

Music and the Culture Wars in the 1970s and 1980s U.S.

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Abstract

This paper examines how evangelical Christians viewed music as a potential means to enact social change as they were becoming a basis for the Religious Right during the decades that led up to the 1990s, when “culture wars” became prominent in the U.S. It focuses on the periodical, *Christianity Today*, initiated by the politically influential evangelical leader, Billy Graham, to assess the ways in which music was part of the culture wars. The writers for the Christian magazine demonstrated more inclusive attitudes toward rock music than the anti-rock Christian leaders of contemporary and earlier decades that have been documented and analyzed in previous research. Instead of denouncing rock music, the magazine writers utilized the popularity of the musical form to justify their beliefs and activities. At the same time, they also extended some of the ideas earlier critics put forward, such as valorizing classical music and focusing on the youth.

Keywords: Culture Wars, Music, Evangelicals

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Introduction

This paper examines the role music played in the “culture wars” waged by evangelical Christians during the 1970s and 1980s in the U.S., when they increased their political power. In particular, it focuses on the evangelical publication *Christianity Today*, a magazine started by an influential evangelical minister Billy Graham, to examine how evangelical Christians debated music. I argue that while the prominent culture war warriors debated the issues in dualistic terms, as shown by previous research, there was more nuance to the debates over the incorporation of increasingly popular rock music into their ministry and activism.

Culture Wars

The term “culture war” became prominent in the 1990s with the publication of *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991), by sociologist James Davison Hunter. He showed that seemingly unrelated issues such as public funding of the arts, women’s rights, and court-packing, reflect a deeper debate between the “orthodox” and the “progressives” over national identity. Cultures became battlegrounds for political and religious fights. While Hunter spent only a few pages on music in his book, music was a major site of contestation in culture wars. For example, “In 1985, a group of parents formed an organization called Parents’ Music Resource Center (PMRC) and lobbied Congress for a record-rating system to warn parents about the sexual and violent imagery in the lyrics of many rock albums” (Romanowski, 1996, p. 14).

While the term “culture war” became prominent in the early 1990s, the actual wars had been waged in the earlier decades (Kondo, 2005, p.6; Nekola, 2013, pp. 407-408). Historian Andrew Hartman concurred with Hunter and argued that culture wars were a battle for the soul of America, a struggle over defining the national identity, which had repeatedly been waged in American history during times of rapid change. He identified the sixties as one of those historical moments when the nation went through turbulence, which led to the culture wars of the following decades (Hartman, 2016).

The dichotomous nature of the “culture wars,” in which their warriors saw themselves as fighting against the existential threat to the foundation of the country, is evident in the “Culture War” speech by Pat Buchanan at the Republican National Convention in 1992. Buchanan, who had unsuccessfully run against President George H.W. Bush in the primary, called for unity using the language of the war between us and them:

George Bush is a defender of right-to-life, and a champion of the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which America was founded.

The agenda that Clinton & Clinton would impose on America—abortion on demand, a litmus test for the Supreme Court, homosexual rights, discrimination against religious schools, women in combat units [...] it is not the kind of change we can abide in a nation that we still call God’s country.

My friends, this election is about more than who gets what. It is about who we are. It is about what we believe, and what we stand for as Americans. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America. And in that struggle for the soul of America, Clinton & Clinton are on the other side, and George Bush is on our side.

As Buchanan's emphasis on "Judeo-Christian values and beliefs" and his definition of the U.S. as "God's country" shows, central to the conservatives' idea of national identity was religiosity; they felt that the country was being secularized by their enemy.

The Religious Right (or the Christian Right) was a major proponent of the culture wars. They focused on moral issues to galvanize voters and engaged in culture wars on issues of "abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, evolution, family values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, media, multiculturalism, national history standards, pornography, school prayer, sex education, [and] the Western canon" (Hartman, 2016). The Religious Right was a group centered around evangelical Christians who asserted political power through the advancement of religiously based policies. They became visible in the late 1970s and 1980s and emphasized cultural and social issues in advancing their policies. They included banning abortion, opposing gay rights and feminism, promoting prayers in public schools, and eliminating pornography and other corrupt content in the media, which were unified with the theme of "family values." Televangelist Jerry Falwell established the Moral Majority in 1979, which mobilized conservative religious voters to the polls, and helped Ronald Reagan win the presidential election. By the end of the Reagan presidency, the Moral Majority had waned, but the Christian Coalition, founded in 1989 by another televangelist, Pat Robertson, who ran for the presidency himself in 1988, continued the political mobilization of evangelical and other conservative religious voters (Shires, 2007). While these organizations eventually declined, the Religious Right's grip on conservative politics, particularly the Republican Party, remains to this day.

CCM and Moral Debates

The ascendancy of the Religious Right coincided with the rise of the popularity of Contemporary Christian Music (CCM), which combined religious messages with rock and popular music formerly deemed immoral by conservative Christians. The Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in which former hippies converted to evangelical Christianity and brought along their countercultural cultures to the Christian community, led to Jesus Rock, which paved the way for CCM, which became popular with some crossover success in the 1980s (Baker, 1985; Howard & Streck, 1999; Stowe, 2011; Thornbury, 2018). The title of Larry Norman's song, "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music" (1972), summarized the sentiment behind the new genre. In my earlier work, I have shown that CCM coopted not only the musical forms of rock and folk music but also the whitened image of both types of music. Additionally, it incorporated the authentic and inclusive qualities associated with folk music, which had become apparent during the folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. I also showed that despite the change in rhetoric over time, anti-CCM criticism was centered on race, and it continued well into the 2000s. An analysis of *Explo '72*, an outdoor Christian rock concert hyped as the "Christian Woodstock," revealed that the event propagated conservative political positions (Tachi, 2022).

Christian rock thrived at the same time as it was attacked. Anna Nekola argued that the anti-rock discourse of the 1960s and 1970s by conservative Christians became the basis of the culture wars that followed. Critics of the music argued that not only the lyrics and cultural association of rock but also the sound itself would corrupt the youth, making them rebellious to authority, which would lead to the disintegration of society and the nation. In particular, three prominent conservative Christian leaders, David A. Noebel, Bob Larson, and Frank Garlock, made the claim that rock music was inherently evil, barbaric, and had the power to corrupt the listeners, and since young people, like other "inferior" people like women and

non-whites, were more susceptible to evil influences, they would become degenerate and rebellious, which would then destroy the foundation of society such as family and church and ultimately the nation; in order to prevent that, one must wage a full-scale war against this music. They also tied this war to anti-secularism and anti-Communism. According to Nekola, the dualism inherent in their arguments—good/evil, civilization/barbarism, religiosity/secularism, and the concept of war itself—persisted in the later decades when social conservatives engaged in the culture wars, arguing for the need to combat the negative influence of popular culture on the youth (Nekola, 2013).

Billy Graham and *Christianity Today*

Billy Graham was an influential evangelical leader with political clout who not only reached out to millions of people worldwide both in person and through media but also “personally knew all twelve presidents from Harry S. Truman to Barack Obama,” ten of whom ranked as his “friends”; four of them, Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, and Bush I, and their wives, were his “close friends” (Wacker, 2017). As Edith L. Blumhofer wrote in her book, *Songs I Love to Sing: The Billy Graham Crusades and the Shaping of Modern Worship*, Graham utilized music in his ministry from the 1940s by teaming up with classically trained singer George Beverly Shea and music director Cliff Barrows. They regularly held large-scale preaching events called the Crusade, to which music was central. Shea would sing a hymn at the beginning of the rally to set the tone, followed by Graham’s preaching. Barrow would arrange the music program to suit the audience and the place where the crusade took place. They had mixed opinions about rock music. Shea continued to hold the view that “neither rock ‘n’ roll nor ‘Christian rock’ had a place in Christian contexts.” Barrows stated that “his parents [...] considered rock ‘n’ roll ‘the devil’s music’ and would have forbidden him to listen to it” and worried about the music his own children listened to. Graham regularly wrote about his “concerns about the role of music and musical styles” in his “My Answer” columns. According to his biographer, Graham studied rock in the 1960s by listening to records and surreptitiously attending concerts to better understand the young generation, whom he valued. Eventually, in the late 1960s, the trio incorporated CCM into their programs. When Graham endorsed Explo ’72, he admitted that rock was not his favorite music, but he regarded the Christian rock concert as a youth revival and praised it “as a work of God that revered the Bible, promoted the new birth, and prioritized evangelism.” The trio altered the musical style of their crusade again in the 1980s to further accommodate their ministry to the younger generation (Blumhofer, 2023). Graham’s gradual acceptance of rock music differed from the Christian leaders’ denouncement of the music that Nekola demonstrated, but it also showed a commonality in the sense that his primary concern was the young generation.

Graham established *Christianity Today* in 1956, which “soon won recognition as the normative voice of mainstream evangelicalism” (Wacker, 2017). During the 1980s, the bimonthly magazine included articles that referenced political issues, such as calling for the need for a Christian think tank (Henry, 1985, pp. 14-15) and the prospect of televangelist Pat Robertson’s likely run for the presidency (Spring, 1985, pp. 48-49, 51). During the 1984 presidential election, the magazine published extensive articles explaining each party’s policies on issues pertinent to Christians (October 5 and October 19 issues). Alongside these political pieces, the magazine published articles on the role of music in evangelism and what music was appropriate for their causes. For example, C. Nolan Huizenga wrote an article entitled “A Biblical ‘Tune-up’ for Hymn Singing” in the June 27, 1980, issue, which showed his interpretation of what the Bible said about hymns. He concluded that the Bible did not specify the types of music to be used. “Stated simply, the Bible gives us the spiritual ‘why’

and ‘how’ of music in worship; it does not give us the musical or stylistic ‘what’” (p. 21). He further noted, “Paul discusses the attitude and motivation of the singers and the spiritual content of their hymns, but he says nothing about musical styles forms, or accompaniment. It is important, especially for professional musicians, to remember that we have no inspired scriptural revelation regarding the music itself, which is largely affected by changing culture and history” (p.21). Using the same logic, rock music could be an appropriate medium for hymns. The author thus laid out a case that would justify CCM.

The magazine published positive reviews of Bob Dylan’s *Slow Train Coming*, an album considered to show the former 60’s folk singer’s turn to evangelical Christianity. In the January 4, 1980, issue, Noel Paul Stookey (of the folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary) contended that Dylan’s new release was obviously a “Christian album” and that his credential of having made songs that questioned authority when he was a folk singer made the album convincing. In the same issue, the magazine’s art director at the time, David Singer, wrote an article entitled “Not Buying into the Subculture,” in which he asserted that *Slow Train Coming* showed that Dylan’s “quest [had] been satisfied” (p. 33). According to Singer, Dylan was appreciated for his “sage-like message” in his lyrics, which showed his keen observation of human nature, but he had not found the meaning or the roots of the truth he had revealed until he converted to Christianity. Singer also praised Dylan’s album for not having “bought into the Christian subculture’s status quo.” He wrote: “His gift to us remains his once-removed prophetic insight” (p.33). By praising Dylan’s prophetic and critical abilities while at the same time determining that Dylan’s ultimate answer was found in evangelical Christianity, Singer justified his faith.

The magazine continued to follow Dylan. In an article entitled “Has Born-again Bob Dylan Returned to Judaism?” (January 13, 1984), the author reported on the speculation concerning Dylan’s possible return to Judaism after his conversion to evangelical Christianity which became evident with the release of *Slow Train Coming* in 1979. The author cited Dylan’s friend and a former pastor who had guided him to Christianity to make a case that he was still a Christian. His basis was that Dylan had not refused the invitation to participate in an Olympic evangelistic outreach. The author noted the significance of Dylan’s turn to Christianity because he was an influential countercultural figure in the 1960s who had “a reputation as a musical prophet to the sixties generation” (p. 46). Instead of denouncing rock music, these articles used Dylan’s credentials and fame as a folk and rock star of the previous decades to justify their beliefs. If the former countercultural superstar had come to their side, they must have been right.

The magazine also addressed the crossover success of Amy Grant, who debuted in 1978 and whose 1985 album *Unguarded* “achieved gold status (500,000 units sold) and a #35 ranking (out of 200) on *Billboard* magazine’s ‘Top Pop Albums’ list” (p. 62). In his article in the November 8, 1985, issue, Steve Rabey reported that some Christians criticized Grant for using “hard-edged rock” and for appearing on the 1985 Grammy broadcast wearing a leopard-print jacket and being barefoot. She was also accused of having a beer company sponsor her concerts. The article defended her by clarifying that it was the concert promotor and not her who had a contract with a beer company and that Grant did not regard her sexy appearance as “signs of sexual sin” but her efforts to “present a strong but modern female Christian role model to young people who confuse lust with love” (p. 62). Don Butler, executive director of the Gospel Music Association, was quoted as stating that people like him and Grant “should go where people are,” which was what Grant was doing (p. 62). The

writer justified her popular and secular outlook by regarding it as a means to reach out to the secular world.

Rabey's other piece in the same year, "A Christian 'Heavy-Metal' Band Makes Its Mark on the Secular Music Industry," reported on the rising popularity of "Christian heavy metal" music and how it was met with criticism within the evangelical community. Rabey took up the Christian metal band Stryper, who were "shattering the stereotypes" of heavy metal bands. Unlike their secular counterparts, who had taken "the themes of generalized rage, sexual abandon, drug abuse, violence, and despair into the homes of millions of young record buyers" and whose music videos "graphically depict[ed] violence and rebellion," Stryper incorporated Christian themes into heavy metal sound while maintaining the same type of make-up and attire (p. 45). The band's drummer and spokesperson, Michael Sweet, stated that his band's purpose was to tell "God's side of the story" in the secular popular music world, particularly to the "young kids—in a way they can understand" (p.45). Rabey explained that since gospel music companies had "promoted sanitized hard-rock bands for 15 years," the combination of rock music with Christian lyrics was "nothing new" (p.45). It is interesting to note that while the author viewed this band favorably, he employed the same language as earlier critics to describe secular heavy metal, such as violence and rebellion. He saw the band as an exception to the otherwise evil heavy metal music. Both the musician and the author focused on the influence the music had on young people, a concern shared by the earlier critics of rock music.

The article reported that the band received mixed reviews from the evangelical community. The pastor of Calvary Chapel, California, which was central to the Jesus Movement, praised the band for "pulling people out of hell" and "bring[ing] people [...] to fellowship" (p. 47). Other pastors accepted the band by viewing its approach as the end justifying the means. Still others denounced the use of rock music in evangelism. Bob Larson "strongly object[ed] to the whole heavy-metal frame of reference, their stage presence, and the chains, leather, and studs" and "question[ed] the wisdom of using this kind of imagery" while appreciating the band members' sincerity and the message that they tried to send (p.47). David Noebel categorically denied the music, along with the televangelist Jimmy Swaggart, who would later famously disgrace himself and the evangelical community with his scandal. Sweet responded by saying that he respected Swaggart and hoped they could talk to each other someday with the hope that Swaggart would understand that "God can use whatever he wants to use" (p. 47). The band took a conciliatory attitude toward the detractor of their music and justified their choice of music by expressing their desire to reach out to the youth. Furthermore, there was a difference in tone between Larson and Noebel in their criticism of Christian rock.

As Nekola showed, the earlier Christian critics who denounced rock 'n' roll as "bad music" contrasted it to "good music." Noebel, in particular, provided a chart that listed the specific characteristics of each type of music. The qualities ascribed to "good music" are those associated with Western classical music, such as having a "variety of pitches" and "melodies" and "us[ing] many chords (harmonies)" and modulation, while "bad music" was less melodious, had limited numbers of chords and based on "beats" instead of rhythm, with "unnatural" accents on off beats (p. 412). According to William D. Romanowski, in the first half of the twentieth century, critics also pointed to musical characteristics associated with classical music as Godly while denouncing popular music, which allegedly lacked such musical elements, as "inspired...by demons" (p. 212). One author suggested in the 1940s that, as Romanowski paraphrased, "Bach, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn were appropriate for

Christian participation, but the popular music of the day threatened moral and spiritual purity” (p. 212).

While the articles that appeared in the magazine during the 1980s affirmed Christian rock, classical music was also given reverence. In the March 15, 1985, issue, musicologist Richard Dinwiddie, in his article entitled “J.S. Bach: God’s Master Musician,” wrote extensively on Johann Sebastian Bach, whom he saw as not only a composer but also a “competent theologian.” “He expressed a profound theology in music better than anyone has ever done” (p. 17). Dinwiddie stressed the fact that Bach was a man of faith who studied Luther’s translation of the Bible diligently and believed God had called him to be “a minister of music” (p. 17). Bach also edited the text to reflect his theology, a fact that was required to truly appreciate his music. Dinwiddie bemoaned the fact that “often, with disturbing frequency, the people who make decisions concerning sacred music in church, school, and on religious radio seem to seek primarily the popular paths of mediocrity” and avoid Bach, thinking that he made “too many demands upon the listener” (p. 16). Dinwiddie insisted on the supremacy of Bach’s music and portrayed Bach as an evangelical role model who devoted himself to expressing his worship of God in his music.

Conclusion

This paper showed how Christian rock music was debated in the decades following the tumultuous 1960s. The counterculture of the 1960s gave rise to the reactionary politics of cultural and social conservatism which led to the culture wars. As the culture wars were waged and the Religious Right amassed power, rock music was incorporated into evangelical Christianity, becoming the subject of debate. While fierce criticism of rock music by prominent Christian leaders left a mark on the ensuing culture wars, more nuanced discussions about the music took place in the ministry and publications of an influential evangelical leader. An examination of his periodical demonstrated that writers for the magazine held a more tolerant attitude toward rock music, justifying and utilizing its popularity while, at the same time, sharing with earlier divisive critics implicit valorization of classical music and concern for music’s influence on the youth.

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