

Major Elements of the Contemporary Worship Experience

by David W. Cloud

This article is comprised of p. 12-30 from the booklet, *The Transformational Power of Contemporary Praise Music* (www.wayoflife.org)

Having studied Contemporary Christian Music since the 1970s, I have identified six elements of the music that work together to create the sensual experience sought by contemporary worshipers.

1. Syncopated Dance Rhythm

Irwin Silber, a communist who desired the see social degeneration that would overthrow the “old order,” observed that rock music has this power and it lies in its backbeat rhythm. He wrote:

The great strength of rock & roll lies in its beat. It is a music that is basically sexual, unpuritan. (*Sing Out*, May 1965).

I can concur with this statement, along with thousands of others who have been “transformed” by the power of rock & roll music. It was the “beat” of rock that reached into a Christian home and captured my heart and soul as a teenager in the early 1960s. I can testify that the influence was indeed “basically sexual, unpuritan.”

And the heavily syncopated rhythm, the rhythm that literally grabs the body and encourages it to move in a modern dance fashion, is a major part of the contemporary worship experience.

The heavily syncopated rhythm is what has always made rock & roll sensual party music. That’s its very essence. John Makujina says,

Rock’s danceability is due predominately to its emphasized syncopated rhythms. (*Measuring the Music*)

The very name rock & roll was a euphemism for fornication. Since the 1950s, the phrase “let’s rock” has meant “let’s party, let’s drink, let’s get high, let’s do as we very well please.”

Rock music has always been about living as you please and thumbing your nose at authorities. It was summarized by the Rolling Stones in 1965:

I’m free to do what I want any old time.

And by The Animals:

It’s my life and I’ll do what I want
It’s my mind, and I’ll think what I want.

And by the Mamas and Papas:

You got to go where you want to go
do what you want to do.

And by the Isley Brothers:

It’s your thing
do what you want to do.

And this licentious anti-God philosophy has been driven by the heavy dance syncopation.

Graham West, a pastor in Australia who has a background in writing, recording, and producing pop music, says,

When you take away the accent from where the strong beat should fall the human body is instinctively inclined to move into the gap and mark where the missing accent should be. (video presentation *The Rhythm of Rock*)

Some common types of syncopated dance rhythm are the back beat, the silent beat, the staccato beat, and beat anticipation.

a) The Backbeat

The backbeat, which rockers and social commentators have identified as “sexy,” has been the chief characteristic of worldly dance music since the beginning of the 20th century. It was the rhythm that drove ragtime, the blues, boogie woogie, jazz, big band swing, and honky tonk or Western swing.

Fifties rocker Bill Haley said:

I felt that if I could take a tune and drop the first and third beats and accentuate the second and fourth, and add a beat the listeners could clap to as well as dance this would be what they were after.

Indeed, it was! The backbeat drove a virtual revolution.

The backbeat emphasizes the offbeat, such as
one-TWO-three-FOUR

The backbeat is in contrast to the straight or march beat, which has the emphasis on the first beat or every beat equally:

one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four

or

ONE-two-three-four, ONE-two-three-four

b) The Silent Beat

The silent beat is another type of syncopated dance rhythm. By simply dropping a beat, a sensual rock effect is created

Da Da Da Da, Da Da Da Da

vs.

Da Da -- Da, Da Da -- Da

c) The Staccato Beat

In the staccato beat the notes are clipped.

Da Da Da Da, Da Da Da Da

vs.

Dop Dop Dop Dop, Dop Dop Dop Dop

d) Beat Anticipation

Beat anticipation, as Graham West explains in his video presentation *The Rhythm of Rock*, is a type of syncopation that falls at the end of a phrase and is unresolved; it is as

much a major element of rock as the backbeat. It can create the jerky rock feel even when the other types of syncopation aren't present. It leaves the listener anticipating something that is not there and the body wants to fill in the gap.

Beat anticipation is a major part of contemporary worship music, and fundamentalist churches that are "adapting" contemporary worship songs are typically buying into the beat anticipation, not understanding that they are actually performing soft rock ballads. They think that since they don't have drums and a bass guitar thumping out a heavy backbeat that they have removed the rock from Christian rock, but nothing could be farther from the truth.

The backbeat, the silent beat, the staccato beat, and beat anticipation are some of the many kinds of off beat dance syncopation that go into the creation of rock.

The Rhythm Bible has

...over 1,000 examples of rhythmic figures common in jazz, rock, Latin, blues, funk, and other styles—rhythms that make contemporary sounds so exciting.

The point is that rock is made up of many types of syncopation, but they all have the same type of effect on the body. Whether rock is soft or hard, quiet or loud is irrelevant. It matters not if it is played in an electric bass guitar or a piano. It moves the body and makes you want to dance.

The heavy syncopation is why pop music is so physical.

Jimi Hendrix said this of his music:

Perhaps it is sexy...but what music with a big beat isn't?
(David Henderson, *Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix*, p. 117)

Gene Simmons of Kiss said,

That's what rock is all about—sex with a 100 megaton bomb, the beat! (*Entertainment Tonight*, ABC, Dec. 10, 1987)

Describing how she felt when attending her first big rock concert, Janis Joplin said:

I couldn't believe it, all that rhythm and power. I got stoned just feeling it, like it was the best Dope in the world. It was so sensual, so vibrant, loud, crazy. (Joel Dreyfuss, *Janis Joplin Followed the Script*, Wichita Eagle, Oct. 6, 1970, p. 7A)

The sensual dance rhythm of rock music has addictive, transformative power.

Dan Lucarini, a former contemporary worship leader, led churches from using traditional hymns to a contemporary worship program, and in the book *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement* he describes how he did it.

The key was starting out with “soft” rock, which acts as an addictive, transformative influence on the congregation. He writes:

The rock was softer, but it still contained the rock rhythm that undeniably appeals to our flesh. The listener soon develops a craving for it. Just like an addict, there is no turning back. What happens over time is a steady slide down the slippery slope away from all traditional music into the latest, edgiest contemporary styles.

Graham West, formerly associated with the pop music industry, issues the same warning:

Once you begin listening to soft rock, you begin sliding down that slippery slope to the more aggressive forms of rock. Soft Rock begins to orient the whole way of perceiving music around rhythm and away from melody. Your musical interest will change. Hymns will seem dull in comparison to your newly acquired tastes. It's a progression I've seen over and over again in the lives of Christians. It's a downward spiral. It happens in the lives of individuals; it happens in the lives of families; it happens in the lives of churches.

There is a gray area of ignorance about the power of Pop syncopation. And the devil, taking advantage of this, being not only the master musician but also the master of subtlety, comes along to a strong fundamental church or a Bible college and he offers his wares of Contemporary Christian rock ballads. It sounds great. There's no drums, no wild electric guitars, no obvious back beat, just the piano or guitar

and the singer. And it's almost the same as the songs that they used to sing, except the rhythm kind of trips a little bit. But that's O.K. because it's exciting, and the young people love it.

The problem is that when the rhythm does that little trip it means that the music contains a basic, distinctive rhythmic feature of all rock & roll since its inception in the 1950s. In this way, before you've even known it, you've been deceived by the subtle strategy of Satan. This is the blind spot that Satan is using to his advantage. He knows that once a church accepts rock ballads, complete capitulation is almost inevitable.

In the case of vigilant, serious-minded Christians, he has to start them up at the very top of the slope with very gentle rock so that the conscience doesn't scream out, "This music is wrong!" Just as long as he can get you started, he has won, because just like a drug pusher he knows that his users will want more and more of that sensual rhythm. (Graham West, *The Rhythm of Rock*)

Many churches that are adapting Contemporary Christian Music think they are removing the "rock" from Christian rock, but they are actually just toning it down to "soft rock"....

2. Unresolving Chord Cadence

Another major element of the sensual contemporary worship experience is the unresolving chords.

Contemporary worship music tends to use a chord cadence other than the "perfect" or "authentic" cadence, which is used by the old hymns and which resolves back to the first tone. A "weak cadence" or an "imperfect cadence" does not resolve in this way. It is always more "feely."

Pastor Tim Kelly of Maine has taught music theory for almost 25 years and was previously deeply involved in the pop, rock, new country rock, rap, R&B music culture. He makes the following observation about contemporary praise music:

The emphasis is on the IV chord. The V chord is always

called the dominant chord in music, but in Contemporary Christian Music it is avoided as often as possible. It doesn't resolve. Music works like this: You have a question (phrase) and then an answer (phrase). There is tension and then release (resolve). Contemporary praise music seems to present questions with no answers, no absolutes. It is wispy and draws on the emotions, with no intellectual purpose or guide. This is the philosophy of the Devil.

3. Sensual Vocal Styles

Another major element of the contemporary worship experience is the sensual vocal techniques that have been borrowed from the morally corrupt pop music field.

a) Breathy Style

There is the Breathy Style, in which the microphone is held extremely close to the singer's mouth. This gives a feeling of intimacy and sexuality. Elvis Presley and other pop sex god "crooners" used this technique to great effect, and contemporary Christian musicians follow this pattern.

b) Scooping and Sliding

Then there is Scooping and Sliding, by which instead of hitting the note cleanly and directly, there is a slide from above or below its true pitch. It adds a great sensuality to the music.

The 1950s book *How to Sing for Money* said,

Scooping is a common practice...as a swing effect.

Thus, the scooping technique was created as part of the commercial dance music scene, and it works with the syncopated rhythm to create the sensual atmosphere that dancers desire. It is a technique that fits the night club, the bar, the gambling den.

But it has been adapted by contemporary Christian musicians and Southern Gospel performers.

These styles are not only sensual, they draw attention to

the singer, which is another major element of both secular pop and contemporary Christian music.

4. Electronic Modulation

Sometimes contemporary praise is performed with acoustic instruments only, but typically it incorporates full-blown and very loud electronic instruments with reverberation, echo, feedback and other types of electronic modulation. This is used to intensify the sensuality of the music and to create a mystical atmosphere.

5. The Rise and Fall of the Intensity of the Music

A contemporary worship experience typically involves a dramatic rise and fall in the sound level and intensity of the music. This is used to create an emotional roller coaster. One minute you're body is twisting and jerking to earsplitting rock & roll and the next minute you are immersed in a near trance-inducing atmosphere in which the music is toned down and less physically demanding but more mystical.

6. Repetition

Repetition is another major element of the contemporary worship experience. Because of the repetition, Contemporary Christian Music has been called "7/11 music"—seven words sung 11 times.

Actually, the repetition can be much more extensive than that. In Kevin Prosch's song *Signs and Wonders*, the words "signs and wonders, healings, deliverance" are repeated at least 20 times and the words "the kingdom of God is here" are repeated at least 25 times.

At the 1996 Heart of David conference, they sang Prosch's "Praise the Lord, Oh My Soul" for 20 minutes, and they sang another song for over three hours! That must be the epitome of contemporary repetition!

This music is indeed transformational. By yielding to it, the Contemporary Christian Music crowd is carried along into a

“tangible experience.” When combined with the syncopated, body-jerking rhythms, the electronic modulation, the unresolved chord progression, the rise and fall of the intensity, and the sensual vocal styles, the repetition can have a hypnotic effect on those who yield themselves unreservedly to the experience.