

The Legitimacy of Music in the Life of a Believer

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It's 2 a.m. and my exhausted body is draped over my subway seat. The train pulls out of the station and my friend Tim informs me that our bus route probably won't be running this late. That means we'll have to walk from the train stop to our rented house in the Bronx, about a two mile walk. With our backpacks. And our gear. I'm not looking forward to lugging our equipment through the Bronx streets, but the joy of playing a great show with the band in Manhattan currently makes up for what looks to be somewhat of a grueling near future. During the thirty minute subway ride my mind wanders. What is all of this worth? Is it just for the fun of the live show?

Throughout the past year, the six members of The Oaks have given time, effort, energy, and countless other pieces of themselves for the sake of the band. This trip to New York is one event among many where lives that would have been at home with spouses or kids are all entangled in this world of "indie music." Is it just for fun- just for producing the entertainment of a live show? Or is there something more?

At the core of the band, The Oaks is about a platform, and not about a platform. There is a strong sense of social justice associated with the band. We give 50% of our current album's sales to a humanitarian non-profit, Global Hope International, we speak about others who need our help in war torn Afghanistan, and we sing about aspects of justice and action in the songs themselves. At the same time, the members of The Oaks intend that the music be something more than just a mere platform, regardless of the validity of that platform. This leads me to ask two questions of myself while riding on the subway out of the city, into the Bronx:

1. Is it legitimate to use music as a social platform? and
2. Is music legitimate when separated from a platform?

It is my intention to demonstrate that it is legitimate and effective to use music as a platform and that music does not have to be closely tied to a platform in order for it to be a legitimate. Music can exist to push others toward a certain program and music, in itself, has merit that we cannot overlook. Both of these aspects of music are important and valuable.

Can rock save the world? This was *Paste Magazine's* cover story in July 2007.¹ It featured artists and celebrities like Bono, Al Gore, Peter Gabriel, along with The Oaks and Ryan Costello (lead singer). Essentially, the core of the article was to ask, "Is this possible, is this effective?" and went on to display what it was that people were doing and the effects of their action. The article was attempting to investigate if the idea of music persuading for humanitarian action works, in light of the "morally bankrupt" backdrop that is often associated with rock music.² The article ends on the note that rock will probably not be able to save the world, but it can definitely change the world and has "always has been a powerful force for change" for good or ill.³ Jumping off where the *Paste* article ends, there are two contemporary case studies of those in music that have used the medium for change: Bob Dylan and Bono of U2.

Bob Dylan's music was influential by changing people's minds about the deepness of Christianity through the deepness of its expression. He has been characterized as a poet and a musician and he truly embodies the singer/songwriter genre. The subject of much controversy, Dylan often wrote songs about God and the Bible, sometimes without clearly articulating his beliefs in both. He claimed to be a Christian,

¹ Josh Jackson, Tim Regan-Porter, "Can Rock Save the World?" *Paste Magazine*, July 2007, 50.

² *Ibid.*, 51.

³ *Ibid.*

even if he was a little slow in admitting this fact⁴, and dedicated many songs, even whole albums, to his belief in Christianity. Dylan's method of changing his world had two foci: music itself and personal interaction. The aesthetics and profundity of his music (recorded and live) and his relation to those around him both served to broadcast, "there's only one way to believe."⁵

This can be seen looking at just one of Dylan's 32 studio albums, *Slow Train Coming*. Barry Beckett, one of Dylan's producers said of Dylan's music, "It wasn't your typical corny Christian-related music...It had depth."⁶ Tim Charles, a stage sound manager remarked that Dylan's "born again shows" had "energy."⁷ At the same time, people outside of his concerts handed out tracts, presenting "the gospel through the lyrics of Dylan's songs."⁸ There was also a spirit of genuine authenticity from his stage, as writer Harvey Kubernik expressed "any jerk...could realize that he wasn't faking"⁹ and, off the stage, it was not uncommon for Dylan to talk with others about God or the Bible. During the recording sessions, Dylan and Jerry Wexler, another one of his producers, would often be seen in a discussion of the Bible.¹⁰

There was a richness to his music that kept people engaged. One of the songs from *Slow Train Coming*, "Gotta Serve Somebody", won a Grammy for best male rock performance.¹¹ According to singer/songwriter and writer Leonard Cohen, the songs from

⁴ Scott M. Marshall and Marcia Ford, *Restless Pilgrim: The Spiritual Journey of Bob Dylan* (Lake Mary, FL: Relevant Media Group, 2002), 42.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

this album “were some of the most beautiful gospel songs that have ever entered the whole landscape of gospel music.”¹²

U2 is one of the world’s biggest all-time rock bands. From the beginning of the band’s inception, the lead singer Bono, has seen U2 as not just another rock band, but is how “we worship God.”¹³ Like Dylan, Bono’s system of rock music changing the world also had two main fields that often overlapped. The first sphere is the band’s songs and concert events; the second is social action/awareness, of which Bono in particular has been a strong voice.

Bono, who has always been very interested in performance art ranging from The Virgin Prunes (an art-house band of performance artists started by the brother of The Edge and other friends of U2 members) to Monty Python, saw the responsibility of the artist as one who will “throw out thoughts and slants, maybe even slants no one else has thought of. They should give another view of something familiar to help us learn more about it.”¹⁴ This was the idea behind their Zoo TV tour, which followed the release of *Achtung Baby*. There were many performance-art related elements in this tour, one of them being stage characters that Bono developed to point to our obsessions with glamour and fame, much like Lewis’ demon characters in *Screwtape Letters*.¹⁵ He would dress up like an Elvis character, or The Fly, a “hedonistic rock star”, or as McPhisto, a “horn wearing devil” not to say, “this is me” but to say, “this is you.”¹⁶ According to Stockman, “the band was keen to show the lunacy of what it had been made into.”¹⁷

¹² Marshall and Ford, 81.

¹³ Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 147.

¹⁴ Steve Stockman, *Walk On: The Spiritual Journey of U2* (Orlando, FL: Relevant Media Group, 2005), 96.

¹⁵ Stockman, 106.

¹⁶ Stockman, 105.

¹⁷ Stockman, 105.

The lyrics for *Achtung Baby*'s track "Mysterious Ways" use the metaphor of a woman for the Holy Spirit, where this "woman" will "Lift my days/Light up my nights" and instructs us that when we "hit the ground" "she'll be there"; God in our time of need.¹⁸ The songs "One" and "Acrobat" also deal with serious spiritual themes, the former of community under Jesus, the latter of hypocrisy.¹⁹

Bono has also been known for his work with humanitarian issues. He has worked for many regions of the world, but most of his action has been with Africa. Early on, Bono focused on debt cancellation in Africa, and was able to get agreements from some of the richest countries to cancel \$110 billion of debt in varied countries of that continent.²⁰ Wanting to see more help from the bottom up, Bono founded DATA (Debt, AIDS, Trade, Africa). According to their 2007 report, the organization has raised almost \$4 billion and plans to raise \$25 billion by 2010.²¹ The report details many positive statistics correlated with aid disbursement, not the least of them: access to AIDS treatment is up 27% from 2002 (when DATA was first founded), there are 20 million more children attending school since 2002, and a region of South Africa has reduced the occurrence of malaria by 90%.²²

There are many times where Bono's songwriting and social concern overlap, creating a blend of his two main approaches. *The Joshua Tree*'s "Bullet the Blue Sky" (1987) was written in response to the United States' involvement in El Salvador, after Bono visited the country.²³ The last track on *The Joshua Tree*, "Mothers of the

¹⁸ Stockman, 98.

¹⁹ Stockman, 98.

²⁰ Stockman, 154.

²¹ The DATA Report 2007, "Executive Summary"; available from <http://www.thedatareport.org/pdf/execSumm2007.pdf>; Internet; accessed 20 November 2007.

²² The DATA Report 2007.

²³ Assayas, 182.

Disappeared” was written in reaction to the children who were kidnapped and killed in Argentina by “the secret police”.²⁴ And of course 1983’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday” from the album *War* was not about “a call to arms” but was “about unity.”²⁵

It would seem from a few present examples that music can definitely be a legitimate means towards a platform, and can also be very effective. There need not be a disconnect between authenticity and social change, indeed for the Christian, seeking justice ought to be a part of our genuine being. To quote Bono once more, “To me, faith in Jesus Christ that is not aligned to social justice- that is not aligned with the poor- it’s nothing.”²⁶

But what happens when music is separated from an easily recognizable platform? Is this a legitimate use for the Christian? One idea that must be addressed is that the absence of a platform does not mean the absence of meaning. A work of art, such as music, can have merit and be meaningful if it “serves the purposes for which it was made or distributed” and if the work “effectively serves the purpose of contemplation for aesthetics delight.”²⁷ So, a pop song should fulfill the purposes of a pop song- how satisfying or not satisfying, that will determine if it is a “bad” song or a “good” one. Wolterstorff grounds the worth of the “aesthetic contemplation” in the peace of God that He “has ordained as the goal of human existence” and writes that it is a matter of “responsible action” (especially for the Christian) to make this contemplation available.²⁸ Being made in the image of God, we cannot help but be creative beings and we must be responsible with our image bearing.

²⁴ Assayas, 187.

²⁵ Assayas, 170.

²⁶ Stockman, 46.

²⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 157-8.

²⁸ Wolterstorff, 169.

R. Kent Hughes writes of a few good and functional uses of music in the church setting, of it bolstering the preaching of the Word, developing maturity, and its use of getting everyone to participate in the worship service,²⁹ but, not forgetting these aspects, we must also go beyond this. There is something, not on the periphery, but in the music itself that is helpful and instructive for us.

Music comes with unique perspectives and limitations³⁰ and only recently has music been an area for doing theology. Music, unlike the visual arts, is highly dependent on time, not just for the performance itself, but part of something being music necessarily includes time.³¹ This aspect constantly reminds us that we are temporal beings, not living in the future or the past, but in the now, and we cannot escape our own physicality, grounding music in the material, temporal world, “in and through its making.”³²

In music, just like our lives, there are multiple times going on simultaneously, coexisting side by side: smaller units within larger and larger units. This leads to Begbie’s parallel with metrical waves and the human experience (in western tonal music in particular).³³ Starting from each measure of a piece of music, there are patterns of tension and resolution (the use of tension presupposes equilibrium) that reside within larger patterns of tension and resolution (multiple measures), and can lead all the way to the whole piece as having an arc of equilibrium-tension-resolution.³⁴

This system of looking at music is helpful in many areas, of which only a few will be outlined. Music’s perspective suggests our human temporality, one of the necessary

²⁹ D. A. Carson, ed. *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 166-9.

³⁰ Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

³² *Ibid.*, 34.

³³ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

constraints placed upon us as being human: “existence necessarily carries the predicate of temporal presentness.”³⁵ This is an area that Americans in particular can benefit from. We often see time as our enemy, we are working “against the clock” are often trying to “catch up” and just often feel pressured by time. Looking at the rhythm of tension and resolution that are often found in music, we can appreciate the need for a Sabbath rhythm. At the same time, one can also appreciate the tensions that occur in life, and not try and do away with them as quick as possible. Listening to a piece of music without tension, just equilibrium, can be a bland experience. Knowing that a tension-free life is not part of the human experience, in music we see tension as “the very opposite of futile and senseless.”³⁶ The pleasure of music itself can be that of “enjoying tension.”³⁷

Additionally, tension is not the end all, but the way to get to the resolution. Music “presents tensions, not as obstructions, but as themselves vehicles to the achievement of resolution.”³⁸ There is a delayed gratification that makes the music worth listening to, and so it is with our salvation. We are living in the time that exists in between the spoken promise and its complete fulfillment- in a tension.³⁹ Not only personal salvation, which could be seen as a smaller unit of tension-resolution, but the redemption of all things. This is where the equilibrium-tension-resolution model takes on a macro level.⁴⁰ At Eden, there was equilibrium, and that equilibrium was disturbed creating the first tension between God and man, but the tension was not the end, there was a hope, a movement, a direction in this tension, and time continues on. Presently, we are awaiting the resolution

³⁵ Ibid., 63.

³⁶ Ibid., 93.

³⁷ Ibid., 103.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 108-109.

⁴⁰ UC Santa Barbara, "The Sense of an Ending"; available from <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=7426466675984198163>; Internet; accessed 2 November 2007.

that will come out of the tension that we all experience. There is a hopeful suspension, one that looks to the root chord for completion. And in music, just as in the life of the Christian, we can simultaneously experience the completion and incompleteness.

If each measure in a piece of music can be seen as a tension-resolution structure, with each last beat of a bar seeking a resolve on the first beat of the next bar, something needs to be said of this repetition. These smaller units could be seen as vain duplication of the previous measure's unit, which could lead to a cyclical view of history, not the progressive view that the Old Testament assumes and the coming of Christ makes real.⁴¹ However, as we noted before, each smaller unit of tension-resolution takes place within a larger tension-resolution unit, and, therefore, in a different relation to the overarching tension-resolution unit. Each tension and resolution is different because of what precedes the measure, group of measures, etc.⁴²

Again, it is important to see music as a temporal art, for its temporality coincides with our lives, especially with the Eucharist. This repetitive act becomes important in the overarching theme of the tension and the resolution, but also in the smaller tensions and resolutions that we experience ranging from daily to yearly, to our lifetime.⁴³ What might be seen as the same, the taking of the bread and the cup, is also different, the experiences we bring from that week, or other timeframe. This view instructs us to see the Eucharist as a rhythm of resolution within the tension that we have as yearning for that which is not complete.

⁴¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Creators: A History of Heroes of the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 61.

⁴² Begbie, 158-161.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 166.

There is also the unique position of hearing, instead of seeing, that makes music useful in communicating truth. The fact that more than one sound can occupy a given space is something unique to hearing.⁴⁴ Doing theology through music can illuminate other areas of truth, such as the concept of the Trinity. Often analogies are given that rely on physical-spatial aspects. It might seem absurd for something else to exist in the same, physical, seeing-space as another. If the book is on a specific place on the table, another thing cannot occupy that same space. This is not true of music, of the acoustic-spatial world.⁴⁵ There can, at the same time, be multiple sounds occupying the same exact space. Pushing the analogy further, these multiple sounds also create once sound, so three instruments can, simultaneously, be heard as three (Persons) and one (God).

With music as helpful as we have seen, for social change and for the instruction found within, is the Church being a competent steward of her gifts? Even in Bach's day, there was not a place that encouraged the arts.⁴⁶ There are claims that "enthusiasm" and the assertions of humanity have ostracized the artist.⁴⁷ The encouragement to be creative is not nearly as strong as the protection of doctrine; the two actions should not be seen as mutually exclusive, but as mutually dependent.

Music is a legitimate agent for social change, as seen in the "case studies" and music is also legitimate in the absence of such a platform, as evidenced by the elements of the art itself. These truths give us solace and hope to continue interacting in the world, performing music in a bar on Saturday night, or singing with a congregation on Sunday morning.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁶ Boorstin, 431-433.

⁴⁷ Martha Bayles, *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty and Meaning in American Popular Music* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 132-134.

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