

Spirituality In Song

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When we think about pop music, often we think about themes of love, partying, lust, money, freedom, or dancing. What does not usually come to mind are themes of spirituality, transcendence, or theology, but maybe they should. Western pop music moves in and out of religious themes, but any type of music is still inherently spiritual by the function, use, and nature of music. From a theoretical standpoint, music achieves the same goals and functions as religion. They both invoke emotional expression and offer a description of human existence in a way that represents and guides society. From a historical standpoint, music was created for the sole purpose of religion and as it broke free, the spiritual elements of music remained intact. Even through the lens of current popular music, we can see the ups and downs of spirituality often mirroring the ups and downs of political events and participation. Music and spiritual are both inherently intertwined with all aspects of life, so their combination to this day should not be as foreign of a concept as it seems.

Before we launch into our discussion of music and spirituality, there are certain parameters that must be set. Unless “traditional” or “organized” is used before it, “religion” is a word that is used interchangeably with “spiritual”. We will use both of these terms as codified language to mean acknowledging or questioning theological topics such as (but not limited to) existence, morality, meaning, etc. Additionally, we will be discussing overtly traditionally religious music when discussing the broad history of music, but when we discuss modern pop music we will not be covering actual religious or worship music like Christian rock or gospel music. Both of these genres do not necessarily speak to a larger audience and are exclusive to the group they are written

by. Christian rock and gospel music are both cases of Christian music written for Christian people. Meanwhile, for example, a genre like country music attracts all types of people using secular music that is commonly infused with Christian themes while still appealing to a wide audience. The history of music in a religious context is important to note because life during these time periods surrounded around religious contexts, so they attracted the entire society of that time. Today, our society is much more theologically diverse and therefore theological music must be further reaching. The main focus of this discussion is about music whose purpose is spiritual and transcendent but still relatable to all types of people, which means that all types of music can accomplish this.

Theoretical Context

If we are to discuss such subjective topics as music and religion, we need to explore the theories behind the intersection of them first. This is an important step in explaining the human connection of making and listening to music. It must be established before we delve into history since these theories can explain the shifts that we see throughout time. After all, music has come a long way and has arrived from many different avenues across the globe. As it is called the “universal language”, we need to approach it from an anthropological perspective.

Alan Parkhurst Merriam, a cultural anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, explored the different functions of music in his book called *The Anthropology of Music*. In it, he differentiates between ten overall functions of music. Five of these theories are

relevant to the religious function of music outside of the standard practices written for religious contexts. The function of emotional expression states that music functions as a way to communicate feeling that normal discourse cannot. This can easily be used to explain not only why humans are attracted to making and taking part in music, but also why music is inevitably rooted in religion. Spirituality inherently involves feelings and experiences that are unable to be communicated through words alone, and music acts as that expression of what cannot be expressed (Merriam, 1964).

The next important function of music Merriam examines is the function of representation. In common instances where music does not involve words, it relies on symbols that connect the unknown to the known. According to Victor Turner, a cultural anthropologist, symbols represent important social processes and values, making music a medium to convey these social values and processes (Turner, 1967). Merriam's basic idea is that music is not just created for the sake of creativity, but to represent other ideas or beliefs to a specific community. Using music for this function transforms it from a mode of sounds to a representation of human behavior. Applying deeper meaning to music and what we consume, we deepen our understanding of what it means to be human, a fundamental principle of any religious practice (Merriam, 1964). So, when we view current pop music as completely devoid of spiritual connection, we music look back to this theory in how it represents the moral and social questions of its time period. Any expression of the human experience, no matter how superfluous and indulgent, is still an expression of theological questioning.

The final important function of music we will be discussing is enforcing conformity and social order, which intersects with two of the other functions: contribution to the continuity and stability of culture, and the contribution to the integration of society. According to Merriam, music has been used to educate society and societal behaviors, “both through direct warning to erring members of the society and through indirect establishment of what is considered to be proper behavior” (Merriam, 1964). He goes on to describe music as a way to express cultural values. Merriam calls music, “a vehicle of history, myth, and legend” and “through transmission of education, control of erring members of society, and stress upon what is right, it contributes to the stability of the culture” (Merriam, 1964). The theory behind why religion has been constructed in almost every corner of the world is to give society these rules of right and wrong. Religious institutions have historically taken it upon themselves to be the societal lawmakers and societal stabilizers, so it is not surprising that music would be an essential asset to that mission (Merriam, 1964).

It is easy to look at the music of today and see the opposite happening. Many view current popular music as heretical and immoral, but this is still a form of conveying to a society what is acceptable or what is preferable. When today’s music explicitly describes drugs, partying, sexual behavior, and other indulgences (things that are traditionally looked down upon in Western religions), they are still setting standards for current mainstream society. They are still telling us what is ideal behavior for people who are attractive, successful and happy. While this is outside of a spiritual or even philosophical type of cultural lawmaking, it still has the same effects as the ways religion

seeks to create cultural laws. Clearly they are both capable of pushing societies in certain directions.

Additionally, music can also unite societies. Music's inherent ability to bring people together makes it a starting point for any of the above mentioned social commentary. This theory of music is congruent with Durkheim's theory of religion, stating, "religion's true purpose is not intellectual, but social... It serves as a carrier of social sentiment, providing symbols and rituals that enable people to express the deep emotions that anchor them to their community" (Jones, 1986).

Lastly, and most importantly, music has an inherent function of validating social institutions and religious rituals. Similar to his previous idea, Merriam believes that religious and spiritual institutions "are validated through songs which emphasize the proper and improper in society" (Merriam, 1964). This, however, has been commonly seen as an outdated function of music. Popular music has clearly evolved to encompass ideas outside of religious or even moral themes. Many people see current popular music as even immoral and indulgent, seemingly contradicting traditional views on the function of religion. Dr. Rupert Till, author of the book, *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music*, suggests that popular music will always be linked to religion as long as young people connect with it to establish their own status quo and provide themselves with a sense of identity and community. These are just some of the aforementioned basic functions of both music and religion.(Till, 2010).

We will also see, when this paper explores the historical aspect of music's role in religion (and vice versa), that society itself has come from a place of spirituality and

religious participation. Music has always been deeply rooted in our social cognition, which in turn inherently encompasses religion and spirituality. Bruce Venable, author of *Church Singing: The Fathers and Beyond* wrote,

“Every aspect of life was at one time accompanied by its proper music: weddings and funerals, work of all sorts, planting and harvesting, games, social dancing meals, and drinking. Anthropologists declare that all these activities were regarded as in some broader sense religious, as affirmations of the inherent social order, taught to the ancestors by the gods” (Venable, 1995).

While this has not changed today and we still incorporate music into weddings, funerals, and holidays, these activities are no longer seen as traditionally religious in mainstream culture. Justices of the Peace conduct marriage ceremonies, church funerals have turned into ‘celebrations of life’, and holidays have become more commercial than spiritual. Yet, music still plays an essential role in all of these social events. This could be attributed to the theory that society is moving away from spirituality, but as we will discuss later, that is not necessarily true.

Considering the theories we have discussed about music’s societal importance, ability to build community, and ability to bring identity and structure to culture, it makes sense to form the connection between music and religion considering that religion seeks to achieve similar ideas. One aspect of religion that we have not discussed yet is the aspect of a higher power and connection to something larger than human existence. This is probably the most elusive aspect of religion as there is no way to communicate or share this type of experience. Many, though, believe that musical experiences, like

concerts or performance settings, can feel comparable to these transcendent experiences.

Ritual is the religious equivalent to a live music experience. Ritual is the performance which goes along with the content, and gives experience to the belief system of religion. The etymology of “ritual” comes from the Latin word for “rhythm” (“Ritual”). According to Stephen A. Marini, author of *Sacred Song in America; Religion, Music and Public Culture*, the aim of both rituals and live musical performances is to, “move participants out of everyday awareness into a state of shared mythic consciousness” (Marini, 2003). This goes beyond one side of a performance.

Austrian-Jewish musicologist Victor Zuckerkandl believed that music functioned to connect the singer, the audience, and the subject, which in this study would be the religious being who is sung about. He believed that through singing, an artist, “first joins the individual singer to a community of other singers, then the singers together seek identification with those things that are sung about” (Zuckerkandl, 1971).

This is rooted in music about religion, but as music moved out of religious contexts that spiritual connection between a performer, an audience, and the subject is still palpable. While singing a love song, the artist and audience can feel the same or similar emotion together, though standing in a crowded venue. When singing a sad song, members of the audience may cry at the reaction of being a part of that experience, though they may have never had such a strong reaction to the recorded song itself. These are very powerful, physical responses to something that is so intangible. These experiences can oftentimes be reported as out-of-body or even

transcendent, similar to the description of spiritual transcendence, even though there was nothing textually spiritual about the music being played (Till, 2010).

In Marini's writing, he recognizes the central role that spirituality plays in music. He argues that a rise in pitch can create 'outgoing emotion' while a downward pitch can create an 'ingoing emotion', and that the major keys can express joy and minor keys express sadness. While these are the basic functions of music theory, the cause of these psychological emotional reactions are still unknown to this day. Marini implies that these inherent uses of emotion in music is instrumental in religious and spiritual understanding, which explains why the creation of music was for religious contexts (Marini, 2003).

Marini also relies on a theory from psychologists John A. Sloboda and Anthony Storr, who argue that music is similar to the linguistic structure of the unconscious mind. Marini wrote that no matter what language someone speaks, "music expresses our inward state in much of the same way a religious belief system, by providing an ideal order through which to perceive the world and thereby ourselves" (Marini, 2003). The theories he writes about are attractive to people when applied to sacred music because of, "the importance we have traditionally attached to the emotions in interpreting the nature of religion itself" and he then "grants the idea that music itself can convey religiousness" (Marini, 2003).

Before we move on to discuss the way music and religion have been intertwined throughout human history, it was important for us to discuss the theories that also bind the two together. In order to understand *how* they are connected, we needed to

understand *why* they were. It is because they both seek to accomplish similar goals and even do so using similar means. Music and religion both seek to make sense of the outside world around us using the internal experience of living, they both seek to define and represent a society and the values that society holds, and they both bring people together in doing these things. As we move to our historical analysis, we will be calling upon these theories to make sense of the trends we see in the connectedness of religion and music.

Historical Context

It is nearly impossible to step through every root of music in our world since music can be found in the formation of every single society in all corners of our planet. Coined as the ‘universal language’ by American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, every society in human history has had music. According to cognitive psychologist Daniel J. Levitin, “Throughout most of the world and for most of human history, music-making was as natural an activity as breathing and walking” (Levitin, 2016). Archaeologists all over the world have routinely discovered artifacts that were used to create music dating back to the beginnings of human existence. In 1995, Slovenian archaeologists found a fragment of a bone flute that is thought to be around 44,000 years old, suggesting that music has been around as long as anatomically modern humans (Blum, 2019).

Because of all of this, the musical history we will discuss is going to focus on and begin with religiously used music. My timeline will have gaps in it as music builds upon

one another and not all shifts in music history will be relevant to proving the inherent connection between music and religion.

To step through the concept of the origination of music and how it is rooted in religion, we can look at multiple corners of the world to prove that music arose out of religion no matter where it came from. While all corners of the earth had their own forms of music, Ancient Greece is thought to be where our current understanding of music began (Hagel, 2018). There is evidence that music theory was being formed in Ancient Greece as early as the 4th century with the publication of the text *Harmonic Elements* by Aristoxenos where he studied harmony, acoustics, scalars, and melody. In Greece at this time, many philosophers studied music as a mathematical expression of the cosmic order. Music was held to have certain medicinal powers over physical and mental illnesses since to the Greeks, music was literally a gift from the Gods. Certain instruments were associated with certain deities, and specifically the Muses personified different forms of music in order to entertain the Gods on Mt. Olympus (Hagel, 2018).

The Greeks also subscribed to and even originated some of Merriam's theories, specifically the theory that music can morally and ethically control or set the rules for society. They believed that music played an ethical role and even banned overcomplicated rhythms, fast tempos, specific sounds and musical motifs for fear they were morally dangerous or could literally control the moral choices of the audience. Both this philosophical view of music and the Gods' role in music lead music to be the central factor of Greek plays and rituals which were used to praise and tell the stories of Gods and demigods (Andrikou).

If we move further east to India, we can study one of the oldest religious and musical practices of our world: Hinduism. Guy L. Beck, a professor of Asian Studies and Philosophy at Tulane University stated in his article *Sacred Music and Hindu Religious Experience: From Ancient Roots to the Modern Classical Tradition*,

“While music plays a significant role in many of the world’s religions, it is in the Hindu religion that one finds one of the closest bonds between music and religious experience extending for millennia... Nearly all genres of Indian music, whether the classical Dhrupad and Khayal, or the devotional Bhajan and Kirtan, share a common theoretical and practical understanding, and are bound together in a mystical spirituality based on the experience of sacred sound” (Beck, 2019).

At the roots of Hinduism and Hindu rituals is the syllable OM. Recognizable in its popular use in yoga, OM is a sacred chant whose purpose is to bring the chanter closer to the divine and enlightenment through careful meditation. Research on the origins of OM show its close connection to tonal chant and music from ancient India. The chanting of OM is almost always monotone on the tonic note of the scale and is commonly used in not only meditation but also fire sacrifices and devotional worship of gods and goddesses. The first thousand years of OM constitute a Samavedic movement within the broader religious culture of Vedism. This is thought to be an extremely important finding in the study of Hinduism: that the history of the sacred syllable resounds with music and song (Beck, 2019).

Individual meditation is so inherent to Hindu practice because, since the beginning of this ancient religion, “ritual chanting was viewed as an effective means to interact with the cosmos and to obtain unseen spiritual merit toward a heavenly afterlife... musical sound in Hindu tradition is linked to the divine Absolute known as Brahman” (Beck, 2019). Meditation is something that every individual can do by themselves in order to have a personal spiritual connection and experience, and OM was essential to that. Even just one repetitive note is seen as a rhythmic music that is the key to the divine and to a heavenly afterlife. One could not be attained without the other (Beck, 2019).

In the form of social rituals, more dynamic music was often used. During ritual fire sacrifices, verses from religious texts were chanted in three distinct musical tones which were expanded to seven notes in the singing of hymns from the text *Sama Veda*, which comprised some of the earliest hymns in world religion. According to Beck, these hymns were, “believed to possess supernatural powers capable of petitioning and supporting the deities that controlled the forces of the universe, indicating to us that music was mysteriously linked to the divine at this early stage of Hindu ritual practice” (Beck, 2019).

What began as this classical Hindu music slowly transformed into what we now see as Indian popular music, or Bollywood music. While Bollywood music has moved away from religious context specifically since the 80's, this music and its roots in traditional Hindu music, as well as having Western pop influences, can be

used to make a similar example as we will make with American popular music: its roots are inherently religious and cannot be separated from them. The tonal and rhythmic nature of Bollywood music came from the sacred OM and rituals of traditional Hinduism, a religion that is seen more like a unifying culture across the extremely diverse regions in India. If Hinduism is a religion that is seen as intertwined or even one in the same with Indian culture, then current Indian popular culture is inherently Hindu culture (Beck, 2019).

Now switching to the Western hemisphere, Native Americans had their own system of prayer, music, dance, and culture centuries before European settlers stepped foot on native soil. Marini, in addition to his writings on sacred music in settled, colonial, and post-colonial America, recognized that, “Native American tribal societies developed extraordinary rich and diverse traditions of sacred songs” (Marini, 2003). Marini’s research found that Native American tribes used music in two different ways: ceremonial and social.

Ceremonial songs are “sung in the higher sacred rituals of tribal religion, are employed to make spiritual beings present and to purify participants” (Marini, 2003). Examples of these ceremonials would be hunting, healing, war, and harvest. Though these may seem like parts of everyday life, as we have discussed previously these everyday events are spiritual events. Especially for Native American tribes, every aspect of their lives involved their spirituality.

Social music, on the other hand, is used in social events that may lack this high ceremonial aspect, but “still maintains its potency as a sacred medium”. An example of

these types of social events would be the powwow, which is defined by Marini as, “a public ritual gathering of one or more clans or tribes dedicated to skill competition, feasting, and dancing” and is deeply rooted in tradition. Henrietta Mann Morton, a member of the Southern Cheyenne tribe, defines powwows in her own eyes as, “an outgrowth of the religious and social dances of the Plains tribes” (Blum, 2019).

These thoughts become even more potent when we consider that most Native American tribes do not subscribe to the Abrahamic view of a world made for people, but view a world that is the mother of people and that people are an integral part of the earth. Joel Brady, “Land itself is sacred... Native American faith is inextricably bound to the use of land” (Brady, 1999). For Native Americans from all tribes spanning the entire continent, every aspect of their lives were sacred because every minute of their lives were spent interacting with the land, taking and giving back. Therefore, as Venable wrote earlier, everyday moments were all spiritually connected. Whether the music they were interacting with were ceremonial songs or social songs, no matter what the context is, they are interacting with their spirituality through their sacred songs (Marini, 2003).

These Native traditions would unfortunately be overrun by the European influences of colonization. Puritans, a conservative religious movement banned from England in the 1600s, colonized the land that would become the United States in order to find religious freedom. With them, they brought their ultra-religious views and perspectives on music, which influenced the emergence of American music. While the Puritans believed that music was a gift from God, they followed in the footsteps of many other religious practices and believed that certain instruments and music were sinful or

representative of the devil, and therefore music in the beginnings of current American society were used for religious and moral propaganda (Denisoff, 1970).

This view changed as more Christian denominations settled New England and brought with them their varying amounts of liberalism. What was consistent between each was that music was mainly consumed by communities within churches. By the 1700s, many of these denominations thought that hymnals and music were a powerful force for conversion and began publishing music for mass consumption outside of church. An excellent example of this was the Methodist church, which not only published music books but even rewrote popular tavern songs as sacred songs in order to draw a wider, more “spiritually lost” crowd. While these music books still had strong rules attached to them, many churches strayed from the rigid nature of written music that required participants to sing exactly as printed in favor of a more spontaneous approach to singing hymnals, which sought to involve the listener in a more religious experience. Hymns were then seen as a way to create a “we” feeling amongst a community of believers (Denisoff, 1970).

In the United States, Methodism created many processes of public and communal singing. With the creation of the American frontier came the creation of the “camp meeting”. The inhabitants of an area would meet together at a predetermined time and place (outside of a church), to hear the circuit rider. Circuit riders were clergymen assigned to travel through new American territories to minister to settlers as churches might not have been established in new colonies yet. At these camp meetings, songs were sung loud and for days at a time. One circuit rider commented,

“They may have enjoyed themselves, but they were not singing for the sake of singing. What they were there for was the hammer on the sinner’s heart and bring him to the mourners bench” (Denisoff, 1970).

One artifact of these camp meetings was the *Pocket Hymn Book*. This book was an easy to carry, small book filled with hymns without written music in them because each hymn was written to the tune of popular standards everyone knew. This marked a time period in American music where sacred music was purposefully made accessible to all people and secular music was rising to popularity out of it (Denisoff, 1970).

If we were to progress through American music, we would see trends that were similar to those of Europe as Europe had a significant influence over American music. In order to move forward through music history, we will be discussing the history of European music before returning to the United States in the 20th century to discuss the emergence of what we see today as popular music.

Beginning in the medieval period, music was formed mainly as Gregorian chants which were monodic (written as one musical line). Gregorian chants were used in the Roman Catholic Church, the dominant religious institution in Europe at the time. The clergy were the only literate members of society who were capable of reading the text of the mass as well as the few emerging pieces of early sheet music. Therefore, music was inaccessible to almost all people unless they were attending mass (“History of Classical Music”).

From Gregorian chants came a type of music called Organum which was initially stifled because by the rigid rules implemented by the Catholic church to monitor the use

of melodies and rhythms. The Catholic church, at the time, believed what the Ancient Greeks did: that certain melodies, harmonies, and rhythms are rooted in sin and are capable of even making people sin. This idea would carry over to the Renaissance period with the augmented fourth/diminished fifth tritone. This tritone was seen as the Devil's Tritone or the "chord of evil" by the Catholic church in the Renaissance period and was banned from musical compositions all together (Burns, 2016).

To move onto the Baroque period, this was the first time in European musical history that there was a split between secular and religious music. If someone during this time period, as well as far into the Classical and Romantic periods, wanted to be a composer they would be relying on the church to fund their music and put a roof over their head. Emerging from the Baroque period, though, were composers like Antonio Vivaldi who were receiving patronage by royalty to write secular music. One of the most prolific pieces written at the time was Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* which was written to express every season, using orchestral instrumentation to copy sounds found in nature. This may seem secular, but in sonnets that accompanied the compositions, Vivaldi invoked religious imagery showing that it was less a departure from secular music but a widening of the definition of sacred music. Sacred music was no longer shackled to the inside of cathedrals and instead could enter concert halls ("History of Classical Music").

The same is considered for operatic music which came to prominence after the Baroque period, in the Classical period. It is impossible to separate the Classical period, the period of music happening, and the Enlightenment, the political movement happening at the same time. This was the time period that created and popularized the

then-radical notion of the separation of church and state, a concept that would challenge our theory that everyday life inherently holds spiritual value (“History of Classical Music”).

From 1750 to 1820, caused by the Enlightenment, secular opera music was considered higher than sacred church music like oratorios. People started valuing music that had more structure and symmetry, mirroring the values and belief systems relevant at this time. While this belief system was based off of the rejection of traditional religion, this meant that it was in direct response to the church, and therefore the music was as well. Music that challenges or rejects religion or spirituality is still theological music. It forces the listener to reevaluate their spiritual views or lifestyle and consider transcendent questions (“History of Classical Music”).

The last musical movement we will discuss in Europe in order to show the progression of Western popular music is the Romantic period, which lasted approximately from 1830 to 1920 and brings us into modern history. The Romantic period was in direct response to the Enlightenment and Classical eras. In the way that the Classical period was defined by logic, science, and secularism, the Romantic period was defined by emotion, drama, and paganism. While still turning away from the church, the artists of the Romantic period copied the philosophers of the Enlightenment by turning to Greek mythology (“History of Classical Music”). Yujie Su of Wenzhou University in China wrote of poetry in the English Romantic period,

“English Romanticism reacted against the convention and authority, a freedom in personal, political, and artistic life. The romantics revolted against the rationalism,

the classicism, and the aristocratic social and political norms of Enlightenment Age as well as impersonality of growing industrialism...The core issues in English Romanticism are liberation from the church and state and the pursuit of spontaneous outpouring of personal feeling, emotions. Death, depression and individualism are themes constantly appear in English Romantic poetry” (Su, 2016).

In the Enlightenment, the focus was pointed towards the scientific and philosophical importance of Ancient Greece and specifically rejected the mythological and religious aspects of the time. In the Romantic period, composers went back to this mythology and found meaning to incorporate into their art.

This inspiration happened mainly due to the stark differences between the Greek’s relationship with their deities and the current belief systems they had, including scientific beliefs and Christian beliefs. In Greek mythology and paganism, their Gods directly cause all natural occurrences and phenomena, and Gods featured in Greek storytelling are extremely human-like and flawed. This contrasts Abrahamic religious consistencies which teach that the singular God is perfect, almighty, and far above human flaws and emotions. During the Romantic period, while composers were concerned with the emotions and drama of life as well as engaging with natural life, this concept of Gods that are relatable and human-like was very attractive (Su, 2016). They were consumed with thoughts about death, depression, individualism, and personal emotions which were not themes that Christianity was giving them. While this does not mean that Romantic era musicians truly believed in the existence and worship of Greek

paganism, it does speak to a spiritually driven desire to connect with something more accessible and relatable than science or the church, and this desire was expressed through music (Su, 2016).

Su explains this by saying, “The interest in Greek mythology can be seen [as] part of a more widely based concern to investigate the origins and significance of the mythological, indicating beneath the seemingly disparate and heterogeneous elements of ancient universal mythoi-religious and historical traditions there lay a harmonious tradition”. Some musicians, “believed that the Greeks had invented the ‘poetry of gladness’ and identified in them ‘the religion of the Beautiful and the Religion of Joy’” and saw in Ancient Greek art, “a sense of strength, power and authority that demanded imitation” (Su, 2016).

The Romantic period is a perfect example of how religious iconography does not need to be authentic in order to be spiritual. This means that while a musician or writer may utilize references to religious scripture or beliefs that maybe aren't their own, it still represents a consideration for the spiritual and a reflection on it, as well as the artist's relation to it. So, while the music of the Romantic period may not have been for the purpose of being sacred, it actually speaks to our topic much more because it represents secular music which asks non-secular questions. This history of European music is also an excellent representation of the trend of music progressing from a place of clear inherent religious affiliation to a separation between sacred and apparent secular music.

As we enter the 20th century, we will be returning to the United States as this is the place where current popular music emerged, even when we are speaking world-wide. It is no secret that American popular music and artists have spread worldwide, but as we have seen with Bollywood, K-pop, and Arabic music, American popular music has heavily influenced the styles and subjects of international pop music as well (Hennessy, 2014).

In the United States of America, we must consider all types of people when discussing it, as we did with Native Americans earlier in this timeline. In the new nation, African Americans slaves were instrumental in the development of music outside of the European instrumental and operatic music we previously discussed. At the turn of the 20th century, American popular music grew out of minstrel shows which primarily utilized blackface, a performance that relied on offensive stereotypes and caricatures of African American music, dancing, and behavior. The music featured in these shows found inspiration from African American spirituals, which were religious folk songs that emerged from slavery, which became one of the largest and most significant forms of American folk music (“African American Spirituals”).

Spirituals have their roots in informal worship gatherings of slaves called “brush arbor meetings”. At the meetings, people would sing, chant, dance, and even reportedly enter trances. These meetings also had to be kept secret because slave owners had banned song, dance, and congregation amongst slaves in order to avoid community and organization. While the evangelization of Africans was slow, since Africans came to America with their own religions, they eventually became, “fascinated by Biblical stories

containing parallels to their own lives and created spirituals that retold narratives about Biblical figures like Daniel and Moses. As Africanized Christianity took hold of the slave population, spirituals served as a way to express the community's new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes" according to the Library of Congress ("African American Spirituals").

Moving onto the 1920s, also known as the Roaring 20's, society took an indulgent turn. After the American success in World War I, the country experienced serious economic growth as well as rapid political and social change. This time period of mass consumerism caused the emergence of a "mass culture": everyone listening to the same music, doing the same dances, and using the same slang. A massive cultural phenomenon happening during this period was the reaction to the war. Existentialism and a feeling of lost youth was felt amongst the young generations in the 20's, which meant that these generations were much more morally open. This caused a negative reaction to the music of the era from older generations on the basis that music was causing the moral liberation of the youth, which mirrors what we saw in Ancient Greece and in Europe. Jazz music and its apparent "vulgarity" seemed immoral and unspiritual, but the motivation behind this liberal behavior is an important spiritual note ("The Roaring 20's History").

Because of the horrors of the first World War, many people in the 20's turned towards God, but most people turned away from traditional religion in favor of a nihilistic point of view. Those who turned away from God and became "loose" gave the Roaring 20's its name, but were still making spiritual decisions. What they believed in at this time

was their own mortality and indulgence, and they created music that highlighted these things like jazz and dance music. Issues of mortality and morality are issues of higher existence and therefore spirituality, and were in careful consideration at this time in response to serious trauma (“The Roaring 20’s History”).

This invokes Merriam’s theories we discussed prior: that music tells society how to live and explains what human existence is. During this time period, human existence was nihilistic, consumerist, and selfish which is in stark contrast to what organized religions stand for. But, these themes are still questions of spirituality. Is indulgence selfish? Is going against tradition immoral? Or is this the social transcendence we have been looking for, as women were slowly gaining more liberation from misogynistic norms? Jazz music was about dancing, smoking, drinking, and wearing nice clothes. Clubs gave younger generations a place to feel freedom on the dance floor and partake in music which tells them how to experience their lives after the horrors of a world war (“The Roaring 20’s History”).

This theme of young indulgence came back in the 1950’s with crooners becoming not only popular, but attracting hysterical fan bases. Singers like Frank Sinatra, Frankie Laine, and, later on, the Beatles, engendered their fans in ways that no other musicians had in the past, and this was largely due to the fact that these were attractive men singing love songs to an audience of young girls.

This seems as though it is the furthest away from sacred or spiritual music we have discussed, but nonetheless this time period could be seen as a group of young women worshipping something. In Ancient Greece we discussed how they worshipped

very flawed and relatable Gods who would affect their lives directly. In Hinduism we discussed how they worshipped transcendence and personal peace. When discussing Native Americans we discussed how they worshipped land and the animals they share it with. In Christianity we discussed how they worship the one God who gave us the earth to use. While in no way was Frank Sinatra a religious figure or did these young girls see their fandom as a religion, it does invoke a thought that this is what young people were worshipping: romance, love, talent, and yes, attractive men.

While this may sound extreme, when we invoke Merriam's theories, it does make sense when considering that new religious movements are being created constantly. Humans have historically organized themselves around religious texts, and vice versa. Humans organized rituals and traditions as the values of organized religions have altered based on current social behavior. While music is not a new religious experience, the organization of a group of people around one concept or experience that gives them the feelings of community, transcendence, and emotional meaning in their lives are the same values that organized religion is based off of (Till, 2010).

So, as we discussed when exploring theories that state that the performance of music about any subject has spiritual elements and communication with them, the same goes for this time period. When artists were singing about being in love, there is an inherent human experience that connects them with their audience. When they sing about dancing and are performing to an audience of people taking part in that dance, it is that musician giving their audience the experience of the joys of which they are talking about, as well as telling them how to socially and morally live their lives. So,

when we look at any of the music coming from these times periods, whether it be crooners, rock and roll, country western, soul (which was the direct combination of gospel techniques and secular themes), disco, or otherwise, we are discussing music that worships emotions and experiences that connect people in otherworldly ways, even though they occur outside of the traditional idea of organized religion.

This theory continues when we enter the counterculture of 1966-1976. This counterculture was a youth movement in response to the political climate at this time. Because of the Vietnam War and the ethical questions it brought up, the counterculture centered around the ideals of peace, love, and community, which are not far off from the ideals of most religions across the world. Young people at the time were giving up their entire lives and material possessions to join communes and religiously follow artists like The Grateful Dead as if they were religious figures. The music and art of the counterculture were defined by not only their political themes and meanings, but also these more spiritual and communal ideas of peace and social liberation.

One of the most influential artists of the counterculture from the perspective of spirituality was the former Beatles member, George Harrison. After leaving the Beatles, George Harrison was the first and most successful to begin his solo career, and it centered around his experiences and education in India as well as his spiritual beliefs as a converted Hindu. While still in the Beatles, he traveled to India and began studying sitar under Ravi Shankur. When he returned, he began using the sitar and other Indian instruments, as well as transcendent themes, in the Beatles music. The song "Within You, Without You" contrasted Western individualism with Eastern monism, while "I Me

Mine” conquered the “eternal problem”: the ego (Mead, 2006). These songs were not exactly the most successful songs of the Beatles, yet were still early examples of Harrison’s developing spirituality and desire to share it with his huge audience.

When the Beatles broke up, Harrison used Hindu ideology, philosophy, and spirituality in his own music. His first solo release, *All Things Must Pass* in 1970, was the most successful and well-regarded of all four members, spending seven weeks at No. 1 in the US and eight weeks at No. 1 in the UK (“No. 1 Spot for All Things Must Pass”). This is especially impressive considering that he was the first major musician to bring Eastern religion and philosophy to the Western world, and was actually well received.

Of course this is because the ideas he expressed in this album as well as the rest of his solo music was consistent with the values the counterculture held. In a culture that rejected all traditional forms, turning away from organized Western religion was a given. What also had emerged, though, was a desire for personal transcendence that came about through a rise in recreational hallucinogenic drug use. Because drugs like LSD and ayahuasca gave users a euphoria and perceived religious experience, outside of drug use these users chased this expansion of consciousness as well. This, along with the growing popularity in community manifesting in the creation of communes, meant that Harrison bringing this alternative religion with values in community, personal transcendence, and karmatic good became very popular amongst this prominent community (Mead, 2006).

The amazing aspect of George Harrison's career during and even after this time period was the way that he was writing massively consumed pop music that brought these themes into pop culture. George Harrison had a larger fan base outside of the counterculture, leftover from his Beatles days, who he forced to really think about their own consciousness and challenge popular beliefs. With this comes a struggle, though, as mass media and pop culture did not always want these beliefs to be challenged. As he entered the 80's and 90's, Harrison became more and more disillusioned with the direction of consumerism and apathy Western culture was heading towards. As he wrote in his song *Living in the Material World*, "Hope to get out of this place/By the Lord Sri Krishna's grace/My salvation from the material world" (Mead, 2006).

In the 1980's and 1990's, spiritual devotion fell out of favor with the public (Grant, 2014), but religion was still on the minds of the public. Between Madonna's rise to superstardom and the growing number of sub-genres within rock, music began fighting directly with organized religion, namely Christianity. Notably, Madonna's *Like a Virgin*, *Like a Prayer*, *Live to Tell*, and *Papa Don't Preach* directly offended the Catholic church in the 80's and 90's, giving her a reputation and aesthetic of being a Catholic school rebel. Madonna constantly used the rejection of her Catholic upbringing to bring themes of sexual liberation to her music, which challenged media's perception of feminism and the church at the time. While the Catholic church condemned her, Madonna actually converted to Kabbalah (a sect of Jewish mysticism) in 1996, providing an argument for the possibility of the intersection of women's sexuality and devoted spirituality (Allen, 2015).

Rock music's sub-genres were also a focal point of tension between popular music and Christianity as hard rock, punk rock, grunge, and others threatened it. Even John Lennon said in the 60's that Jesus will be forgotten and the Beatles will still remain, causing a massive boycott of Beatles records in the United States. In the 80's there were rumors of rock records being played backwards playing satanic messages and some groups outright rebelled against Christianity. During this time period, music became a battlefield with Christianity (Aarons, 2019).

These themes, though, came into direct opposition to George Harrison's perspective of spirituality. While Madonna and many rock groups were advocating for pleasure, liberation, and indulgence, George Harrison was increasingly criticized for his very personal, reserved and Eastern spirituality. He eventually withdrew from the spotlight from 1987-1992, then again from 1997 to 2001 while he battled throat cancer. In 2002, George Harrison's son posthumously released Harrison's final album, *Brainwashed*, written while he was alive and in seclusion. While *Brainwashed* was finished by his son, it was written by George Harrison who knew he was about to die. The album was filled with incredible insight into the mind of a man spiritually prepared for death, but it was also an album about the doom the world was heading towards. Before he died, Harrison joked that the name of the album would be called *Your Planet is Doomed- Volume One*. Even the end result along with its cover art evoked themes of the destruction of self and the advice of mending one's relationship with the spiritual. He saw the world in serious spiritual danger and his last message to us was one of getting

back onto the road of enlightenment because it is worth the time and effort (Hausmann, 2013).

While this album was filled with written connections to his spirituality and his own journey of death and the destruction of the self, *Brainwashed* is an excellent example of how even pop songwriters can achieve spiritual meaning through the music itself, without the necessity of lyrical content. In John Hausmann's 2013 analysis of *Brainwashed*, he took a composer's eye to the musical choices made which gives a greater insight into how Harrison utilized musical expression to further the listener's spiritual and emotional understanding of Hindu text. In musical terms, Hausmann describes the chord progression in the first track of the album, *Any Road*. He writes that the song, written in D major, begins on the tonic chord, but routinely uses foreign chords throughout the verses and the chorus. By using chords that are not in D major and by sitting on them for longer than the chords within the tonic, he is creating tension and throwing off the listener's expectations. While this might sound like simply some unusual pop songwriting, Hausmann explains how this is actually much more important,

"Its use in 'Any Road' goes beyond a stock songwriting device to become a metaphor of metaphysical proportions, musically representing the dangers of departing from the spiritual path. D major can be interpreted as representing God, spiritual awareness, or any other religious goal, since we as listeners desire all movement to other harmonic places to resolve back to the tonic. The key of D major is firmly established as a goal at the beginning of the song, but the verse's end introduces foreign elements that are expanded in the refrain. As the narrator

was unsure of his direction and was lost, the harmonic direction of the song was also sidetracked. The refrain loses its way harmonically (represented by the use of two chords borrowed from a new key, C major), and only through the dual function of the pivot G chord does the music find its way back into D major” (Hausmann, 2013).

Harrison is not just singing about his someone losing their way, he is composing music that does that same. This is directly connected to Marini’s theory that the actual composition of music is what physically represents and causes the inwards/outwards motion of expression and human experience. While this might seem like simple music theory, Marini believes that the function of music theory is much deeper as it is consistent throughout the human world. We are all connected by our emotional response to music composition and therefore it is an expression of the human experience more than anything else (Marini, 2003).

This is just one example of how all of Harrison’s music was spiritual in two senses. Yes, its lyrical text told stories about his own spirituality as well as stories inspired by Hinduism, but his music also told the story through spiritual means. By just listening to the basic chord progression of the song, one can understand the emotions of being lost and going through pain in order to be found. According to Merriam’s theories of the functions of music in regards to spirituality, this is a spiritual story Harrison is trying to convey to his audience in the most internally accurate way. Any song that utilizes this degree of musical storytelling does not rely on text to be spiritual. The instrumental and classical music we discussed earlier in this section was spiritual

yet had no text to prove it, the music conveyed the spirituality itself. This being said, the same principle could be applied to any secular music, as long as it makes some type of higher emotional connection with its audience.

This is important to remember while we move onto the next time period of popular secular music we will be discussing. Going back to the 1980's and 90's, religion or spirituality in any context was generally rejected and declining as a part of a general trend over the past 60 years called The Great Decline (Grant, 2014). Music during this time period, like punk, grunge, hip hop, R&B, and even just pop music, was telling young people to be consumers and to seek out sexuality, and what is seen as immoral behavior like drinking and drugs. While we see very little, if no religious or spiritual mentioning in mainstream music at this time, it could be said that this music was following in Madonna's footsteps, of sexuality, indulgence, and a rejection of what came before. These are spiritual themes because they are coming in direct conflict with previously established spiritual norms and questioning them (Till, 2010).

If we consider the theories discussed previously, we could consider these mindsets and the growth of worshipping other things like consumerism as a metaphor for new religious movements. Again, while this is not a religious movement, these themes effectively accomplish the same goals as any organized religion: to reflect the values of the current society, to tell the members of society how to live, and to connect emotionally to the society (Till, 2010).

This would make sense as we saw secular and "sinful" music attracting young people away from the traditional organized religion of their parents and into a new

community of liberation. Even with “sinful” music, it is still connecting listeners with the question of meaning in our lives, because the concept of “sinful” or immoral behaviors or even social progress and liberation is a concept of purpose and meaning in life (Aarons, 2019).

According to research conducted by Hayden Aarons from Australian Catholic University, “More theologically conservative Christian groups are also much more likely to shun popular forms of music than the non-religious. Evangelical groups, for example, were five times less likely to listen to or state a preference for rock, heavy metal, and alternative rock than the non-religious”. Aarons’ research expands to show the popularity of classical orchestral musical genres in regular church goers as well, and even a theme of judgement of those who listen to less highly revered genres (Aarons, 2019). While this seems like a small detail, it shows that music during the 80’s and 90’s as well as today is a frontline for a war between conservatism and liberalism as well as traditional morality and updated values. The same war is being waged within the walls of religious groups knowing they are declining and concerned about being palatable for a 21st century world (Aarons, 2019).

This same trend only grew as religious participation dropped consistently until today. After about 2 decades of relatively no significant cases to explore, it is safe to say that during this period, larger theological questions were not on the minds of young people. Though this is not discounted by the aforementioned theory that music on any topic has spiritual elements, it is notable that this lack of overtly spiritual music shifted in around 2012. We will continue to discuss current topics and case studies in our next

section, as well as how the rise and fall of politics and theological question seem to go hand-in-hand.

Before we step into our next topic of politics, current media, and spiritual pop music, it is important to emphasize the fact that this has only been a brief history of the intersection between Western pop culture and spirituality. We have left out many valuable perspectives because similar points could be made using other examples. This, as well as the fact that current Western pop culture has mainly been derived from European and American musical practices meant that our main focus would be on European and American music.

The purpose of this entire exploration of sacred music throughout time was to make the point that no matter where you are in this world, music and religion are two constants across all human civilizations. Music and spirituality cannot be separated, so we began with the history of the intersection between them in order to get to the roots of the interwoven vines. Even when talking about some of the areas we did not discuss, like ancient storytelling traditions in Judaism, the call to prayer in Islam, chanting practices in Buddhism, or flute calls in indigenous Australia, it is overwhelmingly clear that music was created for the purpose of spiritual connection and must be seen as so while we move onto current pop music and the current events that has effected it.

Political and Current Context

After discussing the context of music and spirituality, one aspect of this history has been glossed over: spiritual music's correlation to political events and political

action. Music and politics have always been intertwined based off of the fact the political views have been historically based on religious views and teachings. We can still see this today with the US Republican Party's monopoly on "Christian Values" and the ongoing prevalence of Christianity in US government despite the separation of church and state. This being said, here we will discuss specifically how music, especially spiritually centered music, has been connected to politics. This is in order to come to the conclusion that a rise in political activity also causes a rise in spiritual questioning, both of which manifest themselves through music.

It is easy to look back at our history and view some major political trends in our music, like the Romantic period's response to the Enlightenment, or the Roaring 20's in response to World War I, but here we will be delving into some deeper moments that show spiritual pop music at the forefront of protest. The first example we will go back to will be from the Native American tribes and ceremonial songs. As we already covered, Native American music is inherently spiritual because of the emphasis they place on land and nature. So, it only makes sense that during recent protests organized to protect the planet and the homes of indigineous tribes, they use ceremonial songs from their ancestors. According to Gina Blum from the University of Colorado, these songs call for the same activism that Native Americans are fighting for today: protecting land and advocating for Mother Earth as well as their right to the land they were born in. What makes this truly incredible is how these ancient religious songs have been passed down and preserved for long enough to be chanted at the sight of the Standing Rock protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016 (Blum, 2019).

Moving through US history, African American spirituals were a more codified version of political music. Spirituals were usually call and response which made them perfect to incite escapes from bondage. Songs like, *I Got My Ticket* use codified language referencing to the Underground Railroad, inspiring and encouraging slaves to “get their ticket” and escape via the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman famously used the spiritual *Go Down Moses* to identify herself to slaves who might want to flee to the north, and Fredrick Douglass wrote of his road to freedom, “A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan” (“African American Spirituals”).

These spirituals grew into many different genres, but notably grew to be known as soul music. Soul music was gospel musical techniques and styles using secular text and topic, and it blew up in the 1950's during the Civil Rights Movement, giving them the name “freedom songs”. Tamara Roberts, an ethnomusicologist from the University of California Berkeley states that soul music during this time period was “especially powerful because they came out of the black church tradition, and out of a shared body of song, and already had a history”. Soul music and freedom songs relied on its degree of spirituality in order to bring a specific group of people a new way to express hope and frustration that was specific to that community. Using music that was so spiritually connected to a society was an important role in bringing that society together into a community to fight for their equal rights (Henwood, 2017).

We already discussed the next time period, the 60's and 70's youth counterculture, in detail, but here we can explore elements of their political activity as well. The counterculture was in direct response to America's involvement in Vietnam, causing intense amounts of protests across the country lead by young people. As the 1960s progressed, widespread tensions developed in American society that tended to flow along generational lines regarding the war in Vietnam, race relations, sexual mores, women's rights, traditional modes of authority, a materialist interpretation of the American Dream, as well as religious and musical lines. It is interesting to note that even though the youth revolted against everything that stood for mainstream or popular Western culture, they still turned towards and searched for religious connection in some way. As we already discussed, a lot of popular music within the counterculture and spilling out into the mainstream had elements of Eastern religion in them and were used as protest songs. When the counterculture died down, so did the popularity of these new found religious movements, whether it be Eastern religion, communes, the occult, or even new Christian movements (Mead, 2006).

We will fast forward past the consumerism and materialism in the 80s and 90s caused by Reaganomics and an increased leaning towards conservatism as the music at this time expressed that self-centered culture as we discussed earlier. We can now arrive in current history that is still affecting us today, on 9/11/2001. According to a 2009 survey, 9/11 was the most influential event in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of young people today (Towns, 2015). Especially for Millenials, who were young and impressionable when 9/11 occurred, something so traumatic on a world-wide scale

created more patriotism and belief of government, especially after the assassination of Osama bin Laden in 2011.

This is where “America’s Music” comes in. In the wake of 9/11, people who had previously been searching for rebellious music now searched for music that could be used for the purpose of nation building, mourning, patriotism, and healing. Seemingly overnight, themes that country music had always championed began to appeal to much wider audiences, causing the largest rise in popularity ever seen in country music (Hight, 2018).

Though country music is known for its love of veterans, keg parties, and patriotism, it is also well known for its love of Jesus. While we agreed that we would not be discussing specifically religious pop music like Christian rock and gospel music, country music is a completely different animal in a way that it is marketed as and usually is secular popular music. Though country music claims to be secular, and most songs are about drinking beer in the back of a pickup truck, it has the highest rates of Christian themes than any other genre of popular music. In addition, these Christian songs are not just making it onto albums, they are rising to the top of country and pop radio charts (Hight, 2018). So, it makes perfect sense that a rise in this genre of music that perfectly balances clear political conservatism, patriotism, partying, and Jesus would become popular after an event such as 9/11. Instead of protest music like we had seen in response to political unrest in the past, 9/11 actually sparked a greater devotion to not just the United States, but to Jesus as well (Towns, 2015).

This is also interesting when we consider the socially perceived fear of radical Islam that manifested in the aftermath of 9/11. As the United States is a Christian nation and has more members of Christianity than any other faith (Grant, 2014), it makes sense that in response to the perceived threat of radical Islam, the United States reacts with radical and popularized Christianity.

If anything, country music's rise during this time is a perfect example of Merriam's theory of music telling society how to act as well as wrong from right. In American history, most large political events invoke a divide: some support and some rebel against, usually along generational lines. With 9/11, though, it was a massive trend of an increase of patriotism, Christianity, Islamophobia, and dedication to our military. This was only exasperated by country music telling us what is the appropriate response to such an event. While it is impossible to detangle which came first, it is no coincidence that despite all the atrocities committed by the Bush Administration in the wake of 9/11, our popular music was still focused on an unwavering devotion to our country, especially as a Christian state (Hight, 2018).

With the Obama Administration came an influx of political music surrounding the LGBTQA+ community, which was sorely needed as the United States debated over marriage equality, eventually becoming legal in 2015 at the end of Obama's presidency. With songs like *Born This Way* by Lady Gaga and *Same Love* by Macklemore and Ryan Lewis becoming extremely popular, these might not seem like protest songs or even spiritual songs. What brings these anthems of pride into our discussion is the context of religious opposition to the Marriage Equality Act. LGBTQA+ issues in the United States

have been traditionally fought on the religious battlefield, especially when it comes to marriage equality because of the Christian notion that marriage is defined by the Christian God (Henwood, 2017). So, while songs like *Born This Way* and *Same Love* do not actually speak to spirituality by name, they are just as valuable religious rebellions as Madonna's *Like A Prayer* because of their direct response to religious persecution and the bubbling conversations over this battle between the domination of Christian values in this country (Henwood, 2017).

A song that stands out as a direct and oppositional rebellion against Christianity and specifically the Catholic Church is the 2013 song, *Take Me To Church* by Hozier. Hozier is a singer-songwriter from Ireland whose style is influenced by folk rock protest music, blues, as well as gospel and soul. His first released single was *Take Me To Church* which launched him into international stardom, becoming certified 6 times platinum in the US alone ("YTD Marketshare at the Seven-Month Mark"). This is surprising due to the subject matter of the song and the video that accompanies it. The song itself grew out of Hozier's frustrations with the Catholic Church, and the song's reception spread to represent Catholicism's rejection of the LGBTQA+ community ("Q&A: Hozier on Gay Rights, Sexuality, and Good Hair"). The viral music video that accompanied it showed the story of two men being the victims of violent hate crimes over their romantic relationship, and ultimately blames these very real events on the anti-gay doctrines of the Catholic church (Nichols, 2013).

While it is a given that the Catholic church did not react well to the song or the video, the song's success is very telling of young society at the time. Millennials and

members of Generation Z are of the most diverse and socially liberal generations there has ever been. They each have the highest rates of LGBTQA+ identifying people as well as the lowest rates of devotion to organized or traditional religions (Towns, 2015). So, it makes sense that during a time where the political rights of people are being threatened by an old religious institution as well as its followers, young people turn to an anthem of non-judgement and frankly apparent anti-Christianity. While it may come as a surprise that a song in such direct opposition to a religion (as opposed to Madonna who constantly walked the line of offensive but devoted), it makes perfect sense considering the political climate at the time.

While the pendulum swung to President Obama, the pendulum must swing back. With the incoming Trump Administration, the music community had many reactions to such a strong, divisive, and disheartening event in our nation's history. While many artists released extensive music about the election and in opposition to Trump, one song that is especially relevant is the song *Hallelujah Money* by the Gorillaz.

This song was released the weekend before Trump's inauguration in 2017 and it is a political commentary on the way that Trump, as well as his supporters, worship money more than all else and how money played an essential role in the outcome of the election itself. It describes a dream-like version of America that Trump promised his voters, one of racism and apparent economic prosperity using a tree as well as other Christian themes, as symbols (one of the main functions of music as defined by Merriam). While this is obviously based off of Trump's campaign promises in the coming days of his inauguration, these are both themes that are essential to the Republican

party who have repeatedly claimed a monopoly on Christian values as well as protective economic policies (Henwood, 2017).

The song opens on the line “Here is our tree/That primitively grows/And when you go to sleep/Scarecrows from the Far East/Come to eat/Its tender fruit”, threatening China’s economic manipulation that Trump continually stressed on the campaign trail. This sets up the tree symbol for the rest of the song, as the next lines of the song say, “And I thought the best way to perfect our tree/Is by building walls/Walls like unicorns/In full glory and galore/And even stronger/Than the walls of Jericho”. Jericho is a historical city with one of the oldest known protective walls, but it is central to a story in the Old Testament where the Israelites tear down the wall using purely their faith.

The chorus of the song invokes Christian feelings of a choir singing “Hallelujah Money” repeatedly, ironically showing listeners in an ominous voice that money could be their new God in order to gain power. While this song plays on the heartstrings of America, by ironically evangelizing Trump’s views, it also is asking us important moral and existential questions. On the morning of the inauguration, how will we know we are still human? How will we dream, love, know? It can be an unsettling song to listen to, yet the video had amassed 5.5 million views by May that same year (Henwood, 2017).

But, this is not the only rise in Christianity-infused music of this time period. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Kanye West has very recently announced that he will only be releasing Christian music for the rest of his career, starting with his recent album *Jesus is King*. While this may seem like this is irrelevant to our discussion of secular spiritual music outside of the overtly sacred, Kanye has been moving in this

direction over the course of his entire prolific career, and has taken his secular fans with him. This is because West sampled hip-hop and rap songs and created spiritual meaning from them, so his music is still appealing to a wider and non-religious audience (Klinkenberg, 2019). This is very reminiscent of the circuit riders of frontier America: taking secular melodies everyone knows to attract listeners, and exposing them to spiritual themes through the altered text.

Kanye West has been playing with Christian iconography for his entire career. As early as 2004, Kanye released one his most successful singles, *Jesus Walks*, and in 2006 he appeared on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine donning a crown of thorns (Grady, 2019). In his 2013 album *Yeezus* (a combination of Jesus and Kanye, suggesting he was another version of Jesus), he included a song called *I Am God* that, while reflecting usual braggadocio known in the hip hop and rap genre, was a strong statement to make considering the self-centered cult of personality he has built around himself (Grady, 2019).

It is important to note, though, that until 2019 West had only used Christianity as a metaphor. In the beginning of 2019, West began to create what he calls Sunday Service. Sunday Service is an actual mass that is centered around music and informal prayers. In it, an entirely black band and choir plays gospel covers of West's music and others, and mainly involves West giving the sermons himself. Every member of the performance is wearing West's clothing line and a ticket to get into this event is given either by invitation or, more recently, by paying a lot of money. The early iterations of this event mainly involved a cast of other high-brow celebrities documenting their times

there in order to build the status of this church, but now that it is open to the public, NDA's are signed by every single person entering the church (Grady, 2019). The most public display of Sunday Service was on David Letterman's coverage of it on his Netflix show, *My Next Guest Needs No Introduction*.

In this documentation, West also expands on his musical influences and healing since becoming a born again Christian. West subscribes to similar ideas to the Ancient Greek idea of sinful music or tones as well, even though this theory has since been debunked by psychologists. In the interview, he talks about sonics of healing and even uses Eastern religious theories to enhance that experience, "We do our services in a circle and I removed the programmed drums... that usually hit inside of the lowest chakra, which is your sex chakra" (Steed, 2019). He continued to talk about low tones and how he wanted to sonically create purity, using not only Marini's theories of music's sonic ability to reach a spiritual place in an individual, but also the theories of Greek philosophers and Catholic lawmakers who truly believed certain sonic elements of music could encourage lewd behavior. So while Kanye's Sunday Service and the music included in it is all worship music, he's also changing his own popular and mainstream music on the assumption that music is sonically connected to each individual's spiritual state.

This large and overarching switch to Christianity comes in the wake of West's controversial and often offensive support of Donald Trump's presidency and policies, which has made him fall out of the good graces of the country, and specifically his liberal fan base. *Jesus is King* performed well on the charts for a brief moment before

dropping back down, and most reviews felt lukewarm about such a highly anticipated album (Klinkenberg, 2019). West has made multiple visits to the White House as well as has gone on record stating that slavery was a “choice” and the 13th Amendment that abolished slavery should also be abolished (Grady, 2019). Ta Nehisi-Coates of the Atlantic wrote of this strong conservatism coming from West by saying, “These are not stray thoughts. They are the propaganda that justifies voter suppression, and feeds police brutality, and minimizes the murder of Heather Heyer. And Kanye West is now a mouthpiece for it” (Coates, 2018).

West’s switch to both Christianity and stark political conservatism is a trend that goes hand-in-hand. While his version of Christianity incorporates a new-age approach to spirituality combined with black church traditions, it is not surprising that when being rejected by a liberal fanbase he seeks to pander to a conservative one (Coates, 2018). The only issue here is that with the negative reviews of *Jesus is King* comes an important note about the fatal flaw of his music: it is not as relatable or exciting as his early music. As we saw with Hozier’s clear rejection of the church and general trends of a dying traditional religious connection in young generations today, his fanbase is not relating to cut-and-dry Christian worship. *Jesus is King* left no concept up for question the way that George Harrison’s spiritual music introduced the question. Many reviews of the album claim that in a society where disillusionment is at every turn and where there are more questions than answers, the generation he is writing for does not need West to tell them Jesus will solve their problems (Klinkenberg, 2019).

In Conclusion

Think about the most profound musical experience you have ever had. A time where a song felt like it was written for you, or a performance that brought you to tears. These are experiences that transcend normal human interactions and become intangible connections. All music is spiritual as long as it connects to the human experience. This includes current pop music no matter how superficial it may seem, as music began in religious contexts which lead to and intertwined with current pop music. When we listen to the radio, it is impossible to take the humanity out of what we are listening to, and therefore we cannot subtract the spiritual connection we all have with each other through music. If we are connecting to one another in meaningful, intangible, and transcendent ways, it is a spiritual experience. Music is about the only place where this experience effectively happens in pop culture today.

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