
Pro Rege

Volume 3 | Number 4

Article 9

June 1975

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Recommended Citation

Van Zee, Alwyn (1975) "Changes in Winning Music," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 3: No. 4, 28 - 32.
Available at: http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol3/iss4/9

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

Changes in Winning Music

by Alwyn Van Zee



Mr. Van Zee, from Harrison, South Dakota, has completed his junior year at Dordt and is majoring in Communications. During the 1974-75 school year, he was the host for the Christian contemporary music program "Illumination" on KDCR, the Dordt College Educational FM radio station.

Those of us who grew up, or didn't quite grow up, during the sixties like to spend a great deal of time discussing that decade, perhaps an amount of time all out of proportion to its real significance. But it was a fascinating time to be growing up. The panaceas and paradoxes it produced for us may explain why we like to look back at it with a mixture of nostalgia and suspicious curiosity. The music it produced was its most characteristic feature. It has goaded us Christians to re-examine some of our own approaches to music.

First, let's set the stage by going back a few years even before 1960. Radios and

phonographs came into common use after World War II because of a rising standard of living. They were still relatively bulky instruments, and the disc recordings of the time were fragile and their fidelity was poor. Then, several things happened that radically changed the nature and output of popular music, and made that output more accessible to younger people.

The use of magnetic tape recording made the production process faster and easier. A new type of disc recording was developed and released that was cheaper, lighter, and more durable: the 45 RPM record. Later, an electronic device called the transistor made it possible to produce music machines (radios and phonographs) that were lighter, more portable, and less expensive. Along with this, the standard of living was still rising rapidly. Parents became more liberal with the family budgets and allowed kids to use the family car regularly (a private use of the car radio), or they allowed their children to own small, cheap radios over which parents had no control. Kids were given the same freedom with phonographs and with records as their elders because the money was there, and most of these things weren't that expensive anymore.

We might speculate that some observant eyes began to notice there were all these radios and phonographs and all that money in the hands of these kids, and that there were a lot more kids out there who might want to own radios, phonographs, and records if they knew that these things could produce the kind of music they really liked. Maybe there were no such observant eyes and there was probably no grand conspiracy involved, but we do know that the factors that made it possible for the kids to own and control the use of these music machines also made it possible for a form of music to emerge that was typically "kids' music", or "youth music", or whatever. The developments have been so fast and furious since then that musicologists haven't been able to sort out their terms in describing it. It's been most commonly called "rock music."

It was specifically designed for youth. It was energetic. It required a great deal of stamina to keep up with -- so much, in fact, that most adults who heard it were repulsed. The adult reaction was as completely natural, as the kids' affinity for the new sounds. In some ways the music was like hide and seek and jumping rope and recess-time softball -- it was a way to let off steam. What many adults also became concerned with, however, was the emphasis of the lyrics. Many adults considered the emphasis frivolous, cheap and even dangerous. The lyrics of "rock" concerned themselves with the feelings and thoughts that kids were desperately concerned with, but that many adults had long ago forgotten or had long since sublimated: the terror and beauty of first love, the frustration of acceptance by peer groups, the excitements of newly developed skills like driving cars, sailing boats, and riding motorcycles. The music became a cultural expression of the state of being young. It was a musical movement that was in many ways right for its time. It allowed youth to use the technological and social developments of its time to communicate with itself and with older generations the spirit of what

it means to be young and naive, and fired up with anticipation for what life could offer. The energy and exuberance of the music made it legitimately and exclusively music for the young.

But as the texture of "rock" developed, some of the adult fears and criticisms of it began to justify themselves. Producing rock records for adolescents proved to be a lucrative business and also a quick way to get into the headlines. The business attracted pied pipers who in many cases were downright irresponsible. The money they had made and the influence they had gained caused some of the young millionaires to think they were entitled to make broad statements on politics and social behavior. Happily, some of the influence the young rock artists wielded helped speed up needed social reforms, especially in the United States. Other causes that they pushed, however, turned out to be emotionally and socially destructive. Some groups pushed drugs, inside and outside their music. For others, it was parent-hate, birth hate, and still others pushed illicit sex. The variety of causes and counter-causes matched the personalities and backgrounds of the musicians themselves. Jim Morrison of "the Doors" yelled, "We want the world, and we want it now." The "we" referred to youth in general, but he didn't seem to take into account the fact that some youth didn't want the world but wanted to shut themselves off from it with communal living. Others were content to "shoot horse" and "drop acid" in the back room and create their own universe in their heads. The whole thing was a schizoid, turbulent confusion which, in the middle sixties was termed a "movement." Youth music, that is "rock," and a common youthfulness held the "movement" together to its culmination at Woodstock in 1969.

But then events at Altamant (a Hell's Angels policed, Rolling Stones concert at which several people were killed) and several rock festival fiascoes later began to provide hints that "young people" weren't

the homogeneous block of single-mindedness that younger and older people once thought it was. Since then, groups like Three Dog Night and Gladys Knight and the Pips have come out against drug usage. Other groups are still advocating "the flight." In other areas, as well, the ideological divergence of "rock" has become apparent. Through all of this splintering and polarization, though, rock music has survived as a loosely amalgamated form, because the essence of rock music is neither moral nor ideological as with all music. It is rather emotional and creatively instinctive.

Consider the developments in distributional and promotional techniques in the recording and communications industries, the technological advances in the production of disc and tape recordings and sound reproduction devices like phonographs and radios, and also consider the economic capabilities at present. We have the ability at this point in created time, to put to use a potent cultural force, the energy and optimism of being young -- Christianly.

The opportunity is already being taken. That's what KDCR's "Illumination" is all about. The music being used on Illumination is being produced by people who have a stake in, and concern for, the Kingdom of God, and a rock fancier's place in the Kingdom. "Jesus Rock" or "Gospel Rock" or the variety of other names by which it is identified has already set some promising precedents. Larry Norman, Andrew Crouch and the Disciples, Danny Lee and the Children of Truth, and Paul Stookey were some of the first individuals and groups to use rock music. The music introduced by these performers was not so innovative musically as it was a new combination of Christian philosophical and religious lyrical thought and the rock idiom. Musically they depended on trends set by other performers and other tastes outside Jesus Rock, with the exception of Paul Stookey who used a style based on English folk music that he had developed along with Peter Yarrow and Mary Travers

when the three were still together as Peter, Paul, and Mary. Stookey's two chart singles, "Wedding Song" and "Hymn" did a lot to start the movement originally. Off the charts, but quite popular with younger people within Christian circles, were two songs by Larry Norman, "Walking Backwards Down the Stairs" and "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," that had a pioneering effect. These were some of the songs and people that first began to delve into what could be musically called Classic Rock with a "Jesus emphasis". But about six years before "Wedding Song", something happened that perhaps had more to do with getting Jesus Rock started than anything within Jesus Rock itself. World Wide Pictures put out a movie in 1964, called "The Restless Ones" and Ralph Carmichael composed the score. The movie's music was a departure in that it was upbeat and quite a bit more adrenalizing than anything Christians had recorded up to that time. If Crouch, Norman, Lee, and Stookey can be called the fathers of Jesus Rock, Ralph Carmichael would have to be, as Broadcasting Magazine termed him, grandfather of "Jesus Rock."

Some music surfaced outside the usual grouping of Christian artists that also had an inspiring effect. The Edwin Hawkins Singers did "Oh Happy Day" and Ocean did "Put Your Hand in the Hand." And then, of course, came the controversial "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell."

Starting with a typical rock sound that provided an intergeneric identification, Jesus Rock has largely been a lyrical emphasis rather than a musical one. Jesus musicians have ventured into "untamed" areas of music already, though. The vocal harmonic qualities of the 2nd Chapter of Acts are qualities that haven't been heard before. Three women, making up The Goodwill Industry, are something different in rock music, too. Lazarus, one of the most highly developed and lyrically sophisticated of the Jesus groups, has a sound similar to America and the Eagles but one that is lighter and more sensitively modu-

lated. Lazarus has climbed to the apex of Gospel Rock so far with "Warmth of Your Eyes," a song that is, quite frankly, Christianly sexual. Sonlight and Agape have borrowed freely from the jazz idiom and transformed it into a Rock interpretation. Just recently, Andrae Crouch released a new LP on which he dabbles a bit in Ragtime. To say that these various artists have used other materials isn't secondranking them at all. All of Rock borrows heavily from other parent forms like blues, country, and various ethnic folk backgrounds. Rock, of all the musical forms throughout history, is perhaps the most wildly eclectic because it has been exposed to a so much larger volume of influences. And if it's true that eclecticism is the mother of invention, as it sometimes is, then Rock may also be the most wildly prolific.

What follows does not necessarily apply to Jesus groups mentioned previously (out of descretion, no names will be mentioned), but admittedly much of what has surfaced in Jesus music so far is of decidedly inferior quality. Some groups and writers seem to have no qualms about stealing themes from already existing material almost phrase for phrase and note for note. Sometimes the production quality of recordings suffers because of a lack of adequate funding or a shortage of properly trained technical personnel. There are lyrical problems. Some writers try to pack a whole sermon into one song, with an end result that is neither artistic nor communicative. Some groups' repertoire is almost exclusively evangelistic without realizing that conversion isn't the only thing in the world that needs doing. And some performers are just plain lousy musicians, a condition that most of us certainly could identify with but few of us can spend time or money on. But they're all, every one of them, pioneers in a brand new field of expression, and for that reason, deserve our attention. Patience and confidence are useful commodities for all of us at this point.

New material emerging in the last year has exhibited a craftsmanship and imagina-

tion that is remarkable, on the other hand, Petra impressed a good many people at a concert in Northwest Iowa with its meticulous mastery of hard Rock and progressive Blues. James Ward is a top notch lyricist and songwriter. He has an amazing eye for word's connotative nuances and draws on a wide variety of experience for his images. Listen to "Creation" or "Roll the Wheel" as examples. According to the rumor, Jimmy Hendriks was once asked who was the world's second-best guitarist (Hendriks, the best, taken as given). He said that it was a guy nobody had ever heard of named Phil Keagy. At the time Keagy was with a group known as Glass Harp. Since then he has released an album entitled "What a Day." He's a Christian. Guitar Player Magazine listed him as one of the masters of flattop technique. These are all promising signs and they bode well for the future of Jesus Rock.

That future doesn't merely depend upon the quality and quantity of new music being produced but also on the willingness of Christian broadcasters to bring that music to the attention of the public. KDCR's Programming Committee has shown admirable foresight in that regard, but that foresight hasn't been displayed at many Christian stations. Part of the elaborate social and economic system that made and continues to make Rock music so popular is the function of "Top Forty" and "Progressive" radio stations using new music as entertainment for their listeners and at the same time providing free exposure for the recording companies' products. Christian broadcasting organizations will have to play that same role if Jesus Rock is to be a viable cultural force. As a matter of fact, the distributors and manufacturers of "sacred music" (a rather inaccurate term) as well as the mammoth recording companies depend almost exclusively on radio to let people know what's available—a situation in which companies like Word, Inc., John T. Benson Pub., Zondervan Corp., or Sunrise Mercantile Co. have been at a distinct disadvantage because there are very few

radio stations willing to use music that has anything to do with Christianity.

Another factor upon which the success of Jesus Rock depends is whether people within the community of Christians are willing to spend the music-buying dollars on records and tapes that support their own cultural and religious interests or on material that doesn't. Christian musicians have to make a living as well as anyone else, and record sales is, by and large, their main means.

Finally, a measure of good old moral support couldn't hurt. Sometimes the beat and volume of Rock tends to be a bit frightening for older people, which isn't surprising. The slow composure of traditional hymns tend sometimes to be a bit boring for young people, as well. There's probably an analogy to these reactions in how fast we feel like running when we're seventeen, and how fast when we're fifty. Of course, the differences and similarities between traditional hymns and Rock aren't as simple as that. There are bound to be things about Jesus Rock that older people will come to like a great deal, just as there are hymns that young people are fond of. We Christians sometimes don't have a lot of confidence in our own talents and insights. That may be part of the reason why we've never had a reputation for getting along with each other. We have a rough time

convincing ourselves of the quality of our mutual outlook and the volume of our abilities. There is a multitude of talent within the body of Christians that needs to be cultivated and harvested. We have the capability to "sing a new song" and, indeed, we've been told to do so.

Some of Ken Medema's lyrics read, "You can't go back to the music of yesterday," which is maybe something of an overstatement. We can, and indeed have gone back almost consistently. But now, with the advent of Jesus Rock or "Christian contemporary music" it is nice to know that there will be new songs to look forward to—new songs that praise and glorify God as well as test the temper and timbre of our own times. These songs will be winning songs. The Christian cause is a winning cause. Rock sage Bob Dylan's words may have anticipated that:

Come writers and critics who
prophesy with your pen,
Then keep your eyes wide. The
chance won't come again.
And don't speak too soon, for the
wheel's still in spin,
And there's no telling who that
it's namin'.
'Cause the looser now will be
later to win,
And the times they are a-changin'.