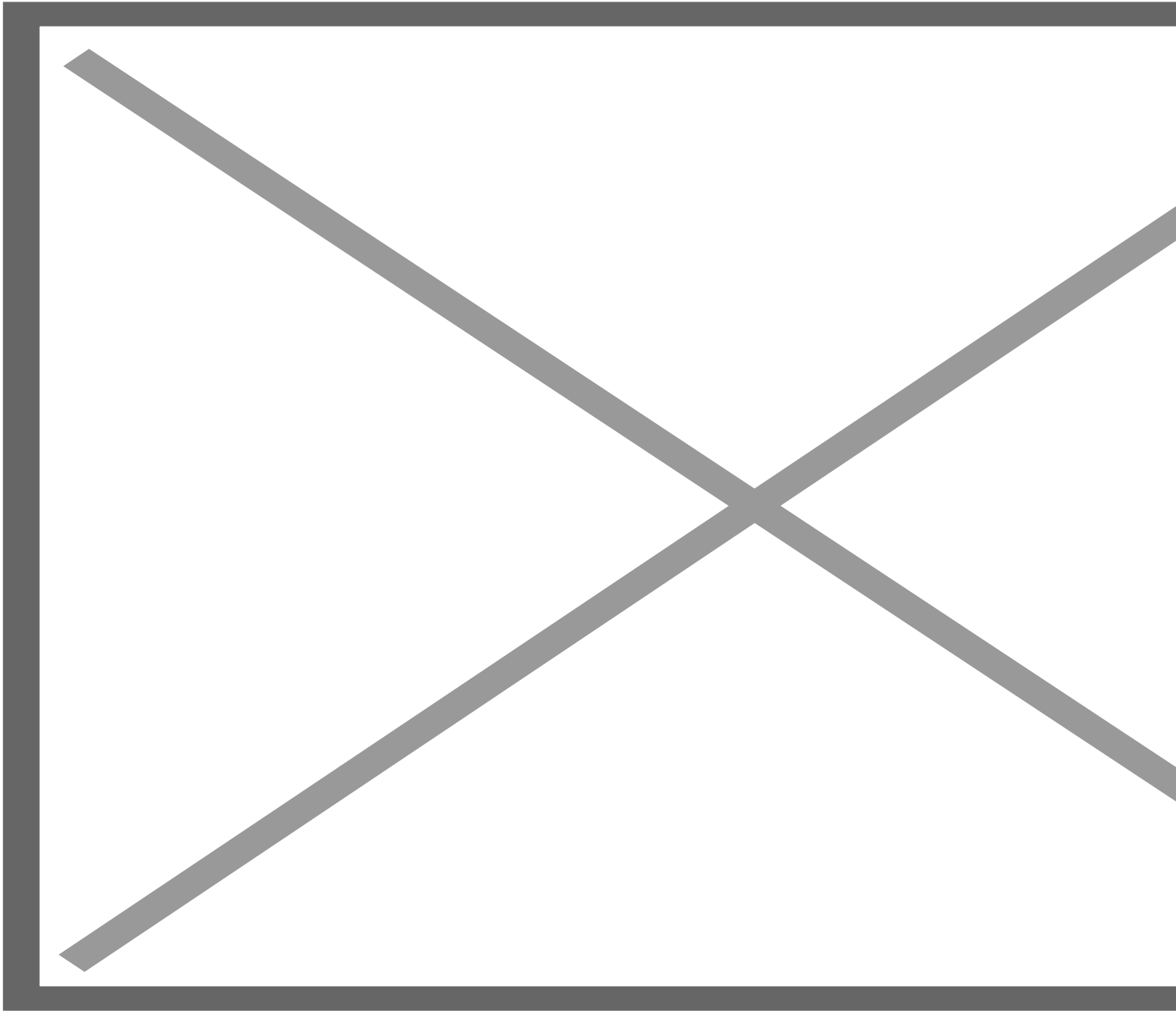


Singing the Newsboys with Flamy Grant

The musician and drag queen is an exvangelical who came to see that holding on to a theology of self-loathing was just too dangerous.

by [McKenzie Watson-Fore](#)

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Flamy Grant performs in Nashville (Photo by Emily Tingley)

The night was perfect: balmy enough for my strapless black dress with splotches of animal print, breezy enough for the denim overshirt I shrugged on after sunset. Flamy Grant performed on a small outdoor stage at the Gold Hill Inn, a log-cabin-style outpost in the mountains above Boulder, Colorado. The show wrapped up around dusk, and my partner and I grabbed seats inside to finish our drinks and chat with whoever hung around.

Flamy Grant is an exvangelical drag queen whose music revolves around their conservative Christian upbringing and the freedom they find in queerness. After the show, Flamy exchanged their towering magenta wig and pink denim overalls for an oversized yellow sweatshirt and gym shorts, and they pulled up a chair near me.

How did our conversation go? I'm trying to reconstruct the scene in my mind: lacey curtains wafting over the open windows, Flamy gentle and warm, and all my religious trauma pinging through my limbs, both activated and validated by the night's show. I wanted to crawl into Flamy's arms, to be cradled by this unexpectedly maternal figure who would tell me that it's okay to have been wounded by religion.

Contrast that with my mother, who gets nervous whenever someone articulates a negative experience or perceived shortcoming of Christianity. She doesn't want to give anyone reason to think poorly of God. This is the ever-present burden of the evangelical—that strain of Christian who in my experience values conversion above all else, to whom nothing matters so much as how you represent the faith. “Preach the gospel at all times,” the saying goes. “Use words when necessary.” People should be drawn to Jesus just by looking at Christians.

That's the message of the Newsboys' song “Shine”—which, somehow, Flamy Grant and I started singing together:

Shine
Make 'em wonder what you got
Make 'em wish that they were not
On the outside lookin' bored

Shine
May you shine before all men
Let 'em see good works and then
Let 'em glorify the Lord

“Shine” is the 1990s would-be street-ified version of “This Little Light of Mine”: it proclaims the Christian's responsibility to reflect God. One's life is meant to be a living witness, a constantly unfolding testimony that points the viewer to the light of Christ.

The song is instantly recognizable, its beat branded into the memory of everyone within earshot of Christian radio during the 90s or early 2000s. “Shine” received a 1995 Dove award (the Grammys of Christian music) and, in 2006, was ranked by *CCM Magazine* among the ten greatest songs in Christian music.

After the chorus, our singing dissolved into laughter. Flamy and I cackled about how the Newsboys' lyrics had been used to bludgeon us into performing our faith. As a teenager, I felt like the quantifiable measure of my relationship with God was how well I managed to market Christianity to my peers.

I kept humming “Shine” for the hour-long drive down from the mountain. At home, I flopped on my couch and opened Instagram. My scrolling stopped short over an image of Michael Tait, the longtime lead singer of the Newsboys, paired with a headline about allegations of sexual assault.

The Newsboys' song turned to ash in my mouth. I learned that earlier this year, Christian watchdog site The Roys Report [announced allegations](#) that Tait (who had [stepped away](#) from his role with the Newsboys five months earlier) had participated in "sexual assault, grooming, and substance abuse, dating back to 2004."

On June 10, Tait posted a statement on social media titled "[My Confession](#)," stating that the allegations concerning him were "sadly, largely true. . . . For some two decades I used and abused cocaine, consumed far too much alcohol, and, at times, touched men in an unwanted sensual way," Tait wrote. "I am ashamed of my life choices and actions, and make no excuses for them. I will simply call it what God calls it—sin."

What stood out to me in that moment was the contrast between Michael Tait and Flamy Grant. Two Christian musicians, one who refuses to play into the conversion-pandering politics of evangelicalism and another who has achieved Christian superstardom by singing about sanctification and who allegedly has leveraged that platform to assault others. One whose music embraces the fullness of their personhood, the other whose music reflects a narrow range.

I spent the following weeks processing the news about Tait, sifting through videos, interviews, and testimonials, all alongside the memory of my experience at the Flamy Grant show. These two artists represent radically different approaches to Christianity, and I struggled to pinpoint exactly what differentiates them.

[The sex scandals of Christian leaders](#) are, unfortunately, nothing new. Writing about a [Christian leader disgraced](#) by a [sex scandal](#) is one of the [oldest stories](#) in the book. But something about this scandal hit me particularly hard. Tait's voice has been in my life as far back as I can remember. He took on the role of Newsboys frontman in 2009, and prior to that he was one of the co-founders of DC Talk, best known for their 1995 hit "Jesus Freak." I remember listening to songs by DC Talk and the Newsboys when I was as young as five years old. At that age, I imbibed the message that I was supposed to model belief for the nonbelievers around me. Tait's music was the soundtrack to my nightly prayers, when I begged God to scrub me of my iniquities so that I could better reflect him to my peers.

It was probably just a coincidence that I was singing a Newsboys song with Flamy Grant on the night I would learn about Tait's misdeeds. But I think there is something important in the contrast between these two artists. They were both raised in conservative Christian settings that likely taught that homosexuality renders one unfit to be close to God, let alone to perform on stage in God's name. Grant has spoken openly about their [attempts to forsake their queerness](#) before eventually deciding to depart from the framework that told them to hate themselves. Tait—a Black man in a context that centers Whiteness and straightness—has lived a conflicted [double life](#) within that framework.

Tait [has not self-identified as gay or queer](#), and sexual orientation is different from sexual expression. However, Tait has admitted to engaging in sexual acts with other men without their consent. It seems clear that Tait, like Grant, was wounded by a theology that taught him to vilify certain parts of himself in order to access righteousness.

This education in self-hatred is not unique to issues of sexuality. As an evangelical teen, I felt subject to two contradictory demands at all times. On the one hand I was supposed to be a light for Christ, living in such a way that made other people envious of the salvation I had. On the other hand I was supposed to be ever aware of my sinfulness and my urgent need for Jesus. I learned to hate myself and my sinful nature and to consider whole swaths of behavior and inclinations as dirty, depraved, and damned.

Nowhere was this self-flagellation (in the name of receiving forgiveness) more gratuitously displayed than on cry night, the climax of church camp. When we hung out after their concert, Flamy told me about the cry night spectacle at a religious retreat they attended while in college. The camp erected a giant wooden cross to which

the campers were invited to nail palm-sized pieces of paper inscribed with their most pernicious sins. “So, of course, I wrote that I was gay!” they said.

Flamy eventually recognized that holding on to a theology of self-loathing was just too dangerous. Their music openly addresses the elements of their former faith tradition that caused them harm—but their lyrics are not exclusively critical. They also lift up [life-giving aspects of faith](#) that some expressions of Christianity have overlooked.

But in Tait’s case, no part of his public persona allows him to name harmful elements of the theology he was raised with. Theology wielded to inculcate hatred or disgust rather than grace is one of the most destructive forces I know. Anti-LGBTQ theology is a clear example of one that offers no real route to redemption—only conversion therapy and its attempt to “pray the gay away,” an approach so ineffective and harmful that every major medical and mental health organization has condemned it. Not only does this theology engender prejudice and violence toward queer folks, but for queer folks in these spaces, it breeds self-loathing. Theology that asks one to see not their sin as bad but their *self* as bad cannot lead to flourishing and kinship. That theology ends in annihilation, not renewal.

If a person finds themselves trapped within a theology that offers them nothing but condemnation or self-erasure, what is that person to do? They can choose to reject that theology, name its harms, and leave that environment—which is what Flamy Grant did. But as long as one chooses to stay in that space and promote it as good (the kind of action advocated for in songs like “Shine”), they cannot acknowledge it if their theology is harming them. Because Tait’s public platform exists to promote Christianity, his position prevents him from living with integrity.

I think about the Newsboys’ shine: the elaborate production of their concerts, the pounding drumbeat and repeated choruses, shout-sung by thousands of acolytes, and how all of this spectacle is meant to prove the goodness and realness of God, to drown out any quiet, pesky qualms. There is no room for nuance at a Newsboys concert.

I know some people who praise Tait for not giving up on God or recanting his faith. They assert that Tait has taken the high road while Flamy Grant walked away from church. But isn’t it better to give up on a theology that cannot be reconciled with self-love? I worry that Tait’s success in CCM has led him into a dark cycle of repression, performance, and relapse, with ever-increasing stakes.

Did Tait ultimately calculate that the positive kingdom impact from his music career outweighed the costs of his destructive behavior? This would be an easy equation to justify in a culture that minimizes the harm of abuse and transmutes all consequences into spiritual ones. It’s a deeply twisted version of the ends justifying the means.

This was [the rationale invoked by Ravi Zacharias](#), world-famous apologist, when, according to the ministry he founded, he raped women and then told them to stay silent or risk jeopardizing the souls of millions who benefited from his ministry. Christian communities will often rally around “a brother found in sin” and seek to [settle the matter internally](#), because a scandal would reflect poorly on the church—and, by extension, on God. Many churches and Christian institutions, along with much of the CCM industry, seem more interested in being [PR managers for God](#) rather than protectors of the vulnerable. When there’s so much emphasis on spreading the gospel, that single-minded mission allows for all kinds of unsavory, un-Christlike behavior along the way.

The proselytizing culture reflected in songs like “Shine” creates the conditions for the elevation of image management over any competing value, whether integrity, transparency, or accountability. It elevates performance over presence.

Authenticity means embracing the good but also being willing to call out when something is harmful or dangerous. Flamy Grant's music has no ulterior motive. They're not trying to convert anyone with their songs, not trying to blind anyone with their shine. The glitter, glitz, and glam isn't advertising for the Christian life. Flamy's [sparkle](#) exists for its own sake. Their performance opens up room for authenticity, and they don't attempt to consolidate my emotions into an acceptable script for someone else's edification. At a Flamy Grant concert, my experience is valid—not for whatever conversions it might spur, but all on its own.