On Hillsong’s continued reign over the Australian contemporary congregational song genre

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Abstract

Australia’s popular music charts are not dominated by Australian music. However, in the popular music subgenre, contemporary congregational songs, a single Australian producer has a disproportionately high chart presence compared to international producers: Hillsong Music. This article offers an exploration of and explanation for this anomaly. It examines the extra-musical and musical/lyrical components contributing to Hillsong Music’s dominance in the field based on a music semiological approach. Comparisons are made with the international competition within the genre, based on church usage. Finally, this article proposes ways of understanding Hillsong Music within the context of the contemporary congregational song genre both nationally and globally.

Keywords: Christian Copyright Licensing International; congregational song; contemporary worship music; praise and worship

Introduction

It is hard to pin down the ever-shrouded national and international revenues from sales and royalties that are returned each year to Hillsong Music Australia¹ and Hillsong Music Publishing,² but they are, without doubt, considerable.

1. Hillsong Church’s record label.
2. Hillsong Church’s publishing company.

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Reports suggest Hillsong Music albums have sales in excess of 14 million (Car-
swell 2013), yearly revenues from music of over AUS$10 million (ibid.), 30 gold
and platinum sales awards (Hillsong Music Australia 2016), 13 ‘number ones’
on Billboard’s Christian Album charts (Asker 2015), and four ‘number ones’ on
the ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) charts (ARIA 2015, 2016b;
Hung Medien 2016). Hillsong Music is among Australia’s most significant musi-
cal exports.3

Hillsong Music’s revenues and accolades stem from their distinguished role
as the most popular producer of contemporary congregational songs (CCS)4
as utilized in churches across the Asia/Pacific region. The CCS genre5 exists as
an extension of particular contemporary Christian worship practices; popular
music oriented songs with Christian lyrics designed for congregational engage-
ment in both communal and personal settings.6 I refer to CCS as a genre rather
than a scene throughout this article. It certainly could be explored through the
lens of ‘musical scene’ as other researchers have done in their respective fields
(Moehn 2012; Oldham 2014; Whiting 2015). The notion of scene allows for a
greater focus on the social milieu and dynamics contributing to the music. How-
ever, there is already valuable ethnographic research which explores these songs
and the scenes which surround their creation, promotion and utilization (Evans
2006; Ingalls 2008; Riches 2010; Wagner 2013). What has been lacking from
the research into contemporary congregational songs is an exploration of this
music as a genre. The genre framework allows analysis to transcend the variety
of performed and mediated contexts, be they church worship services, individ-
ual devotional settings, large cross-/non-denominational conferences, or YouTube

The analytical approach for this article is a form of music semiology based
on the work of Nattiez (1990), whereby musical meaning is explored in a dia-
logical analysis at three levels. The first level (‘poietic’) is that of the composer
and the production milieu. The second (‘neutral’ or ‘immanant’) focuses on the
musical work, or text, itself. The third (‘esthesic’) explores the listener’s per-

3. The music industry has acknowledged Hillsong Music’s importance via the appointment
of Steve McPherson (Head of Hillsong Publishing) to the board of the Australasian Music Publish-
ers Association (AMPAL).

4. I use the acronym CCS for both the singular and plural forms of the term. Which one
applies will be clear from the context.

5. This genre is more popularly termed ‘Praise and Worship’ or ‘Contemporary Worship
Music’ in the literature. However, I have theological and semantic issues with both of these terms
which I have outlined elsewhere (Thornton 2016: 3–6, 16–21).

6. The history of this genre has been well documented elsewhere (Cusic 2002; Evans 2006;
Ingalls 2008; Nekola 2009) and as such is not given further attention in this article.

spective; their perception, cognition, interpretation and reception history (Thornton 2016: 2). While these terms are not expressly referenced in the rest of this article, they undergird the research and are thus worth briefly summarizing here.

Hillsong consistently accounts for at least 10 of the top 25 songs sung by churches across Australia, as compiled by Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) and has done so for over 20 years. No other single record label, or publisher, accounts for such a significant percentage of the list. The next most-sung CCS producers would be artists such as Chris Tomlin, or Matt Redman, who each consistently achieve three to four songs in the top 25. This situation is unique for a popular music genre in Australia. Australians import eighteen times more music, revenue-wise, than they export (Australia Council 2016). Put in different terms, ‘only 9 of Australia’s top 100 chart singles last year [2012] were Australian’ (ibid.). However, when it comes to the CCS genre, Australians buy and use over 40 per cent local music, and that music is from a single source. It is this phenomenon which this article seeks to investigate. Why should the single producer, Hillsong Music, dominate its genre’s landscape in a way other Australian popular music artists/producers, in their respective genres, do not?

This article explores the musical/lyrical and extra-musical factors contributing to the disproportional influence of Hillsong Music’s songs. It will be shown that Hillsong’s early contribution to the genre, its consistent output, the church’s significant and increasing attendance, its yearly conference, ongoing branding exercises, as well as its ability to find a balance between popular music elements and congregational singability, all contributed to its dominance. While the genre is unique in certain ways, the observations made in this article may well have relevance to other emerging popular music genres. Using recent CCLI top songs lists, this arti-

Hillsong's continued reign

icle compares and contrasts Hillsong’s CCS with those originating from overseas. Finally, this article will propose ways for understanding Hillsong Music’s prominence not only nationally, but internationally.

Background

Before exploring Hillsong Music further, and the crucial role of Christian Copyright Licensing International, it is important to contextualize this genre for those who are unfamiliar with it. Contemporary congregational songs emerged in a period of revitalization for contemporary western Christianity, known as the Charismatic renewal (Synan 2012). These popular music oriented songs are congregationally sung within church services as an expression of corporate musical worship, although in their commercially recorded versions, they have become a source of personal Christian devotional material utilized in diverse contexts. In church services, they are generally accompanied by a band, which often comprises guitar(s), keyboard(s), bass, drums and vocals, but may be embellished by any number of other instruments, or pared down to a smaller ensemble depending on both the availability of musicians, and the size and musical preferences of the local church. Such musicians are invariably volunteers. The singing is led vocally by what is commonly termed, the ‘worship leader(s)’; and this time of communal singing can range from a single song to sets that last for a couple of hours, although typically between 15–30 minutes (Thornton 2016: 183–84). There are often components of improvisation and spontaneous song that are interwoven into the standard forms of CCS; in these ways CCS are a vernacular genre which affords diverse readings, expressions and contexts.

Hillsong church, from which Hillsong Music emerged, was founded by Brian and Bobbie Houston in 1983 as an offshoot, commonly termed a ‘church plant’, from Brian’s father’s (Frank Houston) church, Sydney Christian Life Centre. It is now a Pentecostal megachurch, with 34,000 attendees (Hillsong Church 2016a), affiliated with the Australian Christian Churches (ACC, formerly Assemblies of God, Australia (AOG)). They have 34 church locations, and are in an active phase of global expansion (ibid.). It is their music, however, which has attracted international attention long before their church planting activities. Some academic scholarship of Hillsong Music has been conducted (Evans 2006; Riches 2010; Thornton 2016; Wagner 2013), although only Evans focuses on the dominance of Hillsong within the broader genre. It was through my PhD research, and as a veteran practitioner within the scene, that I observed Hillsong’s unique place of prominence in the field of contemporary worship nationally, and internationally, and I draw from aspects of that research in this article.
CCLI Asia/Pacific

While most Australian music copyright owners are familiar with APRA AMCOS, few may be as familiar with the royalty collection society CCLI. As such, it is important to establish CCLI’s validity as the foundational data source for this research. Just as APRA AMCOS license individuals, groups and venues, on behalf of copyright owners, to comply with performance and mechanical rights, CCLI supplies similar licences to (Christian) churches. Moreover, like APRA AMCOS, CCLI collect reports from licence holders on their usage of songs within church service contexts. They use this data to distribute royalties, and in the Asia/Pacific region, a small region globally, they have paid copyright owners over AUS$16 million since its regional establishment in 1993 (CCLI 2013a). The majority of licence fees are returned to copyright owners (writers/publishers), and somewhere between 22–35 per cent are retained for administration and growth, making CCLI a multi-million-dollar business.

Over the last 20 years, CCLI has become the central repository for contemporary congregational songs (CCLI 2013b). It has over 200,000 English language congregational songs in its database. CCLI represents all of the key songwriters and Christian music publishers and has an active policy to contact writers whose songs are reported to CCLI, but are not currently represented by them. They currently license over 8000 churches in Australia across a host of denominations, although Anglicans, Baptists, Australian Christian Churches, Uniting, and Presbyterians make up the majority (60%) of those licensees (CCLI 2013a). With a reporting rate from licence holders of around 70 per cent (accounting for the usage of 8000 to 9000 songs) (ibid.), CCLI data are a reliable and rich source of information about song usage among contemporary churches. CCLI data are also unique sources, as no other organization regularly monitors the individual songs sung across the broad cross-section of Christianity in Australia.

A comparison with the Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) charts, which monitor the popularity of recorded music, is worth briefly exploring. ARIA charts are ultimately concerned with retail (and wholesale) sales data (ARIA 2016a), which are constantly affected by a coordinated process of legal manipu-

8. Australasian Performing Right Association and Australasian Mechanical Copyright Owners Society.
9. The percentage is dependent on the region, the market size and the particular license, and as a private company, the exact figures are not always publicly available.
11. Some composers may choose not to monetize their compositions because of philosophical positions on the nature of songs for church use or of copyright in general (Ccworshiparchive 2008; ShareSong 2015; Cartwright 2009). See also http://creativecommons.org/.
lation between large record labels and prominent music retailers. In other words, the strategic release of albums, combined with marketing campaigns, tours, radio releases and bulk wholesale distribution, seek to maximize a song’s impact on the ARIA charts. By contrast, the CCLI top songs charts are solely the product of CCS usage within local churches. Neither record companies, nor publishers, nor retailers report to CCLI. Thus, it is a ‘grass roots’ measurement with perhaps one caveat. CCLI weights reporting activity from licence holders. Larger churches, paying higher licence fees, influence CCLI charts to a greater degree than smaller churches.\(^\text{12}\) As such, Hillsong, Australia’s largest church, arguably has a disproportionate influence over CCLI charts. However, it is still only one of the over 5000 churches reporting. Furthermore, some songs which appear in the CCLI top songs list are never sung at Hillsong church, thus demonstrating the reporting power of the numerous smaller mainline churches across Australia.

The purpose of this section has been to establish the validity of CCLI as a reliable and accurate source of data representing CCS usage and popularity among Australian Christians, at least within the context of church services. The next section turns its attention to Hillsong’s impact on the CCLI charts.

**Hillsong songs in the CCLI charts**

The most recent CCLI top songs list, based on the October 2015 reporting period, indicates that 11 of the top 25 songs were from the Hillsong stable of writers.\(^\text{13}\) They span 22 years of the producer’s output, the oldest—‘Shout To The Lord’ (Zschech 1993) to the newest—‘O Praise The Name (Anástasis)’ (Hastings et al. 2015). The year 1993 may appear to be old for a ‘current’ chart of contemporary songs, yet it is by no means the oldest song on the list; that achievement goes to ‘How Great Thou Art’ (Hine 1949). This is testimony to the long-standing tradition of hymn-singing within church worship, and the list would contain even older songs if it included those in the public domain, that is to say, the majority of traditional hymns. Additionally, even when newer songs are introduced into traditional church contexts, they have a longevity not commensurate with CCS sung in pentecostal-charismatic (Ingalls and Yong 2015: 4) contexts. For example, it is not pentecostal-charismatic churches that still sing ‘Shout To The Lord’, even though

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12. This information is not publically available. However, as a member of the advisory council for CCLI Asia/Pacific, I can attest to the practice of weighting activity reports based on church size.

13. These lists are publicly available from CCLI’s SongSelect site: https://songselect.ccli.com/search/results?List=top100. It should be noted that some older Hillsong CCS, such as ‘Shout To The Lord’, or ‘The Power Of Your Love’ (Bullock 1992), have been assigned to other publishers and no longer appear under the Hillsong Music Publishing label on the charts, even though they originated and were popularized under that label.
it was written and released in that context, and a great majority of pentecostal-charismatic churches would have sung that song in the 1990s. Rather, it is the mainline churches\(^{14}\) that appropriated ‘Shout To The Lord’ well after its initial popularization, and then perpetually maintain it in their repertoire, that keeps it on the current CCLI charts. With all of that context in mind, the mean year\(^{15}\) of the CCLI top 25 is 2003, and the median is 2008, so they are on the whole relatively recently written and released songs.

**Hillsong CCS’ extra-musical features**

The extra-musical features of the 11 Hillsong songs represented in the CCLI top songs list are worth an initial focus, although this should in no way infer a value judgement on the compositions themselves.

Hillsong Conference is an annual event hosted by Hillsong Church. Commencing in 1986 as a local worship conference, it now fills the Qudos Bank Arena (formerly Allphones Arena) in Sydney with 22,000 delegates from 19 denominations representing 60 countries (Hillsong Church 2016a: 30). It is promoted as ‘championing the cause of the local church everywhere’ (Hillsong Church 2016b). While this is the expressed intent, it is arguably also an intense and pointed marketing exercise for Hillsong Music. Up until 2015, Hillsong released their main live worship album at the conference each year. Key songs from the latest album are sung at every session, and promotion of the album is ubiquitous, whether via videos before and after sessions, or throughout the main foyer in sound and visuals, or through printed materials, or directly from the stage. Guest artists are given the platform for brief moments, but the dominant musical voice is that of Hillsong Church, and tens of thousands of delegates are taught a number of songs from Hillsong’s latest album before the conference is finished. The enthusiastic delegates then take these songs home to their local churches and often introduce some or all of them within a short space of time, as discussed below.

In my PhD research, I utilized a list of top songs not based on the CCLI, as used in this article, but on the CCLI’s SongSelect data\(^{16}\), their digital sheet music repository and subscription-based service. The top songs lists from SongSelect are perpetually and instantly updated as churches access CCS sheet music through the site, unlike their CCLI top songs lists which are only updated semi-annually. Thus,

\(^{14}\) Mainline (sometimes referred to as mainstream, or oldline) denominations refer to Protestant churches as differentiated from evangelical, and pentecostal-charismatic Protestant denominations. See [http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/mainline.asp](http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/mainline.asp).

\(^{15}\) Based on publication dates.

\(^{16}\) [https://songselect.ccli.com/search/results?List=popular](https://songselect.ccli.com/search/results?List=popular)

it is the most volatile list, but also the most current. It was in August 2013, soon after Hillsong Conference, when I first used this list as a reference point for my research. That year, Hillsong released the album *Glorious Ruins*, and only a couple of weeks after release, the SongSelect top 25 list already contained four songs from that album.17 This proximity suggests that Hillsong Conference has a significant impact on Australian churches' uptake of songs from their yearly live worship album releases. It might be argued that the yearly recording release itself is enough to engender local church enthusiasm in Hillsong's new CCS, and thus, perhaps it is not the conference that significantly contributes to an album's initial momentum. However, in 2015, Hillsong chose not to release their yearly live worship album at the Sydney Hillsong Conference, but rather in October 2015, to coincide with their Hillsong Conference in New York, USA. The uptake of songs from that album in Australia was desultory compared to previous years' releases (based on CCLI reports). It is possible that the songs simply were not as endearing as those from earlier albums, but it is more likely that the Sydney Hillsong Conference plays a significant role in disseminating and popularizing the songs from their albums, and did not have the opportunity to do so that year.

It should be further noted that popularizing songs for churches through large conferences was a strategy utilized by Hillsong historically. In 1989, Brian Houston (senior pastor of Hillsong Church) became the state president of the Assemblies of God, New South Wales (now Australian Christian Churches, or ACC). I observed at the time that he immediately implemented, or at least condoned, a policy of utilizing only Hillsong music at state conferences. The historical cross-section of musicians, singers and songs, occurring at state conferences, was replaced with only members of the Hillsong worship team, and only Hillsong songs. Thus, the one thousand church pastors and leaders attending from all over NSW were given no choice but to learn the latest Hillsong CCS, and again, were given every opportunity and encouragement to purchase albums and sheet music to take back to their local church worship teams. When Brian Houston then became the national president of the AOG in 1997, the same thing occurred at national conferences, utilizing only Hillsong musicians, singers, worship leaders, and songs. This was clearly an effective and strategic marketing tactic for Hillsong Church, which resulted in the yearly enforced training of hundreds, and later thousands, of church leaders within the denomination, in Hillsong's latest musical offerings.

On a related note, in the early years of Hillsong Music (the late 1980s/early 1990s), and alongside the Hillsong Conference, Hillsong also strategically involved

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17. ‘Christ Is Enough’ (Morgan and Myrin 2012), ‘Man Of Sorrows’ (Crocker and Ligertwood 2012), ‘Glorious Ruins’ (Crocker and Houston 2012), and ‘Anchor’ (Fielding and Ussher 2012).
themselves in providing music for youth events. Youth Alive, an initiative within the AOG, which quickly expanded well beyond its denominational origins, also became a platform for Hillsong to promote their music to many thousands of young people across Australia (Evans 2006: 95–96). As these young people reached adulthood, eventually gaining responsibility and authority in churches, they were already fans of Hillsong Music, and nostalgic towards the large and dynamic events of their adolescent years.

SongSelect lists attest to the fact that Hillsong conferences, plus the regular yearly release of worship albums, produced an environment where churches often oriented their introduction of new songs around the Hillsong calendar. However, there was more to their influence. By the mid-1990s, Hillsong was already one of Australia’s largest churches (based on attendance), which it continues to be to this day by growing margins. Thus, its sheer size has dominated the Christian landscape in Australia for over 20 years (Riches and Wagner 2013). I would propose that the unspoken axiom among many Australian Christian communities was that Hillsong Music was somehow attached to Hillsong’s growth. Such logic, however flawed, extended to the idea that if a church used Hillsong Music, reproducing it in the way that Hillsong does, then they would somehow also experience a growth like that of Hillsong. Morgenthaler articulated this philosophy of church growth with her book *Worship Evangelism* (1998).

Two additional extra-musical factors relating to Hillsong Music are worth noting. First, when Hills Christian Life Centre (as Hillsong Church was originally named) began releasing albums in the late 1980s, there was very little ‘competition’ in Australia for this genre. The other prominent producer at the time was Christian City Church (now C3) (Evans 2006: 93). In the late 1980s/early 1990s just as many Australian churches sang songs from C3 as they did from Hillsong. However, C3 went through a number of different worship pastors over the 1990s, while Hillsong remained comparatively stable. Furthermore, C3 did not have the denominational platform that Hillsong had with the AOG/ACC, nor did it keep up with Hillsong’s growth in numbers as a church. Furthermore, the national growth of the AOG/ACC over the 1980s and 1990s provided a vibrant environment in which Hillsong could enlarge its influence.

Second, from 1993, Hillsong ensured that their live worship (albums initially recorded within the context of a church service) was videoed in that context, and the video version also made available for purchase. While these videos purportedly captured Hillsong’s live worship experience—a typical church service, they were also carefully crafted in such a way as to maximize the excitement and affective nature of the event. Enthusiastic young people were placed near the stage, singers and musicians on stage were required to effusively express their worship
(which is not at all to imply they were unwilling), and several ‘takes’ were even recorded of crowd/congregation cheers, in order to compose the ideal experience of Hillsong worship. Thus, it was not just the music which churches had access to, but also the full worship experience via video. These videos became promotional tools, but also instructional tools for other church worship teams to replicate. Interestingly, in more recent times, YouTube has become a core platform for CCS promotion, instruction, and perhaps even community (Thornton and Evans 2015). Hillsong’s long history and experience in making engaging videos of their live worship music gave them an immediate advantage as Christians began looking to YouTube for their favourite CCS, or potential new CCS. Even though in the early years of YouTube (2005–2008) it was often third parties who were illegally format-shifting Hillsong DVDs and posting the videos on the site, these offerings nevertheless promoted Hillsong and Hillsong Music (Thornton 2016: 208–209).

Although the extra-musical features of CCS from Hillsong make a compelling argument for their dominance within the genre, there were also a number of musical/lyrical features that helped initiate and sustain their influence.

**Hillsong CCS’ musical and lyrical features**

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Geoff Bullock was the key worship leader for Hillsong’s first worship albums. His background in rock garage bands set the musical tone for CCS initially written, recorded and released through the church. This raw and enthusiastic worship provided a contrast to the more refined gospel and ‘Nashville’ sounds of CCS coming out of the USA (Perkins 2015). It was representational of the Australian pentecostal-charismatic psyche of the day; a music that represented and facilitated the unrefined, raw, embodied, yet supernatural experience (Clifton 2009: 84, 132, 151). Even though there were American gospel influences on some of Hillsong’s early CCS, especially with the musical input of Russell Fragar (Riches 2010: 105), there was also a focused empowering of emerging generations, who progressively introduced more contemporary popular music sounds and styles to Hillsong CCS (Riches 2010: 132). Thus, the sound itself, and its concomitant musical style, played a role in establishing and maintaining Hillsong’s dominance as a provider of CCS for Australian churches.

One of the features that Hillsong more consciously employed, as their influence increased, was simplicity of harmony and melody in their CCS. Chords I, IV, V and vi have been the overwhelming favourites, with the occasional chord ii providing some respite (Thornton 2016: 178–80). These are predominantly presented in repeated patterns of four chords, which change, if at all, with sectional changes (verse, chorus, bridge). Examples include ‘Mighty To Save’ (Fielding and Morgan 2006), ‘Cornerstone’ (Batchelder et al. 2011), and ‘Oceans (Where Feet
May Fail’ (Crocker et al. 2012). While in once sense these harmonic practices are in line with those of broader popular music (de Clercq and Temperley 2011), they are different to some of the more sophisticated harmony that was popularized from USA CCS in the 1980s and 1990s. Gospel music traditions influenced CCS written in the USA, which frequently contained embellished or chromatically altered harmonies (Boyer 1979; Williams-Jones 1975).

Given that this genre is specifically crafted for congregational engagement, it is worth considering the melodic/intervallic content of Hillsong CCS. For melodic analysis, I used a specially developed plugin for the notation program Sibelius to assess the intervallic content of CCS. The ideas of intervallic proximity and expectations are based on the work of Schellenberg (1997; 1996; Schellenberg and Trehub 1996; Stalinski and Schellenberg 2010), as applied by Humberstone (2013) to vocal works for musically-untrained children. ‘Cornerstone’, a typical recent Hillsong CCS example, uses 152 intervals across the scored version of the song, 116 of which are repeated notes, or diatonic step movement (tones and semitones). That is to say, 76 per cent of the song is made up of western music’s easiest intervallic relationships. Furthermore, melodic phrases, especially in the more recent offerings from Hillsong Music, are written with numerous repeated elements that make the learning of the songs intentionally easy. This not only occurs at a phrase level, but also at a form level; there may be multiple verses, but they have the same melody, and the chorus and bridge are repeated multiple times. From my personal conversations (p/c to the author, July 2014) with Steve McPherson (Head of Hillsong Music Publishing and Hillsong Church member of around 30 years), he has indicated that it is the Hillsong songwriters’ aim to make a song singable by the congregation the very first time it is introduced. One of the techniques that facilitates this directive is that melodies are syllabic, and the only time signature utilized, for those Hillsong songs occurring in the top 25 list, was 4/4.

Repetitious, simple intervals and repeated melodic phrases are not necessarily mirrored in the rhythms employed by Hillsong songwriters, which instead typically take up the syncopated popular music idioms around them (Evans 2006: 166–67; Faulkner 2012: 193). This is not to suggest that they are inherently difficult to reproduce. Lyric lines often feature a mixture of syncopation and places where the melody lands on dominant beats of the bar. The repetition of any syncopated phrases or sections still makes the songs relatively easy to sing for those who are familiar with current western popular music genres.

Riches (2010) notes that Hillsong’s lyrics, though initially quite Pentecostal—that is to say, contained a focus on the Holy Spirit’s engagement with the believer—progressively moved towards theological ecumenicalism (169). Again,
in conversations with Steve McPherson (p/c to the author, July 2014), this was apparently a strategic move in recognition of the increasingly wider ecumenical interest in the CCS of Hillsong towards the late 1990s/early 2000s. With this in mind, it is not surprising that some of their most successful CCS are reworked hymns (‘Cornerstone’), or defining encapsulations of Christian tenets (‘I Believe (The Creed)’). However, from an alternative perspective, one of their most recent hits, ‘Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)’, has only one Godhead title reference, besides the divine ‘You/Your’, and it is to the ‘Spirit’. Furthermore, their most recent album’s title track, ‘Open Heaven/River Wild’ (Crocker and Sampson 2015), is unapologetically Pentecostal, although it does avoid the word ‘baptism’ in relation to the Holy Spirit. It seems that in recent times the juggernaut of Hillsong Music allows it to be less conciliatory to possible denominational sensitivities, or perhaps, that those sensitivities are less pertinent in our present age.

Hillsong, consciously or otherwise, made another strategic move when they allowed the youth band, under the direction of Reuben Morgan (Riches 2010: 114), to develop their own musical sound, in the context of CCS and record albums. Just as the initial Hillsong worship had targeted a younger demographic than traditional church music, so Hillsong United targeted another generation of young Christians. More guitar-driven and percussive, with garage rock and grunge elements (Riches 2010: 132), these releases appealing to a younger audience afforded the brand (Riches and Wagner 2013) a strength it could not have had with a single ‘sound’. Hillsong again replicated this generational shift by releasing Hillsong Young & Free in 2012, featuring more electronically-driven, dance-style songs. ‘Alive’ (King and Pappas 2012) from Young and Free’s first album now appears in the most recent CCLI top songs list. Moreover, because Hillsong kept each of these musical offerings under its brand, rather than championing individual artists, they hedged for the potential loss of key songwriters/worship leaders from the Hillsong Music fold. Geoff Bullock, the initial driver and developer of Hillsong Music, was effectively replaced by Darlene Zschech in 1995. Zschech, as a worship leader, was succeeded by Joel Houston, Reuben Morgan and Brooke Ligertwood (née Fraser), and even more recently by Ben Fielding, Matt Crocker, Taya Smith, and others. In this way, the longevity of the Hillsong Music brand lasted well beyond the average popular music band or artist (Riches and Wagner 2013).

The extra-musical, musical and lyrical elements, mentioned above, all contribute to Hillsong’s dominance and endurance in the CCS genre in Australia. The next section explores international CCS on the CCLI charts in comparison to those of Hillsong.

International songs in the CCLI charts

In many ways, the internationally-sourced CCS that appear on the CCLI charts share many features with those of Hillsong. They are all promoted through significant cross- or non-denominational platforms. Chris Tomlin’s songs are featured at the Passion Conferences in the USA. Matt Redman’s and Tim Hughes’ songs are featured at the Soul Survivor events in the UK. These artists also engage in conscious stage/platform-sharing activities, authorizing their own place within the CCS genre, and reinforcing the place of those to whom they give prominence (Thornton 2016: 168–69). Hillsong has had all of the aforementioned songwriters/worship leaders as guest artists at their conference, and these invitations have been reciprocated. Harmonically, melodically and rhythmically, the more recently written international CCS on the list have similar features to those of Hillsong. They share similar harmonic structures such as the repeated patterns of some combination of chords I, IV, V and vi, and are constructed with melodic configurations that are repetitive and intervallically simple while rhythmically interesting. Structurally, most songs have multiple verses (no more than four), a chorus, and a bridge, although for some of the UK songwriters aligned with traditional churches this is not the case.

Matt Redman’s songs, for example, often contain elements of traditional hymns. His songs often include a greater word count, or perhaps more hymn-like song structures, or melodic features. Such a writing style is to be expected given his history with, and connection to, the Church of England. These features are even more closely aligned to traditional hymnody in the ‘new’ hymns of Stuart Townend.18 Despite the fact that Pentecostals are the second largest attenders of church in Australia (McCrindle 2014), Catholics being the largest, the combined number of Anglicans, Baptists, Uniting, Presbyterian, and other mainline denominations, contribute to these hymn-like CCS featuring on the CCS top songs lists. With this in mind, Redman, Hughes and Townend all contribute to the historically contested space between popular music oriented CCS and traditional hymns (Dawn 1999, 1995; Dawn and Taylor 2003; Hamilton 1999). Hillsong have only more recently engaged with this space, as they originally wrote specifically for, and as an expression of, the contemporary pentecostal-charismatic worship context.

CCS that appear on the CCLI charts are those that have to one degree or another transcended denominational boundaries. As mentioned above, sometimes that is through finding a musical compromise between historical church worship traditions (hymns) and those emerging from pentecostal-charismatic persuasions. Chris Tomlin, who has three songs on the latest charts, accomplished

18. His songs ‘How Deep The Father’s Love’ and ‘In Christ Alone’ are both in the top 25 list.

Hillsong’s continued reign

this initially through simplicity of musical content, and theologically rich and ecumenical lyrics, in his song ‘How Great Is Our God’. This was followed by his version of ‘Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)’, which again found an audience across diverse expressions of Christianity. Finally, ‘Our God’ was a co-write with Matt Redman and others, and thus had the commitment of each writer and in turn a global promotion through their respective platforms.

Observations and propositions

As already noted, Hillsong Conference has played a key role in the propagation of Hillsong Music within the CCS genre. While artists in other popular music genres might also rely on key music festivals such as Tamworth’s Country Music Festival, or the Melbourne International Jazz Festival, to connect with their market, they have to share those platforms with their competition. That is to say, most musical festivals have multiple artists. Hillsong Conference is a, if not the, key festival in Australia for the CCS genre, yet it features only one music producer, and is run by that producer, admittedly with rotating international guests.

As significant as Hillsong Conference has been for Hillsong Music, other promotional fronts have been developing, such as tours. Over the last ten years, Hillsong United has toured extensively, promoting the Hillsong brand. One of the culminations of this practice was The I Heart Revolution: With Hearts As One music DVD (2008) and documentary DVD/Blu-ray (2010) featuring the band playing across different nations around the world. Their international fame led to a deal with Warner Bros. and Alcon Entertainment for a documentary film—Hillsong: Let Hope Rise—that, although delayed due to contractual complications (Warren 2016), was finally released in cinemas on 16 September 2016 (USA).

In the April 2015 reporting period, Hillsong had six songs in Brazil’s top songs list, five in the USA, four in Canada, and three in the UK. Hillsong’s influence in the USA, in particular, has been steadily growing. At first, it was with Darlene Zschech: the female Australian worship leader who wrote the ‘famous’ song ‘Shout To The Lord’. The fact that she was female was celebrated among the often male-dominated field, and the ‘uniqueness’ of her Australian nationality no doubt also contributed. Her song, ‘Shout To The Lord’, became such an outstanding success that it was featured on American Idol in 2008, is still in the top 50 of the CCLI USA charts 22 years after release, and has been extensively covered by major worship artists in the USA including Don Moen, Randy Travis, Kevin Prosch, Michael W. Smith and even rock/metal band Skillet.

As significant as ‘Shout To The Lord’ has been internationally, Hillsong has won numerous Billboard, and Gospel Music Association (GMA)’s Dove awards for many of their songs and albums. ‘Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)’ won several awards

between 2014–2016 and was ‘streamed, downloaded, or otherwise acquired over 75 million times’ (Hillsong Church 2016a) that year. ‘Mighty To Save’ won GMA’s best worship song in 2009. Hillsong United has won Billboard and Dove awards for each of their past three albums. Had these songs been released under the individual worship leaders who wrote them or artists who featured in the recordings, it would be difficult to identify the overarching influence of Hillsong. However, by maintaining the Hillsong brand (Wagner 2013) over any of their artists, Hillsong remains the identified creator and ‘owner’ of these CCS.

Conclusion

Hillsong’s dominance within the CCS genre in Australia is unique in several ways, as this article has explored. It has managed to maintain its preeminent status for over 25 years, which alone is remarkable. No other producer of CCS has come close to the influence of Hillsong Music on Australia’s contemporary Christian worship scene; it is not only Hillsong’s prominence, but the degree of that prominence that is noteworthy. In the broader scope of Australian popular music, here is one of the few genres in which an Australian producer dominates its charts. Unlike the general Australian pop music charts where Australian artists are a minority, international artists vie for equality with Australians in CCS charts. This article has sought to establish the reasons for the outlier, Hillsong Music, in its genre when compared to the broader Australian music industry. The promotion of Australian music to Australians is of relevance to all local music producers, and further research could compare this sector with others across the national musical landscape to examine the correlations or idiosyncrasies between them.

This article has focused on Hillsong CCS’ numerous and compelling extramusical qualities which account for Hillsong’s pre-eminence in the genre. They appeared relatively early on the Australian scene for this still-emerging genre in the 1980s. They strategically promoted their songs through contexts with influence well beyond their local church: Hillsong Conference, Youth Alive, AOG/ACC state and national events, and more recently, tours. As a church, they experienced significant and sustained growth over the past three decades which helped to sustain and promote their role as the dominant producer of CCS. They annually released albums at Hillsong Conference, maximizing the number of churches that would be quickly familiarized with key songs. They allowed for new generations of Hillsong songwriters/worship leaders to release albums that were differentiated stylistically from that which had come before, yet maintained the Hillsong brand, which in turn, expanded their audience.

There were also musical and lyrical dimensions to Hillsong Music’s success. Their early albums were less polished with raw, rock elements (Riches 2010: 123)
Hillsong’s continued reign

compared to parallel releases from CCS producers in the USA and UK, while still being professionally produced. The songs were in many cases rigorously field-tested, through use in Hillsong worship services, before making their way to an album, and thus, were congregationally appropriate. Their CCS were simple enough to be played by amateur musicians, while also presenting a challenge through various riffs or instrumental lines for those who wanted to faithfully reproduce the recorded versions. The melodies were repetitive with predictable intervals, but this was not a negative feature: it made them more easily singable by congregations on their first or second hearing. The lyrical content was progressively ecumenical, stating broadly accepted Christian truths, while also being quite personally oriented (Thornton 2016: 258–59), and colloquially relevant.

Newer Australian CCS producers have begun to appear on CCLI charts including Planetshakers and Citipointe. Moreover, YouTube and other music streaming sites have done much for the democratization of musicians and songwriters across all genres including CCS. At the same time, the dominance of Hillsong Music, its protected platforms, and its continued growth and church-planting expansion, create a weighty challenge for any other Australian CCS producer to replicate in the near future. Their continued dominance in the genre, which now extends for almost three decades, deserves further academic scrutiny and engagement both within its genre/scene contexts, and within the broader frame of Australian popular music.

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