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Rockers Moving to the Beat of a New Evangelization

Gregory Ruehlmann | Aug. 20, 2008

Prescott, Ariz.

There is a black sports utility vehicle idling in the parking lot of Yavapai Community College here that features, across its passenger side, an enormous picture of Pope John Paul II. His image rises up above the back wheel well and stretches his arms toward the front door, culminating, near the rooftop, in a radiant golden monstrance that the late pope lifts above his head.

This is an expanded version of the article which appeared in the Aug. 22 issue of the National Catholic Reporter.

Listen to songs by Matt Maher at **spiritandsong.com** [1]

Also read: Targeting the papal iPod [2]

Beyond the makeshift popemobile, a faint thump of bass escapes the campus arts center, where the Matt Maher Band plays music for a darkened auditorium packed with college students and youth ministers. The audience raises hands and shouts along with the lyrics, as the air swells with the sound of Maher?s assured tenor singing and the aggressive playing of his band ? drums, guitar, bass and keyboard.

From outside, the noise sounds like a pulse ? which, in a way, it is. Inside, the Matt Maher Band?s performance might resemble a concert, but to both the musicians and the crowd, it?s modern Catholic worship in action, and the heartbeat of a movement championed by a pope who, three years after his death, remains their inspiration.

Welcome to ARISE 08. Welcome to the new evangelization. It?s late May in this small town in northern Arizona, where a youthful crew of the faithful convenes every year with a purpose, and where the soundtrack is largely provided by a bespectacled, unassuming native of Canada who happens to be the biggest young Catholic songwriter in the country.

This is a story about contemporary Catholic music ? its principal figures and its pioneers, its defenders and its

discontents. It?s a story about Matt Maher and other musicians like him, along with their publishers and producers, who see their work as one part of a larger effort to convert hearts and minds. It is, finally, a more fundamental story about what the future church will look and sound like in America and beyond, both during the Mass and outside the parish walls.

Youth rising

Even to unreligious ears, praise and worship music ? or, more generally, CCM (short for ?contemporary Christian music?) ? has an almost instantly recognizable sound. The songs are generally up-tempo and heavily produced. Guitars and amplifiers predominate, as does a verse-chorus-verse structure where the choruses repeat a few central, frequently scriptural proclamations. Since catching on in Protestant circles in the early 1990s, contemporary Christian music has transformed evangelical youth culture and become a lucrative industry, with radio stations proliferating in markets nationwide.

It has also spilled over into Catholic worship, particularly among the young. By the start of this decade, the genre already formed the backbone of the repertoire at most so-called youth Masses in U.S. parishes. It had become associated as well with rallies, retreats and conferences like ARISE 08 ? the gathering at Yavapai run by Youth Arise North America, an organization that began as a school of evangelization in Phoenix for Catholic high school graduates who aspired to ministry with the church. Today, Youth Arise focuses on outreach to college students, primarily through the annual conference in Prescott. The four-day event features Masses, witness talks, motivational speeches and a heavy dose of loud, enthusiastic contemporary music. This May, when I arrived, over 340 people were in attendance, most in their early 20s.

Many of the young participants and volunteers at ARISE have also been involved in Life Teen, a youth ministry program founded in the Phoenix suburb of Mesa in the mid-1980s that has expanded to hundreds of parishes across the country. In the last 20 years, Life Teen has developed a track record for producing youths who become active in their own communities, as well as in programs like Youth Arise and the Steubenville youth rallies sponsored by Franciscan University.

?The way I see it, there was a point when our beautiful church needed to be reminded there were young people who felt very disconnected and weren?t coming,? recalled recording artist and music minister Tom Booth. ?And Life Teen sprang up.?

The 46 year-old Booth is considered something of a godfather figure in contemporary Catholic music circles, due in part to his two-decade career as a recording artist, producer and guide to countless younger artists. The reputation also stems from his involvement with Life Teen. From 1985 until 2005, he ran the music program at St. Timothy, the original Life Teen parish in Mesa. He also oversaw music for the program at the national level during that time.

?[Life Teen] was a response ? not perfect, and not the only one ? to a need,? he said. ?We focused on the liturgy, the source and summit of the faith. And we focused on making sure the music and preaching would be solid, true to the faith, and culturally relevant.?

A brushfire movement

The musical repertoire at Life Teen Masses incorporated popular, Catholic-friendly songs from Christian radio and worship CDs. As it had earlier in evangelical circles, the music energized, and in some ways came to define, the program, both in and outside Sunday-evening youth Masses. Soon, Catholic singers were buoyed to write their own CCM-style music; a remarkable number of these new artists have hailed from within Life Teen?s own ranks.

Susan Bailey, a Massachusetts-based songwriter and the editor of GrapeVine, an online magazine for Catholic musicians, has witnessed Life Teen?s effect up close. ?It?s very fruitful in producing musicians,? Bailey said.

?We recently had a battle of the bands competition in New Hampshire, for example, and six of the eight bands came from Life Teen.?

No Life Teen product has enjoyed more acclaim than Matt Maher, the 33-year-old from Newfoundland, who began by touring with Tom Booth as a student at Arizona State, then served with his mentor as a music minister at St. Timothy. In 2001, Maher released his first CD; since 2006, he has made touring and recording with his band his primary ministry.

At a time when Catholics struggle to dent the upper echelon of contemporary Christian music, Maher?s single ?Your Grace Is Enough? has reached No. 2 on the CCM chart. This year he released his fourth album, ?Empty and Beautiful,? on Sony BMG?s Christian label, Essential Records.

And at a time when most U.S. Catholics pay little attention to religious music outside Sunday, Maher is something of an oddity. He has carved out a successful métier as an unapologetically Catholic artist with a strong Catholic following. Maher has performed for the pope at Toronto?s World Youth Day and in front of tens of thousands at events like the National Catholic Youth Conference. His popular songs span the gamut from praise and worship melodies to more sedate Mass parts (his ?Lamb of God? is used at parishes across America), and from ?Set Me as a Seal,? a duet that?s become a wedding staple for young Catholics, to ?The End and the Beginning,? which is inarguably the hardest-rocking number ever written about the doctrine of transubstantiation.

Despite his unique achievements, Maher considers himself part of a spreading mosaic of Catholic musicians who share a spirit, more than any one approach or age, as well as an aim of evangelization. It?s an assemblage of artists who incorporate disparate styles: Celtic, rock, folk, bluegrass, R&B. They include groups like Ceili Rain and the Joshua Blakesley band, and solo artists like John Angotti, ValLimar Jensen and Paul Melley. While some travel full-time, others are anchored in parish ministry work.

When I first requested an interview, Maher encouraged me to meet him here in Prescott, where he?s become an annual fixture. ?You get to see our music as part of something bigger here,? Maher explains to me between worship sessions at ARISE 08. ?To me, this is a brushfire movement that?s slowly building.?

For Maher, and for the weekend?s gathering of young people in the desert, that movement has everything to do with the pope pictured on the side of the Youth Arise SUV. During John Paul II?s papacy, he preached of a ?new evangelization? ? a rededication to bringing the ancient truths of the Gospel to the secular culture that would be new, as the pope put it in a 1983 speech, ?in its ardor, methods and expression.?

John Paul II?s exhortation has certainly been taken seriously in Arizona, which has become an epicenter of the new evangelization. Groups such as Life Teen and Youth Arise, both headquartered near Phoenix, are putting guitars and drums, Web sites and viral video to use in preaching the Catholic faith to a new generation in America.

?For us, the movement is about ministering to college kids, and then watching them move,? said Andrea Prisby, 27, one of the organizers of the ARISE conference. ?It?s something new, and exactly what JPII was speaking about with the new evangelization,? she went on, using the shorthand nickname that active Catholics of her generation have adopted for the man whose papacy spanned most of their lives.

?We?re the children of JPII, really,? said Maher, who calls his own vocation in the new evangelization a ?songwriter for the church.? He describes the role as ?trying to write songs that the Body of Christ could in turn express in their communal and personal devotion.? Maher might be the most well-known of these songwriters for the church, but he is far from alone, even at Yavapai.

Spirit and Song

Ike Ndolo is a genial, squarely built young man with shoulder-length dreadlocks, who first came to Youth Arise as an 18-year-old student at its school of evangelization outside Phoenix. He credits both Maher and Booth for his gravitation to music ministry. ?They?ve been my mentors,? Ndolo said. ?They taught me what it means to be a worship leader, and see the words as actual prayer. When I have a guitar and I?m singing, I?m not an entertainer. It?s about worship.?

On stage during the second night of ARISE 08, Ndolo leads worship songs with his band. Playing an acoustic guitar and taking lead vocals, Ndolo belts, ?Into marvelous light I?m running, out of darkness, out of shame.? The crowd, aided by the lyrics projected above the musicians? heads, sings along.

Only 25, Ndolo now does full-time music ministry at Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish in Tempe, Ariz. His band will record its first album this fall for Spirit and Song, the youth-focused division of the large Catholic publisher OCP (formerly Oregon Catholic Press).

Though headquartered in distant Portland, Ore., Spirit and Song has been closely tied to the Life Teen movement, and has played an integral role in cultivating the new crop of young Catholic musicians in Arizona and beyond. One of the division?s associate directors is Tom Booth, who works to enhance its stable of artists, as well as its song catalog, which includes many of Maher?s recordings. (He will be handling production duties for Ndolo?s upcoming CD).

In the late 1990s, when Spirit and Song released its first source guide for music, post-Vatican II hymnals such as Glory and Praise and Gather lined America?s Catholic pews and dominated the liturgical repertoire. Spirit and Song?s publication contained Mass parts, along with popular holdovers from the other hymnals. It also pioneered the inclusion of more praise-and-worship-style contemporary Christian songs, which were shaped by the era?s pop charts, and which in turn were reshaping spirituality for the children of the baby boomers, both Catholic and evangelical.

As Booth explains, the guide quickly caught fire as a youth hymnal, and subsequent editions became a depository for new songs intended for liturgical settings like the Mass, and non-liturgical settings such as youth rallies. ?Now we have this wonderful treasury of contemporary Catholic music,? Booth said. ?Other publishers have fine work as well. But we?ve given a home and some validity to this music.?

As Spirit and Song has grown, it has turned increasingly to modern multimedia to showcase its artists and share its songs with young Internet-savvy listeners, said general manager Robert Feduccia. (In our interview, as if to emphasize the point, Feduccia consistently referred to the division by its Web address, SpiritandSong.com.) Feduccia, 40, identifies the publisher?s mission as ?infusing worship music, broadly understood, into every part of young people?s prayer life.? In an age of media ubiquity, Spirit and Song targets iTunes playlists in addition to Mass song sheets.

?If Glory and Praise was the soundtrack to the Vatican II reforms,? Feduccia said, ?we?d like to think we?re the soundtrack to the new evangelization.?

Though nobody has embraced contemporary Christian music as ambitiously as OCP, the genre?s steady rise has not been lost on America?s two other heavyweights of Catholic publishing. Chicago-based GIA and World Library Publications are both catching on.

At GIA, publisher of Glory and Praise, Gather and the Worship hymnal, senior editor Kelly Dobbs Mickus said

the company is stepping up efforts to get into the market. In a musical landscape that is increasingly diversifying, Dobbs Mickus suggests that the most noticeable trend is clear. ?For lack of a better term, CCM is it,? she said.

Across town at World Library, publisher of the seasonal missalette We Celebrate, general manager Mary Prete agreed. ?Out West, they?re way ahead of the game. But we?re seeing a real explosion on the East Coast. At a workshop in Stamford, Conn., last year, we found all these classically trained organists who were tremendously interested in wrapping their heads around this contemporary music. It isn?t in their DNA, yet they?re being called to serve.?

While parishes are widely adding youth Masses and embracing modern music at regular Sunday liturgies, Susan Bailey pinpoints a strange dynamic at work the rest of the week. ?The church values music above other art forms. But most Catholics don?t see a purpose for that music outside Sunday. That?s what makes our artists? situation different from CCM. In evangelical culture, music is the center, and they have resources like record labels.?

Those disadvantages motivated Bailey to found GrapeVine, a webzine that functions as both a newsletter and online community for Catholic artists like herself. In the years since, Bailey notes, some musicians have made real headway. She cites the success of Matt Maher?s single ?Your Grace Is Enough? on the contemporary Christian music charts, and also mentions Catholic songwriter Sharmane, who scored a top 10 hit last year with her song ?I Surrender.?

To Maher, the lack of infrastructure handicaps Catholic recording artists. He points out it?s difficult to get airplay in a corporate radio structure ? even a Christian one ? when music is independently made without national distribution. It also creates what Maher considers understandable concerns about the quality of some contemporary Catholic music. ?A lot of music has been poorly recorded,? he admitted.

Facing criticism

The quibble about production value is just one ? and perhaps the least fundamental ? of a series of objections lobbied against contemporary Catholic music by groups within the American church. Some have questioned the appropriateness of the songs? texts, while others question the worthiness of the musical style to the Mass, and with it, the validity of the genre itself.

Because many of the songs originated in Protestant circles, or were written in a similar spiritual vein, their words frequently take the form of highly personalized witness. The ?I? and ?my? of this music can be at odds with Catholicism?s meticulous emphasis on the communal ?we,? expressed in hymns, the creed, the eucharistic prayer, and elsewhere.

?Some people react to the very personal quality of some CCM songs and feel they aren?t appropriate for liturgy because they focus too much on the individual,? explained GIA?s Kelly Dobbs Mickus. It?s a concern that Dobbs Mickus shares, though she points out there are other settings, like concerts and youth rallies, where textually strong songs of this style are better suited. ?Most people have good judgment,? she added.

Concerns about the texts of contemporary compositions, however, transcend mere pronoun choices. If any stereotype pervades the general Catholic perception of praise and worship, it?s that of a genre riddled with lyrical treacle. Tom Booth, who produces many of the recordings for Spirit and Song, admits it?s a major pitfall of his profession. ?I don?t know why it is, but in contemporary Christian or Catholic music, it?s easy to fall into the maudlin, the trite, and the disingenuous.? Booth tries to combat this tendency by stressing informed theology with artists prior to the recording process.

Jenny Pixler, a singer who worked with Booth on her 2007 debut CD for Spirit and Song, says that she has

come to appreciate the richness of traditional Catholic hymns, sometimes at the expense of the contemporary music that attracted her as a teenager at St. Timothy in Mesa. ?I?ve definitely came to see how, a lot of times, the contemporary lacks depth,? said Pixler, 22. ?But,? she granted, ?I was somebody several years ago who needed the loud, lift-your-hands stuff to draw me in.?

There?s no question that rock, folk and pop have been influencing Catholic music since the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, long before Spirit and Song, the St. Louis Jesuits and other composers were adapting the sounds of their day to what they saw as the needs of their church. But whether this influence has been good for the church is the subject of an increasingly vocal debate. For some American Catholics, the encroachment of profane musical styles into the sacred space of liturgy has been one of the most regrettable ongoing consequences of the 1960s conciliar reforms.

One of the leading critics of contemporary Catholic praise-and-worship-style music (along with its antecedents in Glory and Praise and elsewhere) is William Mahrt, a Stanford University musicologist and the editor of Sacred Music, a journal devoted to the study of the church?s centuries-old repertory of Gregorian chant, sacred polyphony and other modes that have fallen out of wider practice in U.S. parishes in the last 40 years.

In Mahrt?s view, the kinship between contemporary Christian music and secular styles heard on the radio makes the music generally unsuitable for the Catholic liturgy. ?If you take a secular song (or the style of such a song) and change its text, you still have the music of a secular song,? Mahrt argued. ?Music has the inherent capability of evoking the associations of a place and of other contexts.? Those other contexts, Mahrt suggested, are often at intrinsic odds with the sacred, prayerful aim of the Mass, and ?do not belong in church.? Mahrt allows that musical pieces should be judged individually, both for liturgical use and use in the everyday, devotional settings. ?Outside the liturgy,? he cautioned, ?there ought to be more leeway, but the principle still holds that if the style brings with it associations that are in conflict with religious purposes, then it is inappropriate for any religious purpose.?

Matt Maher has heard these objections before, and he takes them seriously. In some cases, he even agrees. ?I?m not sure if all [the Spirit and Song catalog] is suited for liturgy,? Maher says between sets at the ARISE conference. He insists he has no fight with those like Mahrt who see no place for his own music in the Mass.

Maher hopes that his compositions can stand on their own and, fittingly for a self-described ?child of JPII? and ?songwriter for the church,? he believes they have merit as works of art in the service of the new evangelization. ?There should come a time,? he said, ?if Vatican II is really happening effectively, when new ideas should shoot out of the community on life, on art, on beauty, and they should reshape culture. Some people are trying to fit everything into the Mass, and that?s where things get problematic.?

Maher?s approach to his role as a part-time parish music minister evinces an abiding deference to church authority. ?The folks at Spirit and Song and Life Teen, we?ve always maintained obedience to our pastors and bishops, and we?ve never deviated from that.? His advice for priests and parish leaders is simple: ?Do what you feel is right for your parish. If you feel the best way to real contemplation for your community is through a choir and an organ, that?s fine. God gave you leadership. We?ve got to stop arguing about those things, because there are more important issues.?

Steve Warner, the longtime director of the University of Notre Dame Folk Choir, agrees.

?Why choose?? Warner asked. ?To me, it?s a false dichotomy. You end up dividing the rich plurality of

Catholic music into fiefdoms.? For Warner, the criteria for worthy music at Mass have little to do with genre, and multiple styles can coexist within one parish?s repertoire. What really matters, Warner holds, is accurate theology, an accessibility that allows the congregation to participate fully in the singing, and a ?simple integrity? of the music itself ? and both contemporary and chant pieces have the potential to uphold or violate those touchstones.

?I think a great deal of the glory of the Catholic liturgical tradition is the breadth of our engagement with multiple cultures,? said Fr. J. Michael Joncas, who occupies a unique place in the discussion. Joncas is a diocesan priest, as well as a liturgical theologian at St. Thomas University in St. Paul, Minn. But he is probably best known as the composer of pieces such as ?On Eagles Wings,? which have become popular standards of the post-council period. According to Joncas, an exclusive diet of praise and worship music at Catholic liturgy would be ?as undesirable as an exclusive diet of strophic hymnody alone, or folk-pop compositions, or Renaissance motets, or Caecilian Mass parts.?

Cultural context

In fall 2007, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops released a document called ?Sing to the Lord,? which attempts to clarify the role of music in the liturgy. But the document is recommendation, not law, and while ?Sing to the Lord? recognizes a liturgical ?pride of place? for chant and the organ, with its invocation of ?cultural context,? it also leaves room for other instruments and music with secular roots, provided the compositions themselves have suitable religious content.

The result has been a continuation of previous philosophical and theological differences. Music remains among the most reliable of Catholic fault lines, and the volleys fired for and against contemporary styles raise the question of where the church goes from here. Compounding this aura of limbo is the long-awaited new English translation of the Order of Mass (along with Vatican approval).

As GIA?s Dobbs Mickus explains, music publishers are currently ?in a holding pattern,? biding their time until they can publish new hymnals (presumably including more contemporary materials). Even songwriters like Matt Maher, who hasn?t published new Mass parts since his first album in 2001, are holding their breath.

?I?ve been wanting to write a new Gloria,? Maher said. ?But practically speaking, the new translation isn?t out yet. In terms of what it would be like musically, I?m waiting to see where the bishops land ? out of respect for their leadership and authority.?

Meanwhile, William Mahrt hasn?t softened his proposal for a move away from praise and worship, with its pop origins, in favor of the sacred music rooted in church tradition. ?I have never advocated that chant or polyphony should be the exclusive music for the liturgy,? Mahrt told me, ?but it should form the paradigm against which other musics are judged.? Further, he said, you can?t abruptly take a musical style away from congregations. ?You have to provide gradual improvements without the effect of a cold shower. Better and more sacred pieces gradually replace the old pieces as they become well accepted by a congregation.?

At the other end of the spectrum, Spirit and Song?s Robert Feduccia defends the music he publishes. ?I understand people?s criticisms, I really do. I was struck at the beautiful chant music at JPII?s funeral. But I thought: For how many young people is this completely foreign? I don?t want it to be foreign to them, and I?m on board with parishes? efforts to incorporate Gregorian chant. But with that said, I strongly believe we have a valid ministry too. We give cultural voice to the faith life of young adults.?

Maher, Feduccia?s most successful artist, says much the same. ?We need hymns, we need chant.? But, he continued, ?we need to relate to the culture. And in America, part of that culture is the drum set and the guitar. The goal is always contemplation, but you have to start somewhere to get there.?

Grace is enough

Relating to the culture is at the heart of Maher?s ministry and central to the mission of groups like Life Teen, where he is proud to serve. Maher plans to continue recording, and touring with his band. His hope, he says, is to inspire prayer and worship, whatever the context ? be it Mass or next year?s ARISE conference. To Maher, it?s all part of the greater goals of the new evangelization.

At Notre Dame, Steve Warner said time has taught him not to worry about the future of Catholic music. ?The American church, as it always has done, will sort through this and figure out what has meat and what doesn?t. I?ve seen this happen since 1963: The best always surfaces to the top and stays there.?

World Library?s Mary Prete, who served on the advisory committee for the bishops? statement, ?Sing to the Lord,? is willing to go a step further. ?The leadership, all of us, seems to forget sometimes that this isn?t totally up to us. The Holy Spirit plays an important part. Everyone will find their place, and the Spirit will do what the Spirit does.?
Prete?s words reverberate when I recall my drive in late May from Prescott back toward Phoenix on Interstate 17. I had left the ARISE 08 conference a day before its organizers did, and I remember thinking that the following evening, the black JPII-mobile would come barreling down the same highway, and with it a caravan of people determined to make a movement grow in the Arizona desert.

Scanning the radio dial, I came across the opening notes of Matt Maher?s single ?Your Grace Is Enough,? from ?Empty and Beautiful.? The layers of guitar rose, the first verse commenced, then the second. ?You lead us in the song of your salvation,? Maher sang, ?And all your people sing along.?
The chorus was a steady repetition: ?Your grace is enough, your grace is enough for me.? There was a palpable feeling in Maher?s voice of surrender to the Spirit, filling me with the sense that, whatever one thinks of the music itself, the message is loud, growing louder.

Lyrics to songs by Matt Maher at **spiritandsong.com** [1]

(Gregory Ruehlmann is a contributing editor at BustedHalo.com, an online magazine run by the Paulist Fathers for spiritual seekers in their 20s and 30s. He writes from Augusta, Ga.)

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