

Emotional manipulation and music

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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“Were you ever sexually attracted to Amy Grant?” I asked my husband.

Long silence.

“Um. That’s kind of a personal question, isn’t it?”

Nice dodge.

To be clear, my husband had the same experience with Amy Grant as I did. She was a small dot dancing on a stage, a lovely voice pulsing from speakers, and a fresh face smiling on an album. I just asked, because when I interviewed [Tripp Hudgins](#) and [Bryan Sirchio](#) for a “Church in the Making” column, I wanted to explore what’s going on in music, what movements were emerging. I wanted to know what was happening in the midst of aging choir members and pipe organ repairs.

But then this other story kept fascinating me. Tripp and Bryan both spoke about the emotional manipulation in some praise music.

When they said this, my mind ventured off to the Contemporary Christian Music concerts I attended with my youth group. CCM was taking off, and evangelical teens had a mass of buying power. In my home, my mom would pay for any CCM that I wanted. So I listened to the music and even attended Disney’s Night of Joy. It was a magical evening in the kingdom. As Michael W. Smith sang in front of the Cinderella’s Castle, girls in the audience would raise their hands and scream, “WE LOVE YOU, MICHAEL!”

There it was. The manipulation. I remember it clearly. I was a teen and MWS was in his twenties. There was something in the way that the whole thing was packaged. He was as dreamy as George Michael and as non-threatening as a boyband crooner. And though I would never scream it, I felt the pull. The face, the voice, and even the message... what was it exactly? Teen infatuation? How did they create it? *Why* did they create it?

As I think back at the crowds, I know that they had to have been making all kinds of money. And, in less cynical moments, I admit that they must have been reaching people they wouldn't have otherwise. But I still feel I was manipulated by it. And why don't I have that same feeling when I recall U2 concerts?

When Tripp Hudgins talked about emotional manipulation in worship music, I pressed him for a bit more information. I'm not a musician, so I wanted to know the mechanics behind the description. What was the alchemy that turned musical notes into hormonal yearnings?

"Composers use certain sounds and tempos to get certain responses," Tripp said. "There are drums that are used for military marches. When we hear them, we stand erect." In much the same way, Tripp explained, "There are certain drums that incite sexuality or draw us into romance." One type of emotional manipulation occurs when doctrine or a confession is turned into a love song.

Bryan also talked about the pseudo-sexual nature of some praise music, but he didn't think that all emotion in praise music was bad. "People long for music that has emotional authenticity. They are longing for music that moves them, but without manipulating them."