

THE VALUE OF SMUGGLED THEOLOGY IN MUSIC

Sheila Krygsheld on Why What We Hear
Matters

“If you want to make a Christian work,
then *be* Christian, and simply try to make
a beautiful work, into which your heart
will pass; do not try to ‘make Christian.’”

Jacques Maritain

Popular music is incredibly influential in children and young adults, especially in the United States. Much of the music being released today preaches a glamorized lifestyle of sexual immorality, drunkenness, and partying, saturating our youth with a warped sense of morality. Christians, however, have a unique opportunity to smuggle theology into mainstream music without being overtly “Christian.” It is possible to spread positivity and good moral choices, opening doors for unbelievers to experience the gospel.

Music is a globally important part of life, but it is especially important to Americans. According to Statista Research and Analysis, the United States spent nearly \$20 billion of the \$51.5 billion global music market in 2018, making the US by far the largest consumer of music in the world.¹ Americans love their music and pay dearly for it . . . gladly. Mainstream music, music that is popular with a large part of the listening public (typically young people) at any given time, drives the sales of popular music.

Over the past 60 years, the mainstream music market in America has gone through a vast lyrical topic change, and this change has robbed the mainstream music market of typical moral values from past generations. Lyrical topics involving sex, alcohol, drugs and ethnicity have more than doubled throughout these years.² Sexual promiscuity, adultery, intoxication, partying, and even racial tensions are themes that have become

¹ “U.S. Music - Statistics and Facts,” *Statista*. November 4, 2016. accessed March 28, 2019.
<https://www.statista.com/topics/1639/music/>

² Peter G. Christiansen, et al. “What Has America Been Singing about? Trends in Themes in the U.S. Top-40 Songs: 1960–2010,” *Psychology of Music*, vol. 47, no. 2, Mar. 2019, accessed March 29, 2019.

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commonplace in mainstream music. Billboard's Top 100 list of artists with "the most alcohol mentions" includes household names such as Drake, Flo Rida, Rihanna, Lil Wayne, Luke Bryan and Pink. Most children would know many of these famous stars.

Ranker, a leading digital media company for opinion-based, crowdsourced rankings on many topics inclusive of pop culture, listed the top 15 songs with the absolute filthiest lyrics possible. To describe, Ranker said, "it shouldn't come as a surprise to see that most of these are rap songs. The hip hop community has a long and storied history of writing erotic, explicit tunes matched with throbbing bass lines that go into graphic detail."³ What is most intriguing is what Ranker states next. "These are songs that you don't want to hear if you're riding in the car with your mom and certainly don't want to get caught humming in the middle of math class."⁴ Interestingly, the lyrical contents of these vulgar songs are not fit for parents to hear, and the kids who listen to such lyrics should at least feel an uneasiness or at best be embarrassed in response to listening to them.

³ Ann Casano, "15 Songs With The Absolute Filthiest Lyrics Possible," *Ranker*, accessed May 1, 2019. <https://www.ranker.com/list/filthiest-song-lyrics/anncasano?ref=search>

⁴ *Ibid*

In the past decade, Americans aged 18-29 have become increasingly more dissatisfied in their personal lives while the mainstream music industry has matured to multi-billion dollar status. In a study nearly 10 years old, the American Academy of Pediatrics states that listening to popular music not only correlates with but may directly influence listeners' attitudes, values, mood and behavior, positively or negatively.⁵⁶ Likewise, musical lyric content is not getting worse because people are increasingly dissatisfied; rather, lyrics have an effect on those who listen. The music that has lulled our children and young adults to sleep has also awakened them from slumber. The same music has accompanied them on their school bus rides, has escorted them through bustling hallways, and serenaded their homework hours. Unwittingly, music has been an influence.

When analyzing the effects of music it is helpful to recognize that music is a form of art. As a personal expression using skill and imagination, art reveals

⁵ Justin McCarthy, "Six in Seven Americans Satisfied with Their Personal Lives," *Gallup*, last modified February 05, 2019, accessed March 29, 2019. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/246326/six-seven-americans-satisfied-personal-lives.aspx>

⁶ M. Rosario Gonzalez de Rivas, MD. "Policy Statement—Impact of Music, Music Lyrics, and Music Videos on Children and Youth," *PEDIATRICS The Official Journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics*, November 2000, 1488

itself through a useable medium to create aesthetic objects, environments or experiences to share. In his book, *What is Art?*, Leo Tolstoy explains:

The activity of art is based on the fact that a man, receiving through his sense of hearing or sight another man's expression of feeling, is capable of experiencing the emotion which moved the man who expressed it . . . And it is upon this capacity of man to receive another man's expression of feeling and experience those feelings himself, that the activity of art is based.⁷

According to Tolstoy, art, in whatever form it is presented, communicates a "feeling" or "sense of emotion" between two people. Art creates a sense of knowing between the appreciator and the artist. Music declares what a singer is feeling and the listener can relate. For example, Earl Bud Lee wrote the song "Friends in Low Places," recorded by Garth Brooks. After eating at a local tavern, Lee realized he had forgotten his money. When asked how he would pay his bill, he responded that he had friends in low places. He knew the cook. People everywhere could relate to the sincerity of the song. It was a story

⁷ Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Translated by Aylmer Maude (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co. Publishers, 1898), 10, 68.

about how regular, working-class people felt in a rich person's world.

But art does not only share a feeling or emotion, it builds meaning. Excellent artists communicate by awakening the beholder to a depth or beauty or a lavishness that could not otherwise be communicable. In 2014, the popular rock group *Needtobreathe* released the song "Multiplied" and it spent 28 weeks on Billboard's charts. This song could be heard in shopping malls and restaurants across the US and beyond, proclaiming to the general public that God's love is like light, His love will find us, we surrender to God's love, and it includes a prayer for God's multiplied blessings. Although the lyrics are simple, the listener is exposed to a deeper meaning about God and what He is like.

Authors like Madeleine L'Engle have used a Christian foundation to influence their work (or art) and the success of their creative efforts indicates not only the survival but the vitality of Christian art in our fallen world. In her seminal work *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art*, Madeleine L'Engle writes of Christian artists:

We draw people to Christ not by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right

we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.⁸

C.S. Lewis wrote noteworthy works of nonfiction, but his *Narnia* series has become part of the canon of classic children's literature for over sixty years. Lewis wrote from a Christian perspective, and he encouraged other Christians to write by infusing their work with a Christian worldview. In a letter to a friend, he explained, ". . . work whose Christianity is latent may do quite as much good and may reach some whom the more obvious religious work would scare away."⁹ His idea was to smuggle theology into art forms as an introduction to Christ in a covert way where unbelievers would not be unnerved by the word 'Christianity' -- almost an introduction to a desire for Christ. Lewis was not trying to hide his Christian faith from his readers by smuggling theology into his mainstream works; he was trying to communicate with a much deeper meaning.

Peter charged early Christians "to be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for your

⁸ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (New York: Convergent Books, 2001), 112.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *Yours, Jack: Spiritual Direction from C. S. Lewis*, Edited by Paul F. Ford (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 216.

hope.”¹⁰ He is very clear: be able to explain why you have the hope you have. In the words of Ravi Zacharias, “The lordship of Christ over the life of the apologist [defender of the faith] is foundational to all answers given.”¹¹ Every Christian should be a defender of the faith and should represent Christianity effectively. Respectively, mainstream Christian artists committed to the lordship of Christ, such as Lecrae and MercyMe, are beautiful representations of Christianity proclaiming truth into our culture.

Paul tells Christians to do the work of an evangelist, to proclaim Christ by showing people how Christ’s way is different than any other way because Christianity is Truth.¹² The Christian faith offers every advantage to help make sense of the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. Smuggling theology into the lyrics of mainstream music, where our culture spends a lot of time and resources, is worth the effort. The effort Christ made to save our fallen world was worth it. And for those of us who are not in the limelight of the secular music world, it is our responsibility to support and

¹⁰ I Peter 3:15.

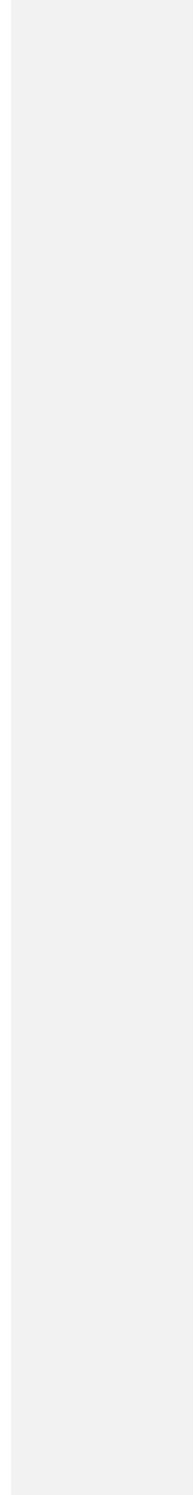
¹¹ Ravi Zacharias, *Beyond Opinion Living the Faith We Defend* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007), 305.

¹² 2 Timothy 4:5

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Smuggled Theology in Music

encourage those who are called to evangelize,
helping them share the light of Christ's message.



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