Musical lives: Don and Emily Saliers on the religious power of song

by Amy Plantinga Pauw in the November 20, 2002 issue

Don Saliers holds the William R. Cannon Distinguished Chair in Theology and Worship at Emory University and directs the Masters of Sacred Music Program. He is the founder and director of the Emory Chamber Players, and since 1975 has served as the organist and choirmaster for the Sunday service in Emory's Cannon Chapel. A United Methodist minister, Don is widely known in ecumenical circles for his lecturing and writing on liturgical renewal, music and liturgy. His publications include Worship As Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine, Worship Come to Its Senses, The Soul in Paraphrase *and* The New Handbook of the Christian Year.

Emily Saliers, daughter of Don and Jane Saliers, is co-founder, with Amy Ray, of the Indigo Girls, a Grammy Award–winning singer-songwriter duo. Their acclaimed recordings and worldwide concert tours exhibit their commitment to social justice and humanitarian concerns. In the back of their CDs are resources for sharing in their activism for a moratorium against the death penalty, for an end to nuclear weapons, for gay rights, Native environmental concerns and other causes. Their latest recording is Become You. *The two songs mentioned in this interview are from their 1994 CD* Swamp Ophelia. *Lyrics to these and other songs are available at www. indigogirls.com.*

Emily and Don collaborated on a chapter called "Making Music" in Way to Live: A Book on Christian Practices for Teens (*edited by Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter; Upper Room Books, 2002*), *and are currently writing another book together. I spoke to them in Atlanta about how music and faith have intersected in their lives. I was especially interested in the connections they find between "Saturday night" and "Sunday morning" music, and what these connections imply for the shaping of Christian worship.*

When I consider your two different kinds of accomplishments in music, I wonder how you think about the difference between "secular" and "sacred"

music and about how the two are related.

Emily: The terms have little meaning for me. A song that is deemed secular is one that has nothing to do with the church, or doesn't come from a sacred text. But if songs can move people to work for justice or inspire people to live fuller lives, then it is sacred music to me.

Don: I suspect that Emily and I might use those terms, but we would quickly want to subvert them. "Saturday night" and "Sunday morning" have much more to do with each other than is often realized. That's a truth certainly recognized in traditional African-American culture.

At times I wish church music would dig as deeply into life as some of the music that Emily admires, as well as creates. More and more in my own career as a liturgical or church musician, I want to see the connections made between the liturgy or church music and the longing, terror and beauty of life—the struggle just to be human, quite apart from religious doctrines.

The music that people encounter Saturday night can be much more unflinching about life?

Don: Yes. I'm thinking, for example, about the Indigo Girls' song "This Train Revised." It's a play on the gospel song "This Train Is Bound for Glory," but it subverts it.

The song is about a railroad car full of people—"gypsies, queers and david's star"—bound for a Nazi death camp. So a gospel song about the assurance of future salvation becomes a condemnation of our present inhumanity.

Don: Right. On the other hand, I think some secular music can be quite destructive and enervating. And misogynist. Often in secular music the rhythm is dominant, which makes it different from music that is contemplative, or designed to help you meditate on a text.

When this style of music is carried over into worship, there are losses. I don't want to be seen as condemning all contemporary services, but I think the rock band approach to songs of praise is different from contemplative music in this respect.

Emily: But all forms of music have their place. To me, the straightest path to God sometimes is to walk into a church when the gospel choir is singing. The choir

members are making a very primal, rhythmic connection to their faith. I know what Dad's talking about with the rock band, but I don't think we should get so caught up in our differences. The issue is what moves you.

What bothers me about a lot of contemporary Christian music is its exclusivity: Jesus is the only way to heaven. And a lot of times the message is simplistic and individualistic too: If you have problems, all you have to do is put them in Jesus' hands.

So your problem with a lot of Christian music is really theological. How does your experience in the church affect your own music?

Emily: I grew up listening to the biblical text every Sunday in church, and reading it at the dinner table, and having discussions about it. I felt comfortable exploring the text with Dad and Mom and my sisters. Images from the Bible continue to stimulate me as a songwriter.

Yet you feel alienated from the church.

Emily: Well, the church has alienated a lot of people, and most of the people I know. My church community continues to enrich my life, and I need and love that community. But I grew up in a very open, thinking church environment, so there's been space for me there. I struggle, obviously, with the church's stance on homosexuality, because I'm gay, and I've seen so many people suffer. I've seen people who are in torment, because they grew up their whole lives being told that they're going to hell. And they are burning in hell over the guilt of it. To me, the greatest evil is the way that people twist the messages of Jesus, or of the prophets, and make them hateful and judgmental. I see the alienation the church causes every day. And I don't think the church is really in touch with the suffering of people, especially young people.

Don: As often happens, Emily, you are reminding me that the question of apologetics, of how to communicate deep religious matters, and particularly Christian matters in the current cultural context, requires far more subtlety than we ever recognized before. But I would remind you that many people in the church know about your music, and often tell me how they have been helped in their religious and moral lives by it. That is very heartening. You are being encouraged by the religious communities, it seems to me, to sustain the realism, the honesty, the prophecy of your music. And the other side of that realism is hope. The song "The

Power of Two," for example—I've encountered many people who say, "That song has actually helped me through the night. That song has been part of the process of regaining a balance, or regaining some self-confidence."

Emily: A song like "Power of Two" is really a love song, but it is also about what happens in sacrifice for love and what the coming together of people can mean in your life. But no matter what my songs are about, I try to use them for a greater good, to try to be part of change.

But your music isn't just a delivery system for the causes you care about.

Emily: No. The two are woven so tightly in my life that they can't be pulled apart. Everything that I've learned about how to marry music and social change, or social justice, has been a result of many, many mentors. And I still feel like a kid in school. My song "Hammer and a Nail," about learning to use my hands so that "even my sweat smells clean," has become a kind of theme song for some folks at Habitat for Humanity. I didn't see the connection when I wrote the song, but it's become a powerful one over the years. Keeping music and justice together so that they feed each other is what my work is all about.

Don, this fits with your concern for the connection between liturgy and life.

Don: It's a crucial connection, and it shows up in many different Christian traditions, often in unlikely places. Oakhurst Baptist Church here in town, for example, is a salt and light church. Its members' worship life is deep because their missional life is deep.

Thirty-five years ago or so when I first started as a teacher of worship, Vatican II had just happened, and I was mostly interested in the reform of the rites and the texts and the music. Now if you ask me about the renewal of worship, I would be most interested in what's happening outside worship. I would look for missional engagements.

The churches that I know that have deeper worship have experienced some solidarity with the poor, or some solidarity with suffering. They have people to pray with as well as for. Even very traditional liturgies will come alive if they're connected to people's joy and suffering. You don't have to go tinkering all the time with the liturgy as such.

Emily: At the same time, simply getting a “contemporary style” of worship is not necessarily going to deepen worship.

Don: It may not lead to anything contemporary at all. In fact it could lead to sentimentalism. I’ve been struck by how some folks, when push comes to shove, are just doing a warmed-over frontier religion, but with technological sophistication.

Frontier religion with PowerPoint.

Don: Yeah—doing the old thing, but using new electricity. Church music has to take us to the full range of human experience and emotion. That’s why ultrabright Christianity finally fails, because it doesn’t taste the depths of Psalm 88. It doesn’t know what to do with Psalm 22. And yet, it may also have settled for such a domesticated little middle that it has no ecstasy either.

On the other hand, hymns have spoken of human struggles to be faithful in the worst circumstances. A brilliant recent example is Brian Wren’s hymn text “When Pain and Terror Strike by Chance.” A new honesty about the world and the divine involvement in evil and suffering has reemerged in some contemporary hymnody. This restores an earlier tradition that was covered over by easy sentimentality and comfortable pietisms.

Both of you have have thought about how making music deepens our lives with God and our lives with each other. It’s easy to see how that’s true for teenagers and for children—they’re immersed in music. Adults, on the other hand, often seem reluctant to make music. How do we address that?

Emily: It’s a good question. One of the things that strikes me the most about our concerts is how much people love to sing together. And in a sense they get to worship in that way. It’s not directed toward anything specifically, but there is something spiritual that happens when people sing together. But making music can be intimidating for adults. Adults are sometimes even afraid to admit they are taking lessons.

Don: Even teenagers are often ashamed of their voices.

Emily: Well, there’s no real opportunity for them to get together and sing. You would never have a party, invite your friends and sing—unless you’re Christians. If you’re in a Christian youth group, then you might. Another problem is that school

music programs have been cut significantly. The seeds have to be planted young for the communal experience of music.

Don: Yes. I hear a lot of adults saying, “When I was a kid I use to skip rope and sing songs, and sing in the shower,” but who now are afraid to sing because someone has told them they don’t have a good voice. I think Emily is right: adults experience more and more intimidation, less and less encouragement. I think we also live in a time in which, at least in classical music, we hear such extraordinary excellence. And then there’s the whole question of sophisticated adults who think that singing together is kind of below them. That’s just stuffiness. That’s just plain ol’ “stuck-upness.”

But I’ve seen transformations happen, when people have been, in spite of themselves, caught up in, for example, congregational songs, or a Palm Sunday procession. We’ve had that experience in the community where I make the music, Emory’s Cannon Chapel, in the last four or five years. And this has made a huge difference. Even if they sing just a little bit of a five-note refrain, people have said how much of a difference joining in on the singing makes to their spiritual worship.

So we’ve got to overcome, somehow, this idea that unless you’re trained in music you are not musical. There are musical themes that are intrinsic to being alive. Breathing, walking, dancing, skipping, or just nodding your head all involve tempo, intensity, rhythm. For me, all that is musical.

Emily: That’s why it’s a joy to see so many people singing and dancing at our concerts. Music releases something in people that nothing else does.

Don: Yes, I’ve seen that too, both at your concerts and even in church. The act of singing together, or playing instruments together, or gathering in a circle and listening to someone else sing or play, is such a profound, intrinsic human good. It shows us what we’re meant for: for each other, for relationship.

And despite this problem of being intimidated by music, worship is about the only place where many adults make music at all.

Don: It’s a paradox. Our culture is saturated with music—it’s used to sell things, and you hear it in elevators. But the one place where many regularly participate in some modest music-making is in church. That may be a hidden treasure for our culture.