A Match Made in Heaven: Why Popular Music is Central to the Growth in Pentecostal Charismatic Christianities

Abstract

Before many Christians become aware of the connection between Hillsong Church and its Pentecostal heritage and allegiance, they know it, and love it (or hate it) for its popular music expressions of worship. Music has been central to the growth of Pentecostal Charismatic Christianities (PCC). One of the reasons for this is that contemporary congregational songs represent a vernacular musical expression of worship for many Christians in the contemporary western church. Put another way, the use of popular music in worship asserts a ‘relevant’ Christianity. A theomusicological and media studies analysis of the 25 most popularly sung contemporary congregational songs, according to Christian Copyright Licensing International (CLLI) data, will provide the foundational sources for this argument. The paper then proposes the PCC theologies which foster and promote the use of popular music in these expressions of worship. Such theologies include the concepts of embodiment, experience, and encounter. It will be demonstrated that these align with popular music’s somatic, emotive, and metaphysical qualities, and thus, that popular music and PCC have foundational harmony, despite popular music’s sometimes negative commercial and profane connotations (from a Christian perspective).
Introduction

Few things define Pentecostal Charismatic Christianities (PCC) as much as their musical worship. And while in recent times many broader evangelical and conservative denominations have adopted at least some of the songs and performative elements of PCC worship (Ingalls and Yong 2015, 4), its origins and still much of its driving force comes from pentecostal-charismatic churches.\(^1\)

Contemporary congregational songs (elsewhere called ‘praise and worship’ or contemporary worship music)\(^2\) emerged in the charismatic renewal of the 1960s and 1970s. The ‘Jesus people’ of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, and David and Dale Garrett from New Zealand, were two notable sources of a new style of congregational song that quickly spread not only through pentecostal-charismatic movements, but well beyond. The recordings of those songs became commercial albums, and an industry soon formed around this new ‘worship music’ along with its consumerism and commodification, and a conspicuous growth in pentecostal-charismatic churches. Apart from the anecdotal connection, National Church Life Survey data supports the idea that pentecostal-charismatic worship style and the worship experience significantly contributed to the growth of such churches (Thornton 2016, 239–40).

The result has been a widespread acceptance and appropriation of the genre across scores of denominations, if not with the explicit motive of gaining similar growth to PPC, at least with a recognition of the way contemporary congregational songs (CCS) are relevant to believers and engage them in worship (Ibid., 239–45). However, equally, the use of CCS has caused countless ecclesial battles over the nature of corporate worship, and the nature of music. The resulting worship wars of the 1990s have been well documented (Dawn 1995; Dawn and Taylor 2003; Galli 2011; Nekola 2009; Thorngate 2013). This paper does not seek to add to the contentious literature on this topic, but rather simply examine the genre as it stands. And, in so doing, propose ways of understanding how PCC theologies applied to worship music, and the musical toolkit applied to the genre, produce an authentic vernacular expression of worship for many contemporary Christians.

First, the 25 most sung CCS (in Australia) will be identified. A theomusicological and media studies analysis will then be applied to them. Given CCS’ appropriation of popular music, this analysis will involve identifying popular music features such as the somatic, emotive, and metaphysical elements of these songs. This paper then identifies the alignment of those features with PCC theologies which initiated and continue to facilitate the development of the genre. In the conclusion, the significance of the links between CCS, popular music, and PCC will be brought together to offer an explanation for their pervasiveness.

Somatic music

The somatic nature of popular music is well researched (Hesmondhalgh 2013, 29; Middleton 1993; Whiteley 2013). The bodily experience of popular music, and perhaps even more so for rock music, is central to these broad musical styles. Drums are an obvious contributor to such felt music, but even in their absence, the predominant driving simple quadruple (4/4) time signature, or on occasion compound duple (6/8), is performed and experienced physically. Scholars of contemporary congregational songs (CCS) have similarly observed this genre’s embodied qualities

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\(^1\) “pentecostal-charismatic” (with a lower case ‘p’) is the term Ingalls chooses to identify the origins of contemporary worship music and practices. It de-emphasises the Pentecostal denominational implications and alludes rather to the orientations of churches that initially produced and popularised this genre/style of congregational worship.

\(^2\) ‘Praise and Worship’ or “Contemporary Worship Music” are the more popular terms for this genre. However, I have theological and semantic issues with both of these terms which I have outlined elsewhere (Thornton 2016, 3–6, 16–21).
Emotive Music

The emotive power of music, and in this case, popular music, have a well-established scholarly history. Frith (1998) argues that the assessment of musical value is its ability to take one out of oneself, offering intense experiences, an overwhelming mood; and by reference to the range of experiences it offers, to genre expectations, and to cultural hierarchy. Music not only has the power to affect people's emotions (Levitin 2011, 191), but people actively and consciously utilise this trait. DeNora observes: “Building and deploying musical montages is part of a repertory of strategies for… generating pleasure, creating occasion, and affirming self- and group identity” (2000, 16).

PPC’s emotional worship is not only plainly evident, but actively pursued (Jennings 2014, 2008), despite many scholars voiced concerns of the potential for emotionally charged music to manipulate worshipers. For example, Webber suggests that emotionally geared worship eventually wears thin, that people will ultimattely tire of the “antics” (1996, 25). Johansson similarly accuses CCS of being “simplistic, pleasure-oriented, emotionalistic, intellectually weak and undisciplined”, finally stating that immaturity is the result of such a diet [of songs] (1992, 136). In the same vein, Abington proposes that modern forms involving “ecstasy”, volume, musical style and bodily engagement (i.e. CCS) quickly become entertainment. He suggests that this becomes a downward spiral where those who are not taught the nature and theology of worship ultimately choose entertainment in worship’s place (2009). Although these scholarly voices are quite influential in the literature, there are others who see things differently. Kallestad, for example, sarcastically counters with, “if people actually enjoy the presentations and if they respond to entertaining music, then the programs must be artistic sellouts; the audience is stupid, and the art critic knows what is best” (1996, 18). Whatever position is taken, CCS are undoubtedly created for emotional engagement (Jennings 2014; Ong 2011; Wagner 2013).

Metaphysical or Spiritual Music

Finally, music’s metaphysical or un languable elements are also well documented. Nattiez, although not specifically addressing popular music, observes that scholarship has limitations when attempting to engage with these elements of music (1990). Similarly, Walser states that, “it’s OK to write about music” (Walser 2003, 23), but he follows with “music often seems not to require translation”. The un languable elements of music prompt such aphorisms as, ‘writing about music is like dancing about architecture’. Scripture, however, frames the metaphysical power of music in terms of spiritual experience, influence, and authority. For example, according to 2 Kings 3:15, Elisha knew that a musician would facilitate the prophetic utterance. In 1 Samuel 16, David played music that caused an evil spirit to leave King Saul. It does not reveal whether it was the specific music he chose to play that brought the result, or whether it would not have mattered which music he chose. Was it rather the fact the he played it, as Boschman suggests (2011)? Did the type of instrument played have any bearing? While such questions are unanswerable, the relationship between music and the spiritual is firmly connected. Even in the New Testament, the singing of hymns is aligned with a miraculous intervention in Acts 16:25-34. Several writers (Evans 2006; Jennings 2014; Robinson 2011) attempt to engage with the transcendent attributes of worship music. However, these are often difficult to articulate within the social science or musicological disciplines. Biblical concepts such as, ‘the anointing’, ‘God’s manifest presence’, and ‘the glory of
God’ resist empirical discussion. Nevertheless, such intangible and subjective concepts are important to acknowledge in pentecostal-charismatic worship.

Pentecostal Scholarship and Music

Pentecostal scholarship involves four elements according to Vondey and Mittelstadt (2013, 10–12); namely, experience, embodiment, play, and analogy. Warrington also proposes encounter as a distinctly Pentecostal approach to research (2008). While all of these have relevance to the study of PCC worship, the approaches of embodiment, experience, and encounter are particularly applicable. As established, the somatic nature of CCS in Pentecostal-charismatic worship is central to the genre and practice. Songs not only include lyrics involving dancing, singing, lifting hands, and bowing down, but these actions are encouraged and modelled in PCC’ corporate worship settings. Live worship videos feature bodily engaged worshippers. Most obviously, the physical act of singing is central to worship, admittedly worship across much of Christendom, but elevated through the time and focus given to this activity in PCC’ services.

Experiential worship is central to the paradigm of PCC. Pentecostals often verbally identify the ‘presence of God’ with musical worship (Boschman 2011, 23; Jennings 2014, 41). On the one hand, such an expression stands in tension with the foundational Christian doctrine which asserts that Christ’s death and resurrection alone provide believers access to His indwelling presence (Smith 2012; Wright 2009, 130–53). On the other hand, subjective emotional experiences can reinforce the perception of God’s presence within personal, or corporate, often musical, acts of worship (Jennings 2014, 53; Smith 2012). This tangible or manifest presence or ‘the anointing’ as it may be termed, has biblical foundations, although predominantly situated in the Old Testament, and only occasionally related to music (for example, 2 Chronicles 5:11-14).

Related to this, is the idea of PCC’ worship as an encounter. Jennings ethnographically explored music and Pentecostalism in a church in Western Australia, and his insights into music’s central role in ecstatic experience are valuable. He states that the “centre of the... service is the encounter, which is catalysed by music” (2014, 39). Furthermore, he notes “that music is deliberately and intentionally utilised... to contain and convey the presence of the holy” (Ibid., 53). He attributes this to a ‘sacramental’ view of music in many Pentecostal churches, whereby music is “an object that mediates the divine presence” (Ibid., 41). Among his observations, Jennings proposes Pentecostals are ambivalent in their adoption of popular music for worship. He states “the church makes use of popular cultural forms at the same time as trying to distance themselves from the secular ethos of popular culture” (Ibid., 98). For those inside Pentecostalism, ambivalence does not quite capture the practice. The current generation of Pentecostals producing CCS grew up utilising musical styles they resonated with, believing not simply that all music could be redeemed for the purpose of worship, but that it wasn’t the ‘devil’s music’ in the first place, and therefore no redemption was necessary. The point here is that pentecostal-charismatic worship represents for many believers, a vernacular authentic expression of their Christianity, which has clearly contributed to the growth of PPC. Put another way, for PCC worship and popular music align along the axes of embodiment, experience, and encounter, and this alignment resonates as relevant worship for many contemporary believers.

3 For a further discussion of perceptions of ‘the anointing’ in churches utilising contemporary worship forms see Robinson (2011, 55–57).
Divergence from popular music

As much as there is an alignment between pentecostal-charismatic worship (utilising CCS) and popular music, the conflation of popular music values and paradigms and those of PCC’ worship are problematic. For example, popular music is generally performance-oriented by the artist/band, rather than communally performed. While CCS can be experienced simply as performed music with religious content, the nature of gathered believers worshiping is communal; gathered believers express their relationship with God through the singing of songs.

Vernacular music is a relatively new term coined by Bruce Johnson (2000) in examining music which is:

largely generated at a local level and expresses the sense of the immediate, lived experience, of individual and collective regional identity. It includes ethnic, indigenous, folk, jazz, pub rock, and community and domestic music experience (8).

Vernacular is the everyday language as spoken by a group of people. In the same way, vernacular music is indicative of music created for and by laypeople and reproduced physically, rather than playing a recording or attending as an audience. Happy Birthday is sung at all manner of venues, by groups of people, to celebrate an individual’s birthday. Generally, all attending will sing, whether trained or untrained, whether musically gifted or completely tone deaf. At the football stadium, fans will spontaneously launch into their team’s anthem a cappella. People join in as someone picks up a guitar at a party and starts to play ‘old favourites’. These are but a few examples of vernacular music. Evans (2006) argues that CCS are “essentially reflective of the immediate, lived experience of particular churches” and thus fit within the vernacular music discourse.

The notion of celebrification provides another example of divergence between popular music and Pentecostal worship. Many authors acknowledge the celebrification of worship leaders as an industry imperative, or perhaps a religious reflection of star-driven secular entertainment ( Ingalls 2008; Jorstad 1993; Price 2003; Teoh 2005; Wagner 2013). Singer-songwriters such as Darlene Zschech, Chris Tomlin, Joel Houston, and Matt Redman have achieved a star-like status in the genre, even though many of them publicly reject such attribution. According to Wagner, “it would be disingenuous for Hillsong’s worship leaders to deny that they are famous. Hillsong’s worship leaders therefore speak openly and often about the dangers of success, always taking care to acknowledge the true ‘Famous One’” (2013, 76–77). As the aphorism goes, actions speak louder than words; thus, one may wonder whether this redirection is entirely genuine, given their very protective, selective and co-supportive platform-sharing. If it is entirely genuine, are they simply ‘victims’ of the wider cultural practice of celebrification? Either way, there is a clear attempt to differentiate this aspect of popular music culture from Pentecostal worship culture.

Popular music and pentecostal-charismatic worship are also differentiated through performance contexts. While the lighting, stage, and media elements of PCC often reflect those of secular popular music performance modes, there are differences. PCC’ worship often features more singers at the front of the stage, than just the worship leader, to remind the congregation of the communal nature of the singing. Media elements almost always include song lyrics, specifically to encourage active engagement through communal singing as opposed to just listening or enjoying the song. The stages are often not as high as popular music performance venues to encourage a greater sense of equality and connection between musicians/singers and the congregation.
Negotiations

To infer the PCC’ worship has adopted, wholesale, popular music’s production and performative elements, would be misleading. In fact, a constant process of negotiation exists between popular music, CCS, and PCC’ worship.

One example comes from Matt and Beth Redman’s song, Blessed Be Your Name. There has been a reticence in PCC circles to affirm God as One who takes things away from His people, which explains why Blessed Be Your Name has been less popular in the CCLI denominational charts of PCC. At the same time, lyrics that touch on areas of human suffering, challenge, and difficulty are quite common in popular CCS, as long as they are presented in a context of hope and faith. Here are some examples from songs in the representative list:

- And on that day when my strength is failing *(10,000 Reasons)*
- I once was lost… was blind… *(Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone))*
- When darkness seems to hide His face *(Cornerstone)*
- This is my prayer in the fire, in weakness or trial or pain *(Desert Song)*
- Where feet may fail and fear surrounds me *(Oceans (Where Feet May Fail))*
- Constant in the trial and the change *(One Thing (Your Love Never Fails))*
- You stood before my failure *(The Stand)*

There is a delicate balance that CCS writers negotiate between honestly expressing the full spectrum of human experience including suffering, yet placing all experience within the revealed nature of God in Christ, and the ongoing empowerment of the believer through the Holy Spirit.

Another example of this negotiation process is the song The Heart Of Worship *(Redman)*. The repentant tone of the Chorus includes the line; “I’m sorry Lord for the thing I’ve made it [worship]”. No other popular CCS expresses repentance so directly, albeit specific repentance, rather than general repentance from sin that Christian doctrine associates with salvation. It is possibly one reason that this song has not lasted long in PCC churches. PCC CCS tend towards a more positive lyric. A lyric such as, “I surrender”, is acceptable, for it could simply mean that whatever agenda the worshipper had, he/she lays down, but “I’m sorry” suggests a particular awareness of one’s sin, an experience of the feelings of guilt and shame, and moreover, a need to ask for forgiveness. PCC CCS tend to focus on the post-salvific experience – a life empowered by grace, expressions of faith (the ideal) over reality, ultimately more God-conscious, than sin-conscious, more future-focussed than past-focussed.

Broader theological considerations are worthy of attention here. There is a large volume of partially quoted Scripture in popular CCS, here are just a few examples:

- You’re rich in love and You’re slow to anger *(Numbers 14:18, Psalms 145:8)* *(10,000 Reasons)*
- *(when He shall come)* with trumpet sound *(1 Corinthians 15:52)* *(Cornerstone)*

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4 “The LORD is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” *(Numbers 14:18).*

5 “in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” *(1 Corinthians 15:52).*
…if our God is for us, then… who could stand against us (Romans 8:31)⁶ (Our God)

The Lion and the Lamb (Revelation 5:5-6)⁷ (How Great Is Our God)

You give and take away (Job 1:21)⁸ (Blessed Be Your Name)

Your love never fails (1 Corinthians 13:8)⁹ (One Thing Remains)

Hosanna in the Highest (Matthew 21:9)¹⁰ (Hosanna)

Lifted me from the miry clay (Psalm 40:2)¹¹ (For All You’ve Done)

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain (Revelation 5:12)¹² (Revelation Song)

This does not necessarily mean that these scriptures are misquoted, or heretical, though they are poised for interpretation. Rather, the partial quoting of scripture both validates the song as a CCS, as well as making personal revelation, context, application and perspective pertinent to the validation of those scriptures. There are also quasi-scriptural elements that while not pernicious, are not recognised doctrinal orthodoxy:

Ten thousand years and then forevermore (10,000 Reasons)

Into the darkness you shine, out of the ashes we rise (Our God)

And there I find you in the mystery, in oceans deep my faith will stand (Oceans (Where Feet May Fail))

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow (Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone))

Baptised in blood and fire (Beneath The Waters (I Will Rise))

My Comforter my All in All, Here in the love of Christ I stand (In Christ Alone)

I see His love and mercy, washing over all our sins (Hosanna)

There is always the potential for such lyrics to be misinterpreted, or blindly accepted as doctrine because of the context in which they appear. Interpretation is a key element to lyrics as a poetic form, and context plays a significant role in that interpretation. Frow (2006) states that genre, “is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning” (10). So the CCS genre itself places “constraints on the …interpretation of meaning” regarding its lyrics. Thus CCS lyrics, occurring in a PCC worship context, that are not specifically scriptural are still perceived as aligning with doctrinal orthodoxy, even if a more literal interpretation of the lyrics may indicate otherwise. This is potentially problematic, given the added

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⁶ “What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31 NKJV).

⁷ “See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah… Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne…” (Revelation 5:5-6 NKJV).

⁸ “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (Job 1:21 NKJV).

⁹ “Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away” (1 Corinthians 13:8 NKJV).

¹⁰ “The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’ ‘Hosanna in the highest heaven!’” (Matthew 21:9 NKJV).

¹¹ “He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, Out of the miry clay, And set my feet upon a rock, And established my steps” (Psalm 40:2 NKJV).

¹² “Saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honour and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:12 NKJV).
factor that CCS lyrics become the personal confession of those who sing them. Indeed, this is not just an issue for CCS, but for all historical and current Christian congregational song forms.

Conclusion

The marriage of popular music and PCC’ worship has been a contentious issue since its emergence. Despite this fact, such musical worship has played a vital role in the growth of PCC. Musically, theologically, and culturally, this marriage of popular music and PCC’ worship is a rational and evidently fruitful one. The embodied, experiential, and encounter aspects of PCC worship utilising CCS clearly align with the somatic, emotional, and metaphysical aspects of popular music. Western Christians who are looking for an authentic expression of their faith, evidently find this alignment alluring. CCS provide an expression of an authentic vernacular musical worship for such believers. However, the conflation of popular music and PCC’ worship, or an unreflective wholesale adoption of secular popular music culture into PCC’ worship is in a constant process of negotiation.

Contemporary congregational songs attempt to hold spiritual truth and communal relevance in healthy tension. Perhaps it is not a match made in heaven, but certainly a cautiously fruitful match made here on earth; and one that has contributed substantially to the grown of PCC.
Bibliography


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