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Rock music and live concerts have long been sites for meaning, identity, and community. Music, especially live music, can be an intensely emotional experience. For a teenager, it can be a source of personal and social identity and meaning that is virtually unshakeable. Music can serve as temporal memory, facilitating emotional recall and is a very effective tool for organization. Music has the ability to both stir one's emotions as well plant one firmly and effortlessly in the present moment can be a transcendent religious experience. In this way, music is also a highly effective contemporary evangelization tool, especially for teenagers. However, when North American evangelical organizations¹ employ rock music, the live concert experience, and merchandising in an effort to evangelize to a heavily-mediated, attention-challenged youth culture, how much of the gospel message translates into a commitment of faith and how much is derived from the transcendent effect of music and live performance in the moment? Is the message getting lost in the medium, or is the medium the message? Is the live music experience serving to strengthen the message or weaken it?

Teen Mania’s Acquire The Fire (ATF) rallies began in 1991, in response to what its founder, Ron Luce, calls a “hunger” for spirituality in a sea of secular media bombardment.² Yet Luce feeds this hunger by appropriating aspects of modern secular media and using them for evangelizing purposes, resulting in a kind of Christian MTV for the Internet generation.

¹ In this case the world of TeenMania and their annual Acquire The Fire [ATF] rallies http://www.teenmania.com/index.cfm/PageID/1603/index.html (United States).
addition to a live concert, ATF rallies aggressively promote related youth ministries, sell merchandise, and have a large online presence (websites, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) much like their secular counterparts. How is the renegotiated evangelical approach to reach teenagers through culturally relevant media affecting the internalization of the gospel and religious message?

Christian media, which includes Christian rock and Christian retailing, is an extremely lucrative international market as teenagers are arguably the most profitable demographic. When this is also considered, Christian media have a lot of power to influence youth, not only into buying their products, but also the message attached to them. Some scholars, such as Colleen McDannell, question whether or not religious and Christian material consumption affects internalization of the gospel message. What is clear is that Teen Mania’s popularity, along with ATF’s ticket and merchandising sales, “indicate that American [teens] are ‘getting religion’ in many other ways besides going to church.” But what if Christian material consumption is merely another updated form of material religion, like a new version of the Bible? The Bible became accessible to an unprecedented number of people during the Protestant Reformation, when it was first translated from Latin to German. Later, the Bible was rendered even more accessible when it

4 Colleen McDannell, Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America (Yale University Press, 1995), 269. “Christian retailing is a striking example of how lay men and women successfully integrate religious concepts, popular culture, and profit making... But this does not tell us anything about whether or not that integration affects, lessens or increases the Christian gospel message.”
5 Jerry Park and Joseph Baker, “What Would Jesus Buy: American Consumption of Religious and Spiritual Material Goods,” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (December 2007), 46 (4), 501. “For many Americans, experiencing or connecting with the sacred often includes mediation through or with material objects or goods. [It] is a mediation that is highly personal and readily accessible to larger and larger audiences... Multimillion dollar sales of these products indicate that Americans are ‘getting religion’ in many other ways besides going to church.”
was updated to plain English from the King James Version. These are two powerful examples of material renegotiation by Protestant Christians seeking to reach more people.

Sociologist Simon Frith⁶ states that the “ultimate goal” for music is “personal and social transformation.”⁷ In this sense, Christian rock events like ATF are potentially very effective evangelizing tools, mobilizing thousands of teens at a time:

[Musical] performances are multi-media events, and their sound patterns are but one of several channels of communication... [In addition to pure enjoyment], the music may express more precisely than any political or religious dogma the really important values that underlie a person's political or religious commitment, such as a sense of human brotherhood or a desire to worship.⁸

The social function of music is to answer questions of identity and social orientation, to come to know one's self emotionally “via the music,” and to shape “popular memory:”⁹

Each mass medium has its own techniques for addressing its audience, for creating moments of recognition and exclusion, for giving us a sense of ourselves... On the one hand, [music] works with particularly intense emotional experiences... On the other hand, these musical experiences always contain social meaning, are placed within a social context.¹⁰

At the same time, the “production of identity” also produces “non-identity” - a kind of us versus them, or Christian versus secular.¹¹ In listening to live rock or pop music, “people directly experience community [and] feel an immediate bond with other people, [articulating] a particular kind of collective pride.”¹² This is due to music's capacity for “direct emotional intensity” which further defines the boundaries between ‘in’ and ‘out.’ In other words, the power of music goes far

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⁶ Also a former rock critic.
⁹ Ibid., 35, 37-8, 40.
¹⁰ bid., 35, 37.
¹¹ Ibid., 38.
¹² Ibid., 37.
beyond music;\textsuperscript{13} it is not only useful for creating a personal identity, but is also useful in the quest for social belonging,\textsuperscript{14} and this quest is especially crucial during teenage years. Because of the universal symbolic power of music and its ability to ‘stop’ time, Frith sees the opportunity for personal transcendence, even in the midst of other, worldlier concerns:

\begin{quote}
It is too easy to explain a pop festival in purely sociological terms and to ignore its significance as a musical event. It may indeed be a case of commercial exploitation, a social gathering, an assertion of youthful identity and revolt, [etc.,] but it can also be an occasion on which people respond to musical ideas and achieve some degree of transcendence.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

He also sees music as socially unifying because “some kinds of communication are [simply] more effective than others at stimulating love, co-operation and... educating the emotions.”\textsuperscript{16} Frith appears quite optimistic about rock music’s ability to affect genuine personal transformation, while at the same time acknowledging the momentary nature of transcendence.

For many Christian conservatives, religious expression is part of a lifestyle, not confined to Sunday services.\textsuperscript{17} Christian retailing capitalizes on this fact by replacing the words of a Sunday sermon with a visual (or aural) religious-material object that can, in essence, serve as a sermon.\textsuperscript{18} But does the message get lost when “a thing, not a word, gains the power to minister?”\textsuperscript{19}

For example, since Christian rock is virtually indistinguishable from mainstream rock,\textsuperscript{20} how can Christian youth make it their own, beyond including obvious (but potentially irrelevant)

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 275.
\textsuperscript{15} Frith, \textit{Popular Music}, 14-5, 40.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{17} Colleen McDannell, \textit{Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 261.
\textsuperscript{18} McDannell, \textit{Material Christianity}, 266-7.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 267.
\textsuperscript{20} Levy, "When God Is Cool", http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1002432-3,00.html.
Christian-based lyrics? Frith asserts that the consumer ‘resignifies’ musical meaning and possesses the power to “reappropriate... music in unintended ways.”

McDannell concludes that religious objects - or in this case, the events - become “the medium for the message, [moving] Christianity out of the space of the churches and into the everyday life of learning, family, and consumerism.” This certainly seems to be the case with ATF, but can religious music also serve as an effective sermon?

The answer, according to Philip Anderson, a critic of Christian rock, is a resounding ‘no.’ The transcendent moment at Christian rock concerts has, for him, everything to do with the power of music to produce an ecstatic, religious-emotional response in the listeners, and nothing to do with Christians dogma, ideology, or the merchandise being sold at the concerts. On this point, he is unequivocal:

Christian rock is a problematic marketing tool, a slippery slope... The message is in the beat, in the tension and release of the rhythm, in the pure ecstatic joy of the human voice in harmony. The words don't mean a thing - your kids are in the moment of ecstasy... Christian rock is the lure to bring kids to salvation... People listen to music for the joy first and the words second.

If “music changes people,” he continues, then it does so on its own, not because it has a (gospel) message attached to it. This may explain why music, “rooted in the body,” resonates far more with an individual's emotions than with their cultural preferences. As well, Anderson's point further reinforces the argument that the medium (music) is the message and that the words are

21 Martin, Sounds and society, 269.
22 McDannell, Material Christianity, 261.
ultimately uninvolved in eliciting the ecstatic feeling, which feels authentically real in the moment.26

Modernity fosters the “formation of strong religious subcultures provided there is something to rebel against.”27 For example, conservative Christians’ battle with secular culture, based on a perception of threat, creates a strong urge for sociocultural cohesion and distinction.28 The “subcultural identity theory of religious strength”29 posits that American evangelicals construct a religious subculture in order to distinguish themselves from mainstream society and that this conscious construction of social identity serves to strengthen their religious cause:10

One of the primary ways social groups provide their members identity and meaning is by inculcating in them a normative and moral orientation toward life and the world... Life and the world are made meaningful, then, and individual identity is constructed precisely by establishing moral bearings, values, and standards that render a sense of location and normative direction for those who embrace them... ‘To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space.”31

In becoming spatially oriented, the social group's collective identity is thus constructed by establishing itself as the “in-group” while contrasting itself with the “out-group.”32 Social identity is predicated not only on who you are but also who you are not, and this ideology is especially

26 Thomas Turino, Music As Social Life: The Politics of Participation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2-3. “Music, dance, festivals, and other public expressive cultural practices are a primary way that people articulate the collective identities that are fundamental to forming and sustaining social groups which are, in turn, basic to survival. The performing arts are frequently fulcrums of identity, allowing people to intimately feel themselves part of the community through... shared cultural knowledge and style... Music [is] key to identity formation because [it is] often [a] public presentations of the deepest feelings and qualities that make a group unique... Through moving and sounding together in synchrony, people can experience a feeling of oneness with others. The signs of social intimacy are experienced directly – body to body – and thus in the moment are felt to be true.”
28 Smith and Emerson, American Evangelicalism, 89-90.
29 Ibid., 118-9.
30 Ibid., 89.
31 Ibid., 90-1.
32 Ibid., 91.
prominent during the teen years.\textsuperscript{33} Christian rock music and evangelistic youth events are, in this sense, \textit{results} of this ongoing process of creating and re-negotiating meaning and identity:\textsuperscript{34}

Religious traditions have \textit{always} strategically renegotiated their collective identities by continually reformulating the ways their constructed orthodoxies engage the changing sociocultural environments they confront. [But] sociologists of religion need seriously to rethink how they use the idea of ‘accommodation.’ Far too often, when sociologists see a religious group modifying itself in response to, or incorporating new elements from, its surrounding culture, they automatically label it ‘accommodation.’\textsuperscript{35}

Religious modification is not accommodation; rather, it is a reformulation and renegotiation of evangelical practices in an attempt to compete with secular media. Evangelical organizations like Teen Mania, whether they are conscious of it or not, are in the business of recruiting and will use whatever means they have from any given time or culture to stay relevant. As most youth are disinterested in attending church, the creative renegotiation of the worship space and the way one evangelizes to young people is completely justified and may in fact be successful for evangelicals. At the same time, however, the “alternative image masks a harsh reality”\textsuperscript{36} because subcultures “often appropriate elements of the dominant or hegemonic culture and use them to criticize that very culture.”\textsuperscript{37} In doing so, this raises the question of whether or not teen rock festivals like ATF and Christian rock, in general, can qualify as ‘real church’ or ‘real worship,’ or whether they fail to reveal the true message of the gospels.

Philip Anderson strongly asserts that Evangelical Christianity not only makes accommodations for secular culture by appropriating secular youth culture and music to suit its

\textsuperscript{33} Smith and Emerson, \textit{American Evangelism}, 91.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 97.
\textsuperscript{36} Martin, \textit{Sounds and society}, 268.
\textsuperscript{37} Kotarba, \textit{Baby Boomer Rock’n’Roll Fans}, 105.
purposes, but also feels that, in so doing, it is hypocritically embracing the very thing it claims to abhor: echoing the iconoclastic paradox of demonstrating one’s opposition to the material world through the material world.\footnote{Anderson, The Stillborn Twin, 212-3.} Anderson describes American evangelical youth movements like Teen Mania and the ATF rallies as “a desperate effort by the (Christian) right to co-opt popular culture [by] creatively packaging the message of the gospels [to make] it palatable to Christian youth and potential converts.”\footnote{Ibid., 214.} While he acknowledges that, since the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth-century, churches have “understood that the Christian message was best conveyed through the joy of music, [and that] people were more likely to attend church services that were entertaining,”\footnote{Ibid., 216.} he still concludes that their modern equivalents employ nothing more than a “marketing tactic” that is predicated on fear, has no redeeming value for youth, and plenty of profit for the church and “Christian-based businesses.”\footnote{Ibid., 214-5.}

As many know, the power of music to shape “popular memory” is intensified by the fact that music is “often the key to our remembrance of things past.”\footnote{Frith, Popular Music, 40.} Music tends to have the biggest effect on people during their teen years, as it is then that they saturate themselves with and really absorb music, along with its attendant merchandise and paraphernalia.\footnote{Ibid. See also Donald A. Hodges, Music in the Human Experience: An Introduction to Music Psychology, ed. by David C. Sebald (New York: Routledge, 2010), 225.} Thus, decades later, the memory of musical songs, artists, and events has the power to return people in a visceral way to a time in their lives where they may have felt completely devoted to whatever cultural world they inhabited. This is the recurring transcendent moment and it has definite value – not only for the
emotional self, but also for the collective social group in which it was experienced. In this way, the evangelical attempt lasts - even if one stops practicing their religion at some point, there is always the possibility, through the *transcendent* power of music, that one will return.

Religious consumption can be reflective of one's religious identity, but there can also be a gap in understanding between the consumer and the subtleties of the faith being consumed. It may be too simplistic and dismissive, however, to conclude that consumption of religious music minimizes the potentially powerful message of the gospel. Maybe the message is being received in a way more deeply-felt because its presentation to specific demographic groups has been renegotiated. On the surface, it appears as though evangelicals are accommodating secular culture because they feel beaten by it. However, what they are actually doing is appropriating its power to mould teens' behaviour, providing youth with a potentially appealing alternative in their search for identity, and, most of all, strengthening their own subcultural identity and relevance. Still, the majority of teens who attend these rallies cite the music as the number one draw, above and beyond the gospel message. For them, the music *is* the message.

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45 This conclusion was drawn from interviews I conducted while attending ATF at Copps Coliseum in Hamilton, Ontario. It was conducted for a journalism assignment for a University of Toronto religion course in 2010, in answer to the question: “what is your favourite part of the ATF weekend?”
Bibliography


