

In Praise of Mainstream Music

An index of familiar songs from sources outside our philosophy

by [Erin McGaughan](#), Music Director, [Seattle Unity](#). August 2014.
photos by Annie Christensen



Picking music for New Thought church is often tricky. The technical parts are challenging enough: can the band play it, can the singers sing it, do we have the proper permissions, can we get the charts and arrangements, etc. Sometimes we're also meeting a minister's specific request, or trying to match a talk topic or seasonal theme, and we're always under pressure from a Sunday morning deadline. Where do we find music? Mainstream and traditional church repertoire is abundant, but NT planners have to pass over much of it due to lyric. No "Blood of the Lamb" or rugged crosses here; no eternal damnation or sin-sick souls.

Through organizations like [emPower Music and Arts](#) and the [Positive Music Association](#), contemporary New Thought worship planners now benefit from an ever-expanding repertoire of music written especially for NT audiences. Resources like the Unity Association songbooks, the Agape songbooks, the Karen Drucker songbooks, and Doug LeBow's NT Anthologies give us increasing access to strong music from worthy composers within our own community.

So why do I love to hear my church band play Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On"? It almost feels like a guilty pleasure. Is that okay?

Is it okay that my choir sings Lady Gaga? First off, is that even church, and if it is, then is it OUR church? Is it okay to use songs from THEIR church, where they believe in stuff that I really don't? Would Michael W. Smith be mad if he knew I changed the word 'Jesus' to 'Spirit'? And what about classic, traditional church songs: I know I don't want to sing the old spiritual tune "Jacob's Ladder" because I'd be calling my people 'soldiers of the cross', but what if I change that lyric to 'children of the One'? It's a very deep tune, worth keeping alive, but is it wrong to do it that way?

In this article, I'll show why and when I think it's good to use familiar songs from non-NT sources for our services. I have attached a spreadsheet index of 450+ songs, chosen because they are recognizable by certain larger audiences, yet potentially supportive of our philosophy. I've included some quick-glance examples, as well as longer discussion of benefits and problems. My hope is that ministries will adapt the index for their own use, to expand audiences as well as deepen the emotional connection and spiritual impact of their services.

I am extremely grateful to the music directors who generously contributed titles to this index, especially [Michael Hatfield](#), [Teri Jo Wheeler](#), [Matthew Wilson](#), [Paula Mandella](#), [Beverly Daugherty](#), Beth Trachy, Becky Thatcher, Rich Siegel and the dozens of Facebook helpers who avidly suggested songs. Thanks also to my [Seattle Unity](#) staff and community.

Advocating the use of cover tunes is not without controversy, however, and I include as appendix an excellent statement from [Sue Riley](#), co-founder of [emPower Music and Arts](#), with a quite valid opposing view. I am myself a member of the New Thought songwriting community, and I am proud to present NT composers' original works at nearly every service I do. I actively participate in and foster projects by fellow NT composers. This index must not diminish their importance to NT worship. Rather, it is my hope that this article helps planners create varied playlists that suit the wide range of program styles in our movement's congregations.

LINKS TO THE INDEX: in editable [excel format](#) or [pdf format](#)



Here are 5 example tunes, and how we used them in recent services at Seattle Unity.

Everyday People, by Sly and the Family Stone. (1968). Recognized by baby boomers; our service celebrated the 5th anniversary of our diversity group Umoja; we added a tag repeat of the hook 'I am everyday people' so the crowd could sing along.

In the Middle, by Jimmy Eat World. (2001). Recognized by millennials. Talk theme concerned patience/persistence, and we were also at the half-way mark of our year's theme.

Flower Duet, by Delibes from the opera Lakme. (1883). Well-recognized from TV/movies. IMDB lists 43 mainstream media placements since 1989. Short excerpt using the lyric 'Alleluia'.

Oceans (Where Feet May Fail), by Hillsong United. (2013). #1 on Christian Contemporary Billboard chart for 48 weeks (and still there as of this writing). Day's theme was "The Edge". Lyric adjusted from 'Jesus' to 'Spirit' and 'my Savior' to 'Your Glory'. Structure shortened.

Softly and Tenderly, by W.L. Thompson (1880). Traditional appeal. Talk theme was around inner listening. We sang first verse only; changed lyric from 'Jesus' to 'Spirit'; 'oh sinners' to 'all people'; performance style was very slow, with mystic-sounding synth and lots of reverb – what we call the PBS/Celtic Woman treatment.

Discussion

Benefits

- 1) Boosts positive emotional connection
- 2) Validates and rewards varied demographic groups
- 3) Connects 'our' culture to larger culture

Problems

- 1) Death by comparison
- 2) Lyric/doctrine clash
- 3) Intention/Integrity (permissions, etc.)



Benefits

- 1) Positive Emotional Connection

Club bands learned this before I did: how do you warm up an audience? Play a song they know. Even bands that specialize in original music often use cover tunes to win over new audiences, and veteran music stars note that concert audiences are much warmer to their old hits than they are to the new material.

Recent work in the field of neuromusicology shows that this isn't just a superstition. It's real, it's neurologically based, and the effect is much larger than we thought. [Daniel Levitin](#), [David Huron](#), [Isabelle Peretz](#) and many other neuroscientists are using new techniques in fMRI and real-time EEG analysis to reveal the links between music, memory, and emotion. Huron tracks the process through our brains' anticipation/reward mechanisms, Peretz illustrates music's powerful connection to the limbic system, and Levitin connects it to social cognition and identity.

Even those of us who say we prefer new music – maybe because we think new music is more virtuous or sophisticated – are still consistently shown to respond more positively, and much more quickly, to songs we know than to songs we don't. Even recognizing the name of the song's composer or recording artist helps us like it more than if it came out of the blue.

I am a long-time advocate for original, new, and challenging music. However, in our church services, our priority is to facilitate the worship. Towards that end, not every song must be a "new song unto the lord". Familiar songs can quickly create a potent emotional connection, with (to borrow a phrase from music psychology) "positive emotional valence".

Known songs open hearts.

2) Reaching Demographic Groups

Many churches have traditionally achieved this recognition-reward through repetition of hymns in a limited rotation. We can do the same when we substitute our NT “standards” for old ones, like closing every service with the Peace Song or I Release. However, NT churches are also more likely to embrace what Pastor Rick Warren has called “seeker-sensitive” church models, for which he advocates strongly in his book [“The Purpose Driven Church”](#).

What music in our services will first-time visitors recognize? That depends on who they are. We can choose music that reaches out to the unchurched, or to those from mainline backgrounds, or other cultures, by including repertoire they are likely recognize.



The attached song index includes titles, sources, topics, and some genre tags that have proven to be useful in my own ministry at Seattle Unity. However, each center has a different cultural mix, and needs to identify its own relevant tags. What genre-signals are we sending? Familiar songs can define who is welcome in the church, who is the “in-crowd”, rewarding those who recognize them. Advertisers know: musical genre is a demographic flag, a high-five to everyone from the social group that owns that genre. By playing its music, the church is validating that group.

David Huron’s research into musical nostalgia shows how people tend to highly prize songs they learned between the ages of 12 -22, in what he calls the Memory Bulge. This helps to explain the impact of music from particular decades on particular age groups. We also have extensive research by [Rentfrow and Gosling](#), and now detailed analyses of listening preferences from market researchers like [Nielsen and Arbitron](#), content providers like Amazon, Pandora, and iTunes and countless [ad agencies](#), connecting genres to social groups varying in age, ethnicity, gender, education, personality markers and political leanings.

My index is simplistic by comparison, using a few rough genres, described below, sometimes also noted by decade in the index. These are the genres relevant to my own congregation, but each church is different, and planners may wish to use their own tags such as Indie, Folk, etc.

The Genres

Pop

Younger, less “churched”

Adult Contemporary

More women, especially ages 40+

Gospel

Ethnically more diverse; more passionate

Traditional Christian (abbr.Xian)

Older, more contemplative

Christian Contemporary (abbr. Xian contemp)

Younger, more passionate

Jazz

More intellectual, educated, older, diverse

Country

More Caucasian, less intellectual

Classical

Older, more contemplative, wealthier

Music Theatre (abbreviated MT)

More Caucasian, more educated, more women and gay men



In practice, there are few hard and fast rules about what songs will work for which groups. Presentation techniques and context can have dramatic impact on a song’s acceptance. For example, many people know they like the Leonard Cohen song “Hallelujahs” so it could be wise to mention his name in the tee-up before singing a more challenging tune like “Democracy” or “If It Be Your Will”. There are several Bob Dylan tunes that can be mystifying, but simply telling them it’s by Dylan is enough to amp up appreciation. More examples:

“This singalong hook is from Queen Latifah, 1993, yo!”

“This is a song from the great Johnny Cash.”

“This is by Peter Gabriel, you may have heard it in the movie Wall-E.”

“This is from Sting’s album Sacred Love.”

3) Larger Cultural Connection

One benefit I hadn't predicted, but became clear from congregant feedback: using more recognized music allows us to notice where we share culture with the wider world. New Thought is not an isolationist movement, and we walk our ecumenical talk when we sing certain songs. For example, a New Thought congregation that can sing Gabriel & Martin's hymn "His Eye is On the Sparrow" or Isaiah Jones' song "God Has Smiled on Me" is sharing language with a huge range of denominations that we might typically call "other". These songs help us connect to the larger church world.



Similarly, secular songs in church can show us a spiritual connection to the larger unchurched world. We learn to recognize inspirational messages in music everywhere we go, not just in church. Hearing Katy Perry's "Firework" on the radio, or The Eagles' "Desperado" in a grocery store, or Leslie Bricusse's "On a Clear Day" in a movie soundtrack, our listeners now hear more than they did before. The adult contemporary pop genre is especially full of useful songs of inspiration and affirmation, from artists like Sara Bareilles, India Arie, Jason Mraz, Michael Franti and more.

This type of connection isn't appropriate for every spiritual community, though. Rejection of popular culture (and its music) is a point of pride in some places. In that case, songs that only veterans know can become membership tests, and the energy put into learning them is like an initiation or a secret handshake. Social anthropologists call this a "high cost ritual" that can contribute to bonding and investment. Those who've spent time learning an esoteric repertoire are motivated towards continuing that repertoire, partly because it supports their hard won in-group status.

"Otherness" may be important, too, insofar as it defines the church service as a heightened, special time. For some, "sacred" is defined as something set apart from the everyday. A song from the secular world may feel cheap, even profane or disrespectful, like wearing sneakers to a wedding. [I will note here that my nephew's groomsmen all wore matching Chucks at his very Catholic wedding, and it was fabulous.] Every music director since the dawn of worship has run up against someone's idea of what doesn't "belong in church".

Today, most congregations allow some range of repertoire, and NT communities especially so. My own certainly does, being chock full of proud progressives and cultural adventurers. Our services have 8 songs; other churches range from 5 to 15 songs, depending on service length. There's room for balancing rep to embrace a cultural span. Is this mostly a mature group, or does it cross generations? How ethnically diverse is it? Would we like to be MORE diverse? We choose repertoire to connect to the community we have, but also to the community we are building and wish to serve in the future. The music evolves as the congregation evolves.

Problems

1) Death by Comparison.

A badly done cover can be worse than a bad unknown song, because as performers we can't blame the song if we sing it badly. The audience knows the song CAN work, we're just doing it wrong. This is where the band's skill and interpretive artistry become clear, insofar as the band can make the song its own. Replication of a famous recording is not the goal. Rather, we use re-arrangement techniques to create new, authentic spiritual gesture.

Bands can change the song structure, or switch the gender of the vocalist, or change the vibe or instrumentation, employ key changes, use segue and medley forms, all to the purpose of creating a balance of the expected and the unexpected. This approach maximizes the brain's reward systems: "Ah! I know this piece!" combines with "Ah! I'm noticing what is different!" and that deepens the song's meaning.

Most importantly, by choosing a song that directly addresses the ministerial topic, we focus that increased attention and positive emotional valence towards Spirit. In his book "Beyond the Worship Wars", theologian Thomas G. Long describes ideal worship as essentially "vital and faithful", echoing the neurological description of a balance of expected/unexpected. Music, like theological doctrine, must be constantly re-animated and rediscovered, to be meaningful for our present moment lives.

2) Lyric/ Doctrine Clash

IS it okay to tweak lyrics? Most NT music directors do. However, there are dangers and debates bubbling around our feet every time. Musicologist Dr. Ysaye Barnwell opposes changing any lyrics at all, unless the song's composer explicitly suggests it, and yet she also acknowledges that the song "Woke Up This Morning," became an excellent social justice tool after the lyric 'Jesus' was changed to 'Freedom'. Is it acceptable, then, that we should open our services with this same song, changing the lyric to 'Spirit'?



In following the shades of alteration, we might argue that the common practice of singing only the first verse of a long hymn or only the chorus of a song is also a corruption of the composer's message. It may not be as direct as swapping a lyric like 'sin' for 'fear', 'Father' for 'Presence', or 'blood' for 'light', but it differs only by degree. The South Park creators joked that the recipe for contemporary Christian rock was simply to take regular rock, and say 'Jesus' every time the lyric says 'baby'. Are we being facile and exploitative by editing a secular song? Historically, much of early European and American hymnody was created by hanging new lyrics onto borrowed melodies. Tweaking happens, it's been happening, and likely will always happen. Each director follows an internal compass, which leads us into the next subject.

3) Integrity/Intention

What is our obligation to the composer's original intent? While I'd like to think Kelly Clarkson or Seals & Crofts would be fine with the idea of me performing their songs in my church, I don't really know that for sure. And I'm even less certain that the composers of evangelical spirituals would be pleased to know that my gay female headliner is singing their songs to ovations from lefty liberals.



As a composer myself, I've made peace with some degree of misinterpretation. Sharing art is a kind of surrender and release. Still, each artist holds to different commandments around artistic integrity. Thou shalt not alter my lyric; thou shalt not change my waltz to a bossa nova. As a worship planner, I keep in mind that these are people, not abstract ideals. The composers are people; the publishers and copyright lawyers are people; the ministers, performers and congregants are people. I honor them by learning what I can about their needs and desires, and when I'm in doubt, by choosing another song. This highlights the value of building a very large music library.

To that end, I welcome continued contributions to the index, which I update every few months. As mentioned earlier, this list represents only a fraction of an ever-expanding repertoire of possibility.

Resources

Websites:

- Empower Music and Arts. 2014. <http://www.empowerma.com/>
- Positive Music Association. 2014. <http://www.positivemusicassociation.com/>
- Music, the Brain, Medicine, and Wellness: A Scientific Dialogue. Santa Fe. 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzx20yZgY0nb4-PuQ7qI5XQ>
- Seattle Unity Music and Service Videos. 2014. <http://seattleunity.org/category/music-service-videos/>

Repertoire:

- Blessed Always: Agape Chant Anthology. http://agapelive.com/store/blessed-always-agape-chant-anthology-2cds-dvd-songbook-2/#.U_F9jJUg9jo
- Chants & Singalongs by Karen Drucker. <http://www.karendrucker.com/store/chants-and-sing-a-longs-for-all-kinds-of-gatherings/>
- 101 InSpiring Songs – The Ultimate New Thought Fakebook. Charylou Roberts and Doug LeBow. <http://www.lebowmusic.com/101inspiringsongs2/>
- Unity Association songbooks. <http://www.unityworldwideministries.org/our-products/music>

Publications:

- Guide for Radio Station formats. Berk Marketing. 2014.
<http://www.radioadvertisinghome.com/radio-station-formats/>
- Long, Thomas G. Beyond the Worship Wars: Building Vital and Faithful Worship. Alban Institute. 2001.
- Rentfrow, P.J., Goldberg, L.R., and Levitin, D.J. (2011). The Structure of Musical Preferences: A Five-Factor Model.
<http://daniellevitin.com/levitinlab/articles/2011-JPSP-2011-Rentfrow-1139-1157.pdf>
- Rentfrow, P. J., & Gosling, S. D. (2003). The do re mi's of everyday life: The structure and personality correlates of music preferences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 1235-12561.
<http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Faculty/Gosling/reprints/JPSP03musicdimensions.pdf>

Appendix – A Divergent View from [Sue Riley](#), music director at [Unity Church of Clearwater](#).

Thank you SO much for allowing me input on this... I NEVER use mainstream songs in any church service. The only song is "The Peace Song" and I am actively trying to replace that.

My reasoning is:

1. My minister, her husband, and I are all very involved in emPower, which supports NT songwriters.
2. We feel that songs that are written specifically for NT services by the amazing songwriters we have are much more in line with the message.
3. We always tie the music into the message.
4. While there are many mainstream songs that fit our messages, my opinion is that those artists are generally "well funded" by the Pop machine. I am more inclined to support the Indie artists who believe in the message Unity has to offer and have dedicated their life to creating music that supports that message.
5. I also feel that the music/message is supporting a ministry. When we have an artist come to do music on a Sunday morning, our folks are already familiar with that artist because we routinely do their songs in services. Thus, members of my choir/band have performed that artist's songs and feel "connected" to them. They come to the concerts, and it's community building.
6. In addition, since emPower has the Music Rights license, that is the only license Unity Clearwater carries now. So, mainstream songs would not be covered under our license (we archive and live stream), thus leaving us out of copyright compliance. This is a secondary reason, though...the support of the artists creating this type of music is our primary focus. And, unlike ten years ago, we now have an incredible body of work that supports the message!

[March 4, 2014]