

The Evangelical British Invasion: Challenging Boundaries, Transforming Congregational Song

Within the last forty years, the North American evangelical Christian church music tradition has experienced a series of far-reaching transformations. Musical style has shifted from four-part hymns to a repertory of songs modeled on contemporary Western popular music styles known as variously “praise and worship music,” “contemporary worship music,” or simply “worship music.” This stylistic transformation has entailed multiple changes in how songs are mediated to congregations, how music-making in churches is socially structured, and how evangelicals understand the practice and theology of worship.¹ Though North American worship music has been linked from its inception in the latter half of the twentieth century to transnational networks of charismatic and evangelical churches in the Anglophone world, the sources from outside North America that in turn inform the creation and development of praise and worship music have received little attention. This transnational influence on North American praise and worship music has ebbed and flowed since its inception in the late 1960s; however, since the late 1990s, worship music in North America has been strongly influenced by songs, artists, and church music publishing in the UK. This article focuses on this critical moment of transnational alliance-building between the US and the UK, whose consequences can still be heard reverberating through what US evangelical church song practice.

The rising influence of UK songs can be demonstrated using data gathered by the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), which handles the copyright permissions for over 150,000 US churches and distributes royalties to songwriters based on their reports.² Table 1 demonstrates the influx of British worship songs into the US beginning in the late 1990s.

Table 1: British Worship Songs on the CCLI Charts of the Top 25 Songs Sung in US Churches†

Year	Worship Song	Songwriter
1998	#15 “Lord, the Light of Your Love” (“Shine, Jesus, Shine”)	Graham Kendrick
2003	#4 “Come, Now is the Time to Worship” #9 “I Could Sing of Your Love Forever” #11 “The Heart of Worship” #12 “Shine, Jesus, Shine” #23 “Better Is One Day”	Brian Doerksen* Martin Smith Matt Redman Graham Kendrick Matt Redman
2008	#2 “Here I Am to Worship” #3 “Blessed Be Your Name” #7 “Come, Now Is the Time to Worship” #11 “Everlasting God” #15 “In Christ Alone” #16 “The Heart of Worship” #20 “Beautiful One” #25 “Days of Elijah”	Tim Hughes Matt Redman Brian Doerksen* Brenton Brown* Keith Getty/Stuart Townend Matt Redman Tim Hughes Robin Mark

† Data provided by Christian Copyright Licensing International, www.ccli.com/us.

* Worship songwriters Brian Doerksen and Brenton Brown are Canadian and South African, respectively. They are included because their songs have been recorded and published by the British worship music record labels and publishing houses Vineyard UK and Kingsway Music, respectively.

CCLI's charts show that the number of British worship songs in the US Top 25 has risen from one song in 1999 to eight songs in 2008. British worship songs now comprise a third of the songs most frequently sung by an estimated 40-80 million US evangelical Christians during congregational worship.

This paper explores the processes of and rationales for this sudden widespread popularity of British congregational songwriters and songs—what I've termed the "evangelical British invasion"—through an ethnographically-informed account of the transnational connections forged between US and UK Christian music industries. After examining the stated reasons for the US Christian music industry's embrace of these songs and the influence they have had on the US industry, I then theorize the implications of my exploration for scholars working at the intersection of transnational religious and/or popular musics.

Building Transnational Connections: Methodology and Background

The beginnings of what I am calling the "British invasion" of worship music can be traced back to a series of encounters between US record label executives in the Nashville-based Christian music industry (most of whom worked for EMI's Christian Music Group, or EMI CMG) with worship songs, artists, and executives from the UK in the mid to late 1990s. During the past year, I have had numerous conversations with a dozen or so of the producers, A&R people, and music publishing executives who were most influential in promoting UK songwriters and performers and their songs in the US. In exploring the complex set of networks and identifications within this extended social network—one that Ulf Hannerz has called transnational connections' "little workshops"³—I encountered a common set of narratives and representations from nearly all of my conversation partners that connect the actions of a few influential religious actors to industry actions on a global scale.

In comparing and interpreting these executives' responses across multiple conversations, I discovered that British worship music represented to these American executives an ideal—perhaps idealized—Christian product that executives believed could provide a solution for two specific woes of the 1990s US evangelical Christian context. I will explore these two problems in some detail because it shows how US executives use both religious and popular music discourses to understand and represent this musical repertory to US Christian audiences.

The Sound of Revival: British Worship Music and the Hope of Renewal

First, British songs represented for Nashville executives a Christian unity that churches in the US notoriously lacked. Far from the conservative voting bloc that formed the public face of American evangelicalism, Nashville executives saw the US evangelical community as argumentative, conflicted, and fragmented—a conditioned indexed by nearly two decades of what US evangelicals called the "worship wars," in which churches and denominations fought and split over the musical styles, theology—and I would suggest anthropology—of worship. American executives saw British worship music as a product of an embattled community in a secular culture whose trials had unified them across lines of theological persuasion and stylistic preferences. As one music publishing executive commented to me: "[Christianity] in the UK is small but vital. They don't labor under the delusion that they live in a Christian culture. They realize they have to work together."⁴

The linkage between Christian unity, spiritual vitality, and worship music was cemented for several EMI CMG executives in a short trip to England in the summer of 1997 to talk to a British Christian publishing company about a possible distribution deal. While they were there, they attended a day-long worship event at Wembley Stadium which gathered an arena crowd of an estimated 45,000 people and made an indelible impression on them. After the executives returned, news of the worship event at Wembley Stadium travelled fast within the close-knit Christian music industry in Nashville. According to John Mays, who worked A&R for EMI CMG,

There was a buzz...that maybe this was a tipping point for the “worship thing” going on over there. [People hoped that] maybe it would come here; maybe God’s bringing this [music] across the ocean to ignite something. ...Christian music wasn’t even a big deal over there, so if you’re filling up Wembley stadium, something’s going on!⁵

Throughout our conversations, US executives cited British worship music as a panacea for all varieties of disunity. British songs had the potential to heal rifts between traditional and contemporary camps through combining a rock-influenced style with theologically sound lyrics. One executive described British music as providing a much-needed balance between Word and Spirit; in other words, songs were faithful to evangelical doctrine while also allowing for more emotional, charismatic expression. In the words of another executive, British songs demonstrated the qualities of both “excellence *and* anointing”—the songs had a value that could be perceived in musical and spiritual senses.

To summarize, if the problem in the US was a fractured, divided, complacent church—indexed by a schizophrenic worship music repertory—part of the solution was a shared repertory of songs birthed out of a renewal movement outside the compromised US context that could heal divisions and reconcile tensions. The trope of revival and renewal is precisely how the new worship music was framed in the first album series of British worship music released by EMI CMG to US audiences. EMI CMG’s brand WorshipTogether—developed in 1998 to market the new British songs—began with a series of compilation albums of British worship songs entitled *Revival Generation*. The subtitle of the first album—*12 Songs that Rocked a Nation*—further indexes the dual power of the songs by referencing both a spiritual shake-up of the music of revival, and the songs’ musical appeal as a progressive new rock-influenced style. The liner notes describe the new brand of worship music in epic terms:

Sound of a Distant Thunder—Imagine a revival that touches a nation for decades, not just months or years. ...A revival generation is arising around the world. Passionate for Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, they’re singing with fervor and honesty, poetic but radical sounding songs of praise. In the United Kingdom the new sound, once a “distant thunder,” is now starting to shake the church and the world. There is a new breed, touched by a godly confidence, a generation who will touch the world with the story of Jesus and the forgiveness we can find through the Cross. Listen and you’ll hear the sound of a REVIVAL GENERATION.⁶

Many of the tracks on *12 Songs that Rocked a Nation* expressed these themes explicitly in their lyrics. I will play a portion of “Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble” so that you can get an idea of the sound and the message that was so attractive to US evangelical executives. I will show the lyrics via PowerPoint as they are presented frequently in the context of corporate worship in evangelical churches.

Coming Back to the Heart of Worship: The Authenticity Discourse of Worship

The second American problem to which British music represented a solution was related to issues surrounding the commercialization of Christian music. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the Nashville-based Christian music industry had focused on producing “positive pop” for evangelical listeners while deemphasizing music for congregational singing. With its celebrity systems and scandals, complicated commercial infrastructure, and bottom-line driven production, some felt it had become no different in practice or rationale from any other popular music genre. Nashville executives frequently ascribed to British worship leaders qualities of “authenticity,” “genuineness,” even “naïvete,” taking pains to convince me that, unlike many US Christian entertainers, British songwriters had remained grounded in their local communities of faith. In the words of John Hartley, a Christian music producer and British transplant living in Nashville: “There’s not a [Christian music] ‘scene’ over there. Very few people can make money, so most people are in it for the right reasons. In many ways it’s naïve.”⁷ For Nashville executives, British songs hearkened back to the initial days of Christian rock and folk music during the 1970s pre-industry days of Christian popular music before it had purportedly “sold out” to commercial interests.

As Sarah Thornton has observed, authenticity is the most important value ascribed to popular music because “the experience of musical authenticity is perceived as a cure both for alienation (because it offers feelings of community) and dissimulation...it is valued as a balm for media fatigue and as an antidote to commercial hype.”⁸ This is precisely the way that Nashville Christian music executives saw British worship music: as a healing salve for an alienated Christian music industry that had over time had lost connection with the US church and a remedy for its tired, over-commercialized product. Nashville music industry personnel were proactive about preserving this sense of industry innocence. Several in EMI CMG’s A&R department described to me the special allowances given to allow the British songwriters to avoid the Nashville commercial scene as much as possible. Nashville executives pulled strings to enable bands and songwriters they had signed to contracts to do the absolute minimum amount of promotional touring in the US so that they could remain in the UK. In one conversation, one executive gave me a memorable analogy:

The UK guys are somewhat naïve about what it takes to work in America. And I’m glad. In some ways they’ve picked up on it, and in other ways they don’t get it, and that’s ok. Keep the source pure, as pure as possible. It’s one thing to take water from a spring and put it in a bottle and sell it—it’s another thing for the spring to be polluted.⁹

This ascription of authenticity was further reinforced by certain performance aspects, musical style, and lyrical content of the songs, each of which drew heavily from discourses of popular music authenticity explored by popular music scholars.¹⁰ While I lack the time to provide a detailed discussion about each of these aspects, I will discuss briefly one song often mentioned by US executives when describing the sincerity of British worship leaders—and thereby their songs. Matt Redman’s “Heart of Worship,” an enduringly popular British worship song, demonstrates these ascriptions on a number of levels. I will play the first verse and chorus of this song for you to hear as you follow along with the lyrics.

In the song’s opening lines, the worshipper’s encounter with God moves (symbolically if not literally) from an encounter mediated through music to an unmediated one: the mediation of music “fades,” and all the trappings of performance

are “stripped away.” Indeed, in Redman’s live and recorded performance of this song, he begins accompanied solely by acoustic guitar, suggesting musical immediacy through the paucity of technological mediation. The song’s use of filler words common within everyday speech evidence an aesthetic of inarticulacy: the worshipper “simply” comes, longing “just” to bring an offering to God. Avowing sincerity and purity of intentions and expressing longing to return a way of worshipping that is “all about you, Jesus” echoed the vision and personal prayers of many executives for the Nashville-based industry.

The British Invasion’s Aftermath: Renewing Worship, Reshaping the Industry

As a result of their convictions about and experiences of British worship songs, Nashville-based executives worked tirelessly to promote the songs and artists in the US through arranging church and music industry seminar appearances and worship conferences and distributing the songs widely through recordings and free internet downloads. In examining the British invasion’s aftermath in the early 2000s, it appears that these songs did indeed “rock the nation”—though perhaps not in the way its promoters had envisioned. When I asked one executive for his thoughts on effect of the British invasion, he responded:

I wouldn’t have called it a revival, but certainly a shift. Because to me, a revival is a reawakening of people’s attitudes toward God that draws in new people—something that causes other people to come to Christ, that reawakens and reenergizes people. I don’t know that it did that. But it certainly was—now if you look [back] at it—a seismic shift in the industry in the kind of music people would buy and respond to.¹¹

If British worship music did not necessarily provoke the spiritual revival hoped for, it did usher in a *musical* renewal that resulted in the increased production and consumption of congregational song. Just as British bands like the Beatles and the Stones helped to establish rock as a mainstream commercial genre in the US, British worship leaders and bands introduced a new rock-based style of congregational songs to the US which inaugurated what some have called a worship renewal movement and what others would call the mass commercialization of worship songs by the Nashville-based recording industry. As the British songs popularized by EMI CMG filtered in, the orientation of the Christian music industry in the United States experienced a dramatic shift as the subgenre of worship music exploded in popularity.

British music—and new American bands that sounded like it—was marketed as “modern worship music,” a new genre term coined by EMI CMG WorshipTogether founders Steve Rice and Rick Cua. In the early 2000s, modern worship music came to dominate the Christian radio airwaves, bookstore shelves, and led to the full-scale entry of the US Christian music industry into the business of producing music for congregational worship. This commercial exchange has continued to be immensely profitable for the initiating company, EMI CMG. According to one 2006 press release, earnings on songs in the British-based Thank You music catalogue between the years 1998 and 2005 have increased some 1000% and records containing the songs numbered some eleven million units sold.¹²

Relating Material and Spiritual Economies, Negotiating Evangelical Identities

As I have hoped to show in this brief examination, the evangelical British invasion provides a case study of what Jocelyn Guilbault has called a “point of articulation”: a critical moment—influenced by both popular and religious discourses—that set the process of alliance-building in motion and forged the set of rationales that allowed the building of the present transnational evangelical media economy.¹³ These rationales provided more than simply a mystification of economic realities; in fact, they provided the impetus for this particular case of religious and musical transnational connection. I am reminded of Thomas Csordas’ recent remark:

Global religious activity is neither determined by economic globalization nor describable on the model of economic decision making. [Rather], it is more productive to understand globalization from the outset as a multidimensional process, with religion, popular culture, politics, and economics as necessarily coeval and intimately intertwined, as they are in the lives of actors responsible for bringing about globalization in the first place.¹⁴

In highlighting these two specific rationales, I have also demonstrated the intended cultural work of the British invasion: namely, that US evangelical record executives used British worship songs to do cultural work that worship music close to home could not do. Recent ethnomusicological work by Timothy Rommen, Melvin Butler and Jeffers Engelhardt have each pointed out how religious communities use religious musical styles from afar in order to bypass problematic issues and discourses ascribed to local musical styles¹⁵—a cultural process ethnomusicologist Rommen calls the negotiation of proximity. As Melvin Butler has pointed out, these transnational religious musical borrowing provides an experience of transcendence in more ways than one. In this case, Nashville-based music executives seized upon British worship music as a way to bypass the tricky issues at the heart of the ambivalent intersection of faith and commerce in the US.

My paper has emphasized strongly the ideational logic involved in forging this particular transnational connection—the express motivations of religious actors in accomplishing certain religiously-framed goals. What remains to be examined are these religious rationales’ complicated interrelationship with capitalist logic within the evangelical media industry. While time constraints have prevented me from pursuing this direction further, my ongoing work on this topic will further interrogate the nature of the relationship between US and UK industries, which has more than a few hints of colonialism, with a powerful industry center reaching out to the evangelical margins to find more “authentic” raw materials to be processed and distributed widely. Understanding the ways that evangelicals negotiate and understand these differences of power could illumine the processes whereby members of this global religious communities imagine and construct their corporate religious identities in the wake of expanding transnational connections.

One thing is clear: the evangelical British invasion points to ways in which the spheres of the religious and the economic are intertwined and further demonstrates that the various meanings, discourse, and practices surrounding US evangelical congregational worship songs in the twenty-first century cannot be understood without an exploration of their transnational roots and routes.

Notes

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- ¹ Ingalls, Monique, "Awesome in this Place: Sound, Space, and Identity in Contemporary North American Evangelical Worship" (Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Pennsylvania, 2008).
- ² Christian Copyright Licensing, Incorporated (CCLI) handles the copyright for an enormous repertory of contemporary worship songs, currently around 150,000 and continuing to grow. While many lyrics or chord charts can be downloaded from countless "unofficial" sites online, churches who want to abide by copyright regulations can purchase on a yearly basis the rights to reproduce the lyrics of every song in the online CCLI database, and for a slightly higher fee, to obtain access to lead sheets and mp3 versions of the songs. CCLI conducts detailed polls of its subscribing churches' song choices, then distributes royalties to songwriters and publishers according to each song's ranking. People in the Nashville-based Christian music industry call these the "church charts," and the CCLI "Top 25 Worship Songs" are highly publicized within the evangelical community and serve as major career boosters for worship songwriters and publishing houses. For more information, refer to www.ccli.com.
- ³ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 89.
- ⁴ Fred Heumann, interview by author (Nashville, TN: February 2008).
- ⁵ John Mays, interview by author, (Brentwood, TN: November 2008).
- ⁶ From the liner notes of *Revival Generation: 12 Songs That Rocked a Nation*, WorshipTogether CD 0226R, 1998.
- ⁷ John Hartley, interview by author (Franklin, TN: March 2008).
- ⁸ Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, *Music/Culture* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1996), 26.
- ⁹ Heumann, interview by author.
- ¹⁰ Mark Butler, "Taking It Seriously: Intertextuality and Authenticity in Two Covers by the Pet Shop Boys," *Popular Music* 22, no. 1 (2003), Simon Frith, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free': The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community," *Popular Music* 1 (1981), Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), Keir Keightley, "Reconsidering Rock," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, ed. Simon Frith, Will Straw, and John Street (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), Allan Moore, "Authenticity as Authentication," *Popular Music* 21, no. 2 (2002).
- ¹¹ Mays, interview by author.
- ¹² EMI CMG Press Release. Tricia Whitehead, *Emi Christian Music Publishing and Kingsway's Thankyou Music Extend Long-Term Publishing Agreement* (EMI CMG "About", 2006 [cited 18 June 2007]); available from <http://www.emicmg.com/about/pressRelease.aspx?id=411741>.
- ¹³ Jocelyne Guilbault, "On Redefining the 'Local' through World Music," *The World of Music* 35, no. 2 (1993): 33.
- ¹⁴ Thomas J. Csordas, "Introduction: Modalities of Transnational Transcendence," in *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization*, ed. Thomas J. Csordas (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 3.
- ¹⁵ Timothy Rommen, *"Mek Some Noise": Gospel Music and the Ethics of Style in Trinidad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Melvin Butler, "Songs of Pentecost: Experiencing Music, Transcendence, and Identity in Jamaica and Haiti," (Ph.D. Dissertation: New York University, 2005); Jeffers Engelhardt, "Right Singing in Estonian Orthodox Christianity: A Study of Music, Theology, and Religious Ideology," (*Ethnomusicology* 53:1: 32-57, 2009).