

Slain by the music: Praise music's triumphant spread

by [Larry Eskridge](#) in the [March 7, 2006](#) issue

The images abound in stock video footage accompanying stories on evangelicals, the religious right, megachurches and the culture wars—the obligatory shots of middle-class worshipers, usually white, in corporate-looking auditoriums or sanctuaries, swaying to the electrified music of “praise bands,” their eyes closed, their enraptured faces tilted heavenward, a hand (or hands) raised to the sky. Although the journalistic patter accompanying such footage is often akin in tone to that found in documentaries about Amazonian tribal rituals, the images highlight an ever-growing reality of the past three decades: the spread of Pentecostal and charismatic worship styles and music into ecclesiastical settings that were once resistant—if not downright hostile—to the up-tempo, emotional music of the Pentecostal ethos.

This expansion has hardly been a triumphal march, and it has been anything but direct or one-sided. Nonetheless, the manner in which it has come to pass bespeaks both the changing nature of American religion and the changing status of American Pentecostals.

To outsiders, Pentecostal worship services have long been a sight and sound to behold and hear. What Duke Divinity School historian Grant Wacker dubbed the “planned spontaneity” of Pentecostal worship struck early-20th-century monitors as little more than chaos. And while the startling sounds of glossolalia and the shock of seeing believers “slain in the Spirit” jarred mainstream observers, the sprightly music that accompanied it all was likewise the object of wonder. Preachers and songleaders used singing to both inflame the spiritual fervor of their congregations and cool it down as needed. Such was the distance from mainstream Protestant music that a musicologist observing a biracial gathering of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) in 1929 could only describe the music he heard there as a “steady and almost terrifying rhythmic noise.”

Rhythm and innovation were certainly hallmarks of the early Pentecostal musical ethos. With what amounted to a near open-door policy in terms of instrumentation, many Pentecostals welcomed not only the brass and horns of their Holiness-influenced Salvation Army cousins, but guitars, banjos, accordions, fiddles and even drums into their Holy Ghost-charged services.

Early Pentecostal patriarch Howard Goss recognized that Pentecostals were doing something very different with their music and that this fact was key to the movement's growth. Looking back in the 1950s, he noted that Pentecostals "were the first . . . to introduce this accelerated tempo into gospel singing" and contended that without the new musical style "the Pentecostal Movement could never have made the rapid inroads into the hearts of men and women as it did."

With an inborn resistance to formal worship styles and looking to music as a means to evangelization, Pentecostals remained open to innovation through the interwar years and into the 1950s. Indeed, it was among the Pentecostal segment of the southern white and African-American population during this period that the great boom in the various forms of commercially viable Gospel music took hold, accelerated, and then spread with the migrations north.

However, while the new Gospel music(s) found great favor in the South and among the migrants of the southern diaspora, the music was often the target of scorn outside the South. Black Gospel found a limited—and mostly secular—audience among white listeners, but southern white Gospel was routinely panned as "vulgar," "hillbilly" and "western" style music, even by conservative evangelicals in the North. Such was the reputation of this music that the editors of *Christian Life* magazine, based in Wheaton, Illinois, created a firestorm among its readers in late 1955 with a favorable article about Memphis's famous Sunday night Gospel Sing.

Those concerts—which had earlier been frequented by a young Assembly of God teen named Elvis Presley—were emblematic of an important new phenomenon that occurred in the 1950s: the leaking of Pentecostal musical forms and style, via Gospel music, not into the larger church but into the world of popular music. The raw power of Gospel provided the emotional—and no small part of the musical—muscle that fueled both rock 'n' roll and R & B as it evolved into soul.

Despite the new music's heritage, Pentecostals knew that a sacred divide had been breached; both the young Jerry Lee Lewis (who had been booted out of an Assembly

of God Bible school in Texas in 1952 for playing a too-raucous version of “My God Is Real”) and his preacher cousin Jimmy Swaggart believed that “Great Balls of Fire” was dragging both singer and audience into hellfire.

As the 1960s dawned, a number of new trends arose that altered the relationship between Pentecostalism, other elements of the Christian church, and American culture. Each of these trends would in turn have musical implications within and outside of the Pentecostal camp.

First was the rather surprising advent of the charismatic movement within mainline Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church. Pentecostals wrestled with the conundrums presented by alcohol-imbibing, dancing, “worldly” Lutherans and Catholics speaking in tongues and being slain in the Spirit. In the process they found themselves in contact with people who not only had musical tastes that were more to the liturgical side, but who—even when seeking worship “reform”—looked to the developing body of folk masses and new hymnody rather than to the Fanny Crosby–Ira Sankey–Francis Havergal–Homer Rodeheaver canon or the world of Gospel music. Inevitably, the two sides of the Pentecostal-charismatic divide swapped musical DNA.

A second force at work was the growing power, prosperity and respectability of Pentecostals themselves. Increasingly a force within the world of televised religion, Pentecostals adapted their musical presentations to the expectations of American TV audiences. Televangelists such as Oral Roberts demonstrated that they could clean up nicely for the folks out in TV-land, shifting their musical presentation away from gospel quartet and hymns and toward well-coiffed crooners and troupes of well-scrubbed young people whose musical presentation was one part Up with People, one part Hollywood Palace and one part Peter, Paul and Mary. Just as the charismatic movement introduced the musical influence of mainstream American Christianity back into Pentecostal circles, the new, respectable Pentecostals could not help absorbing the entertainment tastes of Silent Majority America.

But it was at this juncture that a third, unexpected development injected the forbidden worldly extremes of rock ‘n’ roll back into Pentecostalism: the rise of the countercultural—and decidedly Pentecostal-leaning—Jesus People movement at the turn of the 1970s. Spirit-filled “Jesus Rock” bands and a slew of singer-songwriter coffeehouse troubadours sprang up all across the country. The Jesus People’s musical influences were all over the map—from the likes of the Beatles to the

evangelical Ralph Carmichael's youth musicals, from Led Zeppelin to James Taylor—and taken together they laid the groundwork for the rise of what would become the Contemporary Christian Music industry.

The most influential aspect of this movement for both Pentecostals and the larger American church were the musical developments that grew out of the Jesus People happenings at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California. There the balding, self-effacing personage of Pastor Chuck Smith (himself raised in Aimee Semple McPherson's International Church of the Foursquare Gospel) presided over the transformation of his small, independent church into a magnet for Orange County's hippies, beach bums and teenagers. Key to his success was the latitude he gave the teenagers to play music they wrote themselves. The resultant "Calvary Chapel sound" was equal parts folk, pop and light rock—simple songs and choruses that, in the recollection of one early musician at Calvary, "sung themselves."

The sounds were first captured on the Everlastin' Living Jesus Music Concert album, which Smith made with \$2,500 of his own money in early 1971. The record sold hundreds of thousands of copies and led to the incorporation of Maranatha! Music, which via records, songbooks, chorus sheets and overhead slides began to spread the mellow sounds of the "praise revolution" across North America and the world during the 1970s and '80s.

The rather vanilla folk-pop-adult contemporary rock stylings of Maranatha! praise music—buttressed by output from Calvary Chapel's stepdaughter, the Vineyard International Fellowship, and any number of praise-oriented companies spawned by evangelical music publishers; by the wildly popular imported oeuvre of Australia's HillSongs Church; and by the work of British praise tunesmiths such as Graham Kendrick, Chris Eaton and the band Delirious—have now conquered thousands of American congregations.

Indeed, an argument could be made that at no time since the First Great Awakening have so many churches of disparate denominational, theological and stylistic approaches been so united in terms of their music: one can now walk into old-line Pentecostal churches, small-town evangelical congregations, mall-like suburban megachurches, and many a mainline Protestant sanctuary across the country on any given Sunday morning and hear the same hymns and choruses done in approximately the same musical styles, with similar settings and instrumentation.

Of course, the success of the new music has created an opposite—and, if not quite equal, certainly vocal—reaction among adherents of other styles of church music. Proponents of classic hymns and choral music, scions of alternative new hymnody and “world music,” and lovers of the good ol’ “Sankey Doodle” gospel songs have all registered their dismay, as evidenced by the infamous “worship wars” which have plagued churches in recent years. Marva Dawn (most famously) and many pastors, theologians, seminary music professors and church music directors have decried the new “praise music” as so much pap at any level—musical, theological, emotional, intellectual.

And yet, despite the counterattacks of these latter-day Lowell Masons, the new music continues to gain ground (even the CCM charts are increasingly selecting praise-oriented songs and choruses over stand-alone “Christian rock” tunes), and probably a majority of worship-war plagued churches simply agree to disagree by offering “blended worship” or (in the case of larger churches) serving up multiple worship services cafeteria-style.

Undoubtedly, any pre-WWI-era Pentecostal worshipers who dropped into a modern-day praise chorus worship session at First Presbyterian would find much that seems strange beyond the electrified instrumentation. If anything, they would probably find the atmosphere much too mellow for their liking. But other elements of the musical trend—its emphasis on the personal connection between the believer and God, its popular bent, its triumphant spread through the churches, and the very fact that many of the “frozen chosen” find the music divisive and beneath them—would probably strike the early Pentecostals as warmly reassuring.