

A Survey of Christian Cross-Over Songwriting
Core Principles and Potential for Impact

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Abstract

A cross-over song has been defined as a song written by a Christian artist aimed at a mainstream audience. An understanding of the core principles of cross-over songs and their relevance in contemporary culture is essential for Christian songwriters. Six albums marked by spiritual overtones or undertones, representing a broad spectrum of contemporary cross-over music, were examined. Selected songs were critiqued by analyzing the album of origin, lyrical content, author's expressed worldview, and level of commercial success. Renaissance art also provided a historical parallel to modern day songwriting. Recommendations were developed for Christian songwriters to craft songs with greater effectiveness to impact the culture while adhering to a biblical worldview.

A Survey of Christian Cross-Over Songwriting

An exploration of Christian cross-over music can provide an objective framework for evaluating songs and developing guidelines for Christian songwriters so they can enhance their effectiveness in communicating with their audiences. A cross-over song is a Christian song aimed at a mainstream audience. There are four key components of Christian cross-over songwriting: (a) album, (b) lyrical content, (c) author's expressed worldview, and (d) commercial success. The spectrum of artists selected for analysis is representative of the cross-over music culture, with each one expressing unique style and form to connect with their target audiences. While many books, journal articles, and lectures have addressed this crucial and often controversial issue, there is little consensus on the matter. A certain degree of resolution on the evaluation methods can help to provide recommendations on how artists can achieve their potential in writing cross-over songs that appeal to secular audiences while at the same time adhering to a biblical worldview.

The primary motivation and skill of songwriting, both the form and content, are significant. In *The Craft of Christian Songwriting*, Sterling (2009) addressed why it is important to understand the different elements of songwriting and contended that the primary reason to write songs is to make a statement and impart a message (p. 12). In addition, Blume (1999) suggested that artists use songs to connect with audiences and reveal clues as to what they are thinking (p. 35).

Sterling (2009) endorsed Arvin's classification of Christian art as either *explicit* or *implicit* (p. 3). Using this framework, he stated that Christian songs can be explicit (e.g. praise and worship songs) or implicit (e.g. songs written from a Christian worldview

with no direct mention of Christ). Grammy nominated rapper and Reach Records Co-Founder, Lecrae Moore, holds a similar view. In an interview with *The Christian Post*, Lecrae said, “I just really wanted to make good art, and talk about issues I think everyone can relate to and hopefully provide some different solutions, hope and inspiration” (Funaro, 2009, para. 2). Andrew Osenga from Caedmon’s Call stated, “The very act of creating, in and of itself, is an act of worship, of obedience... to be a Christian artist you have to understand you have the ability to write about everything.” (Sterling, 2009, p. 2). Sterling elaborated on Osenga’s idea by saying that if Jesus is central to the life of a songwriter, He will be central in the songs the individual writes (Sterling, 2009, pp. 2-4). This statement provided one of the criterion used to judge the songs, albums, and other art examined in this thesis. This implies that the songwriter’s life must be examined to provide clues for evaluating the songs, along with other factors. There should be a direct correlation between the songwriter’s lifestyle and life message.

Defining a Cross-Over Song

At the outset, it is important to differentiate between Christian songs, especially an implicit song, and a *moral song* written by an individual who does not have a relationship with Christ. By comparing the lyrical content of a song with biblical teaching, one can determine whether the song is Christian in nature (Sterling, 2009, p. 2). It is important to discern whether the song aligns with core biblical values, or whether it deviates from the fundamental message of scripture. While many songs may have Christian characteristics, the writer might not have intended the song to be used for religious purposes. In *The Craft of Christian Songwriting*, Sterling defined cross-over songs (Sterling, 2009, p. 3). He explained that implicitly Christian songs have a much

better chance of reaching an audience that does not know Christ. He stated that when Christian songwriters craft well written, implicitly spiritual songs, many non-Christians may listen and become more receptive to a relationship with Christ. The analysis of cross-over music indicates that songs vary in the level of Christian content—from marginal to highly saturated. By surveying a variety of albums, one can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the musical landscape.

Evaluation Methodology

Four factors were selected to evaluate the performance of cross-over songs. The first factor considered when looking at a song was its album of origin. Each album generally had a consistent theme and shed light on a cross-over song's musical context. This concept was clearly demonstrated in Switchfoot's album, *A Beautiful Letdown*, which utilized every song to paint a picture of humanity and the need for a Savior. Although most of the songs on the album are not explicitly Christian, the album presents a cohesive message (Glauber, 2003, para. 25). According to Blume (1999), great songs convey a central theme and collectively project a common tone. By examining the commonalities in the tone of songs, a recording artist's intent can be evaluated and determined (p. 35).

The second factor considered was lyrical content. Songs have three primary components: lyrics, melody, and rhythm. Plato argued that rhythm was the most important component of a song, contending that rhythm, along with harmony, contained elements that brought peace to the soul (Columbia, 2013, para. 27). Johann Sebastian Bach, an eighteenth-century composer of the Baroque period, used melody and harmonic elements to glorify the Lord in his compositions (Winter, 2013, para. 5). However, in

modern Christian music, lyrical content takes precedence over musical elements. Many leading churches have embraced different musical styles which were once only used in secular settings. For example, Pastor Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church, embraced Jake Luhrs of August Burns Red, a Christian heavy metal band, both as a musician and as a teacher (The Resurgence, 2012, para. 1). The *Passion* movement, along with theologian John Piper, has partnered with rapper Lecrae (Piper, 2011). The support from church leaders has helped Christian artists achieve mainstream notoriety. TIME Magazine critic Tim Newcomb recognized Lecrae's cross-over success, saying:

There's a whole lot of Jesus running through Americans' earbuds, at least according to the latest Billboard and iTunes numbers. In back-to-back weeks Christian artists TobyMac and Lecrae released new albums that made even mainstream artists listen up as they both stormed up the charts (Newcomb, 2012, para. 1).

Since lyrics have become the defining attribute of contemporary Christian music, lyrical content was the primary focus of how the spiritual component of the songs was assessed.

The third factor considered when examining songs was the songwriter's lifestyle. One may ask, "What importance does a songwriter's lifestyle have in regards to their music?" Jesus said in Matthew 7:16a, "You will recognize them by their fruits." The personal life of the songwriter must be taken into account in the evaluation process. *Passion* founder Louie Giglio defined worship this way: "Worship is our response, both personal and corporate, to God for who He is, and what He has done; expressed in and by the things we say and the way we live" (Worship.com, 2010, para. 2). This definition

supports the idea that an individual's lifestyle is a good metric for determining who they worship. In addition, the professed beliefs of the writer must be taken into account.

The fourth and final factor considered was the song's commercial success. Blume (1999) stated that there are no rules or formulas to determine what will make a good song. Rather, he asserted that core principles should be recognized, and great songs or albums should be judged on a case-by-case basis. Fredrick (2008) laid out 126 principles that lead to successful songs in *Shortcuts To Hit Songwriting*. Hit songs include simple harmonic progressions, well-organized melodic rhythm patterns, and thematically rich choruses (pp. 52-159). Bennet explained what defines a well-written and successful song, asserting that great songs ultimately shape the music industry while working within the existing song form. According to Bennet (2011), the economic factors that drive a song's success are by-products of an already well-crafted song (pp. 140-143). For the purposes of this thesis, commercial success was used as an indicator of the song's quality.

Parallels from Renaissance Artwork

While in recent decades music has become a significant avenue to convey philosophical ideals, the precedence to use various art forms to reach people with a particular message has been established for centuries and can be traced to the Renaissance. The Renaissance works by selected artists demonstrate how Christians can use art to communicate spiritual concepts. While the Renaissance did promote humanism, certain artists skillfully used their art to magnify God and point people to Him. The following works of art were interpreted by the writer, who spent a year under the teaching of author and professor, Dr. Michael Babcock. The writer believes that the same artistic challenges present in the current musical landscape were present during the Renaissance.

By examining the art produced during the Renaissance, commonalities were found between paintings from the Renaissance time period and Christian songs written today. This historical context is necessary to understand the progression of art and its parallels with music.

The Birth of Venus by Sandro Botticelli

This painting is critical to the thesis because it represents the danger of blending two diametrically opposed worldviews. Botticelli tried to reconcile humanism and Christianity. In his painting, he essentially created an image of a woman with a secular body and a head similar to Mary, the Mother of Jesus. His attempt to blend the two worldviews created a hybrid work that did not bring glory to God, but rather conformed to the humanistic mindset. This painting provides a powerful reminder to Christian songwriters that they must not to lose the truth of Christianity in an attempt to conform to the world.

The Last Supper by Leonardo Da Vinci

Leonardo Da Vinci's painting, *The Last Supper*, is one of the most famous pieces of art in the world. This painting incorporated certain key concepts and techniques that are found in many successful albums. Da Vinci used a combination of orthogonal lines that he strategically placed throughout the painting, and a vanishing point. The orthogonal lines lead to Jesus, where the vanishing point is located. Everything in the painting ultimately leads the viewer to Jesus. *The Last Supper* models how every element of a piece of art should be in unison. Since songs are the building blocks for albums, every song on an album should point the listener in a single, unified direction. This provides an excellent example of how songwriters should craft their albums.

Self-Portrait at Twenty-Eight by Albrecht Dürer

This work represents a core goal of Christian art: to create groundbreaking art that glorifies God. Albrecht Dürer created the first-ever *Christ-like* self-portrait, with the intention of creating an image of himself that resembled Christ. The goal was not that he would compare himself to Christ, but rather that those who saw the painting would see Christ in him. While this could be interpreted by some as an arrogant move, instead it should be perceived as an expression of humility. This painting was part of the Northern Renaissance which sought to use art for God's glory, not to elevate man. By creating groundbreaking art that exalts Christ, Dürer modeled several key lessons for Christian songwriters. First, the art must be excellent. The painting displayed a high level of craftsmanship and is still considered a masterpiece. Second, the front facing pose was considered to be very secular. While the pose was secular, the message never deviated from biblical principles; it simply expressed biblical truth in a new way. The way Dürer took a very secular art form and turned it into a well done work of art that honored Christ, serves as a valuable example and motivation to songwriters. In crafting Christian songs today, a commitment to excellence, creativity, and humility are all essential as exemplified by Dürer's work.

Oration on the Dignity of Man by Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola

This literary work is key in understanding the dangers of attempting to blend worldviews. Whenever one attempts to integrate two diametrically opposed worldviews, the Christian component is diminished and marginalized. In an attempt to merge the idea that man is created by God with the humanistic view of man's abilities, Mirandola falsely imputed statements to God that were actually made by the Devil to Eve in the Garden of

Eden in Genesis 3. This is a stark misrepresentation of what God had actually said to man in Genesis 2. The work ultimately blasphemed the God it was meant to honor. This illustrates the dangers of distorting the message of Christianity, especially when communicating spiritual concepts in an artistic medium.

The School of Athens by Raphael

This painting focuses on two main figures: Plato and his former student, Aristotle. They are having a disagreement about the origin of meaning. Plato is pointing up, symbolically stating that meaning is found above, not in earthly things. Aristotle is pointing down, referring to the belief that everything finds its meaning on earth. The School is divided along these lines of belief. This painting represents much of the philosophical divide in music today, particularly between Christian and secular artists. The struggle between temporal aspects of earthly life and eternal significance is a tension faced by modern Christian songwriters. Along with Plato and Aristotle, this painting also features influential artists such as Da Vinci and Donatello, and philosophers such as Socrates. Their inclusion demonstrates that excellence is required to be in a position of influence. In addition, this work shows that philosophy can be effectively expressed in art. Finally, it illustrates the need for Christians to be involved in art and create work that influences the culture in which they live.

Cross-over Album Review

The following albums are carefully examined and should be treated as case studies as they provide valuable insights into the principles and purpose of songwriting.

Define The Great Line by Underoath

On June 20, 2006, Underoath released their iconic album, “Define The Great Line.” This album represented the culmination of what it means to adapt the message of a Christian worldview and a secular genre of music. While all the songs on the album are written from a Christian perspective, the album was extremely successful in the heavy metal industry (Hartwig, 2006, para. 3).

Heart In Motion by Amy Grant

In 1991, Amy Grant released her first album targeted at the mainstream market, *Heart In Motion*. Grant is Christian music’s most successful cross-over artist. She had already experienced great success in both religious markets; this album was her first attempt to branch out into secular music (Henderson, 2013, para. 1). While some songs on the CD are explicitly Christian, several songs deal with romance and other non-religious subjects.

Mmhmm by Relient K

In 2004, the Christian Pop-Punk band Relient K released their first album targeted at mainstream audiences as well their Christian audience. Crosswalk praised Relient K, saying that they would always be mentioned in conversations about Christians breaking through musical and marketplace barriers (Thomson, 2007, para. 1). Absolute Punk’s Scott Weber and the audience both gave the album a 90% out of a 100, based on Vocals (9), Musicianship (9), Lyrics (8.75), Production (9.5), Creativity (8.5), Lasting Value (9), and Reviewer Tilt (9). These scores speak to the fact that the album was excellent in every regard (Weber, 2005, para 2).

Sounds of the Season by Taylor Swift

Sounds Of The Season is a Christmas album released by Taylor Swift in 2007.

The album was exclusively released at Target, and featured four well known Christmas songs as well as two original songs written by Swift. The album contains Swift's most overtly Christian song, "Christmas Must Be Something More" (Swift, 2007, track 5).

Teenage Dream by Katy Perry

In the interest of painting a fair and accurate picture of Christian songwriters who have achieved mainstream success, Katy Perry must be mentioned. Perry is the daughter of Pastor Keith Hudson, and was raised in a conservative home (Brokaw, 2012, para 5). Formerly known as Katy Hudson, a contemporary Christian singer, Katy Perry now writes about subjects that are in opposition to traditional biblical values (Moring, 2010, para. 4). Katy Perry's album *Teenage Dream* reflects this shift. This album shows a stark contrast to other albums written by Christians.

The Beautiful Letdown by Switchfoot

Few Christian bands have made such an impact on the world of mainstream rock as the San Diego rock outfit Switchfoot. Their fourth studio release of their double platinum, *The Beautiful Letdown*, permanently established their mainstream appeal (Recording Industry Association of America, 2013, para. 2). The band is vocal about their faith, and their songs deal with many issues that resonate with both believers and unbelievers. The band discusses Jesus, life purpose, daily struggles, and social responsibility, all in an alternative rock format. Switchfoot has spent their career working to bring songs of faith to the world, and this album received praise from both Christian and mainstream critics. Adam Knott of Sputnik Music said, "*The Beautiful Letdown* acts

as an anchor, which might be the antithesis of most life-altering albums, but that's kinda the whole... point" (Knott, 2011, para. 1). Tony Cummings of CrossRhythms.co.uk said this was a "truly brilliant album," and praised several of the songs in detail (Cummings, 2003, para. 1). JesusFreak Hideout, a popular Christian music website, gave the album 4.5 out of 5 stars, commending its vast variety of song styles and deep message (Garris, 2013, para. 4). Switchfoot's record provides an excellent example of a successful cross-over album.

Lyrical Content

Define The Great Line by Underoath

The album was widely praised by both music critics and fans. The band's faith is prominently showcased on the record, beginning with the first song, "In Regards To Myself," which encourages the listener to pursue a relationship with God. The song states "It's all worth reaching for, The hand to pull you out" (Underoath, 2006, track 1). The song states that the light of God is blinding, and exhorts the listener to reach out and take His hand. The song begins and ends the same way, challenging listeners to "Wake Up" (Underoath, 2006, track 1). The next song, "A Moment Suspended In Time," laments how individuals are not in control of their own lives. The song reaches an ideological climax with the phrase, "It's so funny how we see things so clear, when we have no time left to live" (Underoath, 2006, track 2). The next significant song is "There Could Be Nothing After This," which talks about man's constant search for God. The song states, "We're nothing but hollow vessels, In search of what makes us alive" (Underoath, 2006, track 3). Throughout the album, Underoath is building a case for humanity's need for a Savior. While most heavy metal appeals to man's brokenness, Underoath also points

people to the solution for that brokenness. The album builds up to “Writing On The Walls,” which discusses the broken state of humanity and the need for God to deliver man. The song starts by considering the writer’s personal failures and ends with a declaration of faith: “I hope to God!” (Underoath, 2006, track 9). This song also provided them with an opportunity to share their faith with the audiences at their concerts (Underoath, 2008, track 8). AbsolutePunk gave the lyrics of this album a score of 9.75 out of 10 (Gross, 2006, para. 2).

Heart In Motion by Amy Grant

Grant’s first cross-over album maintained a strong theme of faith, although not all the songs on the album dealt with religious issues. The first significant song, “Good For Me,” is a romantic song. While the song does not promote ungodly behavior, it has no religious content (Grant, 1991, track 1). The next track, “Baby, Baby,” served as the album’s title track, as it contained the phrase “heart in motion” which is the title of the CD (Grant, 1991, track 2). Both “Good For Me” and “Baby, Baby” broadened Grant’s audience without sacrificing moral standards. Other songs like “Ask Me,” had more of a religious bent. The song dealt with child abuse, and how God is in the middle of the difficult situation (Grant, 1991, track 5). Overall, the lyrical content maintained a strong Christian message. By mixing songs that had both Christian and secular themes on the same album, Grant was able to successfully cross over into mainstream markets.

Mmmmm by Relient K

Relient K exhibited a unique and satirical lyrical style on this album. Scott Weber stated that the album was saturated with catchy hooks, and the lyrics were mature and very well written (Weber, 2005, para 1). The most notable song is “Be my Escape,”

which speaks to the need people have for God to save them from their own mistakes (Relient K, 2004, track 2). The writer describes his strong desire to “get outta here” and begs God to “be his escape.” The song goes on to allude to the redemptive work of Christ on the cross, saying, “I can’t ask You to give, what You already gave” when begging for help (Relient K, 2004, track 2). The other song which warrants examination is, “Who I Am Hates Who I’ve Been.” The song talks about sanctification and the growth process Christians encounter as life progresses. In addition, the album has fun and carefree songs such as, “My Girlfriend’s Ex-Boyfriend,” which tells the story of how the writer got his girlfriend due to her ex-boyfriend’s mistakes. Another light and upbeat song is, “The Only Thing Worse Than Beating a Dead Horse Is Betting On One” (Relient K, 2004, track 5). However, songs such as “Life After Death And Taxes,” give the album its unmistakable Christian tone (Relient K, 2004, track 13). Weber (2005) said that the album maintained a strong Christian message while conforming to the stylistic norms of punk music (para. 6). He continued that while the album has a message that encourages spirituality and an eternal perspective, non-Christians will be able to enjoy and appreciate the album as well. The album serves as an effective example of advancing a Christian worldview, delivered in a way that a mainstream audience will understand and receive it.

Sounds of the Season by Taylor Swift

On *Sounds of the Season*, Taylor Swift defends her faith while delivering a new Christmas song. The album featured a song called, “Christmas Must Be Something More” (Swift, 2007, track 5). The song focuses on Jesus being the real meaning behind the holiday, asking questions about what Christmas would look like if every materialistic thing society attaches to Christmas was removed, and only Jesus remained. The song

concludes that He is the sole reason for the holiday, saying, “Here’s to Jesus Christ who saved our lives” (Swift, 2007, track 5). The song also confronts issues related to political correctness. This song was Swift’s most overt attempt to cross over from Country music markets to Christian music markets, and she failed. The song received no commercial airplay on either Christian or Country radio. The fact that such an overtly Christian song failed to resonate with markets that are typically friendly to the message and the songwriter reflect the challenges of crossing-over.

Teenage Dream by Katy Perry

While singer Katy Perry claims faith in Christ, her music does not reflect traditional Christian values. Rolling Stone’s review of her album reveals this:

Major themes include: how awesome it is having sex with Russell Brand (“Hummingbird Heartbeat”), how it sucks having sex with guys who aren’t Russell Brand (“Pearl”), how true love rules (“Teenage Dream”), even though it’s not like the movies (“Not Like the Movies”) and “Her Christian back story only comes up once, in “Who Am I Living For,” where Perry riffs on the biblical story of Esther, the Jewish orphan who married the Persian king and uncovered a plot to exterminate the Jews. It’s dark and compelling, especially since she sings it like Rihanna (Sheffield, 2011, para. 4).

There are several Christian themes that run through Perry’s song, “Who Am I Living For” and the song is laced with biblical references (Perry, 2010, track 9). Perry talks about her struggle between the virtuous life she desires to live and the rebellious life she is living (Perry, 2010). However, the message of this song stands in sharp contrast to the sexually explicit songs on her album. The lyrical content is reflective of Perry’s attempt

to fuse her Christian faith with her secular lifestyle (Grigoriadis, 2011, p. 4). The struggle between the sacred and the secular is similar to the struggle that occurred in the Renaissance. When a Christian artist attempts to blend Christian and humanistic philosophies, the Christian philosophy generally suffers, as seen in Mirandola's work (Mirandola, 1994). The album *Teenage Dream* represents the confusion and discrepancy when Christian songwriters do not express a Christian worldview in their songwriting.

The Beautiful Letdown by Switchfoot

On *The Beautiful Letdown*, Switchfoot paints a vivid picture of human nature's insatiable desire to achieve significance. The band takes listeners on a journey of asking deep questions and ultimately concludes that Jesus is the answer. Jon Foreman, Switchfoot's lead singer, spoke about the inspiration for the song "Meant To Live" (Switchfoot, 2003, track 1). In a world that is marked by stark contrasts, Foreman expressed the need for a deeper reason to live with purpose, saying, "Something deep inside of me yearns for the beautiful, the true. I want more than what I've been sold; I want to live life" (Jones, 2003, para. 2). The song was inspired by the T.S. Elliot poem, "Hollow Men," which tells of a desire to live life to the fullest and rise above all the small things that negatively influence individuals (Jones, 2013).

The next song, "This Is Your Life," challenges listeners to an introspective look at how they are living and asks them to examine if this is really what they want for their lives (Switchfoot, 2003, track 2). The song that follows, "More Than Fine," further deals with a desire to have a meaningful existence on earth (Switchfoot, 2003, track 3). The song expresses a discontentment with merely living and encourages striving for more. Foreman said, "I feel like contentment can be a dangerous thing in the wrong hands. Now

is the time to change” (Jones, 2003, para. 5). The following song, “Ammunition,” illustrates the conflict and dissonance that exist in life (Switchfoot, 2003, track 4).

Foreman draws upon insights from Albert Einstein when discussing music:

Einstein said, ‘Without belief in the inner harmony of the world there would be no science.’ Maybe. I say without the dissonance of our modern age there would be no rock and roll. There lies the tension: between the harmony and the dissonance. We’re the problem, we’re the issue (Jones, 2003, para. 6).

This issue of dissonance is a common thread seen throughout the album. “Dare You To Move,” is the fifth song on *The Beautiful Letdown* (Switchfoot, 2003, track 5). While the song has been a staple for the band for almost a decade, Foreman has said he still enjoys performing it live (Martin & Foreman, 2008). When performing at Liberty University, Foreman said the song is still “a song of motion” (Foreman, 2012). The song focuses on the dichotomy between the reality and the ideal, “between how it is and how it should be, between who you are and who you could be” (Switchfoot, 2003, track 5). This theme’s universal relevance allowed the song to cross over and reach a secular audience. When asked about the song, Foreman reflects on the fact that humans only use a small portion of their brains and wonders if the same is true of the soul, causing people to live suboptimal lives without achieving their full potential. Foreman lamented that “true action is rare” and that people instead live in a constant state of impulsive reaction to the situations around them (Jones, 2003, para. 6).

“Redemption” is one of the more explicitly Christian songs on the album (Switchfoot, 2003, track 6). The song states “I’ve got my hands on redemption’s side, Whose scars are bigger than these doubts of mine” (Switchfoot, 2003 track 6).

Throughout the album, Switchfoot paints a picture of discontentment in life that can only be remedied by a relationship with Christ and thematically bears many similarities to King Solomon's writing in the book of Ecclesiastes.

The title track, "A Beautiful Letdown," highlights the liberating joy of knowing that nothing in this world can satisfy man's deepest longings and search for significance (Switchfoot, 2003, track 7). The song states, "It was a beautiful let down, The day I knew, That all the riches this world had to offer me, Would never do" (Switchfoot, 2003, track 7). The song concludes with exhorting listeners to follow Christ, focus on an eternal perspective, and not be absorbed by the trappings of this world. Foreman uses Christian imagery when he says, "I'm gonna set sight and set sail for the kingdom come, I will carry a cross and a song where I don't belong" (Switchfoot, 2003, track 7). Foreman goes on to describe the Christian body of believers: "We are a beautiful letdown, Painfully uncool, The church of the dropouts, The losers, the sinners, the failures and the fools," (Switchfoot, 2003, track 7). He continues by saying that because of our failures, individuals should lead Christ-centered, not self-centered, lives. Foreman explains the importance of having a proper response when tragedy strikes. He contends that one must find the redemptive aspects of any hardship, rather than become disillusioned and express bitterness and hatred (Jones, 2003, para. 9). This song epitomizes the primary goal of the album, which is to show the needs for redemption in the midst of broken humanity.

The following song, "Gone," contends that the brevity of life should motivate individuals to live purposefully and with a sense of urgency (Switchfoot, 2003, track 8). Foreman encapsulated the song this way: "It's a fun, catchy tune about how we're all going to die someday! Life is so short, live well" (Jones, 2003, para. 10). The second to

the last song, “Adding To The Noise,” describes how society bombards individuals with insignificant messages (Switchfoot, 2003, track 10). This song calls the noise a “symphony of modern humanity” and encourages the listener to embrace the quiet, even if it means turning the CD off. “Adding To The Noise” highlights another theme that is embedded in the album, the tension between silence and noise, and Switchfoot uses it to set up the final song which brings listeners back to God and His purpose for life.

The final song, “24,” deals with living 24 years on earth and everything that can occur during that time (Switchfoot, 2003, track 11). Foreman once again uses the concept of introspection to make his point, stating, “I find unity and peace in none of the diversions that this world offers. But I’ve seen glimpses of truth and that’s where I want to run” (Jones, 2003, para. 13). Forman describes his life as a symphony with twenty-four unique parts that God is orchestrating. He wants to see God transform his life and this song acts as a prayer of surrender. Forman has played a pivotal role in the Christian music industry and sets a valuable example for songwriters to emulate. *A Beautiful Letdown* typifies an ideal cross-over album and shows how addressing universal themes can allow a Christian songwriter to reach a mainstream audience.

Expressed Worldview

Define The Great Line by Underoath

Underoath maintained a strong Christian identity as a band in their fourteen years together. Right before Underoath played “Writing On The Walls” for their live album, “Survive, Kaleidoscope,” lead singer Spencer Chamberlin said, “For those of you who don’t know much about us, we’re a band that stands up here in the name of Jesus Christ. It’s what we believe in, it’s who we are.” Chamberlin went on to share his testimony and

encouraged the audience to put their faith in Christ (Underoath, 2008). The band's drummer, Aaron Gillespie, left in 2010 to become a Teaching Pastor at Unveiled Church in Florida (Gardner, 2012, para. 6). The band was able to use their platform to advance the Gospel in several different arenas, and maintained a strong witness throughout their career.

Heart In Motion by Amy Grant

While Grant has experienced success in both Christian and mainstream music, her faith has always been the driving force behind her career. Grant has cited her relationship with Christ as being the primary factor in her music since she started singing in the church at a young age. She has said that while she loves singing "Baby, Baby," a song she wrote about her daughter, that is not the song that most resonates with her audience. Grant has stated that her spiritually-based songs are what help her connect with her audience, and explained that her love for old hymns has informed her songwriting and performing (De Groote, 2011, para. 3). Grant's Christian foundation has enabled her to have a wide-ranging yet distinctively Christian career.

Mmmmm by Relient K

Relient K front man Matt Thiessen has been vocal about his faith, stating that his faith in Christ anchors his music and keeps him grounded (Mousertime, 2010, para. 9). Thiessen expressed dismay with modern pop culture, and even wrote a song blaming Marilyn Manson for the spiritual destruction of one of his friends (Knight, 2013, para. 2). When asked how he keeps his faith strong in the midst of secular environments such as Warped Tour, he referred back to his Christian beliefs. He stated that while both his beliefs and his sound differ from many of his musical contemporaries, he has been able to

keep both intact. He also credited Six Pence None The Richer and P.O.D. for paving the way for him as a Christian musician (Chapman, 2013, para. 1). Thiessen and the rest of his band have remained strong in their faith and continue to set an example for aspiring Christian songwriters.

Sounds of the Season by Taylor Swift

Swift is believed to be a conservative Catholic but is no longer outspoken about her religious beliefs (Kershaw, 2013, para. 8). She attended Aaron Academy, a Christian school in Hendersonville, Tennessee (Soylent Communications, 2013, para. 4). Early in her career she sang the National Anthem at the 2008 Republican National Convention, and posted “Republicans do it better” on her MySpace account (Hatten, 2012, para. 11). Faith has been a theme in many of her recordings, although her Christmas album is her only known direct reference to Jesus in a song (Swift, 2007, track 5).

Teenage Dream by Katy Perry

As previously mentioned, Katy Perry was formerly a Christian singer known as “Katy Hudson” (Moring, 2010, para. 2). In an interview with Rolling Stone titled “Sex, God, and Katy Perry,” the singer talked about her faith, her Christian upbringing, and her Pentecostal theology, along with a litany of other topics (Grigoriadis, 2011). Perry expressed her belief that religion and sex should stay separate. She attacked a sacrilegious statement by her then-husband, Russell Brand, as well as Lady Gaga’s sexual use of a rosary in a music video. Perry said, “I think when you put sex and spirituality in the same bottle and shake it up, bad things happen” (Grigoriadis, 2011, p 4). She went on to explain that while most of her songs deal with sexual issues and only a few touch on religious ideas, she does not mix the two subjects. Perry went on to say that she is a

Christian, believes that “Jesus is the Son of God,” and even has “JESUS” tattooed on her wrist, like her father who is a preacher and a street evangelist (Grigoriadis, 2011, p.4). Perry has expressed a desire to communicate her faith in Christ and promote her very secular music simultaneously. This struggle of attempting to merge the sacred with the secular, while widely seen and experienced by artists today, is not a new phenomenon and is reminiscent of Botticelli’s work during the Renaissance.

The Beautiful Letdown by Switchfoot

While at times the members of Switchfoot have been vocal about their faith, leader singer Jon Forman prefers to let their music speak to their beliefs. In interviews, Forman speaks about being influenced by the writings of Early Church Fathers, among other literary influences (Martin & Foreman, 2008). Foreman has chosen music to be his primary form of evangelism. Instead of speaking directly about his faith onstage, he chooses to sing about his belief in Christ (Foreman, 2012). However, drummer Chad Butler has spoken openly about the band’s faith on many occasions, saying, “I’m a believer and I’m honored to be associated with the name of Christ” (Cobb, 2010, para. 38). Switchfoot has been able to use their music to advance a Christian worldview and share the Gospel, and the band members have maintained personal lives that are consistent with their message.

Commercial Success

Define The Great Line by Underoath

Underoath’s *Define The Great Line* debuted at #2 on the Billboard 200 Charts, making it the highest charting Christian album since LeAnne Rimes released “You Light Up My Life” in 1997 (Downy, 2013, para. 4). The album was cited not only for its

groundbreaking role in Christian Hard Rock/Metal music, but also for the high standard of musicianship displayed on the record. AbsolutePunk.net author Gabe Gross gave it a 96% of 100 and the readers gave it a 89% out of 100 (Gross, 2006, para. 2). The average was on based on Vocals, Musicianship, Lyrics, Production, Creativity, Lasting Value, and Reviewer Tilt. The album was Underoath's most commercially successful album. *Define The Great Line* went on to become Underoath's second Gold album and the band played sellout shows on six continents (CMSpin, 2012, para. 1). The album has many similarities to Dürer's Renaissance painting, *Self Portrait at Twenty-Eight*, in regards to the innovation and Christian focus. By embracing a high level of excellence and a uniquely secular style, Underoath was able to create an album that experienced a high degree of commercial success.

Heart In Motion by Amy Grant

Heart In Motion experienced massive commercial success. The album featured four songs that became Billboard Top Ten hits: "Good For Me," "Baby Baby," "Every Heartbeat," and "That's What Love Is For" (CDUniverse, 2013, para. 1). The record's first song was "Good For Me," and it was the first of four songs to become a Billboard Top Ten hit. The next song to experience commercial success was "Baby, Baby," written by Keith Thomas, which was eventually nominated for a Grammy (rockonthenet, 1992, para. 2). The song hit #1 on the Billboard Pop Singles Chart (Nager, 1991, p. D3) and #1 on Billboard's Hot 100 charts, and experienced tremendous mainstream success (Granger, 1991, para. 1). At the same time that "Baby, Baby" was #1 on Billboard's Pop Singles Chart, "Every Heartbeat" was #8. The song dealt with romantic issues. "That's What Love Is For" would be Grant's final Billboard Top 10 hit on *Heart In Motion* (CD

Universe, 2013, para. 1). Grant received a Grammy Nomination for Song of the Year for “Baby Baby,” before losing to Natalie Cole.

***Mmhmm* by Relient K**

Relient K’s first cross-over attempt, *Mmhmm*, was a tremendous commercial success, debuting at the #15 spot on Billboard’s Top 200 Chart and selling over 51,000 copies in the first week (Mansfield, 2004, para. 1). The sales for this album were about even between mainstream and faith-based markets (Gotee Media, 2004, para. 1), and the album went on to earn Gold certification by RIAA (Bush, 2005, para. 1). Absolute Punk’s Scott Weber (2005) and the audience both gave the album a 90% out of a 100, based on Vocals (9), Musicianship (9), Lyrics (8.75), Production (9.5), Creativity (8.5), Lasting Value (9), and Reviewer Tilt (9) (para. 2). This ranking is further evidence of the album’s excellence. The two Gold Certified singles of this album were also the two most explicitly Christian songs on the album, “Who I Am Hates Who I’ve Been,” and “Be My Escape” (Thomson, 2007, para. 2). “Be My Escape,” landed Relient K on MTV and on the Billboard Hot 100 Charts (Dare 2 Share, 2005, para. 1) and the song was also Certified Gold (Thomson 2007, para. 1). “Who I Am Hates Who I’ve Been” did very well on the Billboard Pop Charts, reaching #32 (Billboard, 2006, p. 58) and went on to achieve Gold Certification (Thomson, 2007, para. 1). *Mmhmm* won the Dove Award for Rock Album of the Year, and also received a nomination for Recorded Music Packaging of the year, but lost to Jars of Clay. “Be My Escape” was also nominated for Short Form Music Video of the Year, but lost to Switchfoot for their songs “Stars” (Jones, 2006, para. 8). With *Mmhmm*, the members of Relient K established themselves in mainstream Punk music, a feat that had never before been achieved by a Christian band.

Sounds of the Season by Taylor Swift

In contrast to Relient K's cross-over effort, Taylor Swift's attempt did not bode well for her. The album, *Sounds of the Season*, experienced very modest success compared to her other recordings, however it was certified Gold (RIAA, 2013, para. 1) and reached #20 on the U.S. Billboard 200 Charts (Acharts, 2013, para. 1). A perplexing observation is that the most overtly Christian song on the album didn't receive airplay on radio. She experienced the exact opposite result as Relient K. Country radio, which is typically friendly to songs with Christian themes, never played the song. On Christmas day she performed on The Today Show, but did not perform "Christmas Must Be Something More," opting instead to perform her other original song, "Christmases When You Were Mine" (Swift, 2007). Furthermore, there is no recorded evidence of "Christmas Must Be Something More" ever being used in a commercial context, which presents a different perspective on the cross-over capability of Christian songs. This illustrates the challenges and uncertainties that a Christian songwriter will face when trying to have a song cross over from the mainstream market into the Christian market.

Teenage Dream by Katy Perry

With "Teenage Dream," Katy Perry tied Michael Jackson by becoming only the second artist in history to have five #1 singles on the same album. Billboard reports these numbers:

Those five singles are "California Gurls," which in all of its versions has scanned 4.92 million units; "Firework," which has scanned 4.8 million units. "E.T.," in all of its versions, has scanned nearly 4.6 million units; "Teenage Dream," which in all of its versions has scanned 3.9 million units and "Last Friday Night

(T.G.I.F.),” which has scanned 2 million units. Those five songs combined have scanned nearly 20.2 million units and all the tracks on the album have scanned 20.9 million units. When converted, those track scans to track-equivalent albums that comes out to another 2.09 million units. That means that “Teenage Dreams” has scanned over 3.8 million albums and track equivalents (Christman, 2011, para. 8).

“California Gurls,” the first single on *Teenage Dream*, stayed at #1 on Billboard’s Hot 100 for six weeks (Trust, 2011). The song featured rapper Snoop Dogg. The song went on to experience massive success, eventually topping 5 million song downloads (Grein, 2012). The song “Firework,” also hit 5 million in sales. Unlike Perry’s other singles, this song encourages individuals to shine, and could be considered an inspirational song. Perry inspired millions of people with the song when she sang it with Jodi PiPiazza, a girl who has autism, at the *Night Of Too Many Stars* autism benefit (Hartsell, 2012). Perry then released “E.T.” which has topped 5 million in sales, and is a love song to an alien (Grein, 2012). In addition, “Teenage Dream” and “Last Friday Night (T.G.I.F.)” both did well commercially (Christman, 2011). The final single is “Wide Awake,” which appeared on a re-release of the album, placed in the top ten on Billboard’s Hot 100 Chart, and was the 8th and final single of the album (Trust, 2011). Perry references being saved “out of the lion’s den” and uses biblical imagery (Rosen, 2012, para. 1). The song went on to inspire a sermon series from Pastor Louie Giglio at Passion City Church (Giglio, 2012). *Teenage Dream*’s commercial success was previously unprecedented and boosted Perry’s career to a new level.

The Beautiful Letdown by Switchfoot

The Beautiful Letdown achieved massive commercial success and received many accolades. Rhapsody ranked *The Beautiful Letdown* as the #1 Christian Album of the Decade (Rhapsody Editorial, 2009, p.1). The first song on the album, “Meant To Live,” achieved Gold status (RIAA, 2013, para. 6). In addition, the song was also nominated for Song of the Year for the 36th Annual Dove Awards in 2005 (Jones, 2005, para. 3). “Dare You To Move,” also became a Certified Gold Single (RIAA, 2013, para. 5). The song ranked 73rd on Rhapsody’s Top 100 Tracks of the Decade (Rhapsody Editorial, 2009, p.1). As previously mentioned, the album also went double platinum. With the commercial success of *The Beautiful Letdown*, Switchfoot established their band in the world of mainstream music.

Findings and Recommendations

Based on the four-fold criteria – album review, lyrical content, expressed world view and commercial success – the author drew general findings and suggested recommendations to enable Christian songwriters to craft crossover songs with greater effectiveness.

Finding #1: First of all, there is no way to determine if a cross-over song will be successful. With Taylor Swift, the most successful recording artist of the digital age, the most overtly Christian song on her record was rejected, but the opposite was true with Switchfoot. So while some very successful writers experience little commercial success from crossing-over, others benefit immensely. Every time a cross-over song was attempted, there was considerable risk involved. The risk was two-fold: first there was no guarantee that the project would be received well by the mainstream, and second there

was always a risk that the religious base would be isolated. So crossing-over is always a risky move for musicians, either from secular to Christian or vice versa. There are no definitive factors to determine whether or not a cross-over song will do well commercially, but the risk does seem to be much less when a Christian writer attempts to reach mainstream audiences, as opposed to the other way around. This is evidenced by cross-over success that Amy Grant, Switchfoot, and Relient K experienced in comparison to Katy Perry and Taylor Swift.

Recommendation #1: Christian songwriters must consider the risks involved before they decide to attempt a cross-over song or album.

Finding #2: The second finding is that excellence in craft is necessary in all areas. While this might seem obvious, the production value on albums made a huge difference in their success. This was especially evident with Underoath, Relient K, and Amy Grant, who reached out and embraced production methods used by their secular counterparts. It appears that with high enough production values, the mainstream market will be more receptive to Christian writers. This was evidenced by the way the writers listed above were able to experience commercial success while keeping a strong Christian message.

Recommendation #2: Christian songwriters must not only write excellent songs, but produce them in a manner consistent with the highest industry standards.

Finding #3: The third finding is that the albums should be cohesive, both in theme and in song flow. This was a problem with Amy Grant's album, *Heart In Motion*, which started with upbeat songs, slowed down, and never picked back up. In contrast, *The Beautiful Letdown* by Switchfoot was laid out in a way that supported the theme of

the album. The beginning laid a foundation for the rest of the album. They started by laying down key foundations about the meaning of life, and then reflected on those truths. With Relient K and Underoath, the album was not organized thematically but rather was structured to fit the flow of the CD. Regardless of how the record is structured, it must flow in a way so the songs do not sound forced or awkward. By keeping the album dynamics in a constant state of motion, the Christian content could be presented in a variety of different ways. This is especially important when considering the fact that most of the songs were implicit Christian songs. The rock bands seemed to do a better job of this than the individual artists. Relient K, Switchfoot, and Underoath all had varying tempos, keys, and sounds to help bring their message to the forefront, even if it was done in a subtle way.

Recommendation #3: Christian songwriters must carefully craft their albums, not simply their songs, if they want to increase their chances at experiencing cross-over success.

Finding #4: Most of the songs featured are secular songs, implicitly Christian songs, and explicitly Christian songs. By having variety on an album, the songwriter is able to address issues from multiple vantage points. By creating a panorama of angles, songwriters can draw listeners to thoughtfully consider their viewpoint. In every commercially successful cross-over song, the content reflected a universal theme. Switchfoot asked questions about life and meaning, Amy Grant talked about love and family, and Relient K discussed everyday life as it happened. By creating content that non-Christians can listen to and enjoy, Christian songwriters stand a very strong chance of reaching out to diverse audiences.

Recommendation #4: If Christian songwriters desire to attract a mainstream audience, writing implicitly Christian songs is a method that should be considered.

Finding #5: The next and final finding is that not all Christians will produce music that honors the Lord. This was clear in the life and career of Katy Perry. While individuals might have professed Christian beliefs, they may choose to compartmentalize their personal convictions when it comes to their music. This means that just because someone claims the name of Christ and has a successful music career, that they will not necessarily produce music that expresses a biblical worldview.

Recommendation #5: Christian songwriters must use discretion when selecting songs to emulate, even if they are written by Christians.

Conclusion: Christian Songwriters' Potential for Impact

This study revealed many important concepts of cross-over music. The study demonstrated that the challenges and struggles facing Christian songwriters today are similar to the challenges faced by the Renaissance artists. There will always be a level of tension when Christians attempt to produce art which glorifies God for secular audiences, but if crafted skillfully the result can be highly effective. This is best seen in Durer's self-portrait and more recently in Switchfoot's *The Beautiful Letdown*. By utilizing an art form with excellence, Christian songwriters can communicate biblical truths in a culturally relevant way. However, songwriters must exercise great caution when attempting to deliver spiritual truth in a secular art form. The potential dangers of communicating mixed messages can be clearly seen in Botticelli's work, *The Birth of Venus*, and Katy Perry's *Teenage Dream*. When artists are willing to sacrifice their religious beliefs for the sake of expediency, the result does not honor God. Content must

take priority over form, and core convictions should not be compromised in order to conform to secular society and attract larger audiences.

In conclusion, Christian cross-over music has tremendous potential to reach secular audiences and impact an increasingly multicultural society with the message of grace and hope that can only be found in Jesus Christ. The music must be original and authentic, with a strong correlation between the artist's life message and his lifestyle, so there is credibility in his communication. By crafting songs that point to Jesus, incorporating core principles of a biblical worldview undergirded by excellent musicianship and professional and artistic production style, both the content and form of the music will be instrumental in expanding its influence. While there is no absolute determinant of a successful cross-over song, by following the recommendations made in this paper, Christian songwriters may have a higher probability of experiencing commercial success and receptiveness in secular markets. Ultimately, every Christian songwriter should be able to present the Gospel in creative and culturally connected ways, and transform the contemporary musical landscape.

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