

Sensing the Sacred in the Secular

Finding Spirituality in Contemporary Mainstream Pop Music

Written by Rich Coffey

"..There is a certain craft to good songwriting. I use the word "Pop" in the best possible sense; Pop for me is an easily understood thing, you listen to it and you comprehend it almost immediately. You relate to it instinctively." - **Bono**

There's a cliché often tagged with pop music that "*Pop music is the soundtrack to our lives*"
What does that mean and is it a true assessment?

I believe pop music has played (and will continue to play) an important spiritual role in each and every one of us by:

- Filling a void
- Inspiring hope
- Transcending the mundane

...and even providing moral guidance and wisdom in times of tragedy and confusion.

I think it's fair to say that certain tunes are inextricably linked with events and time periods of our lives. They become imprinted in our sub consciousness, conjuring up pleasant or troubled memories with every listen...

- A lost love
- A happy moment in school
- A personal triumph or transformation

...are all highly-charged emotional events that are often associated with pop songs.

Soul Searching

The first time I listen to a great song, I have an overpowering feeling of being touched by something profound and ethereal, although I don't consider myself, by any means, a "religious person."

Great popular songs inspire soul searching when songwriters and performers reach out and tread a path beyond the trite "lovey-dovey", "Moon-June" rhyming schemes and crass materialism that tends to characterize the bulk of popular culture. Great songwriters habitually explore deep questions about who we are and what we should live for. Their songs act as a springboard – often reflecting and fueling the dreams of the listener's deeply personal spiritual longings.

The spirituality we most often encounter in pop music is more subtle and complex than the ritualistic singing of hymns or the grandeur and sacredness felt when hearing *Mozart's Requiem* or *Handel's Messiah*. Popular music's spirituality conjures up unique, highly-personal reflection whereas "church music" is generally a communal experience and evokes emotions in a collective and shared way.

The spirituality I'm referring to in pop music covers a wide spectrum from a "*love one another*" to more-focused specifics that point out injustice, inequality and/or personal transformation or redemption.

Before we begin our music explorations, It makes sense to ask yourself a few personal questions.

- *Have you experienced spiritually meaningful moments through music?*
- *If so when?*
- *Do you have any favorite songs that evoke pleasant or troubled memories?*

Multimedia

Created as a catalyst for personal reflection and/or collective discussion, this slideshow features original photo montages custom-crafted for each of the songs listed below. (NOTE: No music is included--this is strictly a "visual accompaniment").

It's recommended to (1) Read through this essay; then (2) queue up the tunes chosen on your stereo or iPOD/MP3 player and finally; (3) go to any selected song of your choosing by viewing the montage while listening in quiet contemplation to the song.

Song Selection

Being a life-long musician and living the life of a journeyman for many years, I might be a little "over passionate" about the significance of music to the "Average Joe" but nevertheless I do believe pop music pervades our lives and culture and cannot be dismissed as merely disposable "ear candy."

I'll highlight a few special songs in mainstream pop that have touched my life (and countless others) and hope to instill in all of you the same passion and inspiration these tunes gave me. My choices are obviously colored by my own personal preferences and life experiences. We can only cover a select sampling – see "*Other Recommended Songs*" link at bottom for further contemplative listening

--Songs--

Early 60s – Protest and Deeper Sensitivity

I'd like to backtrack first to the 60s – when I grew up – and talk a bit about a couple of songs that really epitomized the times and (to me) the new-founded spiritual role that pop music was projecting...

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| Blowin' In The Wind | <i>Bob Dylan</i> |
| Get Together | <i>Youngbloods</i> |
| Eve Of Destruction | <i>Barry McGuire</i> |

From the cheery "love one another" pleas in "*Get Together*" to the dark and apocalyptic words in "*Eve of Destruction*," a seed was sown: Pop music now became a vehicle for social awareness, self-examination and even collective political motivation...

A Higher Calling - Searching For or Acknowledging the Spiritual

Through the ensuing years, popular music evolved musically and lyrically by

- mixing /crossing musical styles [folk / rock / jazz / R&B]; and
- tackling more "ethereal" subjects often spiritual in nature

Interestingly, even in despair, there is always a pervasive sense of hope underlying every song...

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|---|--|
| I Shall Be Released | <i>The Band (Bob Dylan)</i> |
| Visions | <i>Stevie Wonder</i> |
| People Get Ready | <i>Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions</i> |
| Anyone Here Seen My Old Friend Martin? | <i>Dion</i> |
| Somewhere In America | <i>Was Not Was</i> |

Self-redemption, longing for an idyllic society and poignant paeans to pivotal yet fallen heroes of the times took Pop music to continually increasing spiritual heights.

Bible-Based – verses or chapter from the Bible in Song

A few pop tunes are based on direct references to verses in the Bible.

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|--|-------------------------------|
| (To Everything) Turn, Turn, Turn Ecclesiastes Chapter 3, verses 1-8 | <i>The Byrds (Pete Seger)</i> |
| Blessed Matthew 5 The Beatitudes (blessings from the Sermon on the Mount) | <i>Simon & Garfunkel</i> |
| A Distant Hum Genesis | <i>Howard Jones</i> |
| Superman New Testament | <i>Michael Sembello</i> |
| Goin' By The Book Revelations | <i>Johnny Cash</i> |

The Elder Statesman – *Peter Gabriel*

In my opinion, no survey of spirituality on popular music is complete without mentioning Peter Gabriel. Listed in the prestigious Time magazine's 2008 list of the world's most influential people, Peter Gabriel has been described as the musician who keeps finding new ways to bring justice to the world.

Now a gray-bearded elder statesman of rock, Peter Gabriel is a true visionary. His songs explore darker, more cerebral territory, incorporating avant-garde, electronic, and worldbeat influences. He is a critically acclaimed artist and has deservedly earned a worldwide reputation for his innovative work as a musician, writer and groundbreaking videos.

(So many of his songs are spiritual in nature it was difficult to decide which to choose. More of his songs are listed in the **Other-Recommended-Songs** link at the end.)

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| Not One Of Us | <i>Peter Gabriel</i> |
| Don't Give Up | <i>Peter Gabriel</i> |
| In Your Eyes | <i>Peter Gabriel</i> |

Special Mention – **Seawind** - *great music, phenomenal musicianship, poignant lyrics*

Lastly, special mention must be made of a “musician’s band” Seawind, one of the best funk/jazz bands of the seventies with an unabashedly Christian message. They were a showcase of first-class musicianship featuring a tight horn section, great songs, a distinctive (an extraordinarily beautiful) female vocalist and a sophisticated musical vocabulary rooted in jazz, funk and samba.

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|----------------------------|----------------|
| The Devil Is A Liar | <i>Seawind</i> |
| Free | <i>Seawind</i> |
| Follow Your Road | <i>Seawind</i> |

I’d like to close with “*Follow Your Road*” a beautiful ballad. It epitomizes an individual’s personal quest for spiritual fulfillment. There are no easy answers, rather a never-ending “search to experience”, completely unique to each one of us.

SPIRITUALITY

Country legend Emmylou Harris sums it up best

"The thing we tell of can never be found by seeking, but only seekers will find it. Just the act of searching is sometimes the end in itself."

Happy listening to all...

Compiled and written by Rich Coffey - June 2009

<http://www.richcoffeymusic.com>