

# IS CHRISTIAN MUSIC TOO CULTURAL?

BY DAVID V. COOPER, III

*Thomas Dorsey (composer of "Precious Lord, Take My Hand") once said that he had been thrown out of some of the best churches in America.*

I was asked an interesting question. It came from a dear friend of mine whom I have known since we were kids. I knew right away this was not a rhetorical question; he was looking for an answer. The question is has Christian music become too cultural. Well I really can answer that one right away. Yes! However, here's my dilemma: do I take a position on this cultural influence issue? Well I tell you what, I am going to wax political and let you decide.

The question I was asked leads us to ask numerous other questions about today's cultural impact on our music. Are the different categories that are placed on Christian music placed there by Christian artists or for that matter Christians at all? Just what is Christian music? What is Gospel music? Is there a difference? When we make a reference to Christian music, what are we really saying? I've heard terms like *Christian Jazz*, *Christian Reggae* and other secular genres having the term Christian attached to them. What do these terms mean? Since there is secular rock, can there be Christian rock? If rock music represents sex, drugs and rebellion, how can there be Christian rock? If a popular hymn or worship song gets a contemporary overlay by an artist, is this song now "ungodly"? I know, after a while it starts to sound a little strange, but these are issues we need to look at.

If CeCe Winans puts a song on her CD about her life's ups and downs and how she handled them with God, but never mentions Jesus' name, can we still call this Christian music?

So what determines whether music is Christian or not? When a person says, "I'm a Christian," your first thought should be is this person a representative of Christ. This means that whatever that person was or did has been (or is being) changed, and they are now going through the process of having Christ formed in them. We like to call this progressional sanctification. So if music or a song is deemed Christian, then the first thing it should represent is Christ.

That being the case, if I put one of the Psalms to contemporary music, is it “gospel” or “Christian” music? My name, my height, my ethnicity is not where you see Christ in my life, it is the content of who I’ve become and who I’m becoming, and how this is exemplified in my everyday existence. So a song title may or may not show that it is a Christian song, but the words of that song should lift up Christ. The question is does contemporary music make a song less godly. Tonex, a popular contemporary “gospel” artist, on his last release put Christian lyrics to a popular game show jingle. Is this still a Christian song if it lifts up Jesus?

*“From that time many of His disciples went back and walked no more with him...”*

So, if this is how we decide what Christian music is, is it also how we conclude what is considered “gospel” music? What is the “gospel”? According to I Corinthians 15:1 - 20, the gospel is the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, Jesus the Christ.

The gospel must then be contained in “gospel” music or let’s face it (deep breath), it is a misrepresentation. If you observe an individual running up and down the basketball court and he is dressed in a NBA uniform and you see him playing with the 76ers but he tells you he is a tennis pro, what would you think? Kind of grabs you doesn’t it?

This issue really isn’t new; it has been building since the 70's, even the late 60's, when artists like Andrae Crouch and Edwin Hawkins began to make what was referred to as “gospel music” more contemporary and take it mainstream. Andre Crouch began to put Christian lyrics to contemporary music and to use instruments that were at the very least questionable by traditional standards, such as the electric guitar and keyboards. However, even before that, during the 1930's, Thomas Dorsey caused riffs in the church with what we now call gospel music. Thomas Dorsey was a “blues” artist and he brought that flavor to Christian music, so much so that many mainline churches refused to allow his music in their churches. Thomas Dorsey once said that he had been thrown out of some of the best churches in America. Today, his song, “Take My Hand, Precious Lord”, and many others are sung in churches of different denominations from the smallest to the largest. For that matter, back when brother Dorsey penned these great songs, they were called “gospel blues.” How can something as joyful as the gospel give you the “blues”?

This stirs another question, if a Christian artist decides to release a CD with original material that is instrumental and gives the songs biblical titles, is this a gospel CD or if it is mellow is it a “worship” CD? Better yet, if a secular artist pens a song with biblical lyrics, and he is obviously not a Christian, what do we do with that?

At some point, we need to start asking ourselves some questions; we need to look at

these issues and ask simply, is all this really to promote the gospel of Jesus Christ or the musical career of the artist? Does this glorify Christ or the performer? Is this music really bringing young people into the church or just to the concerts? If my recall is working, Jesus himself said that if he be lifted up that he would do the drawing. Paul told the Corinthians that "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe". I don't see anything about singing.

Take a popular "gospel" song like "Stomp" by Kirk Franklin where the music is originally by George Clinton & Parliament Funkadelic. On the CD cover it states that "Stomp" "contains an interpolation from 'One Nation Under A Groove'...". I thought that was quite interesting. When I checked "interpolation" in the dictionary, it means "to alter or corrupt by inserting new or foreign matter..." Let's face it; though it was put out by a "Christian artist," this song does not put you in the mind to praise Jesus. If anything it makes some of you wanna "shake that thang." And some of you sistas ain't got no business... Um, well that's another article.

A lot of this music is really "inspirational", but not necessarily gospel or Christian. Does this make it bad? No, I'm not saying it's bad nor am I condemning it; I am simply trying to clarify what we are really listening to. Are all of these artists who put out this music saved? Does their life style line up with the songs? Can Missy Elliot get you to "Work It" and then promote you to lift up Jesus as she performs on "Go Ahead" and "Higher Ground" by Karen Clark-Sheard?

Truth is if you've read any of my articles then you know my taste in music is eclectic and I like some of the music I've discussed. However, I'm also aware of what I listen to and why. I'm just trying to call your attention to the same. Christian music has as far back as Martin Luther joined our songs with contemporary music. It was the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, who - early in the 18th Century - set out to change worshippers' views of hymns. They were not only the founders of Methodism, but they also insisted that hymns, both words and music, be written to stir the congregation, reinforcing its religious emotions and playing on the "feel good" factor. Yet, we also need to look at the difference in the times. Then the culture was very heavily influenced by the church; wherein, it sadly appears like the opposite is now true. The church is heavily influenced by the world. We must ask ourselves is this what Christ desires of his church?

I think we all know the answer is no. †