

“Your Article on Rock Music is Biased and Unjust”

Dear Mr. Jerry Solomon,

I stumbled across [your page](#) when I was looking for a song on the internet, I thought what you noted was extremely biased and unjust. From what I picked up from your page you obviously have a concern for rock music, maybe this email is completely out of no where but I think you are being slightly over the top. I love rock music and I am a Christian, I go to church twice a week every week and my friends at my church love rock too.

Music is just a way of feeling less stressed for me and rock is just a way of getting everything out of my system when I am at home. I think that you should let your daughter decide what music she likes and no offence but I think that what religion she chooses should be up to her. Also many rock bands are Christian based and maybe you should have done a bit more research on “rock music” before you wrote your page for the whole world to see.

Please don't get me wrong I really don't want to appear rude I just felt quite offended by what you said about the music I enjoy. Thank you very much for your time and would be interested to hear from you.

Dear _____,

Jerry Solomon went home to be with His Lord several years ago so I will answer your questions.

On the one hand I don't think you read Jerry's article very carefully. Jerry's only real problem with rock music was with the frequent anti-biblical message contained in some lyrics. As the quote below makes clear, he emphatically said that

there is nothing “evil” in the music itself.

So rock music basically consists of certain instruments— such as guitars, keyboards, and percussion—a particular rhythm, and the human voice. And none of these is evil. People can be evil, and people abuse rock music, just as they abuse all parts of life. Our sin nature is actively involved in desecrating everything.

This desecration can best be seen in the lyrical content of the songs. We have come a long way from the inane “do-wa-diddies” of early rock history. It is at this point that those in the Christian community are challenged the most. The music alone may be of quality, but the message may be totally in opposition to a Christian worldview. A decision is required. Do I continue to listen, even though the message is awful? Or do I decide to reject it because of the message, even though I like the music?

Unfortunately, the well-worn statement, “I only listen to the beat!” is simply not true. If they are honest, most people who have heard a rock song several times can sing the lyrics upon request. When you consider the fact that most popular songs are heard dozens, if not hundreds, of times, it is not difficult to understand how the messages are embedded. The lyrics come through; we can’t escape that. This does not necessarily mean we always listen and think to the point of really considering what the messages have to say, and that is exactly part of the problem. The lyrics can be subtly incorporated into our thoughts simply because we haven’t stopped long enough to sort them out.

Jerry was simply concerned about young people’s willingness to listen without discerning the message they were pumping into their brain. I am 51 and still listen to some rock music from the 60s and 70s. But I listen selectively and know what the biblical messages are and what is clearly antithetical to what

I believe. Jerry was simply appealing to others to do likewise.

I'm sorry you were offended but I simply think you misread Jerry's intent.

On one further note I would respectfully disagree with your statement that children should be free to choose their own religion. On the one hand, of course, children should choose for themselves, but that doesn't mean, on the other hand, that I leave them completely to their own search for meaning and truth. If I have found the Truth, why wouldn't I work to persuade them of that same Truth by taking them to church, providing a copy of the Scriptures for them to read, teaching them from the Scriptures at home, and living a holy life before them to deliberately try to influence them? Anything less is unloving and irresponsible.

Respectfully,

Ray Bohlin, Ph.D.

Probe Ministries

© 2005 Probe Ministries

Rock Music

Many years ago now, my daughter and one of her best friends returned from their first "solo" trip to the local shopping center. They went into her bedroom, and soon I was hearing some unusual sounds. I listened more intently and eventually realized they had bought a 45-rpm recording of one of the popular songs of that year. Since I believed that my daughter and her friend were embarking on a new musical adventure, I thought it would be appropriate to investigate what was taking

place.

To begin, I asked if they would mind if I also listened to the song. Then I asked to see the record jacket, which they handed to me. After listening to the lyrics of the first side, it became apparent that we were listening to a song about sexual promiscuity. In addition, the record jacket demonstrated that the singer agreed with her message. As we began to discuss what I heard and saw, it was obvious that a sensitive nerve had been touched. They were not exactly pleased with what I was saying. They did not share my perspective. After much talk and emotional wrangling (and a happy ending, I might add), I concluded that this scene is probably duplicated many times in Christian homes around the world. With the memory of this experience embedded in my mind, I began to look into the world of contemporary music, and “rock” in particular.

Perhaps you have had a similar experience. Or perhaps you have heard or read statements concerning rock music from a variety of sources. The subject does not seem to lose its appeal with time. Christians have debated it for decades. Many have strong opinions and emotions about it, both pro and con.

As is true with many contemporary issues, it is very easy to take a generalized, extreme position on the subject of rock music. Some Christians say that we should reject all music found under the label of “rock” because there is something inherently evil in the medium. Others may not see that there are legitimate reasons for being concerned about rock. Christians should not take either of these positions. Rather, we should accept the sometimes-difficult challenge to be discerners. This applies to all the arts, including rock. But if we believe that all truth is of God, we should not let difficulties deter us from being honest with what we hear. Randall Petersen addresses this:

The task for the Christian, as always, is discernment. What can we find in this pile of culture that Jesus likes?

Remember, Jesus walked this beat. The Lord of music climbed through this pile inspiring children's shouts and making crippled people dance for joy. He can help us sort through our society.(1)

The task not only applies to rock music but to all the issues that confront us.

There are many biblical examples of discernment, but first we must understand the principle that all truth is of God. To quote Arthur Holmes:

If God is the eternal and all-wise creator of all things, as Christians affirm, then his creative wisdom is the source and norm of all truth about everything. And if God and his wisdom are unchangingly the same, then truth is likewise unchanging and thus universal.(2)

As a result, truth can be found in many spheres of life other than the religious or peculiarly Christian community. Although this is not found in the Bible in a verse that can be quoted per se, it is implied throughout the Scriptures.

Discernment

Once we grasp the principle that all truth is of God, we can then see that verses such as Heb. 5:14 and Phil. 4:8 apply very well to our discussion of rock music. The writer of Hebrews states, "Solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil" (NASB). We should be about the business of "training our senses." Otherwise, we will often accept falsehoods while rejecting the truth that is a part of many things that are not aligned under a "Christian" banner. In Phil. 4:8, Paul enumerates several ethical principles, including, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there

is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise.” Then he states that we should let our minds “dwell on these things.” Look at the world around you. If you find something worth keeping, keep it. If it needs to be discarded, discard it. And of course this also applies to rock music.

Kenneth Petersen has put it more graphically by stating that “we shouldn’t be afraid to be selective—to pluck diamonds out of the mud.”(3) Yes, there is a great deal of mud in this world. Yes, a lot of that mud is found in rock music, just as it is in all art and entertainment. As a result, we are faced with two options as believers. We can reject all art and entertainment, or we can responsibly practice discernment in our culture. The former can lead to stagnation and ineffectiveness; the latter can challenge the world with a bold and positive witness. Our culture needs the “salt” and “light” we can offer. It needs the impact of redeemed minds.

In the preface to the *Wittenberg Gesangbuch* of 1524, Martin Luther shared thoughts about music that are still appropriate.

I wish that the young men might have something to rid them of their love ditties and wanton songs and might instead of these learn wholesome things and thus yield willingly to the good; also, because I am not of the opinion that all the arts shall be crushed to earth and perish through the Gospel, as some bigoted persons pretend, but would willingly see them all, and especially music, servants of Him who gave and created them.(4)

Luther’s comments are applicable to the subject of rock. But why should we share Luther’s concern for the arts, particularly music?

The first answer to this question is that God carries out His purposes in time and history. He may be “needling” us through contemporary music; He may be challenging us to be alert to the crucial issues and questions of our time that can be heard

in much rock music.

Second, rock can tell us how a significant portion of our culture thinks. The answers, or lack of answers, that rock musicians give to their own questions ring true in the minds of millions of listeners.

Third, we can be sympathetic with many of the subjects found in rock. The difference is that often these musicians provide insights that are not of the Lord. Fourth, rock musicians are image-makers more often than not. They present a facade that is very attractive to adolescents. We need to analyze these images, which can be so powerful in the lives of our children, and react biblically.

We are often guilty of living in “Christian ghettos.” We may understand each other, but we don’t understand our culture, and our culture doesn’t understand us. In the New Testament we see that Jews and Gentiles were approached differently because their presuppositions were different. They were speaking different religious and philosophical languages. Today we are faced with the same task. If we are to communicate with our culture, we need to hear what it is saying. We need to see and hear the world views. We need to react as Paul did in Athens (Acts 17). We need to be discerners.

Steps Toward Discernment

Discernment is the key, but how can we become discerners of rock music? Four simple categories will help us arrange our thoughts.

First, there is good music with a good message. This is the ideal combination. The music is of quality, and the message is true. We should all strive to hear and create this unity.

Second, we often hear good music with a bad message. The music may be of quality, but the message is false or misleading.

Third, bad music with a good message can creep into our listening habits. The quality of the music is poor, but the message is true. This category can be used to describe much of what is called "contemporary Christian music."

The fourth is bad music with a bad message. This combination is more blatant in its degradation than are numbers two and three, but it is often more honest. For example, much of what is called "hard core" or "underground" is not presented as a well-done musical statement, and it is honest in its perception of a world gone wrong. The tragedy is that the perceptions are often false and the music is usually not worth a second hearing.

With these categories in mind we can now consider four steps toward becoming discerners of rock music. The first step is to realize that all truth is of God and begin to incorporate this principle in our lives. As Marajen Denman has said, "Truth is truth, no matter who sings it." (5)

The second step is to **stop!** Stop what you are doing long enough to concentrate on what is being said through the music. Most of us, especially adolescents who spend so much time with rock as a companion, probably need to be more aware of the power of ideas. This can only be done if we take the time to concentrate.

The third step is to **listen!** Listen carefully to the message of the music. This especially applies to those young people who listen to certain songs or albums repetitively.

The fourth step is to **look!** Look at how the music affects your life in terms of such things as thoughts, physical tension and sensuality. It may help to encourage a teenager to ask himself a series of questions, such as, Where am I getting these rebellious ideas? Where am I getting these sexual fantasies? Why am I tempted to reject what I know to be true? Why am I depressed so much of the time? Why does the future look so

hopeless?, etc. These four steps may take some time, but in most cases the effort brings reward.

Before we discuss the music and its messages, it is important to realize that rock music is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a musical one. It is a source of personal and corporate identification. Many young people look to rock for more than music. They seek to identify themselves with a unique generation. It helps them declare their independence.

In fact, rock shares in the unique historical development of the idea of adolescence, which is much more recent than most of us realize. Adolescence has come to symbolize an attitude, a distinctiveness, a rite of passage espoused by millions of teens. While reflecting on the impact of rock concerts, the writers of *Dancing in the Dark*, an excellent study of youth culture, state:

Whatever else rock might be . . . a concert makes it clear that rock is a dramatic participatory anthem of teen life, freighted with the intense experience of what teens believe, feel, value, and do. Rock is at once a barometer of teen experience and the very weather they inhabit, at once the celebration of an ethos and the ethos itself.(6)

An objective awareness of this ethos can lead us to more constructive dialogue concerning rock, especially with our own children. Rock is a major cultural force and has been since its inception. Millions have and will continue to identify with it at various times during their lives. If we don't realize this, the lines of communication are quickly broken. It is not enough to say, "Turn off that noise!" Like it or not, we must approach our children with the understanding that it's not just the music that attracts them. They need to be led to understand *whose* they are in Jesus Christ, and not just *who* they are within the scope of adolescent culture.

Musical Ingredients

The musical ingredients of rock music have been the focus of rapt attention among Christians for many years. Some have attacked rock based upon supposed evils within the music itself. These attacks are misdirected. For example, many of us can remember debates concerning the use of certain instruments, such as guitars and drums, in worship. It was believed that there was something very wrong, if not evil, about using such instruments. With a few exceptions, this concern has been rightfully rejected.

Besides such instruments, the nature of the rock rhythm has been called into question and has sometimes been the subject of fierce arguments. The basic syncopation of rock, which is usually in 4/4 time with an accent on the second and fourth beats, is not evil. It is often boring and uncreative, but it is not evil. Some groups experiment with assorted meters and chord progressions, but the majority of rock bands incorporate this basic rhythm. If there is a problem with rock, it is not to be found here.

Rock almost always has a message. The human voice is used to sing about something. Of course no one would claim there is something evil about the human voice. The message that is communicated can be cause for concern, but the voice itself is not the problem.

So rock music basically consists of certain instruments—such as guitars, keyboards, and percussion—a particular rhythm, and the human voice. And none of these is evil. People can be evil, and people abuse rock music, just as they abuse all parts of life. Our sin nature is actively involved in desecrating everything.

This desecration can best be seen in the lyrical content of the songs. We have come a long way from the inane “do-wa-diddies” of early rock history. It is at this point that those

in the Christian community are challenged the most. The music alone may be of quality, but the message may be totally in opposition to a Christian worldview. A decision is required. Do I continue to listen, even though the message is awful? Or do I decide to reject it because of the message, even though I like the music?

Unfortunately, the well-worn statement, "I only listen to the beat!" is simply not true. If they are honest, most people who have heard a rock song several times can sing the lyrics upon request. When you consider the fact that most popular songs are heard dozens, if not hundreds, of times, it is not difficult to understand how the messages are embedded. The lyrics come through; we can't escape that. This does not necessarily mean we always listen and think to the point of really considering what the messages have to say, and that is exactly part of the problem. The lyrics can be subtly incorporated into our thoughts simply because we haven't stopped long enough to sort them out.

Common Themes

As we listen to the messages of rock, we find that several themes appear. One of these is nihilism and its accompanying despair. Evidently large segments of our youth population are willing to pay to hear that the world is falling apart.

Hedonism is another theme. Sexual emphases, in particular, have long been staples of rock's lyrical content. Rebellion and violence are also prominent subjects. These can be found especially in rap, hard core, and heavy metal. Drugs, including alcohol, are also touted in some songs, although their glorification is not as prominent as in the past. Occasionally some groups will toy with occultic and satanic themes, but most of these are simply trying to sell recordings by attracting the curiosity of teens. These themes are by no means complete. The list of subjects would cover virtually everything imaginable, but these are the more prominent ones.

Parent/Child Communication

Since this subject is too often the focus of intense arguments in the home, the following steps can help to alleviate the problem.

1. Pray over the issue together in order to make a dedicated effort to communicate.
2. Discuss the subject—don't scream about it.
3. Examine yourself to determine if you are acting hypocritically. For example, a parent should not scream at the child about rock and then turn on the latest country songs, which often deal with the same subjects that are found in rock.
4. The parent(s) should honestly seek to spend some time listening to the child's recordings. The child should honestly seek to go beyond the beat/sound in order to hear and see what is being emphasized.
5. The parent can turn on a rock station while driving to/from work.
6. The child can begin to be much more selective about when she listens to the music. The process of discernment cannot take place very easily if there is always something taking place while the music is heard.
7. Take some time to visit the local department or record store.
8. Visit the local library and check out any number of books on rock music. In fact, "topical bibles" of rock music are available. Pick the subject, and the book will lead you to the songs that deal with the subject.
9. The latest issues of various trade magazines can be read in the local library or purchased in some grocery stores or book stores. Some of the magazines print the lyrics of the latest songs.

When children see that parents are genuinely interested, they will often begin to respond positively to what is said.

Challenge them to make a decision, but don't make it for them. Discernment, coupled with an attitude that is saturated in patience, will go a long way toward helping a young person make Christ-centered decisions that will last a lifetime.

Decisions are in order for many people. Perhaps some will find it necessary to "clean the closet" because of prior saturation in rock. Others need to be more discerning. But a rejection of rock and the wholesale acceptance of another form is not the answer. As soon as that takes place, the thinking process has stopped. All of one has been substituted for all of another. For instance, if we put gospel music in the place of rock without thinking about what we hear, we can be in danger of accepting poor theology, if not heresy, on occasion. Each song, each piece of music should be judged on its own merit. No single artist can be accepted without thought. No single style can be accepted without thought. We are responsible to stop, listen, and look at all that we hear.

Notes

(1) J. Randall Petersen, "John Lennon, Rock Music, and American Culture," *Evangelical Newsletter*, 20 March 1981.

(2) Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth Is God's Truth* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977), 8.

(3) Kenneth W. Petersen, "Confronting the Sounds of Culture," *Evangelical Newsletter*, 30 MAY 1980.

(4) Quoted by Francis Schaeffer in *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976), 90.

(5) Marajen Denman, "What's Music to Your Ears?" *Worldwide Challenge*, February 1983, 8.

(6) Quentin J. Schultze, et al., *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 148.

Music and the Christian

Jerry Solomon encourages Christians to begin to think about the place and influence of music in their lives.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Music is a pervasive part of contemporary culture. We hear it on elevators, in restaurants, on telephones while we wait for our party to answer, in offices, in hotel lobbies, and in virtually every corner of contemporary life. In fact, it permeates the airwaves so thoroughly we often do not realize it is there. Television uses music not only in musical programs but also in commercials and program soundtracks. Movies also utilize music to enhance the events shown on the screen. Radio offers a wide variety of music around the clock. The availability of recordings allows us to program music to suit our own listening tastes, and we can hear them in virtually any location. Concerts, especially in large cities, offer a potpourri of music to choose from.

There is also a wide variety of musical genres. Rock (with its assortment of styles and labels), rap, country and western, jazz, Broadway, folk, classical, New Age, and gospel provide us with a dizzying assortment of listening and performing options. Such permeation and variety provide us with a unique opportunity to practice discernment. Some may think this is unnecessary because they claim to listen only to “Christian” music. Nevertheless, the broader population of the evangelical community spends innumerable hours absorbing music, whether “Christian” or “secular.”

Why should a Christian be interested and involved in the arts, music in particular? In his excellent work *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms*, John Newport lists several helpful points:

The first reason Christians should be interested in the arts is related to the biblical teaching that God reveals and carries on his redemptive purpose in time and history. The Christian community ...cannot cut itself off from the characteristic artistic vitalities of history—past and present. Second...the arts give a peculiarly direct access to the distinctive tone, concerns, and feelings of a culture... The artists not only mirror their age in its subtlest nuances, but they generally do it a generation ahead of more abstract and theoretical thinkers. Third...the arts focus (in a remarkably vivid and startling way) on the vital issues and themes which are the central concern of theology. Fourth...the arts spell out dramatically the implications of various worldviews.(1)

The second, third, and fourth points are especially applicable to music. If music mirrors culture, if it tells us of important issues and themes; and if it shows the implications of various worldviews, it can tell us a great deal about our culture. Lyrically, music can be used as a medium for criticism, commendation, reflection, questioning, rebellion, and any number of other thoughts or emotions. When the musical language is employed to relay these thoughts or emotions the result can be significant.

History is replete with examples of the ways music has been vitally employed in various cultures. One of the more prominent examples of this can be found in the Psalms, where lyrics were merged with music to form a strategic voice for Israel's life. The same is true in contemporary life. The themes of rock, rap, and country music demonstrate how music can be a notable voice for the spirit of a culture, whether for good or evil.

In order to affect our culture we must listen to that voice. We must hear its questions and be sensitive to the needs that cry out for the answers God provides.

Can Music Be “Christian”?

One of the continuing debates among evangelicals centers on how music is to be judged. Some say there is a particular musical style that is distinctly Christian. Others reject such a proposition. Some believe that certain musical styles are intrinsically evil. Others reject this. The examples of such conflict are numerous. It is important that we join the dialogue. In the process we will observe several ways we should respond to the music of our culture.

First, the term “Christian music” is a misnomer. Music cannot be declared Christian because of particular ingredients. There is no special Christian musical vocabulary. There is no distinctive sound that makes a piece of music Christian. The only part of a composition that can make it Christian is the lyrics. In view of the fact that such phrases as “contemporary Christian music” are in vogue, this is a meaningful observation. Perhaps the phrase “contemporary Christian lyrics” would be more appropriate. Of course, the lyrics may be suspect doctrinally and ethically, and they may be of poor quality, but my point is concentrated on the musical content.

It is possible that misunderstandings regarding “Christian music” are the product of cultural bias. Our “western ears” are accustomed to certain sounds. Particular modes, scales, and rhythms are part of a rich musical heritage. When we hear music that is not part of that heritage we are tempted to label it, inaccurately, as unfit for a Christian’s musical life.

We should realize that music is best understood within its culture. For example, the classical music of India includes quarter tones, which are foreign to our ears. They generally

sound very strange to us, and they are often played on instruments that have a strange sound, such as the sitar. But we would be guilty of flagrant prejudice if we were to maintain that such music is un-Christian because it does not contain the tones we are used to hearing. Another example of the way evangelicals tend to misapply the term Christian to music can be understood by reflecting on how music may have sounded during biblical and church history. Scholars have begun to demonstrate that the music of biblical history may have been comprised of tonal and rhythmic qualities that were very different from what we are accustomed to in western culture.

The attitudes of Luther and Calvin toward the use of music show a disagreement concerning the truth of a particular Christian style. Charles Garside provides intriguing insights:

Luther had openly proclaimed his desire to use all available music, including the most obviously secular, for the worship of the church. . . . Calvin, to the contrary, now absolutely rejects such a deployment of existing musical resources.(2)

It is obvious that these great men did not agree on the nature of music.

Our musical preconceptions do not die easily, and they seem to recur periodically in church history. Once a style becomes familiar enough, it is accepted. Until then, it is suspect. More recent examples can be found in the controversies surrounding the use of instruments such as drums and guitars during worship services. Evangelicals need to be alert to their biases and understand that “Christian music” is a misnomer.

The “Power” of Music

It is often claimed that music has “power” to manipulate and control us. If this were true, Skinnerian determinism would be

correct in asserting that there is no such thing as personal choice or responsibility. Music, along with other “powers” found in our cultural settings, would be given credit that is not legitimate.

Best and Huttar address this by saying:

The fact that music, among other created and cultural things, is purported by primitives and sophisticates alike to have power is more a matter of the dislocation of priorities than anything else.(3)

Such beliefs not only stimulate a “dislocation of priorities,” they also stimulate poor theology.

The Bible tells us that early in their relationship David played music for King Saul. On one occasion what Saul heard soothed him, and on another occasion the same sounds infuriated him. In reality, though, the reactions were Saul’s decisions. He was not passive; he was not being manipulated on either occasion by the “power” of the music.

Much contemporary thinking places the blame for aberrant behavior (sexual misconduct, rebellion, violence, etc.) on the supposed intrinsic potency of music to orchestrate our actions. Some extend this to the point of believing that music is the special tool of Satan, so when such behavior is exhibited he is the culprit. Again, Best and Huttar offer pertinent thoughts. They write:

Ultimately the Judeo-Christian perspective maintains that man is interiorly wrong and that until he is right he will place the blame for his condition outside himself.(4)

Admittedly, my point is a subtle one. We must be careful not to imply music cannot be used for evil purposes. But we must realize that the devil goads people who use music; he does not empower the music itself.

Current controversy among Christians concerning the rhythmic content of rock music is an example of the tendency to believe that some musical styles are intrinsically evil. For example, Steve Lawhead has demonstrated that the music of the early slaves probably did not include much rhythmic substance at all. The plantation owners would not have allowed drums because they could have been used to relay messages of revolt between the groups of slaves. This observation is central to the issue of rock music, because some assert that the syncopated rhythm of rock is the product of the pagan African backgrounds of the slaves. In reality, American slave music centered around the playing of a “banya,” an instrument akin to the banjo, and not drums or other rhythmic instruments.(5)

Rock music is not intrinsically evil. It did not originate in a pagan past, and even if it did that would not mean that it is evil. Nevertheless, since it has been a prominent and influential part of American culture for several decades, it demands the attention of evangelicals. The attention it is given should begin with the understanding that the problems that are a part of rock do not reside in the music itself; they reside in sinful people who can and often do abuse it. The same can be said about any musical style, or any other art form.

The Quality of Music

So far I have asserted two propositions concerning how Christians can respond to the music of their culture: the term Christian music is a misnomer, and no musical style is intrinsically evil. While both of these statements are true, they say nothing about the quality of music we choose to make a part of our lives. Thus my third proposition is that music should be evaluated based on quality. A proposal that includes judgments of quality is a challenging one. Evangelicals will find this especially difficult, because the subject of aesthetics is not a prevalent part of our heritage.

Evangelicals tend toward lazy thinking when it comes to analyzing the music of their culture. As Frank Gaebeline said, "It is more difficult to be thoughtfully discriminating than to fall back upon sweeping generalization." (6) There are several factors to be weighed if discriminating thought is to occur.

We should focus attention on the music within Christian life. This applies not only to music used in worship, but also to music heard via radio, CDs, concerts, and other sources.

Lack of quality is one of the themes of those who write about contemporary church music. Harold Best states: "Contentment with mediocrity as a would-be carrier of truth looms as a major hindrance to true creative vision among evangelicals." (7) Robert Elmore continues in a similar vein:

There are even ministers who feed their congregations with the strong meat of the Word and at the same time surround their preaching with only the skimmed milk of music. (8)

If negative declarations such as these are the consensus of those who have devoted ardent attention to the subject, what are the contents of a positive model? The answers to this are numerous. I will only relate some of the insights of one thinker, Calvin Johansson.

The first insight refers to movement. Music must move:

The principle here is that music needs to exhibit a flow, an overall feel for continuity, that moves progressively and irresistibly from beginning to end. It is not intended to hammer and drive a musical pulse into the mind.

This principle can be applied to the incessant nature of the rock rhythm we have previously discussed. The second insight has to do with cohesion:

Unity is an organic pull, a felt quality that permeates a

composition so thoroughly that every part, no matter how small, is related.

The third insight relates to “diversions at various levels.... Without diversity there would only be sameness, a quality that would be not only boring but also devastatingly static.”

The fourth insight focuses on “the principle of dominance... A certain hierarchy of values is adopted by the composer in which more important features are set against the less important.” The fifth insight shows that “every component part of a composition needs to have intrinsic worth in and of itself.... The music demonstrates truth as each part of the composition has self-worth.”(9)

These principles contain ideas that the non-musician might find difficult to understand. Indeed, most of us are not accustomed to using language to discuss the quality of the music we hear other than to say we do or do not “like” it. But if we are going to assess the music of the broader culture accurately, we must be able to use such language to assess music within our own subculture. We must seek quality there.

Pop Music

Another factor in musical discrimination applies to the way we approach music outside our subculture. The Christian is free to enter culture equipped with discernment, and this certainly applies to music. We need not fear the music of our culture, but we must exercise caution.

Assessments of quality also apply here. The Christian should use the principles we discussed above to evaluate the music of the broader culture.

We should also be aware of the blending of music and message, or lack of it. The ideal situation occurs when both the medium and the message agree.

Too often the music we hear conveys a message at the expense of musical quality. Best explains:

The kind of mass communication on which the media subsist depends on two things: a minimal creative element and a perspective that sees music only as conveying a message rather than being a message. Viewed as a carrier, music tends to be reduced to a format equated with entertainment. The greater the exposure desired, the lower the common denominator.(10)

The messages of our culture are perhaps voiced most strongly and clearly through music that is subordinated to those messages. The music is "canned." It is the product of cliches and "hooks" designed to bring instant response from the listener. As Erik Routley stated, "All music which self-consciously adopts a style is like a person who puts on airs. It is affected and overbearing."(11) This condition is so prevalent in contemporary music it cannot be overemphasized.

Another concern is found in certain features of what is usually called "popular culture." Music is a major part of pop culture. Kenneth Myers, among others, has identified certain culture types beginning with "high," diminishing to "folk," and plummeting to "popular." Popular culture "has some serious liabilities that it has inherited from its origins in distinctively modern, secularized movements." Generally, these liabilities include "the quest for novelty, and the desire for instant gratification."(12) In turn, these same qualities are found in "pop" music.

The quest for novelty is apparent when we understand, as Steve Lawhead states, that the whole system feeds on the "new"—new faces, new gimmicks, new sounds. Yesterday in pop music is not only dead; it is ancient history.(13)

The desire for instant gratification is the result of the fact that this type of music is normally produced for commercial

reasons. Continuing, Lawhead writes that

...commercialism, the effective selling of products, governs every aspect of the popular music industry. From a purely business point of view, it makes perfect sense to shift the focus from artistic integrity to some other less rigorous and more easily managed, non artistic component, such as newness or novelty. Talent and technical virtuosity take time to develop, and any industry dependent upon a never-ending stream of fresh faces cannot wait for talent to emerge.(14)

We do not offer God our best when we employ this approach. Additionally, we do not honor God when we make the products of such thinking a consistent part of our lives.

Notes

1. John P. Newport, *Theology and Contemporary Art Forms* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1971), 17-24.
2. Charles Garside, Jr., *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979), 19.
3. Zondervan Pictorial Dictionary, s.v. "Music," by Harold M. Best and David Huttar.
4. Ibid.
5. Steve Lawhead, *Rock of This Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1987), 51-52.
6. Frank E. Gaebelien, "The Christian and Music," in *The Christian Imagination: Essays on Literature and the Arts*, ed. Leland Ryken (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1981), 446.
7. Harold M. Best, "Christian Responsibility in Music," in *The Christian Imagination*, 402.
8. Robert Elmore, "The Place of Music in Christian Life," in *The Christian Imagination*, 430.
9. Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984), 93-95.
10. Ibid., 412-13.

11. Erik Routley, *Church Music and the Christian Faith*, (Carol Stream, Ill.: Agape, 1978), 89.
12. Kenneth Myers, *All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians and Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 59-64.
13. Steve Lawhead, *Turn Back the Night: A Christian Response to Popular Culture* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1978), 97.
14. Ibid., 98.

©1992 Probe Ministries.