

“Rock-a My Soul is a most engaging handbook for all whose faith is intertwined with popular music. In friendly prose for seekers of all kinds, David Nantais shows that concert halls and music collections are the postmodern manglers where new and enduring spiritual identities are being born. And to this scene of new birth he comes bearing guitars, drums, bass—and a vivid appreciation for the importance of mystery and mystical experience. An impassioned traveling companion!”

— Tom Beaudoin
Associate Professor of Theology
Fordham University

“A tension between the worldly and the spiritual has existed in rock ‘n’ roll since its foundations in African-American spirituals, gospel, and blues music. But for Catholic drummer Nantais, the very music often feared by religious folk has served as both balm and outlet to help him understand God. In this short, first-person musing, Nantais argues that ‘theology can be done through music,’ encouraging Christians to see rock ‘n’ roll as a ‘mode of theological expression.’ Setting aside contemporary Christian music (which he says is not the only way to marry rock and religion), he argues that mainstream rock has many virtues: community building and transcendent elements, meditative qualities, expression of emotion. Nantais admits to some less edifying aspects of rock (e.g., segregated crowds at rock music venues, ties to consumerism). He also chooses not to address a major sticking point for some—offensive lyrics—and so may not be able to convince every reader of rock’s merits. Despite that, his enthusiasm for mix tapes and chord progressions is infectious. Christians will learn to find God in a rock concert, and lovers of all things drum and guitar will find spiritual validation.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“David Nantais is, hands down, one of the best young writers on Christian spirituality: inviting, inventive, and insightful. In *Rock-a My Soul*, he offers a fascinating look at how rock music, often thought to be a threat to faith, can actually support and nourish one’s spiritual life. If you’re a music fan, Nantais, a rock musician himself, will show you how the music you love can draw you closer to God. If you’re a believer, Nantais will serve as an experienced guide to modes of experiencing God that you might never have considered. And if you’re a music fan and a believer, well, then this book will, as the band said, rock you.”

— James Martin, SJ

Author of *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything*

ROCK-A MY SOUL

An Invitation to Rock Your Religion

David Nantais



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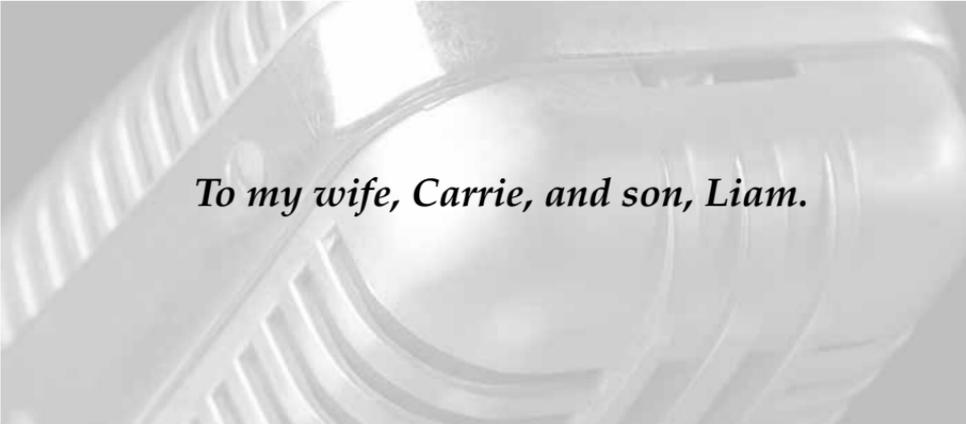
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To my wife, Carrie, and son, Liam.



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David Nantais
Detroit, Michigan
August 2010

INTRODUCTION

For over five decades, it has been labeled “the Devil’s music” and has been accused of corrupting children. But rock and roll music emerged from religious music and, I contend, still maintains close ties with religion and spirituality up to the present day. It has also served as a conduit to spiritual experiences for its fans and acted as an important aspect of their life stories. Rock music deserves a serious theological analysis in order for us to appreciate its role in the spiritual and religious lives of hundreds of thousands of people. I hope to contribute to the dialogue between rock music and religion, and help others understand the significance of this relationship. First, though, I will need to clarify some concepts and terminology in order to help the reader understand what this project is about and why I believe it is important.

To begin, the question will inevitably arise, what exactly is rock music? This question has become more difficult to



answer, and I for one do not believe there is an ideal response. So many different types of music now fall under the “rock music” umbrella, and new subgenres are being developed all the time. While it seems a bit cliché, some have suggested that rock and roll is a lifestyle or a worldview rather than a specific category of music. Rock expresses freedom from oppressive social mores. When society dictates that men should wear their hair short or women should act like “ladies,” the rock and roll ethos resists by encouraging long hair, earrings, and the expression of primal emotions. This is a contemporary expression of a rock and roll ideology, but it is grounded in the history of this music. “The first African captives sold into slavery in the New World in the early 1600s carried with them an agonized inspiration that would become the cornerstone for virtually every American music expression to follow.”¹ Rock and roll is a child of the black spirituals, songs that were drawn from the horrible experiences of suffering, oppression, and pain endured in slavery. This history, which I will touch upon in chapter 1, is very important for understanding and interpreting rock and roll music.

There may be some confusion regarding what I am trying to accomplish with this project. Is this a theology of rock music? Is this a spirituality of rock music? Is this a Catholic Christian looking at the complex culture of rock music through a religious lens and describing what he sees?

¹ Davin Seay with Mary Neely, *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 15.

My answer to these questions is “Yes!” But I hope that in the end, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I have written several articles for primarily religious publications attempting to present religious interpretations of the world of popular culture, which includes rock music, to those who have difficulty seeing anything good in it. I present six of these pieces in chapter 5. Since these projects were expressions of my religious interpretations, they inevitably held some of my own personal bias. This will be true of this book as well. I am expressing my own religious and spiritual views about rock and roll music, which will be different than others’ views.

Rock fans know that the music they enjoy is also an avenue to special memories, experiences, and imaginations that are uniquely their own. I am no different in this regard. At the same time, however, I hope that by drawing on a variety of sources, perspectives, and critiques, I am able to provide a general method for those who are fans of rock and roll music to see the spiritual and religious qualities in the music they enjoy. I also hope that this project helps those who are not rock fans, but sit on the periphery as casual observers, to understand a bit more about rock music and how it carries a variety of meanings beyond the music. I do *not* intend this book to be a vehicle for rock proselytizing—in other words, I will not attempt to convince the reader that the rock and roll musicians and bands that I like are the best. I will be using examples drawn from the music I love, but this is just to help readers understand specific points I am attempting to make.

While I do address the topic of “Christian rock” throughout (especially in chapters 1 and 3), this subgenre of rock music is not the focal point of this book. I have disclosed my views about Christian rock previously,² and I will explore some of the theological implications of this music further, but I am trying to approach the topic of rock music and religion from a different perspective that is informed by my Catholic background. While there certainly are Catholic bands that fall under the Christian rock umbrella, this music emerged from a distinctly Evangelical Protestant tradition and has retained this cast about it up to the present day. I do not wish to trash Christian rock, but in my attempt to promote a different view of how rock music and religious practice can be integrated, I do present critiques of the theological assumptions that *propel* Christian rock. Ever in front of me is the challenge to help illuminate what theologian and musician Jeremy Begbie believes is sorely lacking in the area of religion and music: “Simply put: music is being grounded firmly in a universal God-given order, and thus it is seen as a means through which we are enabled to live more fully in the world that God has made and with the God who made it.”³

Next, this project is not comprised of analyses of rock music lyrics. This is a perspective that, I believe, has been

² David Nantais, “What Would Jesus Listen To?” *America* (May 21, 2007): 22–24.

³ Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 94.

overdone, and while it serves a purpose, it is not the direction in which I wish to go. Lyrical content is an important ingredient in rock music for a variety of reasons, and deserves some attention. For much of its history, however, when rock music has been lambasted for corrupting children, the focus is primarily on scandalous lyrics. Judging music based on a superficial interpretation of lyrics is, I believe, much too simplistic and loses any sense of irony, symbolism, and poetic license that the writer is attempting to utilize. "Songs that mention 'Jesus' are good, but lyrics about sex are bad." This all-too-common perspective, without any grounding in context, does not appreciate the complexity of themes and concepts that a lot of rock music addresses, and does so oftentimes in a very sophisticated way.

In his 1993 book *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Robert Walser deftly explains the problems associated with deriving an "objective" meaning for song lyrics. He posits that sociologists who tried studying heavy metal music but were not "insiders," meaning they were not fans of the music they analyzed, often attempted a simplistic popular culture analysis. They made the mistake of reducing the meaning of music to the lyrics, ironically neglecting the music itself, and then assumed a literal interpretation of the lyrics. "This is called 'content' analysis, and it assumes that an outside reader will interpret lyrics just as an insider would; it also assumes a linear communication model, where artists encode meanings that are transmitted to listeners, who then decipher

them, rather than a dialectical environment in which meanings are multiple, fluid, and negotiated.”⁴ After almost three decades of rock fandom and a lifetime as a Christian, I believe that I am enough of an insider to posit a viable perspective about rock and its ties to religion and spiritual practices.

While it may be beyond the scope of this project, I am also intrigued by how theology can be done *through* music. In other words, it is possible that there are characteristics of music that can enable a theologian to alter her perspective and comprehend religious doctrines in a different way, or to apply musical ways of arrangement to theological notions. For an example, I turn to Jeremy Begbie, upon whom I rely for help several times in this book. Begbie recalled a story about the great scholar of the New Testament, N. T. Wright, who worked with a composer named Paul Spicer to create a piece of music for an Easter festival. Once he heard the completed piece of music, Wright, one who has devoted his professional life to studying the New Testament, discovered that he was able to derive more meaning from the resurrection narrative in the Gospel of John than he ever had previously. Begbie quotes an astounded Wright: “My reading, translation of and meditation on Scripture had not shown me all that I now think I

⁴ Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 21.

see there.”⁵ Something within the music that Spicer wrote awakened a new perspective within Wright, or provided a new lens through which he could view John’s gospel. This possibility for music to inform theology is an academic project beyond the purpose of this book, but it is something in which I am very interested and would like to mention in the hope of sparking discussions between readers, musicians, and theologians.

As I discussed previously, one cannot discuss rock and roll music without addressing issues of race, especially when elucidating the history of this genre as a derivative of black spirituals and the blues. I attempt to do this in chapter 1 and delve further into issues of race and rock music in chapter 4 under the theme of social justice. Why is it that contemporary rock music is primarily made by and marketed to a white audience? The roots of rock and roll are firmly grounded in the African American community. There is a long history up to the present day of this community not only contributing to rock music but also breaking new ground and revolutionizing it.

The advent of music television, especially MTV and VH1, and the use of rock and roll in blockbuster movies has changed how we listen to this music. Additionally, over the past couple of decades some well-known rock songs are used in commercials to market products to a particular constituency. This integration of rock with

⁵ Jeremy Begbie, “The Theological Potential of Music,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 33:1 (Fall 2003): 139.

images and products influences not only how we “hear” music in the present but it also has an effect on the memories of music that we love. Psychiatrist and popular author Oliver Sacks, a self-proclaimed atheist, admits that when he sees a menorah in December, old Hanukkah songs play in his mind.⁶ There is an emotional connection between the visual and the audio—what we hear and see are often difficult to separate. This phenomenon could be harmless or it could be used by a wily ad agency to manipulate me into purchasing certain products. In chapter 4 on rock music and social justice, I raise this issue and also discuss some of the effects it has on a rock fan’s personal identity.

I have been a fan of rock music since I was a young child. I remember listening to Detroit radio in 1981 and hearing The Romantics’ song “What I Like About You” charge at me through the speakers like a bull in Pamplona, pushing my primitive radio/cassette player to its limits. I found the experience simultaneously exciting and dangerous. I recall being extremely self-conscious after the song had concluded as I realized that I had shouted out “Hey, Uh-huh” at the chorus with the lead singer. These lyrics were complete gibberish, but they made so much sense to me. They were shouts of release and freedom, and while I could not at that time appreciate the sexual tension communicated in that song, it felt good to shout, to give voice to whatever nascent angst I harbored in my young

⁶ Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 35.

soul. I wondered if anyone in the house had heard me, and whether I would get in trouble for engaging in such pagan revelry. This was, after all, not church music. But it was definitely spiritual music, and the experience of listening to rock music on that day and since has changed my life. In chapter 6, I share my spiritual/musical autobiography and elaborate more on how rock music has been a spiritual exercise for me.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the importance of the spirituality of St. Ignatius Loyola for help in writing this book. As a former Jesuit, my life is still very much informed by the *Spiritual Exercises*, as is obvious from the numerous times I utilize their wisdom in this book. Ignatius's "mission statement" can be found in his "Principle and Foundation":

Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for the human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they are created.⁷

Simply put, rock and roll music is part of God's creation. It is a gift that, I believe, can be used in spiritual and religious contexts, and can help people praise, reverence, and serve God. For those who continue reading this book, I hope you

⁷ George E. Ganss, SJ, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), 32.

find it intellectually stimulating and that it encourages you to examine the music you love and to seek God there.

Long Live Rock!
A.M.D.G.

Chapter 1

ROCK AND ROLL'S “PAGAN SPIRITS”*

On the evening of June 5, 1956, a young and upcoming rock and roll singer named Elvis Presley appeared on the Milton Berle show. Teenagers loved watching him perform on television, but parents and culture commentators were less than thrilled. It was not so much Elvis’s singing that bothered them as it was the style in which he performed. While singing, he gyrated his hips in a suggestive and sexual manner. In their June 23, 1956, issue of the Catholic magazine *America*, the Jesuit priest editors did not contain their outright disgust for Elvis, his music, and his controversial live performance. “If his ‘entertainment’ could be confined to records,” they opined, “it might not be too bad



* Parts of this chapter first appeared in David Nantais, “What Would Jesus Listen To?” *America* (May 21, 2007): 22–24.

2 *Rock-a My Soul*

an influence on the young, but unfortunately Presley makes personal appearances."¹ The priest writers went on to quote negative reviews of Mr. Presley's television appearance from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *New York Times*. But it was the sons of St. Ignatius who struck the most wrenching blow with this closing statement: "If the agencies (TV and other) would stop handling such nauseating stuff, all the Presleys of our land would soon be swallowed up in the oblivion they deserve."² This incident was not the last time that religion clashed with rock and roll.

It seems that music and Christianity have had a tense relationship since immediately after Jesus walked out of the tomb. By the time rock and roll music burst onto the scene, Christianity already had a long and rigid tradition of condemning various types of music for over nineteen centuries. In the second century BCE, Christians were suspicious of music because of its associations with pagan worship rites. At that time and since, music was also thought to be dangerously appealing to the flesh and the "lower passions," thus neglecting the sanctity of the human spirit.³ The desire to dichotomize spirit and flesh has been a strong motivating force working to suppress music and its potential power. While the reasons for condemnation

¹ The editors of *America* magazine, "Beware Elvis Presley" in "Current Comment" (June 23, 1956): 294.

² *Ibid.*, 295.

³ Richard Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 15.

change over the centuries, at the core of them all seems to be fear—fear of music's power, fear of sexuality/flesh, and fear of "the other," especially African Americans.

Why would music cause people to fear? In this chapter, I would like to explore some of the reasons why Christianity feared to embrace various types of music for so long, even to the present day. Theologians Tom Beaudoin and Brian Robinette, writing in an article in *America* magazine about rock music, point out that "too much Christian writing on the subject has been negative and antagonistic, focusing more on sensational lyrics than on its religiously meaningful effects."⁴ My hope is to add a fresh voice to the dialogue about rock music and religion, and that my perspective will be a catalyst for further thought and discussion. To this end, I will examine some of the religious roots of rock and roll music and how its early practitioners tried to navigate their way through the inevitable tensions that arose between Christianity and rock music. Finally, I examine the phenomenon of Christian rock music, which has attempted to serve as a bridge or negotiator between rock music and Christianity. While its efforts are somewhat commendable, I conclude the chapter by suggesting that there are other ways to bring these two immense cultural forces to the table and perhaps even negotiate a peaceful harmony.

⁴ Tom Beaudoin and Brian Robinette, "Stairway to Heaven: Can You be Saved by Rock 'n' Roll?" *America* 201, no. 11 (October 26, 2009): 19.

Early Christian Views on Music

The great philosopher Plato was obviously not a Christian, as he was born over four centuries before Jesus walked the earth. But his work has had an enormous impact on Christianity, especially through its influence on St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. Plato actually wrote about music, but his perspective is hardly straightforward. He praises music for its potential to bring human beings' souls into harmony with one another. According to Jeremy Begbie, "In this way, music and morality become closely linked. According to the ancient Greek conception of 'ethos,' music, through its direct influence on the harmony of the soul, can influence the formation of good character."⁵ Plato's understanding of the human person, while he did not have the benefit of modern psychological science, does resonate in some important ways. He viewed music as a means for positive social behavior, community building, and bringing harmony to the *polis*, or the city. Music certainly can and has provided a means for bringing people together with common tastes to share their enjoyment with one another. It would be nice to think that music could also help one develop virtuous behavior. The influence of music on human behavior is a controversial subject. While it holds no facile answers, it is an issue to which I give attention throughout the book.

⁵ Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 80.

Plato could also be critical of music. Plato was skeptical of material reality. He believed in the "Forms," or that the ideal essence of everything existed in a distinct world. All of the things of the earth only participate in these Forms; we cannot grasp fully what anything is unless we focus on the Form of which it is an imitation. Understanding the Form means understanding the Truth. Music, too, is only good insofar as it participates in its ideal Form. Plato wondered whether music could sometimes lead its listeners astray, further and further away from the ideal and true Form.⁶ Plato also believed that while music could encourage harmony of the soul, it could also cause dissonance in the soul if it stirred up strong emotions that moved a person away from reason. He was especially critical of instrumental music in this regard. Lyrics, he believed, could keep a check on the music and direct the listener toward the higher passions.

Plato's critiques of music have had a lasting impact on Christianity for hundreds of years, due in large part to Christian thinkers who were greatly influenced by his philosophy. The dichotomy he set up between the material (world) and the Forms (spiritual) haunts Christianity even today. Suspicion of "worldly pleasures" is a common theme in some Catholic and Protestant circles, and it is cast over music among other sensual experiences. Plato's notion that music can encourage wild, uncivilized behavior has also created a legacy. The horrible massacre in 1999 at

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, left many people stunned and grasping for answers. How could these teenage boys commit such ghastly violence? Among the dozens of suggestions proffered was that the music to which the boys listened, in this case the shock-rock star Marilyn Manson, caused them to become murderers. This is, I believe, an overly simplistic explanation for what is a complex psychological, sociological, and spiritual problem. No one can deny the power of music to spark an emotional response, but complex human actions, I believe, cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect explanations.⁷

Saint Augustine also felt conflicted about music, especially the use of music in Christian liturgy. His mentor, St. Ambrose, had initiated the use of liturgical music in the Milanese church. Augustine was more cautiously reserved about liturgical music. He, like Plato, viewed music with a good dose of skepticism due to its appeal to “the flesh.” Theologian Richard Viladesau observes that Augustine “is attracted by the usefulness of song for raising the soul to God, but on the other hand he fears that its pleasures will entrap the soul in a lower order of beauty and prevent its ascent to the true Good.”⁸ Augustine is genuinely concerned for the human soul. If material reality gets too firm a grip on one’s soul, the result could be idolatry—replacing worship of the Creator with worship of creation. Insofar as music can direct the listener’s heart to God, it is helpful.

⁷ David Nantais, “CDs Don’t Kill People . . .,” *America* 182, no. 1 (January 1, 2000): 14–15.

⁸ Viladesau, 18.

But according to Augustine, it is not an art form that should be enjoyed for its own sake.

In *The Confessions*, arguably his most famous work, Augustine admits to experiencing both sides of the tug-of-war between the spirit and flesh. With regard specifically to music, Augustine writes that after he embraced Christianity, he found much consolation in liturgical music but not in the music per se. Rather, it was the words sung and presumably the holy thoughts the words conjured. There were times, Augustine admits, when he found himself enjoying the songs more than their subject. Augustine referred to these episodes as "sins" and added that once he realized the error of his ways, he wished to no longer hear any singing.⁹ For Augustine, anything that distracted a person from God could lead one to sin. Music must direct the heart, mind, and soul to God. If this does not happen, the fault is not so much in the music, according to Augustine, but rather in the intention of the listener. Music, then, could at times serve as the near occasion of sin. Augustine did not believe that the material world was evil, as he is sometimes characterized. But the material world for him had a purpose—to direct one to God. "His main concern is with our attitude, the attitude of the soul; we must love things, so to speak, 'toward God,' not for themselves."¹⁰

As Christianity spread throughout the world from the time of Augustine up through the Middle Ages, the Church embraced liturgical music much more. The memory of

⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Begbie, 86.

music being associated with pagan rituals faded rapidly, and when Latin became the universal language of Christian liturgy, music served as a way for the majority of the congregation to engage in a religious experience without having to understand the words the priest spoke.¹¹ It was from this historical backdrop that Thomas Aquinas wrote about music—a much different context than Augustine. Richard Viladesau highlights the primary difference: “First of all, he [Aquinas] rejects the Platonic division between spirit and flesh: Corporeal song can also be spiritual and can lead to spiritual devotion.”¹² This is a very important development in Christianity’s outlook regarding music. Aquinas did not deny that music could be abused—especially by being “overly theatrical” in a liturgical setting. But he begins with an affirmative stance about the use of music in Christian liturgy. Music focuses the people in the congregation on the power and majesty of the divine. In this regard, it is a useful worship aid and elicits powerful emotions in the listener—feelings of love and transcendence, which help the faithful reduce the gap between human and divine.

Aquinas believed that even if a worshiper in a congregation could not understand the words to a liturgical song, the song would still be fulfilling its purpose due to the intention of those singing it. This, according to Viladesau, is another important distinction between Augustine and Aquinas, which Thomas describes in an article in his

¹¹ Viladesau, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*

famous *Summa Theologiae*. "Even though Thomas cites Augustine as his authority and quotes him several times in the article, he ends up going far beyond Augustine in saying that singing has a valid place in worship, *even if the words cannot be understood*."¹³ If the person or persons singing the song are intending the music to praise God, then it can have a positive effect on the souls of the listeners, presumably since their holy intention would come across in other ways, such as the fervor and joy in their voices.

This is a vital point to which I will return, especially when I discuss the issue of Christian rock music, also called CCM—Contemporary Christian Music. CCM tends to overlook the importance of intention in a song and instead focuses on words as its distinctive trait. There is no way to distinguish a "secular" hard rock song from a Christian hard rock song except for the lyrical content. If intention—the singer's, the band's, the songwriter's—is an important part of what defines a song's purpose and value, as Aquinas posits, then one need not utilize overtly religious lyrics to communicate a message about God.

Many of the early Church reformers, beginning in the sixteenth century, held music at arm's length and distrusted its power. Martin Luther, interestingly, was not one of them. Music was a part of Luther's life from the time he was a child, and continued to be through his tenure in the Augustinian order. He not only enjoyed listening to music but he also sang and played the lute, a popular instrument

¹³ Ibid., 22.

of the time. It is clear from his writings on music that Luther appreciated music's power to move the soul and to stir up powerful emotions and desires. Luther referred to music as a gift from God. Begbie summarizes Luther's feelings thus: "Music is a means, granted by God, through which we are given to share in and enjoy the basic God-given order of the world."¹⁴ According to Begbie, the sense of order that music embodied was very important to Luther. Just as God created the universe by placing order in the midst of chaos, music also places order in the world by arranging notes and sounds in a certain way. Without order in music, the result would be cacophony.

Luther embraced music and its effect on the human person with a passion not found in any of his Reformer contemporaries, many of whom leaned toward a distrust of anything appealing to the flesh in favor of spiritual perfection. Luther was exceptionally fond of music's ability to evoke emotions. His writing suggests that music is one of the best ways to lift the spirits of the depressed and calm those who are too aggressive.¹⁵ Luther was well aware of Augustine's views on music, especially his wariness about its emotional impact on people. His perspective on music, particularly his strong belief in its giftedness from God, persuaded Luther to stand firm, even in the face of a disagreement with one of the Church fathers. Begbie notes, "Supporting this is a view of the human person noticeably

¹⁴ Begbie, 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

more integrated than some of his forefathers—with less distrust of the senses and a greater awareness of the goodness of the physical body.”¹⁶ Luther’s sense of freedom about music is instructive. His personal experiences growing up with music and enjoying it led him to find a way to integrate this passion with his faith. Familiarity, it seems, does not breed contempt when it comes to music.

What can we garner from this brief overview of pre- and early Christian notions about music? First, the flesh/spirit dichotomy that we saw in Plato’s work (although hardly exclusive to him) has been a thorn in the side of Christianity since the beginning. The “flesh” and “spirit” have been engaged in a theological tug-of-war that Christianity has refereed for over two millennia, at times allowing one side (usually the spirit) to gain an advantage. Theologians such as Augustine and some of the Reformers who were much more skeptical of music and its power to entice the flesh were not trying to be killjoys, but were, to give them the benefit of the doubt, honestly concerned about the human soul. Anything that wasn’t of the spirit, they thought, had the power to corrupt and even destroy the soul. We can see this current running through the history of rock and roll music, which I address in the next section. It will be helpful, I believe, to recognize this flesh/spirit struggle as it is manifest in rock music critiques, and develop a more nuanced approach to deal with it.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

One common thread among these four historical figures is that each spoke from experience. Whether they were more skeptical or accepting of music, they heard and appreciated it at some level before passing judgment. This is a vital lesson for us as we approach the history of rock music and the potential spiritual and religious experiences that can come from this genre. Rock music is not above reproach just because there are potential spiritual fruits to be gained from immersing oneself in it. Before critiquing it, however, one needs to listen and listen actively. Part of my desire for writing this book is to help people appreciate rock music in a different way. Some reading this may be casual fans who do not feel strongly one way or the other about rock. Others may be passionate about the music but never considered the spiritual potential in it. Still others may be highly skeptical and even fearful of rock music's effect on children, especially their own. All of these groups, I believe, can gain new insights by listening or relistening to this music from a different vantage point after reflecting on the themes I present. We can then begin a more beneficial conversation on the subject, one not founded upon fear.

Rock and Roll's Religious Pedigree

"The powerful God of Christianity was waging war with the pantheon of pagan spirits. It was in the heat of that battle that rock 'n' roll was forged."¹⁷ This dramatic

¹⁷ Davin Seay with Mary Neely, *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 13.

representation of the birth of rock and roll points to the tense relationship rock music and Christianity have endured for decades. Much of the tension is, to put it simply, because what rock and roll is about to many can seem to be the antithesis of what religion—or in this case, Christianity—is about. Rock promotes freedom, excess, experimentation with sex and drugs, expressing anger at authority, and rebelling from social conventions. Christianity, on the other hand, often promotes obedience to authority—human and divine—relying on tradition for guidance, living for others, and being a responsible contributor to the community. It may surprise many, then, that rock and roll music emerged from religious music and, I argue, still retains the effects of its historical identity at its core. This section will explore the religious roots of rock music and hopefully highlight how these roots helped one of the most popular contemporary genres of music thrive for decades.

Rock and roll's history, tragically, is associated with institutionalized slavery in the United States. As slaves were brought to the United States from Africa starting in the early 1600s, the landowners would often force them to abandon their former religious practice and embrace the "true religion" of Christianity. The plantation owners would often distort Christian teachings to keep the slaves in line, for example, by claiming that it pleased God for slaves to remain obedient to their "masters." The African slaves, having come from a very religious culture, were not strangers to rituals, and would create their own forms of worship that combined their traditional tribal practices with some learned Christian practices. These worship

“services” were held whenever the slaves could get out of the owner’s sight for an extended period of time. Their form varied, but they always included music.¹⁸ It was at these gatherings that the black spiritual was created. Spirituals are a form of song that cried out for freedom from oppression to the God that liberated Moses and the Israelites, among others.¹⁹ These songs played a significant role in slaves’ lives and are still very important to African Americans today.

The spiritual is a revered form of music that also played a significant role in the creation of several other musical forms, including the blues, gospel, and rock and roll. Not surprising, at the heart of the spiritual is the felt experience of God’s Holy Spirit. These cannot be separated—the music and the religious experience are one. African American theologian James Cone writes that in order to understand the religious significance of the spirituals, one should not reduce understanding to an academic exercise. Rather, “the interpreter must *feel* the Spirit; that is, one must feel one’s way into the power of black music, responding both to its rhythm and the faith in experience it affirms.”²⁰ The slaves used the spirituals to express righteous anger at their plight, to cry out to God for help, and to reclaim some of their traditions.²¹ Slaves had been sepa-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁰ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1972), 4.

²¹ Seay and Neely, 20.

rated from their homeland and their families, and often had witnessed their own flesh and blood beaten to death by their captors. They found in music a means to express grief, to cry out to a higher power, and to pass on stories of their horrific experiences so that future generations would never forget. Music was never a passive experience for the African slaves, and sometimes when the Spirit grabbed a hold of someone, that person became a frenzied dervish, dancing and singing and clapping. "It was in the wild release of a Holy Ghost visitation that the slave's Christianity fused with his musical heritage."²² The Spirit was with the slaves, and their religious experiences testified to this loud and clear.

The blues and gospel music both sprouted from the spirituals in the late nineteenth-century post-Abolitionist era in America. Each of these musical forms, however, held its own distinct style and was nurtured in different soils. "Blues, descended directly from the gut-level emotional fervor of the spirituals, was melded with the work songs sung in the fields."²³ The promise and opportunity that comes with freedom was quickly extinguished for former slaves and their families in an unrelenting racist society. These struggles became grist for the musical mill that produced the blues. These songs were gritty, earthy, and blunt: "The blues themselves would quickly come to signify all the varieties of sin and suffering the flesh is heir to, from

²² *Ibid.*, 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 22.

whiskey to unrequited love, from existential angst to being down on your luck.”²⁴ The flesh and spirit war continued with the blues. From a fervently religious people came songs that could tear the spirit in two. They were songs that told it like it was, including the variety of ways one could numb their pain through sex, alcohol, and drugs. Early blues artists like Howlin’ Wolf, Robert Johnson, and Muddy Waters became heroes in the African American community, and later, in the white rock musician community too. There would be no rock and roll without the blues—no Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, or Rolling Stones, or any of the hundreds of grunge, alternative, metal, and progressive bands they influenced. The blues are the meat and potatoes of the rock and roll stew, and its effect on popular music is immeasurable.²⁵

Gospel music was in large part made widely popular by Thomas Dorsey, an itinerant preacher who began crafting religious songs on his piano in the early ’20s.²⁶ Dorsey’s background was in jazz and the blues, but he saw an op-

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁵ The fact that many young music listeners now have no understanding of the roots of the music to which they listen is very troubling to some. Steve Van Zandt, guitarist in Bruce Springsteen’s E Street Band, has developed a high school music curriculum that teaches history through music, explaining the cultural milestones that affected music (and vice versa), from the blues up to contemporary rock and roll. See David Brooks, “The Segmented Society,” *New York Times* (November 20, 2007).

²⁶ Seay and Neely, 23.

portunity for marketing black religious music after the Depression decimated the blues and jazz music business. Soon, southern whites caught on to the gospel music craze as well and integrated this form into their evangelical Christian services. Gospel music certainly exerted an indelible effect on early rock and roll. Musicians such as Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Carl Perkins were all brought up in the Southern evangelical tradition and they were very familiar with gospel hymns. Gospel music also exerted a substantial influence on the original music they wrote and performed. In fact, these three early rock and rollers, along with country music legend Johnny Cash, joined for an improvised session of gospel songs that was secretly taped by an engineer at Sun Studios in Memphis in 1956.²⁷ The gospel influence on rock and roll (and especially on its groovin' cousin R & B) migrated north as well. For example, Aretha Franklin's first "gig" was singing gospel music in her preacher father's church in Detroit.

These examples beg the question of whether there was a difference between the gospel music blacks and whites created in the early part of the twentieth century. Insofar as black gospel music was derived from the spirituals, which testified to the pain and suffering inflicted upon blacks during the time of slavery and even afterwards, then there was a significant difference, as whites did not endure a similar experience. How, then, did this difference manifest itself? According to rock historian Jim Curtis, "The

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

persecutions which blacks suffered gave their gospel singing a transcendent, other-worldly emphasis. To maintain their belief in a better world after death, blacks made a sharp distinction between sacred music and profane music.”²⁸ Certainly, some blacks preferred the dirt and grime of the blues to the pristine, shiny sparkle of gospel. If you are angry about being treated so horribly, sometimes the last thing you want to do is praise God. The blues and gospel undoubtedly influenced each other, but perhaps fans of each did not want to admit how much. The flesh/spirit dichotomy that haunted Christianity for hundreds of years now inserted itself in the genesis of rock and roll.

“Spiritual schizophrenics” is a phrase that Seay and Neely, authors of *Stairway to Heaven: The Spiritual Roots of Rock ‘N’ Roll*, use to describe musicians within whom the flesh and spirit battle raged most violently. Artists such as Little Richard, Marvin Gaye, and Sam Cooke experienced a strong religious upbringing, and their choice of career set them in opposition to some of the values with which they were raised—at least that is what they thought. The inner struggle they experienced left a gaping hole in their souls that they tried to fill, oftentimes with sex, alcohol, and drugs. In their sober moments, the guilt about how they anaesthetized their pain fed into a vicious cycle and

²⁸ Jim Curtis, *Rock Eras: Interpretations of Music and Society, 1954–1984* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1987), 29.

increased their self-destructive behavior.²⁹ Several other artists throughout rock history have embraced faith radically, some even leaving their music careers completely to follow a calling.³⁰ At the heart of some of these conversion stories is a total rejection of what the artist believes is rock and roll's evil temptations. Jewish-born Bob Dylan converted to Christianity in the late '70s and his music started integrating Christian-influenced lyrics and even some gospel and soul musical styles. Many other artists have found a way to be more integrated human beings—to merge their love of rock and roll with a deep commitment to religious and spiritual practices without feeling that these are mutually exclusive. These are the artists, I believe, who discovered a way to find God in rock and roll music and in their creativity.³¹

What Would Jesus Listen To?

It is not surprising that, given its focus on rebellion and excess, some Christians feared rock and roll when it emerged as a popular genre in the 1950s. In the battle of the flesh versus the spirit, it was apparent to some which

²⁹ Seay and Neely, 96.

³⁰ One very highly publicized example of this is Cat Stevens, now called Yusef Islam, a popular folk rock artist from the 1970s who converted to Islam and gave up a career in popular music for over two decades. He recently began recording music again.

³¹ I will return to this point in the chapter on spirituality and rock music.

side rock and roll took. Many Christian parents worried that the sight of Elvis shaking his hips, coupled with a rock and roll “primal” 4/4 beat, might encourage teenagers to engage in promiscuous behavior. Some of these parental worries were allayed with the birth of Christian rock. Christian rock music is, I believe, a fascinating phenomenon for a variety of reasons. I would like to examine the genesis of this music and some of its theological implications. My thesis is that Christian rock is a form of syncretism, that is, it involves the practice of embracing rituals that originate in pagan or foreign contexts and adopting them in a different form within Christian practice. One example of how this is done would be the way Christian rock music, given its appeal to young adults, is now used as an evangelization tool, provided it is “cleaned up” and presented in a Christian context. Christian rock provides one avenue for bringing religion and rock together, but there are, I believe, others that I will discuss in later chapters.

Christian rock grew out of “Contemporary Christian Music” or CCM, a genre popularized in the 1970s and 1980s by artists like Phil Keaggy, Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, and John Elefante. The first Christian rockers had to fight against people who shared their faith but not their love for rock music. Many Christians did not see any redeeming value in rock and roll music, especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s when so many rock and rollers were embracing the drug scene. But this did not stop some from trying to baptize rock. Christian rock pioneer Larry Norman

summed up the early attitudes of the nascent Christian rock movement with the title of his song "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?"

Originally influenced by folk and gospel, CCM gradually incorporated elements of pop and rock music. The primary difference lies in the songs' lyrics, which are meant to evangelize, spread the good news of Jesus, and, presumably, win converts to the faith. This is chiefly why Christian rock draws so much criticism, because it sometimes appears to sacrifice musical quality in order to evangelize. Quoted in a 2002 article in the *Christian Century*, hard rock artist Frank Hart of the band Atomic Opera states that "he hates most Christian music because it is 'not art but propaganda.'" ³² And sometimes it is weak propaganda, incorporating simplistic "Jesus is my friend" piety and failing to posit any theological substance. But for all these criticisms and, perhaps, unfair characterizations that Christian rock endures, it is, according to a 2006 article on Beliefnet.com, the sixth most popular type of music in the United States, outselling both jazz and classical. What could have convinced evangelical Christians that rock and roll, once feared as the "Devil's music," could be something filled with grace? I would like to examine this question, along with some of the theology that informs Christian rock.

³² Mark Allan Powell, "Jesus Climbs the Charts: The Business of Contemporary Christian Music," *Christian Century* (Dec. 18–31, 2002): 22.

Harper's Bible Dictionary defines syncretism as "either a conscious combining of two or more religions over a short period of time, or a process of absorption by one religion of elements of another over a long period of time. In both types the absorbed elements are usually transformed and given new meaning by the fresh context."³³ Christian rock seems to be an example of this phenomenon—by borrowing elements of rock music and absorbing them into a Christian context, thereby changing their meaning and intent. Rock and roll is not recognized as a formal organized religion, but it is exactly due to its similarities to a true religion that makes it so attractive to evangelical Christians. "To millions of devoted fans, rock doesn't simply deal with religion. Rock is religion. The freedom, the power, the rebel thrills, and the fierce hopes that rock music promises comprise a life-style that, for many, will always be more real than any truth revealed in a cathedral or ashram."³⁴ It is precisely because rock music holds a power to attract millions of devoted followers and inspire hope within them, like a major world religion can, that makes it so attractive as an evangelization tool for many Christians. It seems logical to assume that if Christianity could adopt elements of rock music, its power to enrapture its listeners would be transferred to Christianity as well.

³³ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, "Syncretism" (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 1008.

³⁴ Seay and Neely, 7.

Early Christian music artists must have seen some transcendent qualities in rock music and likely themselves tapped into spiritual experiences catalyzed by rock music. Of course, all music potentially holds power to stir emotions and inspire spiritual experiences, but rock music has the added benefit of an enormous worldwide fan base, making it a very potent vehicle for spreading God's word. Christian rock, therefore, borrowed much from secular rock and roll music. Musically, contemporary Christian rock is indistinguishable from mainstream rock and roll. The same aggressive guitar riffs and driving drumbeats that religious listeners objected to fifty years ago can be found in contemporary songs by Christian bands like Jars of Clay, Third Day, and Audio Adrenaline. Christian rock such as this provides a more palatable "package" for a religious message. Instead of celebrating excess, a heavy and up-tempo Christian rock song will attempt to shift the listeners' attention and emotions toward a holier theme such as chastity or being born again.

Christian rock has also attempted to transform the culture around secular rock music. Secular rock music is often associated with sexual promiscuity, drug use, and rebelling against authority. Christian rock is attempting to direct listeners' passions away from these outlets and toward more "morally legitimate" practices. Christian rock bands will sometimes pray with their audiences, to remind them that in the end it is all about God. This can be difficult, obviously, in the midst of smoke and light shows that highlight the band above all else, but the intent seems to be to

direct the emotional power of rock music toward praising God and away from self-indulgent behaviors. Through these practices we can see more than the hint of the flesh/spirit split that Christianity has manifest in various forms throughout its history. It is to this now that I wish to turn, and examine some of the theological assumptions in Christian rock music.

Reformation Rock

The religious roots of Christian rock are largely Evangelical Protestant. While there are certainly many Catholics in the CCM fan base, I, as a Catholic music fan, have always felt uncomfortable listening to it. One reason for this discomfort lies in the foundational differences between Protestant and Catholic theology. Thomas Rausch, SJ, explains such differences cogently in his book *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice*. Rausch writes that Protestant theology has traditionally been more “pessimistic” than Catholic theology regarding the holiness of the world. The “Catholic religious imagination,” as portrayed by Fr. Andrew Greeley and others, helps Catholics to see the sacred in everyday life. The foundations of Protestant theology, however, focused on “Luther’s personal struggle over justification or his righteousness before God,” which according to Rausch, “has resulted in Protestant theology’s stressing redemption more than incarnation.”³⁵ This means that the world is

³⁵ Thomas P. Rausch, *Being Catholic in a Culture of Choice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006), 28.

more in need of being saved than it is good and holy. It makes sense that, if Christian rock emerged from this theological foundation, Evangelicals would consider it vital to "redeem" rock music by baptizing it with Christian lyrics for a Christian audience. Ironically, even with his theological struggles, Luther was an enormous fan of music!

Many strains of Evangelical Protestant theology also emphasize the "Word," or Scripture, as the source of revelation over tradition. "For Protestant theology, because of the corruption of human nature and its faculties, there is no 'natural' knowledge of God. God can be known only through Scripture, 'sola Scriptura,' through the intervention of the prophetic word."³⁶ As I wrote earlier, Christian rock is identical in many respects to secular or mainstream rock and roll music. Most, if not all, of the differences lie in the lyrics. The lyrics of a Christian rock song place the primacy of the Word tradition above all else and must communicate some biblically revealed truth in order to be legitimate. This, after all, is what separates Christian rock from secular rock, and the message of the music is also what Evangelicals believe make the music a powerful tool for proselytizing.

Mark Allan Powell highlights the themes that Christian rock has embraced over the past two decades. In the '80s, the genre took on a militaristic tone, perhaps inspired by the Cold War and the spurious dichotomy its supporters posited, namely, the Christian U.S. vs. the God-less or

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

Atheistic U.S.S.R. Christian rock in the '90s seemed to embrace topics that could have been lifted directly from a conservative evangelical politician's platform, but especially regarding abortion. "At least five songs were sung from the perspective of a fetus who, endowed with adult intelligence, knows that he or she are about to be aborted; in one case, the fetus asks Jesus to come into his heart so he or she becomes a Christian before being killed."³⁷ To be fair, secular rock songs can be just as vapid as some Christian rock. It doesn't matter if you are singing about your relationship with Jesus or your relationship with your girlfriend—if there is no talent base or creative inspiration, the result is going to be bad music.

While I believe my critique of Christian rock is justified, there are also some positive aspects to Christian rock music that I would like to mention. First, Christian rock served as a gateway to many forms of rock music for people in my generation. I know from speaking to dozens of people in my generation (Generation X) and younger that their introduction to rock music was through Christian rock because they were not allowed to listen to anything else. As teens, these women and men embraced Christian rock as their own, ironically utilizing it as a tool of rebellion against their parents. The band Stryper, for example, a Christian heavy metal band in the '80s, was popular with teenage boys especially, and helped inform their identity as music fans. Teenagers normally need to define themselves as autono-

³⁷ Powell, 24.

mous individuals, distinct beings from their parents, and there are plenty of avenues offered by popular culture to help in this regard. Christian rock provided an outlet for rebellion and self-definition for many teens, and gave them a taste of rock and roll music, thereby helping develop their musical palates for other styles of rock music.

Christian rock also attempted to ease the tension between religion and rock music. As discussed earlier in this chapter, at face value, rock and roll and Christianity do not seem to have much in common, and this has kept them at arm's length (or further) from each other for decades. Christian rock may have its flaws, but it has been a decent attempt at reconciling two "worlds" that were previously thought to be incompatible. As it develops as a style of rock music, it could perhaps open up new musical avenues for performers and listeners. Already, it seems that some mainstream rock musicians have discovered that it is acceptable and even desirable to sing about religious and spiritual themes without fearing criticism and accusations of "Bible-thumping." Even within the world of Christian rock, some bands are starting to reject this label, preferring to be known as "Christians who play in a rock band." Some of these contemporary bands, such as Switchfoot and Red, are interesting if only for their avoidance of the clichés often associated with Christian rock. If these and other rock artists feel that they can be people of faith and create credible music, they may have Christian rock to thank.

There are, I believe, other ways to bridge the gap between religion, spirituality, and rock music, specifically

approaching it from a Catholic Christian spiritual perspective. Both rock music and Christianity have formed cultures with distinct vocabularies, lifestyles, and worldviews. As one who inhabits both of these cultures, I would like to try to explain how these two cultures can not only coexist but can also help each other without one co-opting the other. The either/or dichotomy that we have driven between Christianity and rock is unhelpful. It is a reflection of the flesh/spirit separation that Christianity has fought with for centuries. Both flesh and spirit are good, both are holy, and both can benefit the other. Rock and roll and Christianity mirror this relationship, and can do the same for each other. In chapter 2, I examine what some contemporary theologians have to say about music and how it can help one talk about God. I also explore some social and cultural commentators who have offered theological interpretations of rock music, some of which are rather sophisticated and may point the way to a new possibility for Christianity and rock music to relate in the twenty-first century.