

Introduction

Why Make Music?

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.

—John 4:23–24¹

Worship is about the heart and it's about your life, it's not about any type of song. The style of worship songs will change, but the heart of it never will.

—Chris Tomlin²

On the last night of a Christian songwriters' retreat in 2008, songwriter Paul Baloche led worship. It was late and I was exhausted, having spent the previous three days doing as many interviews as I could, listening to lectures, going to songwriting workshops, and even trying my hand at a little songwriting (it wasn't pretty). I had taken too many field notes for my own good and I was looking forward to returning home so I could get some rest and a little distance from all that I'd gathered. Sitting in a covered wooden chapel in the Santa Cruz Mountains, with windows open to the redwoods and a simple stage at the front, it was quiet for a few moments as people chatted with one another before Baloche and his band took the stage. Baloche started in and people sang, and I sang along, too, as best I could. People stood, so I stood. The singing seemed to rise in intensity, and somewhere near the end of the final song Baloche and his band did something. I'm still not sure what it was. Maybe they extended a break or they played a coda of some kind, but the music seemed to open up as the band sat on a single, swirling chord, holding it for some time. People started humming and vocalizing. Someone began

speaking extemporaneously, blessing Baloché and all of us. Someone else quietly spoke in tongues. Other people wept or held their head in their hands or closed their eyes, lips moving and hands extended outward as if they were holding something in their arms. I hummed along, too, enjoying the feeling. The song had almost ceased to be a song, but Baloché and his bandmates held us all together, hovering around a single chord while the rest of us sang or chanted or spoke or simply took in the scene and the sound. I do not know how long it lasted, but I know I was not ready for it to end. I was enjoying this moment and I was moved by whatever it was that was happening.

When Baloché and his band brought the song and the evening to a close, we all looked around and nodded. It felt like we'd shared something quite unusual. Two different people asked me if I could feel the Holy Spirit in the room. They could, they told me. I mumbled some kind of response, at that moment not entirely certain what I had experienced. I knew that the music and the singing felt good and right, and it made the air feel thick with promise and challenge, and it seemed as if Baloché had done something extraordinary. It felt both powerful and personal, as if the music brought us together and allowed each one of us to pray in his or her own way. I wanted to ask him again how he did what he did, even though I knew what he would say. How do you take a room of tired people and, over the course of five or six songs, create space for them to pray their own prayers?

Part of it was due to Baloché and his band, each of whom is an exceptional musician and a person who holds his or her faith deeply. Part of it could have been that we were in an open-air structure in the redwoods, making music together. Part of it could have been that we were not under the typical time constraints of a Sunday worship service, so Baloché and his band could hold us as long as it felt good and right to do so without arousing the anxiety of a pastor waiting to take the stage or a family trying to get to a soccer game after church. Part of it could have been attributed to the people in the ad-hoc congregation who were songwriters of Christian music, and were both experienced with and predisposed toward this kind of thing. It may have been some combination of all of these things, but it still took Baloché and his band, his songs, and his singing to create the conditions for that encounter. We needed music that would enable us to pray, even

as Baloché also understood how and when to silence his songs and let us pray on our own.

This book is an effort to understand moments like that one by exploring how songwriters, worship leaders, and music industry professionals collaborate to make music that can become prayer. Embedded in this investigation is an understanding that Baloché's worship session made clear: inasmuch as it is possible to focus on the music itself, the ultimate aim of those responsible for making music is never the music itself. The music, they explain, is only a medium for a more profound and more important message, one that is necessarily more urgent and greater than any song can contain. Understanding that worship is not, fundamentally, about music allows music makers to be agnostic about style and serious about their faith as they adapt popular musical forms for sacred purposes. Focusing on the production of worship music highlights the extent to which social and cultural concerns underwrite forms of congregational worship, and how investments in cultural forms also make it possible to transcend them. Making music that works in this way requires both a great deal of creative effort and an ongoing reckoning with the theology of worship, the power of popular music, the craft of songwriting, the persuasive dimensions of performance, and an understanding of the role of a commodified form in serving the expressive needs of worshippers. Instead of undermining worship music, highlighting its social and cultural elements emphasizes the fact that even the most transcendent examples of human expression require coordinated and sometimes contradictory human efforts.

Music in Worship

This book is concerned with understanding how people make the songs that become congregational and individual prayer. How do they turn their own worship into songs, and how do they imagine that others might turn their songs into worship? What considerations shape their output, and how do they manage their commitments to art, to their congregations, and to God? How do they understand their efforts as creators of music in the context of an American religious movement that holds that it is possible for anyone to encounter God directly and without mediation? This theological stance would seem to suggest that

their music is, at best, unnecessary and at worst a distraction, and it puts worship music makers in a double bind: they write songs that they hope will allow worshippers to sing them *for* worship, but not *as* worship. They hope their songs will help others to pray, but they understand that the songs themselves always contain the possibility that they might eclipse the worship they have been created to facilitate. The better their songs are, the more likely they will fall short of worship because they might become *too* pleasurable to sing and stop people from worshipping directly to God. They write songs that serve as ritualized forms to mediate a relationship that they believe should be unmediated and unritualized. Songwriters, worship leaders, and music industry professionals are all aware of this tension, but nevertheless they invest themselves in music for worship.

Scholar of religion Birgit Meyer calls worship songs and other cultural artifacts “sensational forms,” which she understands as a religious convention that allows both for the expression of “content and meaning and ethical norms and values” as well as “a modality or device that allows for repeated . . . action.”³ Sensational forms are thus explicitly ritual in nature. With respect to music, historian of religion Stephen Marini defined “sacred song” as music with “mythic content” that is used for “effective ritual action.”⁴ Congregations, in particular, thrive on these forms because prayer is not easy. It requires committing one’s self to expressions that may or may not be reciprocated by the divine being to which one is praying. It thrives on repetition and practice, but it can stagnate when it becomes too repetitive. People who make worship music create sensational forms that they hope will provide enough ritual structure and enough expressive opportunity to enable worship to resist becoming merely rote. Worship songs or liturgies, hymnals or projection screens, cantors and worship leaders help; each serves those trying to worship by providing readily available and accessible ritual forms for people to engage with without having to reinvent modes or expressions of prayer each time one feels moved to do so. They can be thought of as devices or shortcuts that serve like ready-made expressions that, on good days, can transport those who engage with them into a space of prayer. Sensational or ritual forms give familiar features to grand questions, and, as a result, they make the ritual of prayer easier. They may also sow the seeds for new orthodoxies, as people grow attached to songs and styles, associating them with prayer itself.

At worst, these ritual elements privilege form over content. At best, sensational forms mediate content that, in its most successful moments, breaks through the form and allows for something greater, something deeper, something transcendent to take place.

The sensational form of musical worship is so pervasive that no other activity figures as prominently as worship in the lives of American congregations. Sociologist Mark Chaves's national survey of American congregations revealed that "worship services take up more congregational resources and involve more people than anything else congregations do." Moreover,

worship services are the main point of contact between the congregation and the outside world, and as such they constitute a congregation's most public face, the self-portrait religious congregations offer to the outside world. There is also a sense in which worship events are more truly collective than anything else congregations do. . . . However staid the service, it is more collectively effervescent than any other congregational event.⁵

With a nod to Émile Durkheim, Chaves argued that worship creates congregations. It brings people together more often than other activities, and it shapes congregational identity (from both inside and out) more than any other function. With all due respect to education and social action, worship is what congregations do.

Usually, worship involves music. In his analysis of the "repertoire[s] of available worship elements" in American congregations, Chaves observed that 98 percent of people who attend worship services engage in congregational singing and 96 percent of all congregations feature singing in their worship.⁶ Songwriter and longtime worship leader and teacher Bob Kauflin explained to me that the reason there is so much singing in evangelical congregations, specifically, is that the biblical command to sing praise is hard to miss: "There are about 400 references to singing, 50 direct commands to sing God's praise. [Psalm] 47:6 [says], 'Sing praises to the King, sing praises to God, sing praises to our King, sing praises.' So, that's pretty clear. God wants us to give Him praise not just with our lips but with our songs."⁷ But the Bible is not as clear with respect to how songs should sound.⁸ For example, Ephesians 5:18–19 reads, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit,

speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord.” Colossians 3:16 offers a similar prescription: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.” What the Bible means by the repeated use of “psalms, hymns, and songs from the spirit” is the subject of much debate. Differences of interpretation and intention have generated volumes of writing and more than one schism among practitioners, theologians, songwriters, worship leaders, pastors, denominations, and congregations.

These arguments are not new. They stretch back at least as far as Martin Luther’s 95 Theses and they wind a circuitous path through the refractions of institutional denominationalism, the exuberance of the First and Second Awakenings in the United States, and the search for spirituality that emerged from the counterculture of the late 1960s.⁹ They informed Luther’s composition of hymns and influenced those of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, ultimately shaping the work of songwriters and worship leaders who began writing worship music that sounded like rock and roll. Beginning in the 1960s, critics like Bob Larson wrote vociferous arguments condemning the inclusion of rock and roll in worship, and decades later writers like Robb Redman offered spirited arguments in its favor.¹⁰ Music is often the register for larger debates about what counts and what does not count as worship, and discussions about the proper place of music in worship continue to shape how music for worship is made and, consequently, the sound and substance of congregational worship itself.

For many observers and scholars, the centrality of music in worship has made them sound nearly synonymous. Popular news stories about evangelical churches reinforce this impression by regularly detailing stories about worship that emphasize music.¹¹ The ubiquity of music has led some scholars to conclude that “the term *worship* means singing.”¹² Others observed that “at a church like the Vineyard, music is prayer.”¹³ But many of those invested in the production of worship are quick to refute this impression with claims that when music attracts too much attention it can become a distraction for worship and worshippers. Songwriter and worship leader David Crowder explained to me that “if worship consists of music, then I feel like we’re kind of in a bad space since the vehicle or container is so limited in terms of what it provides us.”¹⁴ Charlie Pea-

cock, one of Christian music's greatest champions and fiercest critics, put it more pointedly: "Where the discussion of worship begins and ends with music, there will always be foolishness, error, and strife."¹⁵ Songwriter Sara Groves suggested something similar when she explained that "worship cannot just be this one small passageway of music."¹⁶ Lutheran theologian Marva Dawn also wrote that "music is the outgrowth/consequence (not the antecedent) of worship, the response to God's presence." Songs can distract or engage, but, she admonishes, "it is idolatry to think that our work makes the difference."¹⁷ Songs, they all agree, are vehicles—disposable, transposable, dispensable, and ephemeral. Songwriters and critics understand that worship music is supposed to *facilitate* worship, not *become* worship, warning against the conclusion that worship is defined by its musical forms. The question, then, for those who make worship music, is how to write, perform, or produce songs that serve the needs of worshippers without falling prey to the false equivalence of music and worship.

The answer lies in the efforts of critics, songwriters, worship leaders, and music industry professionals who both invest in and resist music as the focus of their efforts. Music, they assert, is a medium of both collective song and individual expression, and their songs work best as worship when they become the worship of others. This remains true in congregational settings, where a shared repertoire of ritual elements allows a congregation of worshippers to sing together while still enabling individuals to express their own prayers.¹⁸ The sensational form of the song and the cultural practice of singing it in a congregation both create the impression that music is worship and, simultaneously, allow expressions of worship to exceed the music provided for it.

The Cultural Production of Worship Music

The process by which public practice and mass-produced cultural forms become vehicles for private expression of something transcendent is what religious studies scholar Robert Orsi means when he refers to prayer as a "switching point between the social world and the imagination."¹⁹ For Orsi, prayer is often "misidentified as private and so therefore assumed not to have a history or a politics. But people at prayer are intimately engaged and implicated in their social worlds."²⁰ Prayer, he argues, is always social, no matter how much emphasis people place on its ability

to channel an individual directly to the divine. Accounting for the social dimensions of worship, however, does not make private expressions illusions. Rather, Orsi's insight emphasizes the ways in which private expressions are tethered to social and cultural forms even then they offer the possibility of communion with God. The sense of the Holy Spirit that some described to me on that night in the Santa Cruz Mountains was not a fiction, but it was not purely a result of social forces, either. It was, in a sense, the product of people in their social worlds deploying the practice and form of prayer to transcend them. To make worship music in this context is to produce songs that make "switching points" possible. In that service, it bears a significant responsibility for defining, modeling, and teaching people what worship is, how to do it, and what it ought to sound and feel like.

Following Orsi, even the most seemingly subjective examples of worship emerge from social conditions and take social forms. The romantic notion of the singer-songwriter pouring her heart out at the piano or the worship leader standing rapt in front of a congregation masks the much larger network of actions, actors, institutions, practices, and conventions that help to bring songs into congregations and turn them from individual expressions of faith into occasions for corporate worship. Songs need songwriters, of course, and the formulation of something called "worship music" also depends on congregations and music publishers, on pastors and worship leaders, on copyright law, LPs and CDs, and on a host of websites and other resources created to help promote and produce the best possible songs for congregations and worshippers to make their own. As music scholar Tia DeNora has argued about Beethoven, even his apparently singular stature can be understood as the product of a host of institutional actors who collaborated on the construction of the very category of the "modern genius."²¹ The music may have come from Beethoven but it needed a constellation of social, cultural, ideological, and material investments that allowed it to circulate in the ways that it did and to assume the stature and meaning that it now holds. The production of worship music is not terribly dissimilar, insofar as its social conditions shape the ways worshippers understand, imagine, and engage in prayer.

Sociologists Richard Peterson and Howard Becker have each offered useful frameworks for understanding the social and institutional dimensions of the production of culture, of which worship music is one

instance.²² Informed by their lifelong interest in music, both scholars understand culture not as a “reflection” of social life, but as the result of collaborations among social actors, institutions, markets, and cultural forms. Both argue that to attend to art or music largely as receptacles of cultural value, in the mode of early cultural studies or in the fashion of the “myth and symbol” school of American Studies, is to focus too narrowly on meanings that inhere in the products themselves.²³ Songs or paintings or novels or movies might reveal certain cultural truths about historical moments, but approaching them only or primarily as expressions of culture mutes the effort that created the conditions for their appearance. Interpreting culture as representation, Peterson and Becker argue, abstracts it from the material conditions of its production and reifies cultural expression in ways that distort its relationship to the social and cultural contexts that make it meaningful. These contexts include those in which cultural artifacts are made.

Peterson first turned the tools of sociology on the people and structures responsible for the “production of culture.”²⁴ By shifting the locus of cultural investigation away from cultural products and onto their production and producers, he tried to provide a more thorough account of the evolution of cultural forms and their meanings. For example, his study of authenticity in country music highlighted the evolution of cultural conventions that led to their acceptance as characteristics of the genre.²⁵ He traced the ways in which elements of the style were not merely reflections of everyday life, but were themselves artifacts of the larger mechanisms of popular musical production. Becker extended Peterson’s insights about the production of culture in his examination of “art worlds.” Building on the insights of art critic Arthur Danto, Becker located the creation of art within a complex of individuals and institutions, and not only as the result of creative individuals acting on their own. The phenomenon known as “art,” then, could be better understood as the result of a loosely coordinated but collaborative effort of artists and critics, galleries and museums, financiers, art schools, and others. To indicate that he was not talking about art-as-artifact, Becker called the results “art worlds,” which, he explained,

consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well,

define as art. . . . The world exists in the cooperative activity of those people, not as a structure or organization, and we use worlds like those only as shorthand for the notion of networks of people cooperating.²⁶

Differently from Peterson, who focused on the specific work of cultural producers operating within discrete media industries, Becker's "worlds" approach revealed the varied human efforts that collaborate in less formal ways to produce cultural phenomena.

In the realm of music, specifically, musicologist Christopher Small offered the concept of musicking as a way of understanding the variety of practices involved in the production of musical culture, from musicians and their audiences to ticket-takers at a concert.²⁷ Musicking, for Small, refers to the array of practices that are engaged in the production of musical culture. His insistence on using the gerund "musicking" serves as a reminder that music is never only what it sounds like, and that it always reverberates with the human efforts that give it sound and form. Thus, for both Becker and Small, neither art nor music can be reduced to the singular product of a creative act, but each must be considered within broader networks of human activity that make the act and the product possible. Musical cultures and art worlds cannot be separated from the sound of music or the appearance of art; they are what happens when people engage in art or music making, or in meaning making in conversation with those cultural forms.

In some respects, making worship music is no different from these other cultural forms, as it engages all six facets of Peterson's theory of the field of symbolic production: technology, law and regulation, industry structure, organization structure, occupational career, and market.²⁸ As worship music evolved since the late 1960s and adopted the sounds of rock and roll, it adhered to conventions of popular musical production: record albums, artists committed to making worship and leading worship, attention to album sales, magazines, journalists, critics, and organizations committed to managing music copyright for houses of worship. These were not incidental by-products of a nascent music industry; they can be understood as integral parts of the mechanisms of cultural production. Even worship songs can be understood as a specific cultural form designed to serve congregations in worship, and not as "natural" results of prayerful intent or expression. Again, using the cultural production ap-

proach does not mean that worship is artificial or hollow, but rather that the worship song is a cultural form whose social context does not necessarily preclude it from enabling transcendent expressions of worship.

In this light, congregational worship can be understood as a cultural product, but worship music is not a perfect analogue to Becker's take on art or Small's understanding of "musicking" because worship, almost by definition, cannot be contained by a "world." Even though it assumes culturally specific forms and practices, it is supposed to allow those engaged with it to transcend them and to enable practitioners to express and perhaps encounter something universal or divine. This is what separates worship, however one might choose to define it, from other modes of expression or communication. If worship is a cultural "world," it is one that cannot totally encompass the intent or experience of worship itself; the act of musicking in the context of worship must make more than just sound, or else it is merely music. This understanding of the relationship between music and its intended purpose situates critics, songwriters, worship leaders, music industry professionals, and worshippers in a somewhat unstable relationship with the music they collectively make.

The production of culture approach helps highlight these coordinated and contradictory efforts by calling attention to the ways in which they came to be, and not just to how they sound. Attending to the intentions, concerns, and aspirations of songwriters, worship leaders, and music industry professionals, as well as to debates about worship music, amplifies the variety of investments that enable sacred practice. Considering cultural production highlights the ways in which key cultural producers imagine their work in relation both to God and to the human needs of those who might sing their songs for worship. It enables us to hear the contradictory conditions inherent in creating music for worship that should, ideally, not be necessary for worship. Attending to the production of worship music does not compromise its power, though it may help to explain how it makes worship possible.

The Scope of the Work and a Note on Terminology

How to refer to music for worship is almost as contested as the music itself and almost as influential to its cultural formation. The history of music in worship is so long that the form has taken on any number of

titles, each iteration referring to its function and alluding to broader social relationships in which it circulates. The emergence of a specific generic assignation is a more recent development that coincided with the rise of genre as the organizing logic of the musical marketplace in the early 20th century.²⁹ For centuries of worship music publishing, genre mattered less than publishing format or denominational affiliation, as songs for worship were typically published in hymnals or songbooks that were sold to churches. As a result, published collections used a number of terms to refer to the music they held. The subtitle of the 1651 Bay Psalm Book, the first hymnal published in the American colonies, referred to “Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs.” Half a century later, British minister and hymn-writer Isaac Watts called his 1701 hymnal “Psalms and Spiritual Songs.” John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, entitled his 1761 collection “Select Hymns,” and, in 1801, the first hymnal published by an African American congregation referred to “Spiritual Songs and Hymns” in its title.³⁰

Beginning in the late 19th century, “gospel music” emerged as a term that referred to more contemporary-sounding songs written for worship. Led by composers like Thomas A. Dorsey and others, the rise of gospel music eschewed the traditionalism of hymn-based worship and traded on new sounds and new styles.³¹ The term applied to music by and for both black and white Christian communities and, as historian of religion James Goff and others have noted, the black and white gospel music traditions drew on one another, even as sociological and emerging music market conditions segregated them.³² The music industry played a powerful role in shaping American popular music by creating genres that aligned with markets, often defining them according to racial categories. This included a small but significant market for sermons by African American preachers who understood the power of emerging recording technologies as a tool for evangelism.³³ Market dynamics, put in place by policies of racial and commercial distinction, helped to create two parallel industries for religious recordings: one white and one black.³⁴

The music of the African American church has long retained the label “gospel music,” though that, too, is beginning to change. Deborah Smith Pollard, a scholar of African American religious music, found that “praise and worship music” had entered the black church, observing that “praise and worship music is used during the opening period of a church

worship service, gospel musical or concert.” She noted that “praise and worship music” was even threatening to “replace the older gospel song repertoire.”³⁵ The evolution of gospel music and the worship practices of African American congregations is a fascinating and rich story, and it is one that has had a greater impact on the evolution of American popular music than either white gospel music or the much younger forms of Christian rock. Yet the distinction between largely Anglo and largely African American churches is more than just musical.

The fissure between white and African American evangelical churches (to say nothing of the growing number of Spanish-language evangelical congregations in the United States) is a well-documented sociological fact. Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith have examined the ways in which race informs the understandings, experiences, and institutional structures of American evangelicalism, ultimately concluding that the two, appeals to the universal “body of Christ” notwithstanding, are quite different indeed.³⁶ Multicultural churches, as documented by Gerardo Marti, represent a small fraction of houses of worship that attend assiduously to their multicultural makeup.³⁷ But the majority of American houses of worship remain quite segregated. I respect the distinction among forms and sites of American evangelicalism, and my research could not address every aspect of the cultural production of worship music in American evangelical congregations across race and region. So I focus, here, on the production of music for largely white American evangelical congregations, with the understanding that scholars like Deborah Smith Pollard and others are working on projects parallel to this one.³⁸

This book focuses on the music that emerged in predominantly white churches and became the soundtrack for the resurgence in American evangelical life during the latter decades of the 20th century. Owing in large part to the significant place of popular music in the counterculture of the 1960s, a new strain of music influenced by the blues and folk rock eclipsed both “Southern Gospel” and traditional hymns. It first came to be known as Jesus Music and then as Christian rock or contemporary Christian music (CCM). Music written for worship came to be known, successively, as “praise and worship,” “praise choruses,” “praise music,” “contemporary worship music,” “modern worship music,” and, most recently, “contemporary congregational songs,” though this, too, is likely to change in the future.³⁹ Changes in nomenclature have represented

changes in how people make sense of music and its relationship to worship.⁴⁰ Insofar as each and every label for music represents a compromise between the descriptive, the analytical, the practical, and the strategic, I want to state from the outset that, when I use the term “worship music,” I am using it to refer to a product of musical and cultural practices that have come to characterize congregational worship in primarily white evangelical churches since the late 1960s, when rock and roll became the predominant stylistic referent in predominantly white evangelical congregations.

This book examines the production of worship music across four realms: discourse, songwriting, worship leading, and the music industry. Each will be the focus of a single chapter, providing ample space to examine the production of worship music in that realm, even as each is intertwined with the others. Woven through this book’s four chapters are persistent concerns that inform the production of worship music: concerns about the faith and character of worshipers, questions about the prominence that music should have in worship, the definition of worship, the relationship between congregational worship and worship as a lifestyle, and tensions between commercial interests and sacred service. Connecting these is an overarching appreciation of the centrality of music in worship and the understanding that, to serve as worship, the music must not call too much attention to itself.

Focusing on the cultural production of worship music grounds the phenomenon in discursive, material, social, sonic, and spiritual concerns that are channeled through talking about worship, the craft of songwriting, the perils of live performance, and the mechanisms of a media industry. Emphasizing these realms of cultural production allows for an account of worship songs as paradigmatic “sensational forms” that calls attention both to their form and to the efforts required to create them.⁴¹ Understood as a cultural production, worship music also becomes more than just an accumulation of “sacred songs” that serve the needs of a congregation for music with which to worship. By focusing on the production of worship music, *Shout to the Lord* denaturalizes both the sensational and practical qualities of the music, and reveals the human concerns that make worship possible.