

## **Rock, Jazz, Rap and Protest**

In our contemporary culture, music styles and themes have developed in ways previous generation could not have even imagined. Modern technology has transformed both the making and mass marketing of music. Whether we like it or not, we cannot get away from the sound of music. Our privacy is invaded by the constant stream of music which is poured into malls. We hear it in elevators, in restaurants, in offices, in hotel lobbies, and, most annoyingly, on telephones while we wait for our party to answer. Another abuse of music is the television commercial. It exploits the power of music and voice to persuade to buy products which are supposed to make us feel younger, more attractive, more successful. In *Modern Art and Death of a Culture*, Hans Rookmaaker observes that we have now three kinds of music, roughly speaking: widely-revered classical music, true modern music appreciated only by intellectual modernists, and popular entertainment music, apparently of no quality and no cultural import.

In a previous article, *Music and Politics*, I mentioned the impact of Wagner's music on the Nazi movement. In this article, a few music trends and genres which affect our times, our youth, and even the Church.

### **Jazz Music**

Jazz has its origin in African-American culture in New Orleans, but soon dispersed all over the USA to wherever there was an African-American ghetto. Rookmaaker comments that jazz has "the pulsating rhythm of a music that to western man could only be felt to be new, exhilarating, uninhibited and filled to the brim with life."

Jazz developed from several other kinds of American music, mainly the blues which in turn is derived from African-American work songs and spirituals. It was also influenced by the ragtime of the late nineteenth-century minstrel shows, which was originally the white man's imitation of African American music. It also has borrowed the music of the brass marching band, and, finally, the music of the string bands that accompanied dancing and other festivals in the rural areas of the South. The jazz band's main role was for dancing, a pastime that became immensely popular in the 1920s.

In the 1930s, jazz had a great influence on entertainment music. The 1950s brought the development of another style, so-called progressive jazz. But this music was far too complex for dancing. In the 1960s, jazz was used in worship services of the Roman Catholic and various Protestant churches. By the late 1960s, America's popular music was no longer jazz but rock. By the 1980s jazz musicians developed a totally eclectic style known as New Jazz, which drew on the entire sweep of Jazz history.

### **John Cage (1912-92)**

John Cage, American experimental composer, was a musician who questioned the purpose of music in fundamental ways. In order to eliminate the subjective element in composition, he resorted to a method of selecting components by dice throwing, suggested by Confucius' classic *I Ching*, an ancient oracle book. He challenged his audiences to ask whether the

music they make, and indeed all human achievements, are not merely accidental events in a random universe. His emphasis was on the immediacy, on the experience of the moment. He stressed that his music had to do only with the present, with the moment in which it was being performed. When asked in an interview about works he had written earlier, he responded rather brusquely, "You wouldn't ask me in the case of the steak which I ate ten years ago somehow to regurgitate it and eat it over again, would you?"

Cage also became known for his "prepared piano." He placed objects inside the piano to distort its sound. Screws, nuts, bolts, strips of paper and felt, thumbtack, paper clips, marbles and other buzzing, rattling, damping objects were introduced on or between the piano's strings and on the hammers. To hear the resulting sound, one had to stand close to the piano because these foreign objects reduced its natural form. If the performer played it too vigorously, they would simply fly about or be ejected. As a performer of 'prepared piano', Cage attracted considerable attention at his concerts. Eventually the term and the procedure gained acceptance among avant-garde composers.

### **The Turbulent 1960s and Beyond**

The 1960s was a hot time in San Francisco. People were casting off the 1950s. It was a time of ferment and demands for change. It ushered in great cultural changes. "New musicians" came on the scene in revolt against all the shallowness and commercialism that seemed to symbolize their own world. Not only did everybody hear about it, but the lives of all Americans were shaped by it, whether or not they were aware that anything happened. The 1960s was also a time of profound dissent over national and social goals as the agony in Vietnam grew ever more intense. American songwriters turned their attention to the Vietnam War with the "I Feel-Like-I'm-Fixing-to-Die Rag" and other protest songs.

### **Bob Dylan (1941)**

Folk-singer and songwriter Bob Dylan, pseudonym of Robert Zimmerman, taking his professional name from the poet Dylan Thomas, became the dominant influence in the popular music and culture of the sixties. His songs were cries of conscience. They introduced social and political awareness in an attempt to transform society. Many called Dylan "one of the great warning voices of our time." His songs were about opposition to war, the nuclear bomb, and racial and social injustice. Some of his best-known songs are "*The Times are A - Changin'*", and "*Blowing in the Wind*". In the latter song Dylan pointed to the fact that many feel and sense there is something changing, yet they do not see the reasons for the change or the principles behind it, and so they fear it. In the late sixties, Dylan changed from specific protest to more general and personal themes, and to more traditional Country and Western style of music, as in *Nashville Skyline Rag* (1969). In 1979, he became a convert to Christianity, which led to "religious" albums such as *Saved*. Yet he spent much of the '70s in religious turmoil. In the 1980s he returned to Judaism. But he assured his audiences that he was not a "particularly Jewish artist". In *The Jewish Week* (April 25, 2008) Daniel Schiffrin describes Dylan as a "nowhere man", having placed himself outside of traditional Jewish conversations as he went about creating his art.

### **Elvis Presley (1935-1977): The King of Rock**

Elvis Presley was a fantastically popular American rock-'n'-roll singer and balladeer. He was called "The King of Kings of Rock". Millions of his recordings were sold. His fans loved his renditions of such songs as *Don't Be Cruel*, *Hound Dog*, *Love Me Tender*, *Rock around the Clock*. He became the delight of the young, the despair of their parents. With Elvis it was the aggressive, taunting sexual performance as much as the music which drove fans to hysteria. An international Elvis Presley Appreciation Society was organized by 1970. He also appeared as an actor in sentimental motion pictures. His style of rock has been described as a mix of country music and rhythm and blues. For accompaniment, he used the electric guitar, rhythm guitar, and string bass. The new style was adopted by other singers including such groups as the Beatles and Rolling Stones.

Elvis died of a heart disease aggravated by an immoderate use of tranquillizers and other drugs. His entombment in the family mausoleum in Memphis was the scene of mob hysteria, during which two people were run over and killed by an automobile. His home, turned into a sanctuary at suburban Whitehaven, in Memphis, was opened to the public in 1982, and was visited by delegations from fan clubs from many parts of the world.

## **Rock Music**

In the 1960s rock replaced jazz as *the* popular American music. It is not just the dominant idiom in popular culture, it is omnipresent. In movie sound tracks, on television commercials, from car radios, boom boxes, in church services, rock is the most common musical form. There is not just one kind of rock. There are dozens of varieties. The lyrics of rock are not only love ballads but deal also with sex, rebellion, both violent and nonviolent against the "establishment". In *Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom even argues that rock music has one appeal only – a barbaric appeal to sexual desire. And some lyrics have as their theme middle-class complacency, wars, civil rights, social concerns and drug use. Unusual performance styles are basic to rock.

Rock has become very big business, a prime example of an unscrupulous form of capitalism, supplying to demand and helping to create it. Someone commented that rock music requires no talent, the words are dumb, and there is easy money to be made. And some of the impact on our culture comes from the fact that it is so loud. It makes conversation nearly impossible. For example, in *The Music of Man*, Yehudi Menuhin describes the music of the rock group, Rolling Stones, as "aural overkill: a sheer sound wall." And he believes that the human ear is in danger. He writes, "I have been in a rope factory where the level of sound was quite incredible, causing a serious hearing loss among workers over a period of time. For years now, high amplification has been the essence of rock music. I need not repeat the statistics already so widely reported of the incidence of deafness among teenagers."

## **The Beatles**

The Beatles, four boys from Liverpool, England, changed the course of pop music in the 1960s. They were close to the California flower children, offering compassion and companionship. Most will agree that the Beatles remain the deepest influence on the continuing world-wide rock music phenomenon. Elvis Presley's music was the prime

inspiration for the Beatles. The quartet opened at the London Palladium in 1963 and drove the youthful audience to a frenzy, a scene that was repeated elsewhere in Europe, in America, and in Australia. Electronic amplification made the music of the Beatles the loudest in the world for their time. The Beatles were, for a short but much celebrated period, disciples of Maharishi Yogi. Their creed became "all is one and all is God". They sang: "When you've seen beyond yourself...the time will come when you see we're all one and life flows on within you and without you." In some of their lyrics there are covert references to psychedelic drugs, suggestive allusions, and anarchism. Yet, in 1965, each Beatle was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire. In 1969, the Woodstock Festival, whose reverberations are still felt today, was attended by hundreds of thousands of young people. Yehudi comments that without the example of the Beatles and their personal lifestyles, there would not be the lavishly staged and costumed rock concert extravaganzas of recent years.

The year 1970 heralded the beginning of the end for the Beatles. Paul McCartney sent his fellow Beatles a strident letter listing certain demands. Lawsuits and public accusations soon followed which effectively disbanded the world's most popular rock group. A leading member of the Beatles, John (Winston) Lennon (1940), was a singer, guitarist, poet and composer. He said that he was emotionally rocked over by Elvis Presley's "animal magnetism". He did not hide his anti-Christian feelings. He once declared, "Christianity will go. I will go. I will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that. I'm right and will be proved right. We are more popular than Jesus now." On Dec. 8, 1980, Lennon was gunned down by a lunatic in front of his apartment in New York. The shock waves produced by Lennon's death reverberated throughout the world. Crowds in deep mourning marched in New York, Liverpool, and Tokyo. Not even the death of Elvis Presley generated such outbursts of grief.

## **Rap Music**

Rap music is also making its mark on popular culture. It is a kind of improvised chatter, often in rhyme. It originated in New York City in the late 1970s - a rhythmic, improvised recitation practised by disk jockeys (deejays) in Jamaica. By the 1980s, rap became increasingly controversial. For example, dozens of lyrics employ the f-word as verb, noun, adjective, and adverb. Especially the variety called gangsta rap, were condemned for their angry profanity, graphic sex, and black separatism (intolerance of non-blacks).

## **Discernment Needed**

The revolutionary spirit of the 60s and beyond had a greater impact upon the church than the church had on the world. The mainline denominations had already surrendered the heart of the Gospel to the spirit of the age before the sixties. The 1966 World Council of Churches' dictum, "The world must set the agenda for the Church," is an apt description of the church capitulating to the world. By the late 1970s, rock was well entrenched, not only as an acceptable option for listening, but as an increasingly prevalent form in church services which were once dominated by high or traditional culture. The dominance of popular culture in the church is one way by which the twenty-first century uncritically appropriated the values of the world. Developments within Protestantism led to new and informal worship styles, and an explosion of "worship songs." And there was an increasing dislike of the traditional formal liturgical worship, especially the cumbersome use of hymn books, which many saw as

culturally alienating "seekers" from within secular American culture. In *Rock'N' Roll, the Bible and the Mind*, Tom Allen comments that the hard rock element within much Christian music today tends to equate quality with quantity of decibel levels. King David might have called for "loud crashing cymbals", but he didn't have powerful loud speakers in mind to amplify the effect! And some speak about "malling of religion", referring to mega churches as grand cathedrals of spiritual consumption. In modern marketing of the church, the audience, not the message, is sovereign. Churches risk losing the integrity of their message when they attempt to compete with popular culture on "its own terms" in the name of evangelism. They are in danger of recasting the Gospel in such a way as to undermine its integrity and render it unrecognizable to its original apostolic message. They are in danger of turning "Salvation" into shallow religious "experience". John Stott observed that the church has been more influenced by the world than the Word. Instead of challenging the status quo with values of the kingdom of God, it has acquiesced in it. It has accommodated itself to the prevailing culture, leaped on all the trendiest bandwagons, and hummed all the popular tunes of the day. In other words, the impact of popular music means that the Christian faith in America has lost much of its integrity and effectiveness in shaping the lives of believers.

Some people might think that discernment is unnecessary because they listen only to "Christian" music. Nevertheless, the broader population of the evangelical community spends innumerable hours absorbing music, whether "Christian" or "secular." And it shapes how we think and feel. We can't afford to dismiss contemporary entertainment with the word "just." Too much is at stake if we care about our minds, our witness, and our future. Enemies of the Christian faith that come loudly and visibly are usually much easier to fight than those that are undetectable. The erosion of character, and the cheapening of life itself that often accompanies modern popular culture can occur so subtly that we believe nothing has happened. Rookmaaker observes that we have to cope with the popular message, and, at least, understand its message. He notes that modern anti-Christian views are constantly "preached" in a most effective way. Therefore, our task is to instruct the public, and particularly our own younger generation that they may recognize the message that is constantly flung at them. The message? Humankind is autonomous. It does not want to acknowledge God, the God of the Bible, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus.

## **Conclusion**

God has called us to bear witness to Him at this critical point in history. As Christians, we must insist that there *are* permanent standards for culture. Our Lord set the standard for us. It is the purity of the heart of which Christ speaks when He said, "Blessed are the pure in heart." It is a mentality that cannot stand evil and the lovelessness which does harm to others. It helps to see the good and the beautiful. How can one successfully live in the world without knowing about the Triune God whose world it is and who runs it? I am convinced, therefore, that we need proper biblical theology, which seeks to know the character and nature of God as revealed in Scripture so that we may live in a way that pleases Him. It alone offers relevant wisdom for living in the real world.

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