

God's Music

Evangelical Christians can be an anxious lot when it comes to popular music. In the minds of young evangelicals, as in the minds of young nonevangelicals, music signifies overly much about social standing. We—especially those of us who grew up with two social circles (church youth group, and public school friends)—are fantastically worried about our status as cultural outsiders. We want to be in. We want to be relevant. But we know we are out. We fear we are irrelevant. We feel we have been given a terrible choice: either Michael Landon and *Highway to Heaven* or Angus Young and *Highway to Hell*. For us, Coolness and Goodness are completely polarized. All of the high school and college social terror that exists in the mind of every teenager is compounded for evangelicals. Do we have the right taste? Are our t-shirts hip? Is our hair long enough? Yes, we believe in Jesus, but please don't group us with Pat and Jerry! We're nothing like them. We go to rock concerts! We've seen Radiohead twice! We drink socially, if moderately. We read novels. We watch all the independent films. We're trying, really.

Music is the biggest indicator of our dilemma. Our parents want us to listen to Steven Curtis Chapman and dcTalk. (If you do not know who they are, it just means you are inside the mainstream of American culture, or else you are outside in a different way. Chapman is a clean-cut singer-songwriter. dcTalk is, or was, a three-guy band whose music is either rap or grunge or rap-metal, depending on the nation's musical mood. Both are, or were, rock stars within Evangelicaldom.) Our parents want us to listen to anything approved by a Christian label. We want badly to listen to anything approved by

MTV. We may agree to attend the occasional Jars of Clay (also Christian rock stars) concert, but we will not breathe a word of it at school. This is a constant battle, and even church kids who are convinced, as I was, that they *should* listen to what their parents want them to listen to, often do not. And, like all teenagers seduced by the industry of cool, we mostly ignore the innocuous stuff and go straight for the foulest, the stuff that is sure to offend our parents and pastors. When I was fourteen, I knew that DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince had some cultural cachet and were nearly as harmless as dcTalk. But I listened to N.W.A., who were infinitely cooler.

Christian music is an industry and a culture, known as Contemporary Christian Music, or CCM. It is an alternate universe with its own techno, grunge, and pop-acoustic acts; for every popular rock genre, there is a CCM corollary. It began, by most anyone's estimation, in the 1960s and '70s with Jesus musicians such as Larry Norman and Phil Keaggy taking popular forms of rock 'n' roll and using them to communicate clearly evangelical messages. Christian groups had descried the effect of rock music on the youth of America, but the Jesus musicians addressed the problem from within. Don't bring the kids to the church, they said. Take the church to the kids in the only language they understand. Norman put the Christian music dilemma front and center in one of his most popular songs, "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?" Why indeed, went the consumer industrial response, and by the late 1970s Christian rock had its own production and distribution lines and was focused on getting itself into the hands of kids like me.

We were the first generation to have an opportunity to be raised entirely on Christian pop.

As a young kid in a Southern Baptist household, I assumed that the problem with rock music was one of style. Rock was evil because rock could only be evil. The guitar solos, the drums, the long hair—it had all the makings of a demonic scheme. But from its very beginnings, Christian musicians took the position that music is morally neutral. No matter what the form, they said, music is little

more than a tool, a carrier of messages. CCM postulates that it makes no difference if one is strumming a harp and humming softly with eyes closed or finger-hammering a guitar and screaming into a microphone. It doesn't matter, as long as the message is that Jesus Christ saves sinners. Step into a Christian music shop today and you can find a Christian band forged in the image of Korn—tattooed and pierced and angry, only their rage is directed at Satan—or a Christian diva who is a fully clothed version of Britney Spears.

And they are plenty good at what they do. The Christian industry of cool is adept at whitewashing the popular sounds and fashions that inhabit the mainstream industry of cool. Popular Christian musicians are often just as skillful and professionally produced as the stars of Top Forty radio, and if you put a Christian Country artist next to a mainstream Country artist you might not be able to tell the difference unless you pay attention to the content of the songs. Both will sing about broken hearts, but one will suggest that hearts can be mended by Jesus.

Growing up evangelical means that turning on the radio involves a moral decision. Baptist churches like the one I grew up in encouraged us to take a moral high ground in our music selections. Sunday School and youth group made the matter black and white: I could listen to Christian music and please God, or listen to secular music and please Satan. That's what I was told as a twelve-year-old in church youth group, and the things you hear as a twelve-year-old in church youth group stick with you. The music sounds essentially the same on both sides, parents and preachers would say, so why not listen to music that glorifies God? The logic was hard to refute, partly because to admit there *was* a difference was to admit that cool mattered overly much. And it should go without saying that the strict moral dichotomy between secular and Christian music rang true every time I listened to the radio or watched MTV. When I was a sixth grader grappling with these complexities in 1986, Steven Curtis Chapman was singing about how much God loves everyone and about trying to be a good husband. Motley Crüe was singing about strip clubs. God's music was cheesy, but it was clean. The

devil's music was evil, but it was cool. I was always much more interested in Cool than Clean, but I was never able to quite give myself over. Even in my most rebellious days, I kept a couple of Christian albums around for good measure. The things you are told as a twelve-year-old in church youth group stick with you.

For years, Christian music was the only kind available in my house. I didn't even know there were any options other than the Beach Boys, who my parents felt were harmless enough (if only they knew), and movie soundtracks like *Annie* and *Robin Hood* and *The Rescuers*, all of which we had on vinyl and all of which I memorized. When I was in the third grade, I was given my first Christian rock audio tape, *Not of This World* by Petra—a long-haired, leather-clad glam band, equal parts Toto and Air Supply. Petra was like a gateway drug, ensuring that I would forever be hooked on rock music. Electric guitar. Drums. Synthesizer. A lead singer with a girl-ish, screeching voice. The album cover had a guitar-shaped spaceship flying through outer space. I knew the music would take me to the outer reaches before I even turned it on. I had a hot pink shirt and black sunglasses and I'd play Petra on my oversized 1984 boom box and sing to the crowd in my room. I took Petra to school and showed it to all my friends. I had the vaguest notion that it was a Christian album, but mostly I just knew it was rock music. My friends didn't seem to know the difference either. It wasn't as though Petra sang about Jesus much, anyway—they sang about the dead rising and angels warring and feeling like an alien. (Perhaps their outsider status was not lost on Petra. The title track goes: "We are strangers; we are aliens. We are not of this world." The song is about how Christians are not supposed to feel at home in the world because our home is in heaven, but it might also be about how Petra could never get play on Top Forty radio.) Regardless, they were momentarily hip to my fourth grader friends and me.

Extremely momentarily. My buddy Chris had a slumber party for his tenth birthday; we rocked out to my Petra tape for a while and then watched the world premier of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video on MTV. Entranced by Michael and the Creatures of the

Night, everyone forgot Petra immediately. I slid Petra into my bag, a little saddened that my parents had bought it for me while Chris's parents had bought him the *Thriller* album.

When I was in the fifth grade, Kaysie began to listen to secular radio stations loudly in the house. It was her own mild rebellion, and Mom and Dad let it go. She still sang in the church youth group choir, after all. Every morning I would wake up to the sounds of Chicago, Whitney Houston, and Prince. Petra and other CCM favorites—WhiteHeart, Mylon LeFevre and Broken Heart, Michael W. Smith—gathered dust. How could they compete with Jermaine Stewart's "We Don't Have to Take Our Clothes Off"? With WhiteHeart, I could multiply forgiveness seventy-times-seven. But with Jermaine, I could dance-and-party-all-night-and-drink-some-cherry-wine-uh-huh.

There was nothing catchier. Within a few weeks of listening to secular radio, I knew that it was not the music that was better, but the whole package. The effect. The affect. The ethos. The deejays. Everything was carefree and modish and it offered immediate entry into What Everybody Else Is Doing. The allure of this music on my mind and body and soul was something that Petra simply could not duplicate. Phil Collins and Culture Club and the Bangles: I knew I should resist them, but I could not. These folks were not just cool—they were the arbiters of cool. They Built This City on Rock and Roll.

Still, I could not escape the feeling that listening to secular music was doing something dirty. I loved that feeling, but I knew I shouldn't. In the sixth grade, I lived in the basement of our rental home, far away from Mom and Dad and the world upstairs. Every night I would go into my room, shut the door, and listen to the *Top Nine at Nine on 98.9 MAGIC-FM*. For weeks, I could count on the fact that George Michael's "I Want Your Sex" would be played during the countdown. It was the most titillating thing I had ever heard (well, it might have been the *first* titillating thing I ever heard). I would dance and dance and sing and sing, making sure to stay near enough to the radio that I could change the station the moment a parent walked in. "Sex is natural, sex is fun. Sex is best when it's

one on one.” Oh, they would not want their twelve-year-old singing those words. And, yes, well, I should not be singing them. True, true. It was wrong. It was dirty. It was so much fun to listen to.

So from Petra to George Michael to Eazy-E I went, though in high school my moral code was more complex. Drugs and alcohol could be consumed without guilt, but I felt a terrible twinge whenever I listened to Black Sabbath. Led Zeppelin was fine as long as I didn’t believe the rumors about what happened when you played the album backwards, but Metallica was evil. (Until the *Black Album*.) Of course, I listened to everything, whether it was evil or not, but I had to carefully monitor my guilt in order to enjoy it all. For a while, I felt that actually attending concerts was not something I should do, so I let tickets for Alice in Chains opening for Van Halen pass me by, though I had both bands’ songs memorized.

Later, when Kaysie was back home and God was back in the air and I had confessed my sins and gurgled in tongues but was still wondering whether I should make the leap into faith full and complete, it was perhaps inevitable that Christian music would be my entry point back into Christianity. Based on my upbringing and all that I had ever been taught about Things Secular and Things Christian, I knew that listening to Christian radio was a sign that I was trying to improve my life. It was like supporting a starving child. It made me feel that I was doing something good.

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And in the summer of 1993, in the midst of all the pot and LSD and beer and girls and lies piled upon lies, in the midst of wondering about whether my conversion in January had meant anything at all, there was Christian music, acting as an annoying, convenient, and ideologically reliable rudder, directing me to where I (partially) wanted to go. I was not quite ready to give up my wicked ways or read the Bible, and I was certainly not willing to talk to the Holy Spirit Guy again, but I wanted to keep the question of conversion open to discussion, and Christian music was a much safer

dialogue partner than Kaysie. It didn't require any immediate response. It just gave me an opportunity to think about God.

On days after parties when I had done something especially awful, I would drive around town and listen to a Christian radio station. The songs that played on that station were about love and forgiveness, and they opened up a space for me to consider what it would be like to live a supermoral life, a life dedicated to God. The deejay's syrupy sweet voice made me cringe, but she always hoped that I would have a "blessed" day, and I could hear her straining for authenticity. She meant it, or she wanted to mean it. The music was bad—horrible, actually, inexcusably lame—but I felt drawn to it nonetheless. I learned that Stephen Curtis Chapman and dcTalk were still around, as were Michael W. Smith and WhiteHeart, just as they had been seven years earlier. But their competition had changed from George Michael and Motley Crüe to Nirvana and Pearl Jam, so it was even more hopeless than before. Still, listening to Christian music was the Right Thing to Do, and it felt great to do something right.

It also felt great to be able to say, "Kaysie, have you heard of that group Pray for Rain? I like the first single off their new album." (Which was called "That Kind of Love." The song asked, "Where does that kind of love come from?" The answer: "They say that it runs in His blood.") Christian music did not merely answer a spiritual thirst; it answered a need for a homecoming. It was my childhood. It was my roots. It was pure and separate.

One night near the end of the summer I was driving around in Kaysie's Toyota Tercel, thinking and praying. I needed music to fit my mood, and I rooted around in her glove compartment looking for the right soundtrack. All she had was a bunch of popular Christian music and one secular album: *Chicago's Greatest Hits*. I looked at the Christian tapes one by one. *Lead Me On* by Amy Grant. *The Big Picture* by Michael W. Smith. *Freedom* by WhiteHeart. *The World As Best As I Remember It, Volume 2* by Rich Mullins. I was familiar enough with Grant and Smith and WhiteHeart to know I

did not want to listen to them, so I popped the Mullins tape into the player. It was so awful to my ears that I could only leave the volume turned up for the first two songs. But I did not turn it completely off. I drove around and sorted through shelves of emotion; I thought about God and my life and my future and my family; I thought about being high and being sober. I thought about the Holy Spirit Guy. I tried to put it all together and see if I could find some organizing principle. Mostly, I thought about how I was beginning to hope that God still loved me. That idea held a kind of attraction that I had not recognized in a long time. And I knew that His love anticipated a response.

At some point, my ears tuned into the lyrics that were wafting from the speakers. All the clutter in my mind funneled into one stream and began to flow with the song. The music was so unlike the rock that I loved that I tuned it out entirely (my tastes, it turns out, were severely limited), but the simple lyrics simply overtook me. They made sense in a way that only songs can make sense. Song lyrics can be hackneyed and annoying and still come together in a way that reverberates, that reconciles and refocuses everything in view; it happened to me as I drove down the road and listened to Mullins sing about some woman telling him that love is found not in what is kept but in what is given up, and about how truth hits you hard in the middle of the night. It was a sentimental, weepy song, and I began to weep along with it. I pulled over to the curb and took the liner notes out of the tape casing. The song was "What Susan Said" and it was about two best friends growing up together, a lifetime of memories and meaning filtered through a friendship. In some way, it was about Matt and me, and later that year I would type up all the lyrics and send them to him in a letter, and I would make him a tape of this and other songs by Rich Mullins (who had by then won me over completely). Matt would call and say, "I hate that guy's music, but his lyrics are pretty good." I would know what he meant.

That night on the side of the road, I thought about our friendship, but mostly I thought about how I felt lost, and here it was in the middle of the night, and what Susan had said to Rich Mullins

was being said to me right now: *Love is found in the things we've given up more than in the things that we have kept.* I cried silently at the profundity of it all, and deep inside myself I knew that I wanted to give up everything and keep nothing so that I could find as much love as possible.

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Aside from, or in spite of, my impending conversion, the summer of 1993 was deliciously carefree. Matt and I both worked day jobs—I at AT&T, he at Kay-Bee Toys—and as soon as work was over we would meet at his apartment and settle the evening's business in as quick a manner as possible. Three questions: one, how do we get beer? Two, how do we get pot? Three, how do we get girls? Most nights, we would end up at a house party for a while, then return to his apartment to play Spades and smoke endless packs of cigarettes. It was, we kept reminding each other, the best summer of our lives. We had simple pleasures that were easily satisfied. There was no high school to return to, the first day of college seemed far off, neither of us had a steady girlfriend and therefore no one to tell us not to hang out with each other, and we had pretty much perfected the art of dodging our parents. We were on our own. All of our friends were in a good mood all the time. We had free time in abundance. Life was grand.

But even as I kept agreeing with Matt that our summer was going great, privately I knew it had been a mixed bag of mild teenage rebellion and thinking hard about whether or not I wanted, in the language of the megachurch, to “commit my life to Christ.” Halfway through the summer I started going to services every Sunday night, privately. From 6:00 P.M. to 8:00 P.M. each Sunday I would sit in the very back, sing gospel songs and listen to the preacher talk about Jesus, and then hop in my car and speed to whatever party Matt was at. Within the hour I would be stoned, charismatic worship tunes still ringing in my ears.

Pot was helping my conversion process more than hurting it. After Sunday night services, all I wanted to do was think about

God, but I did not want to do it alone. I didn't want to talk with anyone; I just didn't want to be by myself. I could go to parties and be surrounded by people but smoke enough weed to carve out a mental space of my own. I would sit in the backyard with the rest of the stoners, smoke and smoke, and then go inside, find space on a couch, and act as if I was asleep. I could hear people around me: "That dude is so wasted." But I was not only wasted; I was lost in thought about Jesus.

One night at one of these parties, Matt poked me and said he wanted to go for a drive. We hopped in my car and pulled down the street. We got to the end of the block before either of us noticed the awful sound coming from my car speakers. It was Michael W. Smith's "A Place in This World."

"—the hell are you listening to?"

In truth, I had left the radio tuned to the Christian station on purpose. I knew when I arrived at the party that Matt and I would eventually be in my car together. I was already feeling a little evangelistic impulse, and I thought maybe Christian music would give me a way to talk to Matt about God. Plus, I wanted my friend to know what I was going through, and I wanted to know what he thought. Hopefully he would want to talk about Jesus too, and we could sit in my car and pray for salvation together and then return to the party.

Clearly, my hopes were too high.

"I don't know what it's called."

I knew exactly what it was called. I knew every lyric. The station had been playing "A Place in This World" every half hour for a month. For all my distaste for the song, I had heard it enough to memorize it.

"Well, it sucks," Matt said. Click. "A Place in This World" was immediately replaced by Alice in Chains's "Man in the Box." We were both happier.

But over time, I became bolder about my declining taste in popular music. I outed myself completely, in fact, confessing to Matt that I was seriously considering making a 100 percent commitment

to God, and that's why I listened to Christian radio. "Not that it's wrong to listen to Zeppelin and stuff," I said, conflicted, "but I think I need to fill my mind with Christian things. At least some of the time." Matt was OK with that. He was even encouraging. He sure wasn't willing to listen to "that crap too, but not because I don't believe in God, man. I believe in God. I know there's a God. I was raised Catholic, you know."

As the summer wound down, bad Christian music became just about the only music I wanted to listen to, except when I was stoned. I knew that I was not just listening; I was learning how to be religious. I was learning how to have a relationship with God, just as the megachurch had advised. For better or worse—actually, for a bewildering mix of better *and* worse—Christian music was informing the way I believed in God. Life with Jesus was exciting and every day was an adventure (so said Steven Curtis Chapman). God's love was unexpected and unlike any other love (so said Pray for Rain). I was supposed to seek God in the morning and learn to walk in His ways (so said Rich Mullins). Popular Christian music was teaching me how to believe what I wanted to believe; it was inserting me into Christian culture; it was subtly shaping my impression of spiritual things. I would later reconsider my steady consumption of this particular expression of Christianity, but for now it was convincing me, in spite of its notable lack of cool, that I needed to become a follower of Christ once and for all.

At the beginning of August, Matt prepared to leave for college. I knew that as soon as he left I would make a commitment to Christianity. I wanted to wait until he was gone partly because I didn't want to ruin our fun while he was still in town. Matt appreciated this. We had talked about God enough at this point that he knew I was gearing up to become an honest-to-goodness Christian, and he had continued to be encouraging. He understood. He had thought a lot about God lately, too. He thought maybe when he got to college he'd look for a church. We both doubted that he really would, but still he was encouraging (and he would eventually prove us both wrong).

I drove Matt to his college, six hours away in Durango, Colorado. We got so stoned on the trip that we somehow ended up in New Mexico. It took us twelve hours to make the six-hour trip, and by the time we arrived I had to turn right around and drive back home.

A couple of weeks later, I decided that there was no use stalling any longer. I wanted to live for God, and I was sure the place to start was by getting rid of whatever pot I had on me.

The next day I went by my friend J.J.'s apartment so she and Brian and I could get high before class. We did, went to school, and then trudged through class. Afterwards, I nudged Brian as we walked out the door and asked him if he wanted to buy the rest of my bag. We walked to his car, he gave me ten bucks, and I gave him my pot and a couple of pipes.

"You're giving me these, too?" he asked, looking at the pipes.

"Yeah. I don't need them. I'm not going to smoke anymore."

He snorted. "You're not?"

"Seriously. I'm, uh, I don't know if I said anything to you before, but . . . I think I'm going to try to be a Christian."

"..."

"I know. But yeah. A Christian."

"And that means you can't smoke pot."

"I think so."

"Cool, man."

He shrugged. I shrugged. I got out of his car.

So, that was it. I had converted. This time I meant it. Stopping smoking was a symbolic gesture. It was, as far as I could tell, a religious sacrifice, giving up something I enjoyed because I felt it was standing in the way of my coming closer to committing my life to Christ.

I was an ascetic.

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Two weeks later, I buy my CD player and the Christian CDs. I go to one more party, but I do not have the patience or gregariousness to party sober, and I do not know how to tell my friends I am a Chris-

tian, so I leave. Within a month, I am attending the charismatic megachurch on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evenings. By late September, I am rising from bed an hour and a half earlier every morning to read the Bible and pray. I am attending prayer meetings. I am studying Christian devotionals. I am changing everything.

I am becoming a version of myself that will comfort and confound me for years to come.

