

## Using Music in Ministry

by Kevin Heider

While one may be curious as to what exactly it is about music that sometimes persuades a man to let himself slip into partial unconsciousness to experience the great mystery of the aesthetic sensation which it brings, the objective of this article is not to determine the effects of music on the human psyche, for that there are effects is presupposed here, but rather to discuss how music can be used, for lack of a worse pun, as an instrument, as a source of light in a dark world.

The goal of this article is to develop a fuller understanding of music akin to Father St. Maximilian Kolbe's understanding of film: "We must convert the movies. If we give them the proper direction they will stop harming people." In other words, we must take what we have on this earth, the talents and gifts we have been given, and use them for the greater glory of God to the best of our abilities in accordance with His divine grace and will. Effectively using music in ministry towards this end is, like many modern money-making models, a three-step process, here involving (1) Understanding Historical Functions (2) Critical Analysis and (3) Determining Proper Order and the Effectiveness of Current Trends.

Although we can't always determine why a particular emotional response is drawn from us, understanding the historical functions of music will no doubt enlighten us to its power. In cases of classical works, the title of a piece is all one needs to know in order to make sense of the aesthetic, to give the sound and the feel of the music itself a context. Beethoven originally began composing his grand Romantic opus no. 55, "Eroica," for instance, in honor of Napoleon Bonaparte, viewed in his earliest conquests as a freedom fighter for France. However, in May of 1804, when Beethoven received word that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor, he understood the arrogant declaration to be the act of a tyrant. Having originally been titled "Buonaparte," Beethoven's finished work was thus renamed *Sinfonia eroica, composta per festeggiare il sovvenire d'un grand'uomo* ("Heroic symphony, composed to celebrate the memory of a great man"). The words of our own national anthem, "The Star-Spangled Banner," are themselves one man's reflection on the awesome spectacle of the British attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore, Maryland during the War of 1812. The tune of our anthem was reportedly borrowed from a popular British drinking song of the time. It is no wonder then that the musical retelling of the victorious defense of the fort, fondly recalled with images of "bombs bursting in air" and flags triumphantly waving, set to the soaring, dramatic melody unique to well-constructed drinking songs, still manages to rouse patriotic sentiment almost 200 years after Francis Scott Key first touched pen to paper. It was the rebellious tone of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Fortunate Son," coupled with its angst-ridden lyrics, that drew Vietnam War protestors to rally behind its familiar anti-battle battle cry.

While the lyrics to Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind" seem to include important questions for any man to ask, such as "How many years can some people exist before they're allowed to be free?," the overall significance of the song is even more striking in light of the fact that Dylan wrote the lyrics in the midst of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and that the song's melody was borrowed from an old slave



song. And though Dylan's initial efforts were unsuccessful, Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, a championship boxer who spent 19 years in prison for murders he didn't commit, was granted a second trial in 1976 as a result of publicity from Dylan's hit song, "The Hurricane," which recounted the tale of how the boxer was wrongly framed and convicted by racist authorities. Placing all of these familiar songs within their respective and proper historical contexts allows us to more fully understand the truly awesome power of music. When employed as a means to an end, when functioning as an instrument of change, music has the ability to rouse sentiment for the rejection of tyrants, for the reformation of unjust institutions, and for the beginning of a revolution within the hearts and minds of men, the everyday men who will one day be the heads of their own states and cultures. Simply put, music has the power to make a prince a pauper and a pauper a prince. The problem, however, is that today's young generation seems primarily concerned with the aesthetic qualities of music and so ignores the lyrical message that their brain still subconsciously absorbs. This is precisely why objective critical analysis is vital when examining the music of today's American popular culture.



Whatever Bono may have been thinking or feeling when he wrote the words to U2's second #1 song "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" in 1987, it seems all who hear his melodic, heartfelt cry cannot help but empathize with him in longing for something more. Aside from discussing how the aesthetic experience with a particular song makes one feel, it is essential that today's teens be encouraged to ask two vital questions concerning a song's lyrics: (1) What exactly is being said? (2) What does it mean? "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" provides a nice starting point for such an exercise. *PluggedIn Magazine*, a Focus on the Family publication, for instance, considers the song's message to be negative or objectionable: "While U2's Bono acknowledges Christ's sacrifice, he can't seem to find solace there..." Though this is a perfectly understandable interpretation of the lyrics, we should always strive to dig deeper, and too many people too often neglect to use the artist of a work as a source for better understanding. In *Rattle and Hum*, a 1988 documentary about the band, U2's The Edge states that "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" was written as a Gospel song. *PluggedIn Magazine's* interpretation, therefore, seems somewhat off in light of this information. Why would someone write a Gospel song about the insufficiency of Christ's sacrifice? An alternative interpretation that might reconcile the song's intended genre with its seemingly hopeless lyrics might be found in the famous words of St. Augustine: "You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." While we do not know whether or not St. Augustine's words had any direct influence on this composition, one cannot deny that the sentiments expressed seem quite similar. That said, it would be most beneficial to have the teens discuss the overall implications of both interpretations.

Two more excellent songs to use as examples here are popular British rock quartet Coldplay's 2008 Grammy-winning "Viva la Vida" and Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young." We will start with the former. It is clear from the lyrics of "Viva la Vida" that the song is about a once-mighty king who has been stripped of his earthly power, left to "sweep the streets alone," and now faces the threat of execution at the hands of "revolutionaries" who wait for his "head on a silver plate." In May of 2008, the teens gathered at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church in Woodbridge, VA were each given a copy of the song's lyrics. Because the song is sung in the

first person perspective, they were asked to try to figure out what historical figure might be singing the song. They were to defend their answers by citing relevant lines from the song, and the evidence needed to be consistent. With suggestions ranging from Jesus, Moses, and King David to Judas, Pontius Pilate, Nero, Julius Caesar, and even Napoleon Bonaparte, the group had one of their most interesting and lively discussions to date. To draw the conversation to a close, the Coordinator of Youth Ministry handed each of the teens a translated account of King Louis XVI's execution in France as written by Henry Essex Edgeworth, the priest who accompanied the king to the guillotine in 1793. The imagery in Edgeworth's account - from the anxious revolutionaries, to the sound of the drums, to the beheading of the king - strikingly parallels the imagery in Coldplay's song. (\*It is also interesting and important to note that the cover art for Coldplay's "Viva la Vida" album is actually a painting by Eugene Delacroix from 1830. The painting is called Liberty Leading the People, and commemorates the July Revolution of 1830 in France.) "Viva la Vida" is a song ripe with romantic historical imagery of fallen kings and revolutions, as well as plenty of fodder for discussions on what it really means to be a king in this world in light of what we as Catholics believe about the next. Regardless of what a group participating in this exercise concludes about the song, the teens will be forced to think and use their imaginations, and they'll no doubt have a fun time trying to solve this musical puzzle.



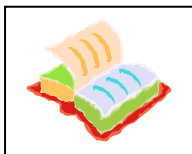
Billy Joel's "Only the Good Die Young" is one of those timelessly catchy tunes that even Catholic music lovers often can't help but sing along with, which is especially interesting in light of the fact that the song is about a man trying to lure a young Catholic girl, presumably a virgin, into bed with him! The challenge here is to determine what line(s) in the song, if any, offer a positive insight or glimmer of hope for the singer. Though the song is replete with Catholic imagery for the sole purpose of mocking the Church's sacred traditions, two lines in particular seem to acknowledge, whether intentionally or not, that there is an inherent power in faithful prayer. In the first line, the singer suggests to the girl, whose name is Virginia: "You didn't count on me when you were counting on your rosary." In the second line, the singer comments about the girl's mother: "She never cared for me, but did she ever say a prayer for me?" Both lines seem to illuminate the singer's mindset, that he might be a bit more respectable, respectful, and understanding in his advances had one of the people who thought him so disreputable taken the time to pray for him. While you might consider this interpretation somewhat loose, and understandably so, I feel it is necessary to note and discuss any line from this song that could be considered redemptive in the slightest, if for no other reason than that this song contains the lyric that could arguably be the motto for most of modern American popular culture: "I'd rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints / the sinners are much more fun." It is also interesting to note that this song, released as a single in 1977, didn't really start gaining popularity until a radio station at a Catholic university in New Jersey banned it from their airwaves. It eventually peaked at #24 on the Billboard Hot 100. Billy Joel later claimed: "I did write a letter to the archdiocese who'd banned it, asking them to ban my next record." Mentioning statues, temples, fate, stained-glass curtains, sin, sinners, saints, white dresses, confirmation, brand new souls, crosses of gold, the rosary, and prayer, "Only the Good Die Young" provides ample opportunities to correct common misconceptions about sacred Church traditions and to

really enhance the spiritual, historical, cultural, and theological significance of those traditions in engaging discussions with teens.

Once we have helped teens understand the historical functions and power of music and have critically examined popular works, they will be better able to identify the current order of music, that is, the end to which it is presently directed. Unfortunately, much of today's popular music is ordered to self-gratification, sex, drugs, violence, and teeny-bopper-bubble-gum notions of "love." So as Maximilian Kolbe said about film almost a century ago, we must now say about music: "We must convert music. If we give it the proper direction it will stop harming people." In a letter to artists delivered at the Vatican on Easter Sunday 1999, Pope John Paul the Great stated: "Those who perceive in themselves this kind of divine spark which is the artistic vocation—as poet, writer, sculptor, architect, musician, actor and so on—feel at the same time the obligation not to waste this talent but to develop it, in order to put it at the service of their neighbor and of humanity as a whole." He goes on to write that the work of artists can and should reflect genuine "epiphanies of beauty" and "moments of grace." As teachers, ministers, counselors, and role models, Coordinators of Youth Ministry are in unique positions of influence to help teens better understand and determine this proper order of music. Throughout his Pontificate, John Paul II repeatedly called for two significant renewals: (1) a renewal of the vision of Catholic Youth Ministry and (2) a renewal of the culture. Having been enlightened to the power that music has exerted over hearts and minds in the past, it should be clear now that the two go hand in hand.

We cannot expect to effectively renew Catholic Youth Ministry without also working to renew the culture (and vice versa). The teens entering our programs today have been bombarded their whole lives, even if only subconsciously, with music and a culture that seems increasingly ordered to the self. We must help them to acknowledge that tragedy and to understand that all things, all gifts and talents, should be ordered selflessly to God and to the good of others - ad majorem Dei gloriam ("for the greater glory of God"). The end result of all our efforts in this regard is to inspire them to use their own gifts and talents to create work that glorifies God and that genuinely strives to better understand the human in light of the divine, to let them know that they can indeed wield music's awesome power to change the world! But before the inspiration can really take hold, we must encourage teens, at the very least, to actually actively think about, acknowledge, and understand what it is they're listening to. Before the revolution can begin, there must be consciousness. Unless we first realize that the reason we keep stumbling is because we've been moving in the dark, we will not think to turn on the light.

### **Recommended Website**



[www.plugginonline.com](http://www.plugginonline.com) - It's Focus on the Family's "Plugged In" magazine's website. In both the film and music review sections they do a good job of telling us about the positive and negative content in most of today's popular films and music. It's not nearly as in depth as what I recommend in the article, but it's a great starting point.



## Recommended Songs for Group Discussions

- *The Sound of Silence* - by Simon & Garfunkel - While this folk classic is a bit mysterious/ambiguous, many of its poetic lines (such as "people talking without speaking, people hearing without listening," and "and the people bowed and prayed to the neon god they made") are great for discussing the nature and importance of silence, especially in relation our relationships with each other and with God.
- *Blowin' in the Wind* - Bob Dylan - Virtually every line of this song asks a really good question. Answer them together or in small groups.
- *The Hurricane* - by Bob Dylan - Examine the history/background of the actual people/events that inspired the song, as well as how the song itself affected the lives of the people about whom it was written.
- *I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For* - U2 - What exactly is the singer saying here? I mention in the article that this song is great for discussion.
- *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* - U2 - great for talking about war from a Christian perspective. Providing a history/background to what actual events inspired the song is essential.
- *Where the Streets Have No Name* - by U2 - great for a discussion about artistic notions of heaven.
- *Yahweh* - by U2 - uses incredible poetic imagery to talk about our need and desire for God.
- *Pride (In the Name of Love)* - by U2 - a song about the life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. that includes parallels and references to Christ.
- Any U2 song on the albums "The Joshua Tree," "All That You Can't Leave Behind," "How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb," and "No Line on the Horizon," is ripe for discussion.
- *Viva la Vida* - by Coldplay - I mentioned a great exercise for this song in the article.
- *Only the Good Die Young* - by Billy Joel - I mentioned a great exercise for this song in the article.
- *Life's Been Good* - by Joe Walsh - This song is about an incredibly self-centered, self-indulgent man. It would be good for talking about what's really important in life and how to not waste what we've been given.
- *Brick* - by Ben Folds Five - This song is about the lead singer's experience with an abortion that his high school girlfriend had and how deeply and tragically it affected them both.
- *Can I Live?* - by Nick Canon - This song is about the lead singer's gratitude that his mother did not go through with an abortion when she was pregnant with him.
- *My Story* - by Da Truth - The lead singer/rapper tells his "average" testimony about being Christian. A lot of teens will be able to relate to what he's saying.

## Contemporary Christian Music

Most of the songs mentioned in this article fall into the category typically referred to in Christian circles as "secular music." This decision was made for two reasons: (1) Most of today's teens are already immersed in secular pop culture in one way or another, whether consciously or subconsciously - if not at home, then at school, on the TV, on the radio, at the movies, at friends' houses, etc. (2) Analyzing and actively engaging in art that doesn't necessarily reflect 100% of it's audience's professed beliefs or worldviews requires much more from the individual in that he or she is forced to think more deeply about what is being said and ask significant questions concerning the content and the manner in which that content is presented. In regards to music, it

gives the individual listener the opportunity to stretch his intellect and develop a more active thought process as he attempts to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, when contemplating a song's meaning or it's artist's intention.



That said here are a few suggestions for good contemporary Christian alternatives to secular music. Because its much too difficult and restricting to categorize Christian artists by style or genre or compare them to secular acts that they may occasionally sound like, here's a big alphabetized list for you to check out at your leisure:

*Audio Adrenaline, Avalon, Bebo Norman, Bob Rice, Brian Kissinger, Caedmon's Call, Casting Crowns, Cheer Up Charlie, Chris Padgett, Chris Rice, Chris Tomlin, Danielle Rose, Da Truth, David Crowder Band, David Hust, DC Talk, Delirious?, Father Stan Fortuna, Grace Ellen, Ike Ndolo, Jaci Velasquez, Jacob and Matthew, Jars of Clay, Jeremy Camp, Josh Blakesly, Katie Rose, Kelly Pease, Kevin Heider, Kutless, Leeland, Marie Miller, Mat Kearney, Matt Miller, Matt Maher, Matt Redman, MercyMe, Michael W. Smith, Newsboys, Paul Vogrinc, Phil Wickham, Popple, Rebecca St. James, Relient K, Righteous B, Scarlet Biberstein, Skillet, SONICFLOOd, Stellar Kart, Stephen Curtis Chapman, Steve Angrisano, Superchick, Switchfoot, Third Day, TobyMac, and Todd Agnew*

While it's virtually impossible to name them all here, this list includes a wide variety of the older and more well-known Christian musical acts, as well as some up-and-coming artists you'll want to keep a close eye [and ear] on. Thanks for reading. And enjoy the music! Peace!

*Kevin Heider has been the Coordinator of Youth Ministry at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton parish in Woodbridge, VA since September 2008. A singer/songwriter eager to share his faith through music, Kevin hopes that his artistic contributions will act as a catalyst for the cultural revolution. For more information on Kevin, his ministry, or his philosophy on music, visit his official website at [www.KEVINHEIDER.COM](http://www.KEVINHEIDER.COM).*