot describes this so-called “middle voice” as follows:

the agent is both actor and acted upon, act and enacted, subject and object of an action at once. A power or dynamic other than the subject's own autonomy or intention is at work on the subject while at the same time “performed” through that subject… The active voice says the subject effects something, the passive voice says the subject is affected by something. The middle form might say the subject effects something and in so doing is affected, or that a subject acted (was not passive) upon itself but was itself not a wholly autonomous agent in the action.

In his later works, Derrida used this concept of the middle voice to illuminate the ways that words like “justice” and “democracy” are able to promise or solicit certain effects without the help of any actually existing entity which might guarantee their efficacy.

In scholarly approaches to authenticity, a similar intervention seems to be necessary. Moore’s model of authentication adopts a passive-voiced approach by continually inquiring about the direct object of the processes he is describing. My approach is not simply a grammatical shift from the passive to the active voice—and thus from object to subject—but rather a grammatological move to the middle voice. I contend that divisions between agent and patient in the process of authentication obscure the ways in which the process is always being affected by the same objects and subjects that it ultimately affects. My analysis of authentication takes place in the middle voice between activity and passivity, between agent


and patient. Authenticity is thus not something that gets done by a specific subject or done to a specific object, but rather something that is accomplished in the tensions between the composition, performance, and reception of music, often in ways that defy clear and permanent location of agency or intent.

As an example of this middle-voice process of authentication, consider worship leader David Crowder’s introduction to a performance of the Hank Williams gospel classic “I Saw the Light.” At a live concert in Kansas, later released as part of the B Collision or (B is for Banjo), or (B sides), or (Bill), or perhaps more accurately (...the eschatology of Bluegrass) EP, the band played an original tune called “Be Lifted Or Hope Rising.” At the mid-point of the song, the instrumental texture dissolves into a halting electronic hum which persists for nearly thirty seconds. Finally, four clicks of the drumsticks by David Crowder*Band drummer Jeremy “B-Wack” Bush launches the ensemble into a full-throated bluegrass jam for the second half of the tune. This bluegrass-styled section is unlike any of the other songs before it on their setlist. At the end, the following conversation unfolded on stage between Crowder, and Shane & Shane frontman, Shane Barnard.

BARNARD: David, can you explain to these fine people what just happened?
CROWDER: Ok, listen, don’t panic. Seriously, don’t panic. We’re all from Texas…
BARNARD: This is true.

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40 David Crowder and Shane Barnard, “Be Lifted (Live From Kansas With Robbie Seay and Shane And Shane)” and “I Saw The Light (Live From Kansas With Robbie Seay and Shane And Shane)” from B Collision or (B is for Banjo), or (B sides), or (Bill), or perhaps more accurately (...the eschatology of Bluegrass), 2006, Capitol Christian Music Group, compact disc.
After this introduction, the band launches into a bluegrass rendition of “I Saw the Light,” which closes their live set as well as the B Collision recording.

In Crowder and Barnard’s statements about bluegrass music, I identify three different modes of authentication at work, evidenced in the following three quotes:

(1) “Seriously, don’t panic. We’re all from Texas.”
(2) “Bluegrass is based upon a very complex rhythm structure known as the ‘boom-chuck, boom-chuck.’”
(3) “Alright, so here we go, one more chance for a little group singing with Shane & Shane and The Robbie Seay Band. This is a little song called ‘I Saw the Light!’”

In the first statement above, we see the first mode of authentication, which I call \textit{biography}. In this instance, DC*B, Shane & Shane, and the Robbie Seay Band can more authentically

\footnote{Their performance is closely modeled on a performance by Ralph Stanley, which is referenced explicitly on the studio recording from which “Be Lifted or Hope Rising” and “I Saw the Light” are taken, \textit{A Collision}. “I Saw The Light,” \textit{Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys: Live In Japan}, 1986, Rebel Records, compact disc, (REB-2202).}
engage in this type of bluegrass-gospel music-making because of the public construction of a biography which shows them to be Texans. Crowder further emphasizes this mode of authentication through his thick Texas drawl, his plaid shirt and western-cut jeans, and his “folksy” demeanor with his bandmates and the audience. Audience members invest the state of Texas with meaning as a cultural source of bluegrass-gospel music—despite the lack of clear historical sense this may or may not actually make—and the musicians with authority about the musical traditions of their home state. This is perhaps the most well-worn trope of authenticity, in which the creative production of an artist is intimately and necessarily tied to lived experiences. The music becomes authenticated in and through the personal identity of the performing musicians, though not exclusively by the performing musicians.

In the second statement, we see the second mode of authentication, which I call proficiency. This meritocratic system of authentication is rooted in the notion that anyone capable of demonstrating proficiency in the specifics of bluegrass-gospel music can authentically perform within the genre. Although the second statement is obviously delivered in jest, it demonstrates that Crowder understands bluegrass to be a self-contained genre with a distinctive sonic signature. He goes on to assert that the genre also demands a certain mode of bodily engagement from the audience, which includes foot stomping and hand clapping in appropriate places. Authentication through proficiency generally draws its power from the two interlocking subprocesses of musical ability and discursive fluency. DC*B demonstrates the first of these through the Scruggs-style banjo, bluegrass fiddle, and four-part vocal harmonies in their performance of “I Saw the Light.” Crowder’s discursive fluency can be seen in his joking analysis of the rhythmic characteristics of the genre, but also in his ability
to identify and faithfully perform a song important to those familiar with its repertory and to demonstrate his knowledge of specific artists and recordings—in this case, Hank Williams and Ralph Stanley—that have meaning within the genre.

In the third statement above, we see the third mode of authentication, which I call *rituality*. Although the word may instantly carry the sacramental connotations of organized religion for some, I want to use the term here in the most generous possible sense, to describe the use of music to accompany or facilitate an experience of community practice. While this particular mode is perhaps less commonly discussed in popular music, one can clearly see this mode of authentication in the case of the hip-hop DJ, for whom success is often measured by his or her ability to create an environment in which a community of dancers feel like dancing. In short, the function of a successful DJ is to transform a group of people into a community of dancers. Like the mode of proficiency, I see that the function of *rituality* hinges on two subprocesses: the creation of an environment conducive to *activity* (such as dancing, political activism, or worship) and the experience of authentic *community* (real, imagined, imaginary, or otherwise).

This ritual mode of authentication, in which one is judged by one’s ability to curate a particular experience for an audience, is also deeply embedded in the Christian tradition of

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43 These ritual experiences of “community” can also be experienced in relative isolation by individual practitioners listening to audio recordings. My contention, however, is that even when listening to a recording of the music in isolation, the power of these moments of authentication lies in their ability to create an *experience* of community for the listener. In this context, the community one experiences might be real (i.e. the Kansas audience on the recording or a local church community from which one learned the song), imagined (a worldwide community of DC*B fans or bluegrass-gospel devotees), or imaginary (the eschatological community of Christian believers throughout the whole of space and time). These various types of community can be evoked to varying degrees and in tandem with one another depending on the particular artist and listener.
pietism. Notions of evangelical piety which situate authenticity within the emotional and bodily response of the worshipper can be traced back at least as far as Schleiermacher’s concept of “religion gefühl” from the beginning of the nineteenth century.\(^{44}\) Here, it is clear that bluegrass-gospel music represents a specific type of Christian piety which provides sufficient conditions for group singing and dancing, even in a present-day evangelical context. This suggests that bluegrass-gospel provides a common or shared musical ground on which all three bands and the audience can encounter one another as participants.

Even though the religious connection is perhaps the most obvious, I would suggest that this “felt experience” of authentication through the practice of rituality is equally common in mainstream popular music of nearly all styles. Sociologist Sarah Thornton argues that authenticity in popular music is always a matter of feeling and experience, especially in our media-saturated culture where reproductions and simulacra are constantly available for access.

Authenticity is arguably the most important value ascribed to popular music… Music is perceived as authentic when it rings true or feels real, when it has credibility and comes across as genuine. In an age of endless representations and global mediation, the experience of musical authenticity is perceived as a cure both for alienation (because it offers feelings of community) and dissimulation (because it extends a sense of the really “real”). As such it is valued as a balm for media fatigue and as an antidote to commercial hype [emphasis mine].\(^{45}\)

While there may be concrete aspects of a performance or artist to which one appeals in a justification of “authenticity,” it is almost always grounded in the felt realities of ritual.

\(^{44}\) For more information about the role of “religion gefühl” in Schleiermacher’s work, see Geoff Dumbreck. Schleiermacher and Religious Feeling (Walpole, MA: Peeters, 2012).

Particularly in this final mode of authentication, artists such as DC*B must strike a delicate balance. As I explored in the last chapter, “performance” and “worship” are often diametrically opposed within evangelical communities, with the first term implying a degree of artifice and showmanship that is incompatible with the second. This means that in order for DC*B’s music to be ritually authenticated as “worship,” it must not be experienced as primarily “performative” by the gathered community. On the other hand, however, DC*B strive to authenticate themselves as thoughtful recording artists, which, on many of their albums, involves the ritual construction of a community of knowledgeable and experienced listeners—the kind who would pick up on subtle references to an obscure Ralph Stanley album, for instance. Crowder and others in the praise and worship subculture must use both of these as carefully crafted strategies of authentication which help them to negotiate the complicated relationships between their roles as recording artists, concert performers, and evangelical worship leaders.

**Ritualization**

Following from my argument above, music is generally deemed “authentic” by a community of practice in order to be included in their processes of self-identity. Musical ritualization is another authenticating process, but one which is specifically aimed at negotiating the visible spaces between evangelical and non-evangelical subcultural realms. Religious studies scholar Catherine Bell’s work on “ritualization” has shown the usefulness of conceiving of sacred and secular as temporary products of an unfinished, dynamic
process. Musicians and fan-worshippers transfer musical gestures and styles from “secular” marketplaces and soundscapes into the liturgical context of a “sacred” community that may or may not share in the sociality of the originating communities. Often, these musics are already understood as “authentic” within their original social and geographic origins, but re-situated, these musics are deemed as authentic all over again by hearers and musicians within the ritual context.

But Bell observes those who declare the music to be ritually authentic are not merely the engines of this process of “ritualization,” they are also products of it.

The term [ritualization] should convey an inherently circular phenomenon: the purpose of ritualization is to ritualize persons, who deploy schemes of ritualization in order to dominate (shift or nuance) other, nonritualized situations to render them more coherent with the values of the ritualizing schemes and capable of molding perceptions.

In other words, the process of ritualization not only creates meanings in otherwise nonritualized spaces, it also constitutes a ritualized and ritualizing subject at the center. By attending events like the Passion Conference, young evangelicals are not simply participating in a massive instance of ritualization or even receiving a lexicon of preordained ritual materials. Rather, if Passion constitutes the entire mode of being-in-relation-to popular music that I’ve argued it does throughout the previous two chapters, Passion is responsible for actually entraining within its participants the conditions under which ritual might be produced in the first place. In other words, Passion is teaching its attendees how to ritualize

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the world around them. For Bell, the very purpose of creating or maintaining ritual spaces is to accomplish and perpetuate the type of ritualizing work this chapter attempts to describe.

Bell also observes that these processes of ritualization and their constitution of ritualized persons serve as a unifying force for religious subcultures.

Ritualization both implies and demonstrates a relatively unified corporate body, often leading participants to assume that there is more consensus than there actually is. It leads all to mistake the minimal consent of its participants for an underlying consensus or lack of conflict, even when some conflict is objectified and reembodied. Most of all, ritualization leads participants to mistake the group's reformulation of itself as a straightforward communication and performance of its most traditional values.48

This power of ritualization to “misrepresent” evangelicalism as a whole is, in fact, an asset for evangelicals, as discussed above. Balmer seems to use a unified “they” to describe a group of evangelical actors, but it isn’t clear who he means. The process of ritualization helps to effectively consolidated evangelicals as a subcultural form and to tacitly communicate a stable set of values on their behalf.

Liturgical scholar Lawrence Hoffman proposes a four-part taxonomy for describing the different kinds of meaning that religious rituals make, often in ways that extend or exceed the bounds of the ritual itself.49 First, rituals carry “private” meanings, which Hoffman describes as “whatever idiosyncratic interpretations people find in things.”50 Many of these type of interpretations of worship songs came up in my fieldwork when I asked musicians or fan-worshippers about their favorite song or musical moment at a particular worship event.

48 Ibid., 210.


50 Ibid., 80.
For instance, one respondent identified “God’s Great Dance Floor” as their favorite song at Passion 2013 because of the way that it summarized so many of their personal experiences over the past twelve months:

I felt a strong connection with this song. This past year was when I really found my faith with God. It was a struggle but the ups and downs made me a better person and stronger believer of Christ…To me God’s Great Dance Floor is everything that I felt this past year.\textsuperscript{51}

Private meanings, like the “subjective songs” examined in chapter one, help believers graft together the religious doctrines and artifacts of their faiths with their own personal ideas and experiences.

Secondly, Hoffman observes, rituals carry “official” meanings, which are “the things the experts say that a rite means.”\textsuperscript{52} At Passion events, so many of the officially-sanctioned meanings for worship music—the idea that worship songs presented by sixstepsrecords artists were divinely-inspired, connections between the experience of singing and the eschatological reality of heaven, the notion of Passion as a globally-connected “generation living for His name”—were essential to fan-worshippers understandings of their own experiences. There are, however, also “public” meanings in these rituals, a third type which Hoffman describes as “agreed-upon meanings shared by a number of ritual participants, even though they are not preached by the experts.”\textsuperscript{53} For instance, many of the speakers at Passion events carried public meanings which lead to certain interpretations of their messages. After speaker Francis Chan broke down in tears during his sermon, one participant commented

\textsuperscript{51} Jessica Long, e-mail to author, 16 January 2013.

\textsuperscript{52} Hoffman, “How Ritual Means,” 80.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 81.
jokingly that “he cries every time he speaks.” Similarly, before hearing a sermon by John Piper, one participant commented that “at Passion, John Piper is like the 4th person of the Trinity.” Based on the rapid assent from those surrounding us during these conversations as well as the number of times I heard sentiments like these echoed by others, these interpretations of Passion speakers constitute “public,” though unofficial, lenses through which the content of their presentations are filtered. Chan’s over-emotionality and Piper’s high degree of theological credibility inflect the ways that the rituals of their sermons are incorporated into the lived religious experience of Passion attendees.

Fourth, and finally, Hoffman observes that rituals are capable of carrying “normative” meanings, which is “a structure of signification that ritual affixes upon the non-ritualized world that the ritual participants re-enter when the rite has been concluded.” In this way, Passion’s rituals are capable of ritualizing spaces outside of the bounds of ritual, just as Bell’s process of ritualization described above. This fourth type of meaning also demonstrates the ways in which these different levels of engagement—private, official, and public—also represent open doors through which mainstream secular content might be ritualized to the sacred realm. For instance, one might simply take a private way of relating to popular recordings, prioritizing certain musical parameters or listening contexts, and transpose it onto

54 Erin Collier, interview with author, 2 January 2013.

55 Racie Miller, interview with author, 3 January 2013.

56 Sermons at the Passion Conference could be productively subjected to the same experiential readings that I have applied to music. Sermons unfold through a series of emotional trajectories, building and releasing tension, rather than through a progression of semantically-linked propositions. When asked about their experience of sermons after the fact, the majority of Passion attendees with whom I spoke referred to the “authenticity” or “realness” of a particular speaker as the thing that connected with them spiritually, even in instances when they could not accurately recall any of the points that the speaker was trying to make.

the experience of pop-styled religious events like Passion (or vice versa). Or, one might take
culturally-negotiated orthodoxy from a rock venue and ritualize it onto top of a massive
rock-styled worship event. The following case studies will attempt to demonstrate the ways
in which parameters of popular music have been ritualized by young evangelicals at the
Passion Conference to create a syncretic link between evangelical belief and popular music.

Perhaps the clearest examples of the process discussed above are the ritualizations of
specific musical gestures or practices which serve as connection points between mainstream
secular rock and pop performance and the contemporary Christian worship. But as I
mentioned above, my primary concern is not simply that musical gestures are duplicated
between contexts or even that they are appropriated from one context to another. I am
primarily interested to locate instances where the specifically religious meanings that praise
and worship music makes are fully dependent on or even indistinguishable from the
meanings made by popular music. Religious meaning in these cases is a dialectical move,
emerging from the interplay between sacred and secular categories, rather than originating
straightforwardly inside the sacred sphere. The series of examples below will more fully
demonstrate this syncretic link between the practices of popular and worship musics.

“You are the Lord, the famous One”

First, one might think about the ways that evangelical worship events have dealt with
the convention of applause or cheering. Applauding or cheering between songs is a
ubiquitous practice in Western musical performances of all types, but this practice was, until
recently, essentially unheard of in Christian worship. But, evangelical believers naturally continued this practice when attending worship events in the style of rock or pop concerts, due in part to the similarities in these contexts of consumption. In worship, however, applause could no longer serve the same function. Applause is inextricably bound up with contexts of performance, which, as I explored in great detail in the last chapter, is positioned as antithetical to the activity of worship. However, it has become more or less standard now for worship leaders to ritualize the gesture of applause by suggesting that congregants “give God a hand” or “give it up for God.” Rather than accepting the applause as recognition for their individual performances, worship leaders redirect the gesture of applause as a form of worship in and of itself. In this way, a gesture which was inherent within mainstream popular music is adopted into a worship context and imbued with new meanings to account for this change of focus.

However, it’s also clear from this example that the sacred meaning of this gesture is fully dependent upon a prior knowledge of the secular meaning. That is to say, the gesture only makes sense in a religious context if one imagines a world in which religious believers are already familiar with popular music practice. Without knowing that applause was meant to convey excitement about and appreciation for the music that is being presented, it wouldn’t be clear to a participant how or why this attention might be meaningfully transferred to the divine. When making sense of applause in this context, one must move

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dialectically: first, thinking about the ways that applause functions in popular music and then considering the ways in which this process has been ritualized by evangelical practice.

But the gesture of applause does not exist in a vacuum. It is a part of a whole tropological economy which helps to construct and manage public engagement with popular music.\(^5^9\) Incorporating applause and cheering into the ritual context of worship inevitably brings other aspects of popular music into view. For instance, in the pop culture world, applause and cheering is generally reserved for performers or celebrities, but in the Passion setting, it isn’t clear here who is “famous” or why. Responding to the attention they have received from the popular press, Tomlin and other Passion artists have consistently disavowed their celebrity status. In a 2007 interview, Tomlin noted, “I would never consider myself a worship superstar—nor do I know what that is. I am a worshiper of the Almighty. That's enough to keep anyone humble.”\(^6^0\) This disavowal, however, often has something of an opposite effect. John Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association, noted that “Chris [Tomlin] doesn't come off as someone who's striving to be a star. Neither does Crowder. And people reward them for that and make them stars.”\(^6^1\) In some ways, this links in with the shifting criterion of “authenticity” put forward above. If being “authentic” within a given subculture involves disavowing one’s involvement in musical production, then that is precisely the gesture which will engender audience appreciation.

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Louie Giglio has explicitly acknowledged the ways that he and the Passion organization have generated phenomena that closely resemble fame, but he is quick to ritualize this fame into an act of worship as well. In the same way that Passion’s artists have ritualized applause into a spontaneous expression of divine appreciation, Giglio seems to transform the entire celebrity apparatus of popular music into an engine for God’s glory.

We’ve just come to peace with the fact that people are going to take pictures, they’re going to ask for autographs, they’re going to put their faces in magazines. That’s okay with me as long as every ounce, every little photon that hits them is reflected back to the author of it all and the center of it all. By changing the direction of the “photons” headed their way, Giglio and Tomlin attempt to subvert the fame paradigm. But celebrity is still an inextricable part of the affective economy of popular music. So, if it cannot be eliminated entirely within worship contexts, how might it be properly accounted for?

In August 2002, Chris Tomlin released his sophomore album with sixstepsrecords entitled Not to Us. The album received moderate sales success, but within months of its release, one particular song was being adopted by congregations all over the US. The song, called “Famous One,” brings together Biblical declarations about the power and majesty of God with a contemporary language of “fame” to communicate the scope and reach of God’s influence. The chorus of the song reads:

You are the Lord, the famous One, famous One
Great is your Name in all the earth
The heavens declare You're glorious, glorious
Great is Your fame beyond the earth

Responding to the song’s success, the popular Christian web portal *Crosswalk.com* published an interview with Tomlin in which he explained his choice of language.

There are so many wonderful and true adjectives and names for God, such as “holy,” “worthy,” “King,” “Lord,” “omnipotent,” etc. I thought “famous” was a fresh word. Everybody understands what you mean when you say “famous.” We all live in a world where fame is one of the highest values, but when you consider the greatness of God, everything and everyone pales. Consider Jesus. The Bible tells that everywhere he went during his short ministry years, “large” crowds gathered. Even when trying to get away and be alone, the Bible says that more than 5,000 people found him. And then to think, as Paul writes in Philippians 2, “God gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.” Now that is fame beyond imagination.63

Here, Tomlin creates a series of strong connections between notions of “fame” or “celebrity” and religious ideas of “glory” or “majesty.” At Passion 2013, Christian rapper LeCrae made a similar declaration, saying “I’m not a celebrity. Celebrities want to be celebrated. I’m just a servant. There's only one celebrity who deserves to be celebrated. That’s Jesus Christ!”64 This is captured in Passion’s frequent use of the idea of “renown,” which is a key part of their self-identity. In its most common use by Passion organizers and spokespeople, “renown” can be taken to mean something like “fame,” which provides a Biblical connection to Passion’s ritualization with celebrity culture.

Tomlin also assumes in his explanation that “everybody understands what you mean when you say ‘famous.’” Understanding Tomlin’s acclamation of Jesus as “famous beyond imagination” is entirely dependent upon one’s prior knowledge of the way fame works in


64 LeCrae, “Third Evening Session” (speech, Passion 2013, Atlanta, GA, 3 January 2013).
other contexts. But his ritualization of “fame” as a religious category also seems to contest the construction of fame that characterizes popular culture. Fame may be one of society’s “highest values,” but God’s fame renders the lesser fame of celebrities more-or-less meaningless. This tension inherent within Tomlin’s use of celebrity discourse is one of the most clearly syncretic aspects of his approach. As I mentioned above, syncretism is often characterized as a strategy of resistance, but it provides space for the subjects of cultural colonialism to articulate resistance to assimilation in precisely the language of that assimilation. Shaw and Stewart make this observation by examining the syncretic use of “circumcision” by members of the Yawing people in New Guinea.

Through this ritual synthesis, Yawing thus resist colonial ascriptions of “darkness” and “dirt” by asserting a hidden reality of powerful “whiteness” within themselves. Yet in so doing, they have internalized colonial and missionary definitions of “whiteness.” Their resistance possesses no “authentic niche” beyond the reach of colonial power.65

Tomlin similarly resists the secular interpretations of fame and celebrity, all the while adopting and reinforcing their purchase and theological significance within evangelical Christian communities.

Passion’s ritualization of celebrity is obviously dependent upon an understanding of the ways that celebrities function in secular society, but it is also structured around a subcultural distinction between “us” and “them.” Music journalist Andrew Beaujon’s *Body Piercing Saved My Life* provides an in-depth look at the ways in which Christian popular music in the United States chooses to participate in or actively avoid larger societal discourses of music and media, and how its fans and consumers use the music as a

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connection point between a variety of media streams. In particular, Beaujon notes that “evangelicals have an odd relationship with celebrity.” While artists and record labels frequently portray the territory outside of the Christian subculture as “treacherous and best left alone,” Beaujon observes that they are still offended that mainstream markets do not pay them more attention, noting “there may be a good deal of carping when a Christian band makes a run at the mainstream, but if one has any measure of success, it is feted like Napoleon returning from Egypt…Likewise, when a celebrity converts to Christianity, all sense of perspective seems to go out the window.” In Beaujon’s view, the effect of Christian double-consciousness is a sense of paranoia, leading members of the Christian media to simultaneously condemn and praise the merits of mainstream media culture.

With the slippage between applause, fame, and celebrity, it is clear that musicians and fan-worshippers are not simply baptizing gestures drawn from popular music. Rather, they are ritualizing entire contexts of popular music performance and consumption. Take, for instance, the concert space itself, which indexes together a number of important markers for so many teenagers. Phenomena like group singing, pilgrimage, and mass gatherings are all important markers of subcultural music experience in so many musical contexts. Passion is not simply creating sacred meanings for its 18- to 25-year-old attendees by changing the


67 Ibid., 156.

68 Beaujon also notes the curious microcosmic parallelisms in the ways in which the Christian music industry organizes itself, especially with regard to the various record labels and artists opting to work on the edges of the monolithic Christian “mainstream.” The “subculture within a subculture” of Christian underground music accentuates the similarities between the sacred and secular by highlighting the similar distancing strategies of “underground” acts and similar complaints about the oppressive “mainstream” culture. For more information on this, see Andrew Mall “‘The Stars Are Underground’: Undergrounds, Mainstreams, and Christian Popular Music.” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2012.
concert experience wholesale. Rather, they are able to provide a Christian ritual language to concert experiences so effectively because concert going is already such an important sacred experience for teenagers.  

**Baptizing the Dance Floor**

Let us return to the example of “God’s Great Dance Floor” which began this chapter. One of the most significant musical-formal gestures that the song borrows from EDM is the idea of “the drop.” This type of build and climax is similarly found in praise songs like “God’s Great Dance Floor,” and is one of the only purely formal characteristics of the music that is frequently evoked among worshippers. As I mentioned in the second chapter, worshippers often use size metaphors to refer to their favorite part of the song, which is almost always “the part where it just gets huge.” Climax moments in worship music, as with EDM, are significant because of the ways they facilitate experiences of transcendence for participants, gathering together a range of sensory experiences associated with interpersonal or divine encounter under a single, repeatable form. An improperly executed climax leaves the gathered community feeling unfulfilled and constitutes a failed performance of the song in question.

This ritualization of “the drop” into a vehicle for divine encounter also highlights the strong connections between the roles of “worship leader” and “DJ.” Musicologist Joseph Maren Haynes, “Heaven, Hell, and Hipsters: Attracting Young Adults to Megachurches through Hybrid Symbols of Religion and Popular Culture in the Pacific Northwest” (paper presented at a joint annual meeting of the American Musicological Society, Society for Ethnomusicology, and Society for Music Theory, New Orleans, LA, November 1–4, 2012).

Taylor Nixon, interview with the author, 3 January 2013.
Schloss’ work on hip-hop deejays, particularly his observations regarding the aesthetic criterion for deejay / b-boy interaction, bears a striking resemblance to the aesthetics of evangelical worship music.

B-boy songs are valued as “frameworks” for the act of b-boying, because they combine practical factors that facilitate the particular dance style with socio-historical associations that place any given performance in the context of b-boy history…In other words, the interaction is not simply one of b-boys appreciating the deejays’ choices on an abstract aesthetic level. Rather, it is the deejay giving the b-boys the tools to express themselves and the b-boys validating the deejays’ choices by making use of those materials.71

Worship leaders, like deejays, are entrusted with the experiences of a gathered community and while technical proficiency is obviously important, the standard of quality is ultimately curatorial rather than performative. Like the deejay, worship leaders are judged on their ability to enact a meaningful encounter for the gathered community rather than their ability to correctly realize a pre-determined musical product.

In the case of “God’s Great Dance Floor,” however, the ritualization runs even deeper. Indeed, the entire participatory context of the “dance floor” plays a significant role in the spiritual meanings that the song makes for artists and fan-worshippers. We can see the ways that this is rhetorically mapped onto the space of the Georgia Dome by Tomlin in his performance. The stadium undergoes a ritualization from a “dome” into “one massive dance floor.” Similarly, the gatherings of people close to the stage are refigured from mere congregation into “the praise pits.” In an interview about the release of his eponymous God's Great Dance Floor album, songwriter Martin Smith continually foregrounded the concept of

71 Schloss, “‘Like Old Folk Songs…’”, 419-20.
the “dance floor” as an essential part of the impact he hoped the song would have on the Christian community.

We’ve realized that when a community gathers together, it has to have that sense of freedom and expression. That is at the heart of gospel. So “God’s Great Dance Floor” is common to everybody, it doesn't matter where you come from. Now’s the time, let’s get back on the dance floor. And this is not about professionalism. This is about getting down…“God’s Great Dance Floor” is about grace. It's about everybody's welcome. Everybody. And that’s the great thing about “Dance Floor,” is it doesn't matter how good or bad you are, you can always give it a go. And I think that’s God’s heart. I think the dance floor is the threshing floor, where God does a lot of healing in us.72

Smith identifies the entire ethos of the EDM dance floor—the idea of cutting loose and “being yourself” in an environment without scrutiny or judgment—as an essential part of what the song means in a Christian context. The “dance floor” here is part origin myth, part ethical rulebook, and part eschatology. What is being ritualized is not simply a lyrical image, a musical style, or even a way of organizing aesthetic judgements, but rather an entire ethical system of performance, participation, and reception that is associated with the EDM subculture. Dance music is not simply the musical model for the song, it is also the model for any proper understanding of the song. Smith and Tomlin seem to assume and even require that their audience already possess an embodied understanding of dance music participation in order to even engage the song as ritually meaningful. That is to say, the aspect of dance culture than has been “ritualized” or “normalized” here is not acoustic, but rather acoustemological.73

72 Dan MacIntosh, “Songwriter Interview with Martin Smith of Delirious?,” songfacts.com, 26 April 2013.

Private Solos

Some of the ritualized aspects of popular music seem to have been borne of necessity. In the case of applause and the complex of “celebrity,” religious communities have used the bounds of ritual to skillfully negotiate territory that inevitably accompanied engagement with popular music. Other parameters have been consciously and carefully cultivated to fit the needs of sacred performance. In the case of “the dance floor,” worship artists and fan-worshippers seem to have almost sought out the dance floor as a site of meaning-making that could be effectively ritualized to evangelical participation. And yet still other aspects of popular music used in worship have much less clear purposes. As an example, consider the ways that instrumental solos function between each of these contexts.

In the variety of rock-derived popular music styles, the space of the instrumental solo is used primarily to: (1) to demonstrate the virtuosity of the performing musicians, (2) to use the immediacy and spontaneity of “improvisation” to forge a connection between artist and audience, (3) to create a specific point of individual identification in a large-group activity, (4) to provide additional rhetoric space for comment on the musical form of the song. However, so many elements of this seem incompatible with the evangelicalism that we have examined thus far. Demonstrating one’s virtuosity would be considered prideful and would too closely resemble “performing” rather than worshipping. Connections between audience and artist are only valuable insofar as they immediately dissolve into connections between audience and the divine. Similarly, calling attention to one’s individuality or announcing

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74 For more information about the function of guitar solos in rock and heavy metal, see Robert Walser, Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music, 2nd ed. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014): 57–107
one’s self rhetorically seems to be precisely the opposite of the ways that praise and worship music renders itself meaningful to its musicians and fan-worshippers. Why is it, then, that so many praise and worship recordings from sixstepsrecords artists contain an instrumental solo after the second chorus?

In the worship context, instrumental solos seem almost vestigial; they don’t seem to serve a purpose other than to reinforce the syncretic links developed between the two spaces. When I asked worship leaders and fan-worshippers about the function of worship guitar solos during my fieldwork, they were consistently baffled by the question. Many responded that they had never considered this idea and weren’t really sure why guitar solos were a part of worship at Passion. “I guess people just expect a guitar solo at some point. And the guitarists are really good, so why not?” answered one attendee with whom I spoke. Others offered the explanation that guitar solos gave them space to themselves in the midst of a massive worship gathering like Passion. During the guitar solo, they weren’t burdened by singing the words or following along with everyone else. Matt, a 21-year-old Passion attendee from Massachusetts, explained, “I like instrumentals more than I like the wordier parts of songs. Instrumentals give me a chance to sing my own song to the Lord. They’re a place for me to glorify my God with words other than what is written on a screen.” Other worship leaders with whom I spoke were much more cynical. They observed that most recorded worship songs had a guitar solo because that was an essential part of the three-and-a-half-minute-pop-

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75 Taylor Nixon, interview with author, 3 January 2013.

76 Matthew Hersee, interview with author, 2 January 2013.
song format. This range of responses was similar in the handful of times this topic was raised at WorshipTheRock.  

Using Hoffman’s taxonomy from above, the convention of an instrumental solo section in popular song seems to be an example of a musical element being ritualized at the level of the “private.” In the cases of applause, fame, or the dance floor, ritualized engagement was negotiated through both “public” and “official” channels, scripted by large-scale, purposive communal engagement. In the case of the guitar solo, though, it seems as though this is a gesture carried over from popular music on the sheer force of its private ritual significances for individual fan-worshippers. People engage this particular convention in a diversity of ways, ranging from enthusiastic piety to cynical dismissal, but rather than collapsing the gesture to a single, official meaning, its engagement in private ritual meaning is allowed to persist in diversity. This is not, of course, to suggest that “official” or “public” ritual meanings do not also carry this private diversity of engagement, but rather to demonstrate that the syncretic bonds between popular music and evangelical worship can be forged even on the strength of private ritual alone.

**Worshipping Works**

The shifting and dialectical relationship between sacred and secular contexts of production and consumption, along with the middle voice authentication I discussed above, both contribute to a considerable confusion about where exactly to locate one’s musical

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77 Most notably in a thread started by a user named “Brad,” who discussed a member of his congregation decrying and sort of musical solo as “bring[ing] glory to the individual, not to God. See “Keeping the focus on Christ instead of ourselves…” WorshipTheRock, 12 November 2008 http://www.worshiptherock.com/forum/topics/keeping-the-focus-on-christ.
ontology: that is to say, precisely which aspect of the musical production or consumption chain is actually accomplishing the work of worship. I have already discussed two important elements of evangelical musical ontology: first, the ontology of neutrality emerging from the worship wars and second, the ontological antipathy between “performance” and “worship” that formed the basis for so much of the last chapter. These two aspects of evangelical thought about music delimit the focus of most fan-worshippers and worship musicians to exclude questions of musical style and to minimize the role of “performing” a particular musical text. Instead, as mentioned with the deejay example above, the focus tends to be on the realization of a properly “worshipful” relationship to the divine. Music is most effective when it functions as a vanishing mediator, transparently giving way to the truly desirable category of worship.

Media studies scholar Philip Auslander has articulated some of these relationships quite well under the heading of “musical personae.” Rather than foregrounding the relationship between abstract “musical works” and performed instantiations of those works, Auslander argues for the prioritization of performers and their concrete relationships to audiences. This performer/audience relationship is not one-sided, as relationships between works and performances so often are, but rather than negotiated between audience and performer in each instance. Although, Auslander acknowledges, a musician’s persona is expected to be “more or less continuous” from one performance to another, musical personae are produced at every performance “through the negotiation of a working consensus with the audience. The audience is thus the co-creator of the persona and has an investment in it that

extends beyond mere consumption." This not only reconfigures the primary relationship that defines musical reception, it also changes the parameters by which a performance might be judged “successful.” If the aim of a musical event is not the authentic rendering of a musical text, but rather the authentic negotiation of a musical persona, one must examine audience investment in performances quite differently.

Auslander also connects the boundaries of these processes explicitly to genre, something which I have mentioned several times throughout this dissertation.

The production of musical identities takes place within social frames that provide musicians and audiences alike with sets of conventions and expectations that govern, but do not determine, their definitions of the situation and corresponding behavior….Each musical genre constitutes a social frame that carries its own particular set of conventions. Both musicians and audiences draw on these conventions in their presentations of fronts, interactions, and so on.80

The conventions and expectations for audience engagement are largely determined by genre identity, which provides a “social frame” for music’s production and consumption. In undergoing the process of genrefication that I described in chapter one, praise and worship music syncretically enmeshed itself in a system of differentiation that is inevitably dependent upon popular music. In a sense, this is related to the use of syncretism as a strategy of resistance I articulated above. In attempting to articulate its difference from other genres, praise and worship music inevitably adopts and reifies a language of genre that is bound up in the discourses of popular music.81

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., 118.

81 This entanglement also bears a close resemblance to the way that Derrida explained the function of language as both “differential” and “deferential” through his concept of “differance.” See Derrida, “Différence,” 7.
I find Auslander’s notion of “musical personae” particularly informative because of the ways that it equally illuminates practices in both live worship gatherings and in personal practices with worship recordings. Commercially-released recordings of worship music, even in moments of live performance, are the most frequent and formative connection point between leaders and fan-worshippers. When asked about the role that music played in her personal religious practices, Racie Miller, a 21-year-old Passion attendee from Chattanooga, Tennessee, noted that she “really enjoyed singing along with Chris Tomlin [at Passion 2013] and when I listen to the Passion CDs, I truly enjoy singing along with them as well. They have been a significant source of encouragement to me.”82 Racie casually indexes together her experience of “singing along” with Tomlin at Passion and her experiences of singing along with Passion’s live recordings because she sees them as two parts of the same process.

In both cases, music is ritualized and authenticated by the production of a convincing musical persona and fan-worshipper rarely drew hard and fast differences in quality between these two types of engagement.

Racie’s blurring of the lines between her singing in live and recorded worship contexts also reminds us of the ways in which Passion attendees actively participate in the recordings that they so eagerly consume. Auslander argues that the audience is the “co-creator” of the musical personae because of the ways that they invest themselves in what the artists are trying to accomplish. In the case of Passion’s live releases, however, the voices of Passion attendees are literally present in the sounds on the recordings. So many of the people I talked to cited this as one of the primary things that drove them to engage with

82 Racie Miller, email with author, 10 January 2013.
Passion recordings after the event. Listening to the recordings made them “nostalgic looking back into a full and fantastic few days of worship” and “amazed that they were able to participate in such an incredible experience.”\textsuperscript{83} When listening to the recordings of Passion events which they attended, they are simultaneously sounding memories of past spiritual experiences and providing the impetus for fresh engagements with the divine.

The capacity of recordings to challenge the linearity of music’s production and consumption complicates models of community religious life like Jeff Todd Titon’s folklife affective model.\textsuperscript{84} Titon proposes that the cultural production within a religious community passes through a sort of “chain” moving from initial affect to community memory. Church musicians begin with an inspiring “affect” which then structures and informs their “performance.” The performance has a reception by the “community” in the moment and also becomes a lasting part of its collective “memory.” Passion’s media packages, however, create a sort of short-circuit or feedback loop, in which one person’s memory is another’s performance—in the case of conference goers vs. non-goers—or one person’s performance is another’s affect—in the case of hearing a recording by the original artist vs. engaging the recording as a blueprint for a performance in a local churches. Because recordings function at multiple places along this continuum simultaneously, they complicate a linear understanding of the production and reception process.

\textsuperscript{83} Peter Schmoling, interview with author, 1 January 2013; Matthew Ellis, interview with author, 2 January 2013.

\textsuperscript{84} Though Titon initially and most fully explicates this particular model in \textit{Powerhouse for God}, he revisited its development along with some of its implications in a later essay regarding the broader study of expressive culture. See Jeff Todd Titon, “Text.” In \textit{Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture}, edited by Burt Feintuch (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 78–79.
The centrality of recordings within the consumption of music is, of course, an essential feature of popular music and perhaps the strongest syncretic link between worship and popular music contexts. Theodore Gracyk has argued that “the central ‘works’ in rock are commercial recordings, created for consumption as recorded music” and that “the song, cover versions of the song, or the song in live performance,” while not totally incidental variables, “are not the central occasions for critical response and critical dialogue.” One might expect fan-worshippers to report that with repeated engagement, recordings would become familiar and lose some of their effectiveness as objects of spiritual ecstasy. But on the contrary, one’s familiarity with a particular worship recording seems to be an expression one’s own personal devotion and to allows for a more specialized and intense form of engagement. Gracyk notes that repeated listenings to a beloved recording can lead to a point where “the music does not simply cause pleasure; listeners take pleasure in it, which is psychologically far more complex.” Each audition of a particular recording affords another opportunity for the production of musical personae.

But even with the familiarity that comes with repeated engagement, recordings continue to be immediate and almost unpredictable in their affect. People I spoke to reported feeling “overwhelmed” or “wrecked” while listening to worship songs in their cars or on their phones, even by recordings that they listened to nearly every day. Jonathan Sterne has argued that “the distinctive temporality of sound recording” is founded on the ways that it

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“moves between the ephemerality of moments and the possibility of an eternal persistence.”

Recordings preserve the fleeting and ephemeral sounds created in musical performances, but also allow for their near-infinite repeatability. Sterne connects this preservation with a desire on the part of modernist culture “to can, to embalm, in order to ‘protect’ itself from seemingly inevitable decay.” Sound recordings are a way to artificially stave off the inevitable decay of cultural practices by trapping them in what Sterne provocatively calls a “resonant tomb.”

However, I found that the people with whom I spoke consistently saw sound recordings as the most important sense of vitality in their spiritual lives. They might encounter frustrations with their home church communities or difficulty with particular Biblical texts, but they noted that listening to or singing along with recorded praise and worship music was the aspect of their spiritual practice that they could get “most emotionally invested in on a regular basis.” One puts on a recording hoping to feel the spontaneous movements of the Holy Spirit, but one also enjoys being able to predict the arrival of these spontaneous movements at three minutes and forty-five seconds each and every time.

Engaging with worship through recordings actually helps fan-worshippers to navigate a number of the tensions I have examined in this dissertation. Recorded worship can be both

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88 Ibid.

89 Ibid., 287.

90 Peter Schmeling, interview with author, 1 January 2013.
internally consistent and yet externally-motivated, privately-experienced and yet publicly-shared, fixed in a particular moment and yet endless new.

This type of engagement with recordings brings together so many of the elements I have discussed throughout the dissertation. A growing body of widely shared recordings helps to establish worship music as a stable genre. In the largely post-denominational landscape of American evangelicalism, consumption of these recordings allows one to locate oneself within a particular worshipping community. Recordings are seen as stable and tangible in the same ways that theological texts are seen to be “stable,” but they also provide room for personal interpretation. Using ritualized forms of engagement that are syncretically linked to popular music, these recordings create a stable vocabulary of sensational forms that help to authenticate “worship.” Additionally, communal experiences listening to and participating in these recordings entrain evangelical believers with a habitus of listening that is essential to their experience of themselves as religious subjects.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the similarity of musical gestures and discourses between “mainstream” popular musics and praise and worship music are the result of a syncretic relationship between these two subcultures. Understanding this relationship as syncretic reveals the ways in which meaning in praise and worship music is inextricably bound up with the contexts of popular music’s production and consumption. But I also suggest that this syncretism offers a potential for forms of resistance, even if it is always couched in the language of the dominant culture. This resistance allows worship musicians
and fan-worshippers to sustain a transformative relationship to popular culture, in which sacred and secular are held in constant tension with one another.

There is an important aspect of the phenomenon here that is perhaps exclusively a function of late capitalism. Throughout his lengthy career, sociologist George Ritzer has articulated a series of relationships between two broad categories of consumable objects that he calls “something” and “nothing.” Ritzer defines nothing as “a social form that is generally centrally conceived, controlled, and comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content.” By contrast, something is “a social form that is generally indigenously conceived, controlled, and comparatively rich in distinctive substantive content.” One of Ritzer’s standard examples is the contrast between a fast-food value meal (“nothing”) and a home-cooked version of a treasured family recipe (“something”). Many of the most vocal critiques of praise and worship music, from both inside and outside the evangelical subculture, have been precisely on the grounds that it constitutes a form of “nothing,” a mass-produced commodity “comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content.”

However, Ritzer observes that consumers are given more agency in the marketplace at precisely the moment that the world is becoming more mass-mediated. Given the wide and ubiquitous proliferation of mass commodities, Ritzer observes that individual consumers are actually given an increasingly rich inventory of objects and contexts through which for construct their own identities and forge connections with others. That is to say that they are

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92 Ibid.
capable of turning “nothing” into “something.” Observing the ways that the gestures, practices, and contexts of popular music are syncretically entwined with the fabric of evangelical religiosity is not meant to show the lengths to which evangelical youths will compromise their faith by incorporating secular material. Rather, it is meant to show the ingenuity of musicians and fan-worshippers to construct ever more vibrant religious identities out of all the materials they find at their disposal.

93 This conversation might be further enriched by the introduction of Elizabeth Outka’s “commodified authentic,” which I mentioned in the previous chapter. See Elizabeth Outka. Consuming Traditions: Modernity, Modernism, and the Commodified Authentic. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
“What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”¹ This now infamous question asked by early Christian thinker Tertullian demonstrates clearly the complicated relationship between Christianity and mainstream “secular” culture even as early as the second century of the Common Era. In this particular passage, Tertullian is drawing a strong demarcation between the intellectual activities of the church (the theology of Jerusalem) and those of the surrounding culture (the philosophy of Athens). For Tertullian, these two activities—though they may involve the same mental faculties or even attempt to answer the same pressing questions about the universe and the human condition—are fundamentally distinct because they proceed from such different commitments. The activities of the Christian church must necessarily stand apart from or even in direct opposition to the activities of this world.

Augustine would famously expand upon this same problem a few centuries later in The City of God by comparing and contrasting the earthly and heavenly cities. However, throughout The City of God, he explains that these two cities exist “in this present world commingled, and as it were entangled together.”² However distinct in purpose and organization these two entities might be, they are never fully separable from one another, destined to remain

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¹ Tertullian, De præscriptione haereticorum, Chapter 7
² Augustine, City of God, Book XI, Chapter 1
“intermixed until the last judgment effects their separation.”

Whether they like it or not, it appears that Athens and Jerusalem are stuck with one another for the long haul.

In much contemporary scholarship, there is a strong sense of the fluid, permeable boundaries between sacred and secular and the importance of social construction for reifying, transgressing, and expanding their borders. But despite almost universal recognition of the fluid boundaries between “sacred” and “secular” as categories, there has been surprisingly little entanglement between sacred and secular methodologies for investigating these religious experiences. Evangelicals write books analyzing and attempting to understand their own practices for a primarily evangelical audience, while simultaneously, academics describe these phenomenon for other academics. But even in the two and a half years I’ve been working on this project, the number of evangelical worship leaders interested in critically engaging with these ideas seems to have increased exponentially. Through a host of international conferences and symposium attended by myself and my colleagues, I have begun to see the development of a network of evangelical scholars and practitioners who are interested in dialoguing with the academy, and in particular with the field of ethnomusicology. These conversations are primarily sparked and sustained by the ability of ethnomusicology to take seriously the theological discourses of those within the faith communities that these practitioners love and serve. Those of us working in ethnomusicology, and the humanities more generally, can enrich this dialogue by engaging deeply and collaboratively with their musical and theological viewpoints, not because we

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3 Ibid., Book I, Chapter 35
necessarily invest these discourses with truth or meaning ourselves, but because we take seriously the task of listening.

Given the time and opportunity, the project I have begun here offers the potential for expansion in a number of different directions. Perhaps most simply, I believe it would be a productive exercise to take a more comprehensive view of the way that “affect” work as an organizing principle. Like the music I have explored in the preceding chapters, sermons at Passion unfold through a related series of emotional trajectories, building and releasing tension, rather than through a progression of semantically-linked propositions. When asked about their experience of sermons after the fact, the majority of Passion attendees with whom I spoke referred to the “authenticity” or “realness” of a particular speaker as the thing that connected with them spiritually, even in instances when they could not accurately recall any of the points that the speaker was trying to make. Such an enriched study might also take into account the narrative function of visual media that are so essential to the experience at Passion and the megachurches within its sphere of influence.

This project would also be enriched by expanding my examination backward in time to understand the ways that the relationships to media I describe here are part of a longer history of Protestant engagement. Since the reformers of the sixteenth century, Protestants have demonstrated a clear anxiety towards any church practice which attempts to “fix” the sacred in material reality. This can be seen in their rejection of key Roman Catholic doctrines surrounding transubstantiation, iconography, indulgences, intercession of the saints, works-based righteousness, and papal authority. Because of their severe “mediation anxiety,” music quickly became a cornerstone of Protestant worship practice, immune from accusations of
idolatry even by iconoclasts like John Calvin and Huldrych Zwingli because of its seemingly ephemeral status. Understanding the history of music’s construal as a transparent and immaterial medium for Protestant encounter with the divine would place this study into a longer historical narrative.

I am perhaps most interested in the possibilities for undertaking an analysis similar to the one I put forward here in contexts outside of the US. I have already mentioned some of the crucial similarities and differences with praise and worship practices in the UK and Australia, both of which would serve as productive foils for understanding practices in the US. But I have also mentioned that ways that Passion has globally expanded its influence since its 2007 World Tour. I am particularly interested to examine Passion’s reception in the global south, where evangelicalism is exploding with popularity and influence. Believers in these countries are consuming and reproducing many of the same songs and recordings I have explored in this dissertation, but so many of the assumptions and power dynamics that have underpinned my analysis here are undoubtedly different in these other contexts. Expanding the scope of the study in this way would also allow me to draw broader conclusions about the varying impact of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and nationality on the functions of praise and worship music in evangelical practice.

Finally, I believe that further study could reveal the ways that the syncretic and phenomenological factors I discussed flow in both directions, with praise and worship music providing an important influence on forms of mainstream popular music. I believe that certain bands might evidence particular influence because of their personal backgrounds, sonic contours, and reception among evangelicals—I have already mentioned the English
folk-rock act Mumford and Sons. But even more than that, I am interested in whether or not the evangelical modes of engaging with media like radio and recordings feed back into consumption patterns for other musical and subcultural communities. Additionally, a materialist study of the relationship between these two cultures would consider the number of prominent home recording or instrumental pedagogy resources which are ultimately bound up with both praise and worship and mainstream popular musics.

In each of these potential expansions of the project undertaken here, my most central arguments remain the same. Musical sound functions as a primary theological discourse, shaping the ways that participants come to know themselves as religious subjects. Music provides the vocabulary as well as the space for musicians and fan-worshippers to construct, contest, and reify the boundaries of their religious experience, even in ways that challenge or exceed the bounds of officially-sanctioned “orthodoxy.” Communal experiences of sound also provide opportunities for believers to negotiate their religious relationships with each other, providing strong sites of affiliation in the post-denominational context of late capitalism. This prioritizing of sound as the primary site of religious meaning-making also necessarily moves conversations about sacred music beyond understanding propositional theology and into the embodied experiences of religious life. By understanding how Christian communities are always worshipping with everything at their disposal, I hope to offer new ways of understanding embodied religious experience as well as the formations of community and identity that congregational music-making provides to so many.


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