

Contemporary and crowdsourced

How a networked generation addresses truth-telling through locally-grown music

by Carl Thomas Gladstone and the EmergeDetroit Community

An emerging generation of musicians, songwriters and choirs is creating a rich landscape of locally-grown worship music in congregations around the world. This grass-roots, contemporary worship music offers the church a kind of contextual truth-telling, bringing the Gospel into focus for each community with their own languages, instruments and sounds. And, as a networked movement, each creative community can easily share their unique worship music with the world through a host of online tools and social media. This is a movement that resists centralization, prefers collaborative curation, and is offering the church a new avenue to share Christ's transformational story through the arts. This is the truth that modern-day contemporary worship music offers, and it is a truth the church has shared with the world since the first hymn was sung in the first catacomb.

First, a word about how we in the EmergeDetroit community (emergedetroit.org) understand the term "contemporary." As the root words suggest, we take contemporary to mean "with the times," or occurring in the present. So, we do not use the term as short-hand for a particular style of worship music dominated by Anglo-American soft-rock bands wearing matching outfits. Nor do we use the term to refer to worship songs published in a particular decade, say 1983-1993. Rather, contemporary worship music happens whenever God's people continually explore our relationship with the Triune God through text and melody, week after week, year after year. This music is the stuff being created right now in the worldwide community of Christ-followers. It is a collection of songs that

changes daily and is continually welcoming new additions.

A generative movement. Some have seen it written (at the front of certain church hymnals): "Sing these tunes before any others ... if you've learned different versions unlearn them!" It is a great (paraphrased) quote from John Wesley at the front of *The United Methodist Hymnal*. But this movement of crowdsourced contemporary worship musicians sees things a bit differently. They are eager to build up new and emerging libraries of songs that speak to the faith-life of church-goers today. And, they are doing so by collaborating with the hymn texts and tunes of the past.

The Gentle Wolves at Servant Church in Austin, TX (gentlewolves.bandcamp.com), sing new melodies and arrangements that

bring old lyrics back to life. Their musical style fits in with the artistic sensibilities of their city, home of the South By Southwest Music Festival, and thus reaches the people of their congregation as a kind of "native artistic language." These old songs, offered in new contextually relevant ways, open up the messages contained in historic lyrics for the edification of the Body of Christ.

Whether in Austin, Nashville, New York or Sacramento, communities and artists create and sing songs that matter for their community. Indelible Grace (igracemusic.com) artists reclaim those lost hymns that still have truth to share with their worship participants. These are not the hymns that a distant committee of the church institution consecrated thirty years ago. Rather, they are the songs and melodies that each



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community discerns as necessary for their worship life today. Other collectives like Red Mountain Music (redmountainmusic.bandcamp.com), Cardiphonia (cardiphonia.org), and City Hymns (cityhymns.com) borrow texts and styles from their local communities and put them to work in new worship music that can teach and form people in Christian discipleship.

This new artistic work is generative, not only in the creation of the worship music itself, but also in the open sharing of this music through online hymnals, music players and downloadable files. Each song created and recorded can immediately become a track that influences other grass-roots communities around the world at the click of a button. By borrowing, adapting, and learning from the locally-grown, and generously-shared liturgy of other communities our own creative efforts with worship music can be encouraged. Then, through collaborative curation of sharing and “liking,” the best worship music from around the network rises to the top and can become a kind of momentary canon enjoyed by all.

We believe that the deepest truth-telling happens when Christians develop worship music that

speaks contextually, emerges from the experiences of the present, adapts quickly to the changing realities around us, and uses modern communications tools to encourage all communities and artists to be generative participants in its creation.

A connected movement.

Another historic Wesleyan instruction is (again I paraphrase): “Sing spiritually, for God only and no one else.” Once more the contemporary worship music creators that we’ve worked among tend to challenge this assertion. For them, creating locally-grown worship music is an integral part of a conspiracy of goodness which calls people together to help rehearse and proclaim God’s justice, mercy, and grace. These are worship artists who see their role as instigators of radical discipleship, encouraging a kind of hands-on Gospel truth-telling that can only happen when Christians hit the streets together.

So, The Table UMC Band (thetableumc.org/rooted/music) gathers a diverse group of musicians, “from jazz to reggae to Spirituals to rock to traditional hymns to Latin and beyond,” to create music that gathers a tribe. This is music that teaches the congrega-

tion who God is and how we can follow Jesus together. This music helps train worshipers how to recognize and faithfully witness the tragic and the beautiful in their lives and in the world. Sometimes, bands like The Table Band use music as secret cues to missional action – so every time members of that church hear “Don’t Stop Believing” on the radio they might pull over at the next gas station and pay for someone’s fill up.

This conspiratorial view of worship music pushes back against the falsehood of worship and praise as a “me and God thing.” In the best tradition of connecting social holiness and personal piety the worship music of contemporary Christian communities is claiming its role in this truth-telling. The songs that these communities sing are training grounds for the missional action that these communities will take when they leave the sanctuary.

A powerful movement. The church may also know Wesley’s other scolding remark to “Sing modestly ... [and] stay in time.” But contemporary and crowd-sourced worship music creators are saying something quite different. They don’t want music that helps congregations stay in their place and accept the rhythms and

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realities of the world as given. They want to sing songs that deconstruct the powers and principalities, expose evil, and offer Jesus' alternative vision of community and justice. They want to write songs that make you mad – songs that scratch at you all day until you call a senator or go hang out with the guy asking for money on the corner. They want to share songs with the world that are dangerous to the status quo, and which bring the wild and beautiful vision of God's new heaven and new earth to life.

Some in our community here in Detroit have been a part of one such project. *The Abolitionist Hymnal* (carlthomasgladstone.com/abolitionisthymnal) is a collection of anti-slavery hymn texts used by 19th century Christians, reclaimed to help fight the ongoing monster of human trafficking in its various forms today. These texts, set to new tunes, recorded, and shared broadly online with chord charts and sheet music, are designed to awaken a new generation of abolitionists from within the Christian church. Contributions from the sale of the album have gone to support the Not For Sale Campaign (notforsalecampaign.org), and live perfor-

mances of the music have benefited a number of other modern-day anti-slavery campaigns.

The value of this and other worship music projects is the ability of artists to energize and mobilize their communities around the continued missional call inherent in the Christian narrative. Contemporary worship music speaks Gospel-truth when congregations behave differently and act transformationally after they have gathered to lift their voices together.

The third greatest commandment. These contemporary worship musicians do sync up with one particular encouragement of Brother John's to "sing all, [and] sing together as much as you can." Like a third greatest commandment, they imagine Jesus, acoustic guitar in hand, inviting all the nations to "come on over and let's jam, man!" They connect their creative musical work with the foundational creative work of God, and the ongoing inspiration and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. These artists know that in the ongoing work of generating truly contextual and contemporary worship music the church is blessed and congregations are encouraged

to live the ancient truth of the Bible through daily praxis. In adopting vast sharing networks for this music, communities across the globe edify each other with their local insight and creativity. And, the movement gathered around this contemporary worship music continues speaking God's story boldly to a world bound up in the narratives of others gods and powers.

At EmergeDetroit we have come to know that the truth-telling of contemporary worship music occurs in our missional action born of unique scriptural wisdom unearthed by the creative processes of artists exploring the Triune God's hopes and promises for a redeemed world. And, we thank God for such music in our worship and in our lives.



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Church in and around Detroit, MI. His work with the EmergeDetroit missional communities and other young people's ministries serves as inspiration for his creative efforts as a singer/songwriter. As "Chief Conspirator" of a growing collective of artist friends who speak from their Christian heritage, Carl seeks to make music that makes goodness happen in the world.



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