



Music, Millennials, and Mission Mobilization



Rachel Dorr

“Give me the music of a nation, and I will change the mind of that nation.”

– Plato

“There is a whole generation that the church has lost – the sight and sound generation. MTV has captured them, but the church hasn’t.”

– Ed Basler,
founder of Souled Out

Some may suspect such claims to be exaggerations, but we must acknowledge that musicians are a powerful influence on the millennial generation, for good or for evil. This wave of young people, born from the late 1970s onward and comprising a fourth of America’s population, responds to authenticity and enthusiasm. While boring sermons or shallow Christianity may turn youth away in disgust, a singer with a guitar and a burning passion for Jesus can shake them to the core.

Has the story of God’s kingdom – the story portraying the goal of all history – been reflected in the music for this generation? Are young people being challenged by Christian artists and worship leaders to consider God’s part for them in missions, specifically among unreached peoples?

What’s already happening?

A number of artists in the 1980s and 1990s – such as Scott Wesley Brown, Keith Green, Twila Paris and Graham Kendrick – infused their music with a global vision. Brown took Perspectives in 1987 and promoted missions at his concerts, even laying out passport applications to encourage

people to go overseas. He founded I CARE MINISTRIES and has trained a variety of Christian musicians.

The message of God’s global reign is nonetheless conspicuously missing in much of today’s Christian music, although the picture is changing. Frank Fortunato, music director for Operation Mobilization, observes, “There has been a gradual growth, particularly in the last ten years, in the increase of songs about worship among the nations.”

For example, the “Passion” CDs are selling like hotcakes; these focus on God’s glory and provide some global glimpses. Worship leader Shane Barnard has produced the “Psalms” album, which includes the lyrics, “Ask and I’ll give the nations to you/Oh Lord, that’s the cry of my heart/Distant shores and the islands will see your light/As it rises on us.” Much global-minded music comes out of the United Kingdom from artists such as Matt Redman. In “There’s a Louder Shout to Come,” he proclaims, “Bowing down before your throne/Every tribe and tongue will be/All the nations with one voice/All the people with one king/And what a song we’ll sing upon that day ... You deserve an anthem of the highest praise.”

Teen Mania Ministries hosts “Acquire the Fire” conventions across the USA. They use worship and popular music to energize the hearts of youth, then challenge them to go on summer mission trips (among other steps). Similar events occur overseas at “Mission Korea” and Australia’s “Reach Out” youth conferences.

Music has been used to raise awareness of the persecuted church, often coupled with a challenge to overseas service. Wycliffe Bible Translators partnered with Steven Curtis Chapman on his most recent tour, featuring a multimedia presentation called

“Beyond the Gates,” based on the Jim Elliot story. Jars of Clay have long been spokespersons for the suffering Body of Christ with Open Doors International and Prayer for the Persecuted Church. DC Talk produced two powerful volumes called “Jesus Freaks,” containing true stories from many nations of radical and costly discipleship.

Some mission-minded groups are dedicated to train musicians, whether to minister in their own culture or to prepare for cross-cultural service. Karen Lafferty directs YWAM’s “Musicians for Missions,” working to train and mobilize “grassroots” musicians from all over the world. The SOZO music festival, in Hungary, trains musicians from surrounding countries to use music in outreach and reconciliation. Dave Hall of Pioneers directs another ministry, also based in Hungary, called “Worship From the Nations,” mobilizing worship leaders to serve overseas and disciple worship leaders among the unreached.

What still needs to be done?

1) Follow worship to its rightful conclusion

Dave Hall (in *Mission Frontiers*, May–August 1996) has written that worship should lead directly into missions so that God may be glorified in the last remaining unreached people group. The link between worship and missions is too vital to be ignored. Yet how many of today’s youth have made this monumentally important connection? Such a message is often obscured by the plethora of worship songs extolling God’s love for me, me, me.

The Traveling Team, which promotes missions in Christian groups on college campuses, has noticed a conspicuous lack of interest on the part of worship leaders. Director Todd Ahrend comments, “This is a continuous trend – very few worship leaders take time to

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meet with us. We have yet to find an artist whose passion is mission mobilization.”

2) Find artists who will catch the vision

Could the Body of Christ raise up a generation of musicians who demonstrate a heart for peoples without church movements in their midst? Heather Miller of Caleb Project summarizes the goal: “I am not looking for singers to use lyrics such as ‘be a missionary.’ I am looking for singers to focus on the glory of God, on the fact that his purposes are global, on the fact that our purpose here is to make his name great among the nations, the fact that many people have never heard his name. We have got to look up out of our comfortable world and be aware of what God is working on worldwide. Many of us feel that musicians in our day serve as prophets and preachers to this generation, and we want them to preach this message. But there are few that are doing so.”

To increase that number, there are at least three levels to target. One is to nurture and train little-known musicians who nonetheless have a burning passion, as Karen Lafferty and others are doing. Second, attention should be given to music producers and others who impact the music industry in a broad way.

Third, an excellent way to involve high-profile artists is to bring them overseas for short-term experiences. Scott Wesley Brown says, “I would take [artists] with us and let God speak for Himself...I wouldn’t have to say a word; God got the ball rolling.” More

recently, Teen Mania has done this with other musicians, including Audio Adrenaline, Superchick, Newsboys, and Rebecca St. James. Audio Adrenaline’s “Hands and Feet” video was filmed on a short-term trip to Panama.

Are mission agencies and musicians working together? Fred Heumann, director of Music Works International, is representative in his call for better partnership: “Today’s mission agencies are just beginning to grasp the idea of using contemporary Christian music.” Shaun Winn, of Teen Mania Ministries, urges organizations to put in the needed effort: “Very rarely do we find resistance when we ask artists to do this, but it takes work because of their busy schedules.”

This task is more difficult because Christian musicians and mission agencies often move in separate spheres. At best there is usually a temporary contract: the musicians draw the crowds and the mission agency preaches the message. James Shelly, worship leader and mobilizer for Pioneers, observes, “The reoccurring ‘gap’ in music and mobilization is that the music is usually the ‘hired gun’ for the organization. We have not yet figured out how music itself is truly integrated into the call.”

3) Be relevant

If students aren’t excited about missions, it may be that we have poorly communicated the message. For them to understand and respond to God’s call on their lives, it is vital that they

don’t connect missions with outdated worship songs, thick theological textbooks, or boring speakers. If we are going to mobilize this generation, relevant music is not an option.

The increasing multiculturalism in our society points to future musical trends. In a recent issue of *Christianity Today* Andy Crouch surveyed the American scene and declared, “The Future is P.O.D.,” referring to the successful, multi-cultural band that is innovating forms of witness to the MTV generation. Crouch observes that the secular world “is falling over itself to court bicultural people with talent and potential” and urges evangelical communities – including parachurch agencies – to better tap into this vitality.

Yet P.O.D. represents only part of the musical scene among millennials. Diverse styles are essential to reach a generation with wide-ranging musical tastes.

Wendy Murray Zoba has observed, “Two characteristics are emerging as defining features of many Millennials: They are activists, and they long for God” (*Christianity Today*, February 5, 2001). If youth are truly seeking excitement and purpose, what weightier challenge could there be than Yahweh’s call to proclaim His glory and invade the darkness of the earth with His light? A new generation is waiting to be summoned to Christ’s ageless call: to give up their small ambitions, take up their crosses, and bless the nations. 🌐



Resources on Globally-Minded Music

- www.worshipmusic.com/mattredman.html
- www.passionnow.org (Passion Network)
- www.scottwesleybrown.com
- www.worshipfromthenations.org (Dave Hall)
- www.billdrake.com
- “Let the Nations Rejoice” – a songbook and double CD produced by Frank Fortunato and Scott Wesley Brown, can be ordered from OM USA, 1-800-899-0432

Other Resources

- www.beyondthegatesthemovie.com (movie shown at Steven Curtis Chapman concerts)
- www.fourthturning.com (information on millennials)
- www.growingupdigital.com (information on millennials)
- www.reach-out.org (articles on worship and youth ministry)
- www.disciplethenations.org (numerous links, resources, clips, and articles on music and missions)
- www.thetravelingteam.org