



introduction

This book shares spiritual reflections emerging from sustained personal listening to select popular music. We encounter commercialized tunes in many forms. We may be introduced to songs and artists by chance encounters on radio, television, or public-address systems at malls or sporting events. We may read a review or get a recommendation from a trusted friend. Like our interaction with persons, some of these meetings are casual and of short duration. Sometimes popular music simply serves as a dance track to enliven communal celebrations. What I'm interested in here, however, are those popular works that really grab our attention and demand careful, repeated listening.

I'm not sure that we choose what I call the playlist of our lives. I think somehow it may choose us! Something in the melody and harmony of a song mysteriously resonates with us at a deep level. Or the lyrics powerfully express something of our own reality, or open us up to the lives of others. We are called to get to know the work of these artists better. We want to return to their songs again and again.

The listening practice assumed here, then, involves acquisition of entire albums, to use that term which originated in the vinyl-record era, or CDs. I resist the tendency

of the new iTunes and Mp3 technologies to create anthologies of songs by various artists. Sure, in some cases only one or two singles from a particular source spur repeated listening. Truly compelling artists, however, make us want to place each song in its broader creative context. Outstanding popular music is rich and complex enough to demand repeated listening. We will hear something new every time we play the disk.

We may yearn to get more personally connected with a favorite artist or band by attending one of their live concerts. Rock-and-roll shows are a complex phenomenon in their own right. Sometimes they are joyous communal rites of celebration. At other times they are grossly

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overpriced. Poorly mixed sound can hurt our ears, sometimes permanently. Rowdy crowds involved in substance abuse can mar the aesthetic experience. While I refer to concerts in passing, I have chosen not to focus on them in this

book. Instead, I assume that most of us, most of the time, listen to popular music alone or in the company of a few family members or friends. We may play it as background music while we read, exercise, clean house, or share a meal. The car stereo enlivens many a long road trip. In our automobile or at home, some music demands very careful attention. I discuss a recent example, Bruce Springsteen's *Wrecking Ball*, in chapter 3. In such cases listening to popular music can become a spiritual practice, a way to focus and meditate. An artist's lyrics may even give voice to our prayers.

Listening to music, then, may be a mostly passive and receptive experience, but it may also engage us more actively. One of the virtues of the relative simplicity of melodies in much of popular music is that they permit persons of various degrees of musical talent to sing or play along. Clearly, some artists compose tunes meant to become communal anthems. This type of participation in popular music can have a formative influence on us. In chapter 1, for instance, I describe how the Beatles taught me to sing both melody and harmony, and how popular music in general encouraged me to become harmonically inventive. I'm a rank amateur, but in rock biographies one can read about how famous popular artists were schooled by listening to their predecessors. Guitarists like Keith Richards and George Harrison learned to play by listening to Scotty Moore or Carl Perkins over and over and over again, searching for new chords and licks.

Personal listening to music clearly has considerable impact on us over time, shaping and transforming our thinking, perceptions and affective engagement with the world. As discussed in chapter 2, thinkers have long been aware of the power of music, a power that some come to fear. Scholars continue to investigate and debate exactly how music affects us. Lyrics function much like any text does. They are often poems, which communicate through imagery and striking word choices. And many popular artists produce a kind of musical prose. In their lyrics, we find various forms of essays, such as strident social protest, expression of popular wisdom, or simple description of life's realities. Country music, in particular, has influenced many to compose three-minute short stories. Setting words to music, however, affects us more holistically. Melody and rhythm get our bodies involved.

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Consequently, songs may become deeply imprinted on our memory and our subconscious mind.

These considerations lead some to counsel extreme caution in selecting good music and avoiding tunes that might have deleterious effects on listeners. From its beginnings in the 1950s, persons

worried about the link between rock and roll and teenage delinquency. I suggest that we shouldn't overestimate the power of music either. How music will shape us is a function not just of the artistic creation but of the character of the human beings that receive it. In this book I assume that listeners to popular music are adults already engaged in spiritual communities, who have already internalized their tradition's ethical commitments. These precommitments not only shape how particular musical works will be interpreted and digested; they will also influence the selection of music chosen for repeated listening. Discerning Christian adults are very unlikely to get hooked on head-banging party music! They may sometimes need to become aware of its existence simply to understand the

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challenges of our broader social environment and to ponder how religious persons should appropriately respond. How parents should shape what their children listen to is an

entirely different subject and one beyond my competence. I would suggest that they probably need to pay as much or more attention to the social environment and practices within which listening to popular music occurs and that significantly shape its reception and impact.

Scripture counsels Christians to be attentive to fruits. It is possible to become so enamored of music that we come to pay too little attention to other vital dimensions of our existence. As Ecclesiastes counsels, everything has its time and place. General wisdom counsels us to partake of all good things with moderation. My spouse and I like to have a bit of fun by turn-

ing on the raucous music of the Rolling Stones, but I hardly recommend a steady diet of such listening! I trust in the capacity of individuals to discern what their own listening canon will be, composed of those works that consistently encourage vir-

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tues such as joy, compassion, attentiveness, and wisdom. Enjoyment of music should occupy its rightful place as one of the ways we appreciate the beauty of God's creation. As the discussion of Augustine and Calvin in chapter 2 may remind us, we need to beware of our tendency to turn good created things into objects of excessive veneration. In this book's vision, music can be a helpful instrument in our spiritual lives, but it is never an end in and of itself.

In the following pages readers will encounter one account of the potential positive spiritual significance of regular listening to popular music. Music engages each

of us in very personal ways. It's notoriously difficult to be objective when it comes to aesthetic appreciation. I apologize in advance if my treatment seems to be too individualistically idiosyncratic. I hope that my personal account will be illustrative and evocative, spurring others to reflect on their own listening experiences. This book bets the bank on grace. Its pages are informed by the conviction that God is incredibly generous, sharing light, truth, love, hope and joy in every nook and corner of creation and in all dimensions of our human existence. The divine goodness is never deterred by human brokenness and perfidy. It just keeps coming, and it overcomes all. God has also taken up residence in popular music! It's my hope that these reflections may bear witness to the goodness and beauty that constantly surrounds us and in which we always abide. We bump into it everywhere, all the time. It resonates in words and melody. May we never cease to marvel at these surprising gifts.

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