

Encountering Grace in Popular Music

The Soundtrack of My Life

I know when I got hooked on rock and roll.

I'd recently turned seven, in the spring of 1963, when we visited my hip cousin Anneke in the great Dutch port city of Rotterdam. In the corner of the small apartment she shared with my aunt Nel stood a wooden stereo console. Anneke was eager to share her latest acquisition with my sister and me. She pulled the shiny 45-rpm record out of its sleeve, placed it on the turntable, and dropped the needle into the groove. For the very first time I heard the music of John Lennon, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, and Ringo Starr—the immortal Beatles. It was their third European single, “From Me to You,” a pretty simple number compared to their later compositions. But in just over two minutes my life was permanently transformed.

I didn't have the words to describe my experience then. I just remember something like an electric jolt of joy affecting my whole being. I simply couldn't keep my body still. I had to tap my toes and wanted to jump up and down. Maybe the girls showed me how to dance the Twist. I know that we played that little disk over and over again,

including the great “B” side, “Thank You Girl.” I don’t know if I’ve ever had more fun.¹

With the benefit of adult hindsight, I can proffer various theories that might help shed light on what happened to me. Maybe it was that big, clean, irresistible beat, so expertly produced by George Martin and his team at Abbey Road studios in London. Maybe it was a visceral connection with the naked emotional longing conveyed by John Lennon’s unique voice. Perhaps the promise of the lyrics spoke directly to an insecure young boy, transplanted from the U.S. Midwest just a year before, who desperately needed the assurance that someone would always be there for me.² Maybe the Beatles replaced the cartoons and superhero comic books that were then more difficult to access in the Netherlands. Imagine only one or two channels on television, and for only part of the day! At the end of one of the coldest, bleakest winters ever experienced in Holland, we had a party. It’s possible that I was bowled over by these older girls who usually didn’t seem to have much time for me unexpectedly including me in their entertainment. Not for the last time, listening to the Beatles shattered barriers that would normally divide me from others on the basis of things like age, gender, nationality, or language.

In the end, however, can we ever really explain a conversion experience? Doesn’t an irreducible element of mystery always remain? This we know: something happened, and the course of one’s life heads in a radically different direction. We acquire a new set of habits. Our desires assume new shapes.

I know that I eagerly sought every occasion to hear more from those young guys from Liverpool. I’d be delighted when “Love Me Do” blared from the tinny

speakers at the ice-skating rink. I snuck into my sister's room after bedtime so we could try to pick up the crackly signals of the offshore radio stations. Sometimes our heroes appeared on TV!

Other featured artists like Roy Orbison, the Scorpions, and Petula Clark were pretty cool, too. I was in seventh heaven when my father returned from Germany with a reel-to-reel tape of Beatles music that a U.S. serviceman had given to him. I remember that it included their

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third album, *A Hard Day's Night*, in its glorious entirety. I would pester dad to put it on again and again. I saved up every penny I could, and if funds were still short I begged my mother for advances on my allowance, so I could get the latest Beatles single as soon as possible after its release. Sometimes I had to go to the record store penniless and hope that the clerk would let me sample the latest hits in the listening booth. I stood in a long line to get an advance copy of "Ticket to Ride," with the final cover not yet ready, but I was more than happy to accept the brown-wrapper substitute with its simple typewritten headings. If only I'd kept that disk, worth tens of thousands of dollars on today's market!

By listening to the songs over and over again I memorized both the words and the melodies. I learned to vocalize by singing along. In time I also began to pay close attention to the harmony, and gradually found that I could develop my own backup vocal patterns. I learned to play

basic guitar and developed rough cover versions of my favorite numbers. In college my roommate and I even performed at a few coffee shops and parties, and I still ham it up at church camps or seminary talent shows from time to time.

I have since readily transferred my initial formation in Beatlemania to a host of new artists, from the Kinks to Death Cab for Cutie. Technological changes have allowed the music to accompany me wherever I go. I transitioned from eight-tracks to cassette tapes to compact discs, and I suppose I will eventually adopt digital formats as well.

My love affair with rock and roll and its sources, the blues and country-and-western music, developed right along with my Christian upbringing, and I never felt any fundamental tension between the two. By the time I was in high school I knew all about the connection many made between sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but I was not persuaded that unbridled hedonism had anything to do with the real essence of the music. I've always known persons like myself, committed Christians who thoroughly enjoy listening to a great variety of artists, read *Rolling Stone* magazine and books on popular music, and take in concerts together without falling into moral degeneracy. Popular music has greatly enriched my life, and I give thanks to God for this wonderful gift.

Christian Faith and Popular Music in Dialogue

My engagement with rock and roll illustrates the process of interpretation scholars call the hermeneutical circle.³ Simply put, what I read, or, in this case, hear, is shaped by my previous background and experience while at the same time it reshapes my developing understanding. As

we learn, any time we talk to friends about our favorite songs, this means that everyone will respond to music in different ways, because no two life journeys are exactly alike. Tastes are notoriously variable. My spouse loves Neil Diamond, while I can't bear to listen to him! And yet we are not entirely trapped in our own separate worlds, because we are responding to the same tracks by the same artists. Shared, common material is woven into the fabrics of diverse lives. By sharing our impressions of material we've all heard, we engage in conversations that can create and sustain community. Through mass media and global commercial networks, millions of people around the world bring their unique perspectives to bear on widely disseminated common sources.

It gets complicated, because everyone's individual perspective has been decisively influenced by her or his culture and religious tradition—in my case, Christianity. My unique biography means that my take on my faith heritage may not be exactly identical to anyone else's, and yet we will share many common elements, such as symbols, stories, and rituals. In general terms, let's just say that my involvement in the Christian tradition has always filtered and formed what I hear when I listen to popular music. At the very same time, my close attention to and attempts to duplicate the soundtrack of my life also means that this daily activity will continually enrich my appropriation and application of the gospel. And in actual practice these elements are inseparable. The distinction between the "secular" and the "sacred," between "Saturday night" and "Sunday morning," breaks down all the time. I am becoming who I am by going to church, listening to and singing lots of music, and by actively engaging all the other subject matters I encounter every day in multiple ways.

We humans are social beings, always deeply influenced by our culture and time. Our personal and shared devotional practices and religious activities are never the only forces forming us. Scholars have rightly worried about the relationship between Christ and culture.⁴ History shows that social location can incline us to complicity with sinful structures and habits. Below I will discuss how rock and roll emerged in a thoroughly racist and sexist culture, marked by sharp boundaries and inequality between “blacks” and “whites” and males and females. We will also note how mass media can exploit both artists and the consumers of their music in brazen pursuit of profit at all cost. The good news of the Christian gospel, however, affirms that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Romans 5:20). At its best my religious tradition has worshiped an incredibly generous and merciful God, who will employ any and all means to bring blessing to every beloved creature in the entire cosmos. If God could employ flawed instruments like Moses, David, and Paul,

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why can't divine grace be channeled through rock and roll? If Jesus showed a marked preference for the company of prostitutes and tax collectors, why would we refuse to listen to hard-living musicians?

To be sure, not everything that shines is gold. We must be discerning listeners. The Christian tradition offers helpful guidance. Jesus tells us that “you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7:20). Paul spells out what these fruits are: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians

5:22-23). I doubt if I'm the best judge of my own spiritual progress, but I can testify that I know many rock-and-roll players and fans who sure seem to be the salt of the earth!

I'm grateful that judging others is not part of the Christian's job description (Matthew 7:1-5). But humility is. In my experience, humble persons maintain open minds. They expect God's Spirit to show up anyplace, anytime, also in the most unlikely persons and occasions. Even bad people might perform grace-filled deeds. Allow me to illustrate by confessing right up front to one of the guiltiest of pleasures I regularly indulge in: listening to the infamous Rolling Stones. Aren't they the very embodiment of everything that worries people about rock and roll—unbridled pleasure seeking, degenerate promiscuity, drug addiction, misogyny, naked pursuit of fame and fortune? It's a good thing that Mick Jagger doesn't have the clearest enunciation of singers, because the lyrics to songs like "Under My Thumb" and "Brown Sugar" make me cringe.⁵

And yet, as I've often told friends, if you don't like how the Rolling Stones play, you don't like rock and roll itself, because no one has ever laid down the groove better than they do. The superb rhythm section of bassist Bill Wyman and his successors and the incomparably steady drummer Charlie Watts keeps the beat, while master guitar riffer Keith Richards creates all those unforgettable hooks. Then add the complex interlocking lead guitar work by Brian Jones, Mick Taylor, and now Ron Wood, who together with Richards create a two-guitar attack like none other. Finally, mix in the raspy blues and country insouciance of Mick Jagger's one-of-a-kind vocals, and it all adds up to song after song that offer the very definition of rock and roll: "Bye Bye Johnny," "Get Off of My Cloud," "Jumping Jack Flash," "Tumbling Dice," "It's Only Rock

and Roll,” and so on. Every one of them repeatedly gives me that same physical jolt of pure joy that I first encountered on that spring day in 1963. This is the soundtrack of a decades-long dance party! What’s wrong with fun? Isn’t joy one of the fruits of the Spirit?

And there’s more. Truth-telling is characteristic of our biblical traditions, a hallmark of the prophetic legacy continued from Jesus to Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. Søren Kierkegaard urged his nineteenth-century Danish contemporaries to opt for plain human honesty.⁶ As a group the Rolling Stones have never pretended to be what they are not and have never censored themselves or others, though even the other Stones lament the campy poses and other pretensions Jagger sometimes adopts. Their negative reputation rests more than anything else on their 1968 song “Sympathy for the Devil.” But when seen in its historical context, and as part of the album *Beggars’ Banquet*, of which it is the first cut, this creepy number was actually an important social statement. 1968 was a horrific year in world history, marked by the tragic assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the brutal repression of freedom movements in Czechoslovakia and Mexico City, the horrors of the Chinese cultural revolution, street fighting leading to the messy end of the de Gaulle era in France, and the televised spectacle of police violence at the Democratic National Convention in Richard Daley’s Chicago. The Rolling Stones finished work on the album in July, before some of the worst tragedies befell us that autumn, but they were clearly reading the signs of the times. Most promoters of Flower Power and the Summer of Love of 1967 were shell-shocked, including the Beatles, who released a glorious, untitled, fragmented mess of a

double-disc set known commonly as the “White Album.” With guitarist Brian Jones personally disintegrating before their eyes, the Stones had the unflinching courage to call it like it was—the devil was on the loose, and we couldn’t evade responsibility for the sad state of affairs. One might choose to be a “Street Fighting Man” (the song opening the second side), but wasn’t it more truthful to acknowledge feelings of impotence as the modern world crashed down around our ears? You might try to celebrate the little people who were the “Salt of the Earth” (the album’s closing number), but one couldn’t contain the cynical realization that the meek were hardly inheriting the earth at that historical juncture. I still feel the horror of that dreadful year every time I listen to this masterpiece. It helps me not to forget all the victims, each one a beloved child of God. The scars of that time have never entirely healed and demand that we lament and repent.

Surely care for others, however undeserving they may be, is also a chief virtue in our biblical traditions. I urge everyone to watch or re-view one of the very best rock documentaries, Taylor Hackford’s 1987 *Hail, Hail Rock ‘n Roll*, featuring Chuck Berry. No one has a better claim to being *the* father of rock and roll than Berry. Writing his own material (after he paid his dues by fictitiously listing promoter and payola virtuoso Alan Freed as the co-author of his first hit, “Maybelline”), Berry’s lyrics were poetic celebrations of teen life, and his often imitated but never equaled guitar licks and Johnny Johnson’s underappreciated piano work created the musical vocabulary for much of subsequent pop music. Berry was a victim of racism, being sent to prison on trumped-up charges at the height of his fame. As we see in this film, he became an embittered man, splitting with Johnson and making fast money

from endless one-night concert stands while cheapening his considerable musical gifts.

Enter Keith Richards, hardly anyone’s definition of a saint. His struggles with drug addiction make Johnny Cash’s ordeals look like a picnic! Yet Richards is a former choirboy in the Church of England, and he claims to read the Bible every day. Whatever. Follow the fruits. Richards is a passionate lover and promoter of African-derived music in general and of Berry’s contribution in particular. He was determined to organize a first-rate concert to honor his guitar hero, and somehow pulled it off, in spite of the fact that Chuck treated him terribly every step of the way. Richards, who takes no guff from anyone, and who says that he’s been in gunfights, patiently endures it all as the cameras are rolling. He lets Berry reteach him how to play “Carol.” He manages to get Berry and Johnson back together and to enlist many rock and blues greats such as Etta James, Eric Clapton, Linda Ronstadt, and Robert Cray. This supergroup puts on a concert in a grand movie

theatre in St. Louis that once banned Berry on the basis of his skin color. Ever contrary, Berry changes the keys and arrangements in mid-song. Richards just goes with the flow. He

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manages to complete his labor of love, properly honoring the pioneering contribution of Berry and Johnson. And we are left with a documentary for the ages, one of the finest of all celebrations of rock-and-roll music.⁷

Maybe admirers of the Stones have a soft spot for sinners—but then, so did Jesus. Truth be told, we are all sinners, too, however justified by grace (thanks, Martin

Luther!). I'm grateful to confess that I have learned much from rock's baddest boys, the Rolling Stones. And if God's grace can work even through them . . .

Spiritual Formation and Popular Music

By bearing my own witness, I will attempt to offer one account of how engagement with popular music might play a positive role in ongoing Christian growth and maturation. I don't have enough space here to offer a full account, nor can I remember or consciously acknowledge all the artists who have influenced me. I also don't intend to suggest that my particular list of musicians and their artistic works is somehow canonical. My selections undoubtedly betray my age! By sharing some of the conversation I've had with partners over an extended period of time, however, I simply hope to encourage others to reflect on their own musical favorites and their impact on our understanding and life practices.

The Power of Creativity. First, I'd like to offer extended reflections on the Beatles, the group that first introduced me to rock and roll and is still the one I listen to and perform the most. And in that I am far from alone! The Liverpudlians often appear at the top of lists of the best artists of all time. They continually inspire new creativity, such as Julie Taymor's 2007 film *Across the Universe*. The Beatles have transcended the bounds of the boomer era to become favorites of new generations. My daughter, now in her mid-twenties, is also a big fan. What accounts for their perennial popularity?

Remembering how variable and subjective aesthetic appreciation appears to be, I will venture some hunches.

John, Paul, George, and Ringo remind us of the incredible gift of human creativity. From a Christian perspective, our capacity to birth beauty is a chief indicator of what it means to claim that we are made in the image of God the Creator (Genesis 1:26). Recognition of this beauty always evokes deep gratitude, which is a core Christian spiritual disposition. The Beatles accomplished their collective work before any of them reached the age of thirty! They had no musical training to speak of and did not read music. Yet, from the beginning they were simply bursting with innovative ideas.

Take that simple third hit that hooked me, “From Me To You.” I like to demonstrate to students and friends that this very early composition already breaks the mold of what came before. Before the Beatles, most rock songs followed the pattern of the blues by riffing on and over a simple chord progression. The most common one is known sometimes as “One-Four-Five” because it goes from the chord corresponding to the first note of a standard scale to the fourth and then the fifth. Examples would be E-A-B, G-C-D, or A-D-E. Blues and rock musicians would vary the standards pattern by using seventh or sixth chords, for instance, or by developing more sophisticated chord substitutes, but the basic structure remained very much in place.

The Beatles sometimes employed that chord structure, as in the late hit “Get Back.” But most of the time they shattered it and left it behind. And you can already see how they are twisting it out of shape in “From Me to You.” First, they’ve intuitively discovered a lesson from basic musical theory, namely the relationship between major scales and relative (here in the sense of “related to”) minor scales. Basically this means that the major and

minor scale's notes harmonize and are interchangeable. So the first chord in the progression of "From Me To You" is made more complex by switching back and forth from the major to the relative minor key. Things get even more revolutionary when you realize that the second chord in the progression, the fourth, makes a very brief but spicy appearance to highlight the passion of the corresponding lyric. The main body of the verses, then—if you can call them that; they are really repeated fragments—is an interplay between the first and the fifth chords, appropriately mixed up by the use of sevenths. And we see an early example of a technique the Beatles used so often that it became required for a time in nearly all songwriting—that is, until they themselves refused to be bound by the rule! I am talking about what is called the middle bridge, a separate melody in a different key inserted right in the middle of the song, yet somehow so right that you once you've heard it you can't imagine it not being there. The Beatles didn't invent the bridge. It's common in the work of the Everly Brothers, a duo they greatly admired and whose vocal technique they sought to emulate and then exceed. But in the music of the Beatles the bridge reached new heights in popular music.

The Beatles impress because they never stood still but pushed themselves to get better and better at their craft. "From Me to You" is already remarkable and innovative, but in short order they are throwing in unexpected chords everywhere—like the sudden appearance of a jazz chord in John's lovely ballad, "If I Fell." They even dare to record a song with only one chord—the in-all-ways remarkable "Tomorrow Never Knows." And musical structure is only the first convention to fall. Soon they are using instruments never before employed in popular music, like the

Indian sitar on “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown).” Their songs become more and more complex—check out the chord progressions on “Yesterday” or “Michelle.” And then the recording studio itself becomes their choice instrument. With the collaboration and encouragement of producer George Martin and chief engineer Geoffrey Emerick, the Beatles soon pioneer the use of tape loops, multitrack overdubbing, feedback, recordings played backwards, sound effects, and on and on.⁸ And all the while they become more and more adept at the use of their own bodies, perfecting the three-part harmony of John, Paul, and George (consider the progression from “This Boy” to “Because”), and hand clapping and knee slapping up a storm (note the propulsive syncopated applause on “I Want to Hold Your Hand”). The songwriting team of Lennon and McCartney gets much of the credit (though in time they actually wrote separately more often than not), but you can listen to George Harrison’s progression as a composer until his best songs equal those of his older bandmates. I’m no drummer, but I can recognize the huge beats and sophisticated rhythms Ringo creates, and more expert percussionists regularly extol his creativity.

Altogether, we possess thirteen first-rate albums and a host of immortal singles, some better than others, but almost all of exceptional quality—and all produced in less than eight years! While the music of the Beatles never grows stale and never ceases to surprise (I discover new elements all the time), some of their techniques are now so commonplace that we tend to forget that someone had to do it first.

Only later would we realize the extent to which their art was forged in a crucible of personal pain and loss. Both Paul and John lost their mothers at an early age.

Ringo survived debilitating and isolating childhood disease. While Beatlemania posed challenges to each member, George particularly hated the prison of his own fame, experiencing it as soul destroying. And the group always experienced creative tensions. John and Paul’s collaboration soon became more of a competition, driven not only by personal ego but by very different conceptions of musical expression. At the risk of considerable oversimplification—they steadily influenced one another, after all—John preferred raw self-expression and became impatient with studio perfectionism, whereas Paul had a knack and preference for catchy melodies and simple lyrics, and could subject even a minor effort like “Maxwell’s Silver Hammer” to multiple takes. The power of the group’s music resides precisely in the way that its chief composers held opposites in creative tension. Yet in doing so they relegated George to secondary status, so that he had to struggle to get his vision on disk. In the latter phases of the Beatles’ collective career his signal contributions—“While My Guitar Gently Weeps,” “Something,” “Here Comes the Sun”—are therefore all the more triumphant. In short, the Beatles remind us that human artistic creation is a rather messy affair, an impossible possibility, always miraculous, a shining example of God’s abounding grace.⁹

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Speaking and Feeling the Truth in Love. In my treatment of the Rolling Stones, I extolled the virtue of

truth-telling. The Beatles offered their own versions of what my grandmother from Oklahoma termed “calling it like you see it.” Paul McCartney’s later suggestion notwithstanding, the Beatles never simply offered up “silly love songs.” Even the early material stood out because it infused teenage infatuation and entertainment with a fresh sense of emotional urgency, complexity, and integrity. It’s always instructive to compare their cover songs with the original versions. My favorite example is “Money,” which closes their second British LP (“long-play” album), *With The Beatles*. John’s incredibly intense vocal turns what had been a light-hearted pop affirmation of materialism into a sort of demonic frenzy that works, ironically, to suggest that love of money might just be the root of all evil, or at least of madness.

In any case, the Beatles soon brought a strong confessional character, a sense of emotional honesty and ambivalence, to popular music. Sideman George made an important contribution to this when his first recorded composition, the moody “Don’t Bother Me,” appeared on *With The Beatles*. But John perfected the art of bringing almost Shakespearean soliloquies into short pop songs. Think of “There’s a Place,” “I’m a Loser,” “Help!,” “You’ve Got to Hide Your Love Away,” and all that followed. Paul made his contributions, too, especially via “Yesterday.” He soon demonstrated a talent for sketching full-blown, powerfully evocative short stories in just a few minutes—listen to “She’s Leaving Home” or “Eleanor Rigby.” The Beatles’ amazingly precocious maturity taught a generation to be attentive to the emotional tragedies that mar human existence on a daily basis. They set the stage henceforth for honest self-revelation in popular music. Think, for instance, of Trent Reznor’s “Hurt” or Kurt Cobain’s “Lithium.”

This quartet could evocatively depict our incompleteness and need for healing, but their quest for redemption also captivated us. Sometimes they employed Christian symbolism, most notably on Paul's "Let It Be," evoking both his lost mother and his Roman Catholic childhood. More frequently, they helped Westerners consider the treasures of Eastern spiritualities. George led the way with numbers like "Within You Without You" and "The Inner Light," but the pioneering use of then-unfamiliar Indian instruments and musical conventions may have blunted the message. I remember being mostly perplexed by those contributions! John, while much less invested in Eastern explorations, made them more accessible, especially on the gorgeous "Across the Universe." The Beatles mediated the first encounters many of us had with Hinduism or the Tibetan Book of the Dead. I suspect that my later commitment to interfaith dialogue owes much to their influence.

With the exception of Harrison, however, the Beatles' spiritual quest felt experimental, like the 1960s in general. One constant remained, however: their repeated insistence on the power of love. John, the most eloquent exponent of this lead theme, in the end could confess nothing more than the healing consolation of intimate interpersonal love. His searing solo album, *Plastic Ono Band*, leaves no doubt on that score. Its narrative moves, from the devastating loss of his mother through waves of disillusionment ("I Found Out") to the anti-creed of the anthem "God," reaching the conclusion that being with Yoko is the only thing on which he can rely. Is this the sum total of what it means to declare that "All You Need Is Love"?

For me, the experience of going through the first wave of the Beatles' popularity will always suggest more. Drawn in by the power of their music, by the irresistible beat

and harmonies, I paid attention to the words to a degree I never have with any group since. The crystalline clarity of EMI's production no doubt contributed to this engagement, because one could actually decipher what these lads were singing without the need of a lyric sheet or songbook. Given the emotional honesty expressed, the result was a very personal exchange. I felt that I was having a conversation with John and the others. Somehow we were sharing at a deep level. And millions of other people were having similar experiences at the same time. While we might not have much of anything else in common, that shared point of reference created a global community. "All You Need Is Love," after all, was featured on the first live global satellite broadcast on June 25, 1967. The remark of one commentator, to the effect that the world was united the week of the release of *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* as it had been at no other point since the Congress of Vienna in 1815, is an exaggeration, but for effect, and pointing to a reality of rare shared discourse on a mass scale.¹⁰ I recognized the same sort of phenomenon when J. K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" books became the talk of the world. However shaped by marketing and publicity forces (a theme to which we will return in the third chapter), there's a grace-filled quality to those unusual cultural moments when to a remarkable degree we transcend barriers of language, nationality, race, gender, ideology (think of the impact of the Beatles in the Soviet Union), and age to become, at least for fleeting moments, one human family. These experiences shape the way I understand the Christian theological virtue of love.

And, recalling the hermeneutical circle, living in the present is also shaped by Christian convictions. I was learning all the key Bible stories at the same time that I

was a passionate young Beatles fan. In my parents' then-sectarian tradition, we talked a lot about the messianic banquet, when God would gather people from all corners of the earth to share equally in the riches of creation. We relished the words of Revelation, describing God's people gathered from "every tribe and language and people and nation" (5:9). Inchoately, I sensed even then that the conversations initiated by the Beatles' creativity were a foretaste, however small and fleeting, of the triumph of love over all the tragedies and obstacles so much in evidence at the close of the 1960s. By grace, four musicians strengthened my faith in God's good purpose and inspired that other Christian cardinal virtue of hope.

Much later I would learn that Christian mystics have always employed the metaphors of human romantic longing to describe how God woos human souls and graciously elicits a passionate response from us. Hence, all the commentaries on Song of Songs across the centuries!¹¹ Having studied this theme academically, I was prepared for how Madonna's "Like a Prayer" viscerally confirmed it! Even as an adolescent, however, I somehow had an intuition that it wasn't blasphemous to think of a song like "From Me To You" as an expression of God's fervent love for me. First John 4:7 affirms that "love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." Verse 12 adds that "if we love one another, God lives in us." I stand in a strand of the Christian spiritual tradition that values all expressions of human love as traces of or pointers to the larger reality of the character of the One whom the evangelist described thus: "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Of course, our human practices of love are incomplete, and they may even be deformed, but they are nonetheless intimations of the transcendent love that lies at the very heart of reality.

As we'll learn in the next chapter, music's power resides in its ability to affect us in a holistic manner, engag-



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ing not only our head but our heart, understood as the seat of our emotions. I contend that inhabiting songs like John's "Love" (also on *Plastic Ono Band*, where it perhaps hints at a larger conception of love in tension with the album's overall direction) or Paul's "Here, There and

Everywhere" and "I Will" forms a passionate disposition in us that can serve to open us to God's fervent yearning to be in relationship with us. Whether the words speak about a girl or about the Divine Lover, the feelings evoked by repeated listening and singing create affective habits that can bear positive fruit in spiritual development. Medieval mystics adapted the conventions of courtly love poems and songs.¹² Why, then, can't we derive similar benefits from the resources of contemporary popular music?

Facing the Demons

I've sought to describe how popular music can draw us to another place, not unlike the desert of the fourth-century Egyptian mystics, where we might become more aware of God's strong love for humans created in God's image. When we read about the experiences of those desert fathers and mothers, however, we soon realize that not everything is sweetness and light. Even our attempts to be brutally honest with ourselves and others don't go far

enough. We have to face the fact that we are haunted and even possessed by demons.¹³

We modern Westerners might refuse to believe in supernatural beings—anti-angels, as it were—seeking to do us harm. However we choose to picture them, I maintain that we humans do contend with “the cosmic powers of this present darkness” (Ephesians 6:12), forces of domination and oppression beyond the control of individuals, and often constricting our imagination and our capacity to act. These evil structures and habits colonize our very being to the point that we often cannot even perceive their powerful influence.¹⁴

In terms of popular music, I refer specifically to the pervasiveness of racism and sexism in the societies, principally in the United States and the United Kingdom, where rock and roll was born. The good news of this exciting communal dance track was blunted and blighted by a lack of sufficient critical awareness of how segregation, stereotyping, and exploitation of African Americans and of women was perpetuated by the mass marketing of the new music. It took me and many others too long to become aware of these dangerous undercurrents. But if sin abounded, grace worked through a growing sense of discomfort after repeated listening and singing. And rock musicians began to transcend and question their complicity in unjust structures in powerful ways. Encountering these artists allows us to name and then denounce social forces denying the full human dignity of all persons made in God’s image.

Racism. Love for the Beatles spurred many to pursue a quest for the origins of rock and roll. In interviews they always spoke appreciatively of their predecessors and

influences. It was a diverse lot of both black and white persons from both genders and varying degrees of fame. Through them fans first encountered groundbreaking black artists like Chuck Berry, the irrepressible original wild and crazy guy, Little Richard, and the cool and suave Smokey Robinson. The Beatles' cover songs, culled from the requirements of all-night shows in Hamburg, also introduced lesser-known artists such as Arthur Alexander and Larry Williams. Moreover, they weren't embarrassed to share their versions of ballads by girl groups like the Marvelettes.¹⁵

But pride of place always belonged to Elvis Presley. John first heard "the King" in 1956. Afterwards he would say that "it was the end for me. . . . Nothing really affected me until Elvis." Speaking of Elvis's first worldwide chart topper, "Heartbreak Hotel," John remembered that "it was the spark, and then the whole world opened up for us." Paul went even further, calling Presley "the guru we'd been waiting for. The Messiah had arrived."¹⁶

I can certainly understand enthusiasm about Elvis and why he became known as the "King of Rock and Roll." I didn't carefully listen to his groundbreaking early music until I was in college, but even then, his fine voice, enhanced by a stunning array of vocal tricks, really grabbed me. The spare musical accompaniment, especially Scotty Moore's stellar rockabilly guitar work, still sounds fresh and vital. I repeatedly receive that same visceral sense of excitement that I first encountered in the spring of 1963. Moreover, Elvis and I have even more in common than either of us did with Lennon and McCartney. My maternal family consisted of poor southern people. My mother lived in the same sort of government-subsidized housing that the Presleys did. Like Elvis, I grew up singing hymns

and gospel music. I don't much appreciate all the snobbish dismissals of him. I've been to Memphis twice to visit his mansion, Graceland, and Sun Studios, where he first recorded under the tutelage of Sam Phillips. Elvis was an American folk original, entirely self-taught, coming out of nowhere to become one of the world's most influential artists, and he deserves our full respect. Elvis Presley helps many people in the United States to acknowledge and claim their own cultural context.¹⁷

Nonetheless, calling him a guru, a Messiah even, a complete game changer, seems odder and odder to me, way over the top. Because associating the birth of rock and roll with the 1954 regional release of Elvis's rendition of "That's All Right, Mama," as some writers do, is highly debatable. African Americans had performed music that sounds exactly like rock and roll for at least several years before Elvis appeared on the scene! Just twenty minutes' drive from where I live, in the environs of 12th Street and Vine in Kansas City, Missouri, Big Joe Turner was the brightest of several stars producing some partying good-time music called "jump blues," or later, in accordance with the marketing directives of the segregated music business, "rhythm and blues." It brought the business into the "black and tan clubs," where whites and blacks were separated by a rope running down the center aisle. Elvis and other early rockers like Bill Haley and the Comets regularly covered this material, like Turner's "Shake, Rattle, and Roll."¹⁸ Sam Phillips and some musicologist believe that "Rocket 88," a song performed by an ensemble headed by African American Ike Turner, was the first full-blown rock record, and it was recorded in Sun Studios three years before Elvis came there.¹⁹ So what exactly is the difference between rhythm and blues and rock and roll?

It's simple: on the one hand, while even the term came from African American street slang for sex, rock and roll was done by whites. Rhythm and blues, on the other hand, was offered by black performers. White singers had always adapted black material. White musical connoisseurs had long learned to appreciate the majesty of African American jazz, eagerly consuming records by stellar artists like Louis Armstrong, Billie Holliday, and Duke Ellington. Elvis was different because he absorbed and replicated black vocal styles. When his version of "That's All Right, Mama," a tune written by an obscure African American bluesman named Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, first played over the radio again and again on that hot Memphis summer night in July of 1954, many listeners assumed that the singer must be black. The excitement really cut loose when they discovered that a white cat could get down like that. Some would say that Elvis's creativity resided in his mixture of black music and white country music. They would point to the even more revolutionary nature of the B-side, "Blue Moon of Kentucky." Elvis took a bluegrass standard from the master, Bill Monroe, and juked it up (Monroe said he didn't mind!). Actually, those kinds of borrowings had been going on for a long time, too. The banjo, after all, is an instrument that originated in Africa and was brought over by slaves. Chuck Berry employed many conventions from country music.

So the emergence of Elvis is a highly ambiguous and ambivalent moment in the cultural history of the West. To be sure, there's absolutely no evidence that Presley was a racist. He frequented clothing stores on Beale Street, where few white customers ventured in those days, and always effusively expressed his appreciation to admired African American artists like Jackie Wilson. Part of the

appeal of this young man from Mississippi was his initial lack of guile. Sam Phillips was more calculating. He'd often figured that he could make a lot of money if he could find a white singer who convincingly performed black blues. But it's hard to escape the impression that Elvis just liked to sing, and that his tastes weren't confined by color lines. And one can argue that thanks to his wild (sex!) appeal, especially to white teenage girls, people of European origins came to a new level of appreciation for African American music. The infectious nature of African-derived tunes and rhythms meant that our society took a giant step toward making African American styles the dominant forces in Western popular music. The cultural patrimony of Africa was now shared by a much wider, younger, and more racially diverse audience.

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Unfortunately, the line between cultural appreciation and wholesale cultural theft is not always readily distinguishable. The music industry immediately sought, on the one hand, to whiten up black music, and, on the other, to exploit African American composers and musicians. The latter was part of the larger pattern of profiteering in the record business, or, for that matter, in capitalism in general. White artists, too, were often shorted on royalty payments and forced into constant touring. Seeking to make money during his financial fight with producer Norman Petty, Buddy Holly died in a plane crash in wintry Iowa—"the day the music died," according to Don

McLean's "American Pie."²⁰ The unrelenting demands of the road induced Johnny Cash and others, including eventually even Elvis, to develop an addiction to stimulants and downers.²¹ But with America's apartheid regime still very much in place, black artists inevitably drew short straws. Chess Records in Chicago made good profits off of its first-rate lineup of African American blues and rock artists, including Muddy Waters (real name McKinley Morganfield), Chester Burnett (aka Howlin' Wolf), and Chuck Berry.²² Elvis's manager, "Colonel" Tom Parker, played the exploitation game better than anyone. He got top-of-the-line black songwriter Otis "Bumps" Blackwell, composer of some of Elvis's biggest hits, like "Don't Be Cruel" and "All Shook Up" to sign over half of his writing and publishing rights to the King.²³

The whitening of black music occurred in at least two ways. First, while musicians like Elvis, Bill Haley, the Burnette brothers (Johnny and Dorsey), and Jerry

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Lee Lewis stayed stylistically close to the original black compositions, others strove to make African American music much more palatable to white audiences of all ages. Pat Boone was the most representative and successful example of this trend. His smoothed-out versions

of songs by Fats Domino and Little Richard departed radically from the originals. I am deeply troubled by these sorts of appropriations. I certainly don't wish to squelch musical creativity, which may also be expressed

by creating radically new settings of older material. But when the otherness of that created by someone else is entirely removed, musical dialogue is replaced by a form of cultural violence, taking what belongs to another and recasting it in one's own image. Second, whitening occurred by promoting a whole new stable of white teen idols, who by the end of the 1950s were shoving rock pioneers like Berry and the vocal harmonies of black ensembles like the Platters and the Coasters off the top of the charts. One gets the impression that after the first wave of rock and roll, the music industry sought to contain African American musical influence and maintain white domination of popular music.

It's important to remember that such trends don't necessarily reflect the racist choices of individual actors. Instead, they point to the persistence of structural patterns of domination and exploitation that constrain everyone. In short, they are demonic. The good news is that the demons never go unchallenged. Grace abounds! The power of African American music continually defies all attempts to domesticate it. Black entrepreneurs and artists constantly found ways to fight back, getting their rightful share of the profits while maintaining artistic integrity. Since the rise of hip-hop and rap and the massively popular music of Prince and Michael Jackson, many black artists currently enjoy great prominence in popular music. When all of rock and roll seemed to have run out of steam in the 1970s, it was saved by two fresh infusions of African-derived musical impulses. Jamaican ska and reggae inspired the birth of punk and the so-called new wave. And hip-hop revolutionized popular music altogether, combining the technical sophistication of sampling with the ancient art of rhythmic poetry.²⁴ So is the artistic color

line a thing of the past? Has popular music definitively moved into a postracial era?

I do believe that popular music reflects the triumph of African culture. That which the West denigrated and relegated to the margins has moved front and center, into the very heart of global popular music, and we should celebrate this realization of justice. The further development and growing popularity of the music brought over by slaves may well represent one of history's greatest reversals. But I'd like to ponder tensions that will endure by reflecting on some of my favorite music, that which emerged from the blues revival of the 1960s.

White kids like the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and guitar god Eric Clapton were bowled over when they discovered American blues traditions. The melancholy lamentations emerging from black experiences in the American South appealed to their own youthful sense of alienation. And they were rightly impressed by the power and integrity of this music.²⁵ They employed their musical virtuosity to create their own compelling versions of blues standards, in the process vastly expanding the audience for this unique genre. White listeners were now prepared to explore the extensive repertoire of Jimmy Reed, Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and a whole host of other blues greats. Clapton and Keith Richards organized concerts that revitalized the careers of African American blues musicians. B. B. King rode this wave to become the most popular of all performers in this musical category.

King's music, in concert and on disk, elicits my particular fondness. Critics and fans note his powerful "blues shouting" voice and the beauty and soulfulness of his elegant single-string guitar runs. He ably represents the genius of African American blues, namely its ability to

express deep pain and sorrow mixed with saucy humor and exuberant bursts of pure musical joy. There's terrible honesty in the blues that continually checks any tendency to forget the anguished, broken state of our world and our relationships. And yet the sorrow does not overwhelm and defeat the artists or listeners. By naming it in song, and by letting guitars, harmonicas, and other instruments do the talking beyond the capacity of words, blues celebrates the amazing endurance and persistence of human beings who can find joy and cause for celebration even in the worst of circumstances.

This is a wonderful tradition that certainly deserves to be far better known. Let us give thanks, then, for the blues revival and its continuing impact on popular culture. But it's important for white persons like me to remember that the experiences that African American blues artists share so eloquently are not our own. I've never been one to engage in what I call "comparative martyrdom." I acknowledge that each person's pain is real and, well, painful for them, thus meriting our sympathy. It's nonetheless important that we not equate youthful alienation with the continual stresses of living under apartheid regimes. Most whites really have no way of approximating or fully appreciating the anguish that led to the expressions of the original blues. I suspect that Eric Clapton and Keith Richards's sensitive awareness of this fact was one of the forces pulling them into heroin addiction. It is as if they wondered how they could be authentic bluesmen without experiencing more profound suffering. But the pains of withdrawal are not commensurate with the constant lacerations of systemic racism either.

I'm arguing for another dimension of the spiritual practice of humility, one that requires us to recognize that

certain differences are irreducible, that we simply can't and shouldn't try to make other cultural traditions our own. We should greatly respect and honor them, we do well to pay homage and bear witness to our enjoyment of them, but we never cease acknowledging their otherness. We must allow these expressions to continue to belong uniquely to their own culture and its creative voices. I'm not interested in some great melting pot of postracial popular music. Guided by Christian visions like that which Paul expresses in 1 Corinthians 12, I eagerly anticipate a genuine community of multiple gifts shared by different cultures that retain their uniqueness even as they offer their particular contributions for the enjoyment of all.



Persons coming from the dominant race in imperial cultures have a hard time practicing genuine respect for cultural differences. The specter of racism still haunts us.



Living in such a blessed reality will require us to guard against our tendency to appropriate that which is not ours in ways we feel we can control. Persons coming from the dominant race in imperial cultures have a hard time practicing genuine respect

for cultural differences. The specter of racism still haunts us. Let us pray that with the Spirit's help we will recognize its lingering presence and that in Christ's name we will demand that it depart.

Sexism. Once I starting paying serious attention to the lyrics of the Beatles, I could not avoid noticing that male rockers were a main source of cultural stereotyping and denigration of women. Women were subjected to the famous double standard. Men were proud of their sexual

proWess. To cite only one of many examples, in a song covered by the Beatles, Carl Perkins, another product of Sam Phillips's Sun Studios, rejoiced that "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby." But if women even thought about straying, the groove of rock and roll could issue growling warnings. Check out the menace of "You Can't Do That" or, for an even worse example, "Run for Your Life." The Beatles could also simultaneously cast women as whores and goddesses. "Girl" is musically beautiful, with a uniquely haunting melody, making its portrayal of women as distant, cruel temptresses all the more insidious.

The Beatles had inherited their misogyny from the entire musical legacy preceding them. On this score African American blues, jump or no, were hardly a positive influence. Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf fiercely competed with one another not only musically but in terms of the number of their sexual conquests. Their songs, whether they wrote them or covered them, extolled a man's right to unfettered enjoyment of women on male terms. If Muddy's only interest in females was expressed as "I Just Want to Make Love to You," then Wolf would brag about being the "Backdoor Man" all the ladies welcomed in (with other sexual innuendoes also implied in the title). And Big Joe Turner's influential "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" is a denunciation of his woman's failure at both of the stations to which women are confined, namely, the kitchen and the bedroom. Sometimes the blues repertoire gets downright creepy, as in "Hello Little School Girl." Apparently no attractive woman, no matter how young, escaped the gaze of male desire.

At least Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf didn't dissimulate, and the Rolling Stones never did either (for a particularly queasy-making example, listen to their song

“Some Girls”). The publicity machine tried hard to balance the sex appeal of Elvis and the Beatles, let alone teen idols like the able Ricky Nelson, with a wholesome image that would keep the parents happy. Their repertoire offered plenty of words to the wise, however, as in Nelson’s “Travelin’ Man.” Only subsequent research would reveal the extent to which these stars were motivated by the prospect of scoring plenty of *Girls, Girls, Girls* (to cite the title of one of Elvis’s movie vehicles). In post-Beatles interviews John Lennon was, as usual, the most candid in confessing to his own linking of sex with rock and roll.

Lennon’s increasingly confessional style of songwriting could issue in angry diatribes against women, as in “I’ll Cry Instead.” Somehow breakups were always the fault of the ladies. Here John was emotionally true to his chief source of inspiration, the prolific Bob Dylan.²⁶ I am a great admirer of the man born Robert Zimmerman in Minnesota, and I perform his songs as frequently as numbers by the Beatles. I constantly return to gems like “I Shall Be Released,” “I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine,” and “Tears of Rage.” And “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “The Times They Are a-Changin’” are unparalleled selections for communal sing-alongs. His creative powers evoke the same sense of awe that I’ve described in the case of the Beatles, but appreciation for Dylan has a different quality. Many consider him the poet laureate of popular music, and indeed of our time. His verbal prowess would have no equal until hip-hop came on the scene, and I’ve always suspected that he influenced rap artists more than is commonly acknowledged. Words and whole phrases of poetic power, even when we have no idea what he is talking about (he loves surrealism), just tumble out of him, year after year. He is connected to the deepest wells of American folk culture

and pulls up images that we've never seen before and yet are somehow always strangely familiar. Dylan has a singing voice that people seem either to love or hate, and age, years of tobacco use (not to mention abuse of various other substances), and constant touring have only roughened it. Yet, somehow that very vocal instrument is exactly right for his declamation in verse. What is more remarkable is that someone who often sounds tone-deaf has composed scores of the best melodies in the history of popular music. No wonder his songs are covered more than those of any other popular artist.

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When he first burst on the scene, first as a leader of the folk revival, then as a rocker like no other, Dylan channeled blazing anger and satire. Considering all that was wrong with the world then (and now!), many persons experienced this as a personal liberation. Finally we could tell it like it was and drop all the pretense of niceness. I was being raised in a prophetic form of Christianity, so I celebrated and resonated with his eloquent talent for denunciation. He sometimes made explicit connections to biblical traditions, as in the song "Highway 61 Revisited." I was not sufficiently aware, however, that in his interpersonal life this anger was directed at females. As a lover Dylan was meteoric, passionately entering and leaving relationships with remarkable women like Joan Baez. I'm sure that he experienced consequent emotional pain, but he never seemed to accept his responsibility for the

outcome, instead directing all his considerable frustration at his partners. His prowess as a poet has produced indelible songs, but his considerable expressive skill makes his version of male rage particularly troubling. The distinctive quality of his voice meant that his words dripped with disdain. Consider “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right,” “Like a Rolling Stone,” “Queen Jane Revisited,” and especially the highly influential, often performed “Just Like a Woman.” Even when he seems to be in a light-hearted mood, you wonder why a song extolling the virtues of marijuana and dropping out has to be titled “Rainy Day Women #12 and 35.” Most concede that Dylan’s attitude toward women has considerably softened over the years. We see evidence for that interpretation in a sensitive song like “When the Deal Goes Down” (2006). So let’s hope he’s just being playfully ironic recently when in “My Wife’s Home Town” he identifies that locale as the hot place down you know where!

I give John Lennon credit for raising my consciousness, and I suspect that of many other young men, about the demon of misogyny. In 1967 he issued a startling *mea culpa* in “Getting Better,” on the first side of their global smash hit of an album, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. It did his long-suffering first spouse Cynthia little good, as he would soon abandon her for Yoko Ono. But it was definitely the start of nothing less than a personal conversion. And whatever one may think of Ono, she played a major role in this reorientation. I have observed the visceral hatred many Beatles fans feel for her with a great sense of uneasiness. I suggest that blaming her for the breakup of our favorite band (the now proverbial “Yoko factor”) is in itself a manifestation of sexism. After all, the tensions that would end one of history’s finest musical collaborations would have played out even if she

had never come on the scene. In our never-ending quest for scapegoats, Yoko seemed to conveniently embody our stereotypes about women as home wreckers (never mind the man's agency!) and domineering "hen peckers." I also wonder, frankly, if our reaction to her is an instance of xenophobia and racism. We were not accustomed then to "mixed marriages," and the demonization of Japanese persons during the Second World War was still fresh in our cultural memory. In any event, all of the Beatles ended up with strong women who very definitely had lives of their own. They came to represent leading models of healthy equal partnerships between women and men.

But courageous creative female performers deserve the lion's share of the credit for challenging sexual bias in popular music.²⁷ They were just too good to be ignored, and they made their mark from the very beginning. Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Billie Holliday are at least as important in the history of blues as the boys are. Etta James continued their tradition in the early days of rock and roll/rhythm and blues. Their transcendence of the restraints of the era continues to inspire us. I weep every time I listen to Billie's indictment of the horrors of lynching in "Strange Fruit," one of the great prophetic moments in U.S. musical history. Sadly, we also see how these pioneering artists are almost obligated by the medium to counterassert their sexual prowess as one of the few channels available for the expression of female power. So when Hank Ballard and the Midnighters released the very suggestive "Work with Me, Annie" in 1954, Etta James made an equally suggestive reply in "The Wallflower" (better known according to its lyrics as "Roll with Me, Henry") and scored her own hit on the R&B charts. You had to admire the sassy way she suggested that two can play that game, but her song was

co-written by none other than Henry Ballard! She stopped performing it long before her death in 2012.

This general pattern would continue through all the fine musical contributions of the female teen idols and girl groups. Even in songs written by prolific songwriters like Carole King and Cynthia Weil, popular tastes mostly relegated women to conventional songs about crushes and hopes for eternal love granted by Mr. Right. There were shining exceptions, like the Shirelles' "Will You Love Me Tomorrow" (1960), co-written by King, which slyly questioned the way males used and then discarded love conquests. Such impulses would come to full fruition when King sang her own songs in the 1970s.

Change was coming throughout the 1960s, and a watershed moment arrived in 1967 when the great Aretha Franklin released her version of "Respect." In a beautiful irony, this number was written and originally issued by Otis Redding in 1965. I immensely admire Redding's talent, cut off far too soon in a plane crash the same year that Aretha's rendition conquered popular music. But as he penned and performed it, the song is an all-too-typical expression of male emotional need. He insists that his lady accord him the full honors men supposedly deserve, considering all he'd done for her. Aretha completely reverses the polarity. The original and still unsurpassed diva, a product of the black church that was going through the prophetic schooling of the civil rights era, turned all the power of the spirituals into a robust, groundbreaking affirmation of women's interpersonal rights. Lest there be any doubt, she issued "Think" the next year. Franklin laid down an unequivocal challenge to the romantic domination of males, and things have never been the same in popular music since. It would take us years to absorb fully

the importance of her contribution, but even at the time millions were blown away by these powerful songs. Lady Soul demanded that we sit up and pay attention!

In the post-Aretha era women would gain ever more prominence in popular music. Currently no one has more clout or popularity than Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, or Taylor Swift, to name only the biggest of many contemporary female stars. Happily, they are a diverse group in every respect, defying any facile categorization.

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The path toward the present, however, was anything but straightforward. I'd like to pay tribute to just a couple of the trailblazers who demanded that we acknowledge the demon of sexism that still threatens to warp our perspectives and moral choices.

Madonna, of course, has acquired iconic status. Love or hate her, one cannot deny her powerful influence on popular culture since the early 1980s. It's still too easy to dismiss her, as early critics often did, as the latest poster girl promoted by the Playboy tendency in mass media, or as a proponent of nothing more than dance music. To be sure, she was willing to exploit these channels herself—but on her terms! Madonna took control of her own career and various images to an unprecedented degree. Her music was part of a carefully planned and managed overall trajectory that deliberately plotted unexpected twists and turns. She mastered the new video medium to

fully integrate sound and visuals. And she used her own body as an expression of art. After hitting the charts with the more conventional “Like a Virgin,” she laid down her intentions in “Material Girl.” As a Christian I was not particularly impressed by the ethical values thus espoused but soon found my judgment questioned by her inventive appeal to the themes and images of her Catholic upbringing in songs like “Papa Don’t Preach” and especially “Like a Prayer.” Was it possible that this blatant proponent of wealth and eroticism, this person who seemed to be the very embodiment of capitulation to perverse male desire, might teach us something about spirituality? Her lovely collection of songs on *Ray of Light* offered a resoundingly affirmative answer. Though I would usually be skeptical of her sources, such as New Age spirituality, Madonna gifts us with profound meditations on themes found in all of the world’s religious traditions, such as connection to nature, surrender, repentance, new awakening, and humility. The musical settings perfectly complement these salutary messages, inducing meditative tranquility that permits challenging messages to be received. I have spoken to a number of young women about Madonna’s impact. Time and again I hear testimonies of empowerment, and it’s hard to argue with that. Lady Gaga appears to have inherited Madonna’s mantle, and it will be fascinating to see how she assumes her responsibilities.

Christina Aguilera is recognized as one of the younger divas with debts to both Aretha Franklin and Madonna. She has one of the best voices in the business, but her choice of material thus far often disappoints. Let us hope that she will develop her full potential. Yet she’s already left us with one song for the ages. It’s particularly important that a person who fits the stereotypical male-defined model of

pulchritude would have offered us “Beautiful.” The song alone packs quite a punch, but the video is absolutely stunning. Presenting gay men, a cross-dresser, a victim of bullying, and young persons of both genders struggling with their body image, Aguilera preaches the good news of God’s love for every single human being made lovingly in the Creator’s image. Few songs in the history of popular music do more to challenge our sinful tendency to rank and categorize persons. I have gratefully shown this clip in various church settings, and have found it be a very effective way to present the gospel’s inclusive message.

Last but not least let us acknowledge the impact of Chrissie Hynde, undisputed leader of the various incarnations of the Pretenders. When I encountered her music in the early 1980s, I had come to admire greatly various female vocalists like Linda Ronstadt and Debbie Harry of Blondie, as well as all-girl groups like the Go-Go’s. Here we find a woman who was the undisputedly powerful leader of her own band—and all the other members were guys! Chrissie wrote most of the material, played a wicked Telecaster guitar, and served as the lead singer. Her songs had enormous appeal, combining the power of punk with great lyrical sensibility. Chrissie tells us about herself and her own life’s journey in uncompromisingly honest terms. On the very first cut of The Pretenders’ eponymous first album, she tells anyone who wants to control her by type-casting her as “Precious” where to get off. She constantly expresses the longing for love in a world marked by ever-increasing cynicism and disillusionment. Hynde lived through the drug-overdose deaths of several bandmates. She had a daughter not long before I did, and her simultaneously heartwarming and heartbreaking address to the newborn baby in “Show Me” continues to help me name

my own parental yearnings. Chrissie is an Ohio native, but came to fame in England, so she has an invaluable insider-outsider perspective on the United States, expressed perhaps most powerfully in “My City Was Gone.” In recent years she has become a ferocious advocate for animal rights, pointing us to yet another demon many have only barely begun to face.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to sketch ways in which engagement with popular music can help develop cardinal spiritual qualities such as joy, gratitude, love, humility, and repentance and conversion. While my own still very incomplete schooling was shaped by my simultaneous Christian formation, I am suggesting that the wideness and extravagance of God’s grace can work through any and all artists to shower blessings on anyone of any religious tradition or none. As a theologian committed to serious dialogue both with the Christian past and with contemporary critical voices, however, I must reconsider my conclusions as I attend to other voices. In the next two chapters I will make my best effort to do precisely that.