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Catholic music: Rockers moving to the beat of a new evangelization

by Gregory Ruehlmann



From left: Matt Maher with band members Kenny Butler, Dan Hinze and Kemi Ndolo

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 Canadian who happens to be the biggest young Catholic songwriter in the United States. Welcome to ARISE 08. Welcome to the new evangelization.

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 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 story about what the future church could look and sound like in America and beyond, both during Mass and outside the parish walls.

Youth rising

Most contemporary Christian music has an instantly recognizable sound. The songs are generally guitar-based, up-tempo and heavily produced, with a repetitive, frequently scriptural chorus. Since catching on in evangelical circles in the early '90s, contemporary Christian music has become a lucrative industry, with radio stations proliferating nationwide.

It has also spilled over into Catholic worship. By the start of this decade, the genre underpinned the repertoire at most youth Masses in U.S. parishes. It has become integral to rallies, retreats and conferences like ARISE 08 -- the gathering at Yavapai run by Youth Arise North America, an evangelical Catholic organization that focuses on outreach to college students, primarily through the annual conference in Prescott. The four-day event features Masses, witness talks and a heavy dose of loud, enthusiastic contemporary music. When I arrived, over 340 people were in attendance, most in their early 20s.

Many of the young participants and volunteers at ARISE have 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. In the last 20 years, Life Teen has developed a track record for producing youths 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,” recalls recording artist and music minister Tom Booth. “And Life Teen sprang up.”

The 46-year-old Booth is something of a godfather figure in contemporary Catholic music, thanks to his two-decade career as a recording artist, producer and guide to countless younger artists. From 1985 until 2005, he ran Life Teen’s music program nationally and at St. Timothy, the program’s original parish in Mesa.

A brushfire movement

The musical repertoire at Life Teen Masses incorporated popular, Catholic-friendly contemporary Christian songs that, as they had earlier in evangelical circles, energized and came to characterize the program, both in and outside Sunday-evening youth Masses. Soon, a remarkable number of Life Teen participants were pursuing and writing music themselves.

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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. “We recently had a battle of the bands competition in New Hampshire, for example,” Bailey said, “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 Booth acolyte from Newfoundland, who in 2001 released his first CD. Since 2006, he has made touring and recording his primary ministry. At a time when Catholics struggle to dent the contemporary Christian chart, Maher’s single “Your Grace Is Enough” reached No. 2. This year he released his fourth album, “Empty and Beautiful,” on Sony BMG’s Christian label, Essential Records. He counts himself part of an assemblage of artists who incorporate disparate styles: Celtic, rock, folk, R & B. They include groups like Ceili Rain

and the Joshua Blakesley Band, and solo artists like John Angotti, ValLimar Jansen and Paul Melley.

Mahe has carved out a successful *métier* as an unapologetically Catholic artist with a strong following. He has performed for the pope at Toronto's World Youth Day and in front of tens of thousands at national conferences. His popular recordings 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 favorite for young Catholics, to "The End and the Beginning," which is inarguably the hardest-rocking song ever written about the doctrine of transubstantiation.

When I first requested an interview, Mahe 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," Mahe explains between worship sessions at ARISE 08. "To me, this is a brushfire movement that's slowly building."

For Mahe, 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."

Arizona 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.

"For us, the movement is about ministering to college kids, and then watching them move," said Andrea Prisby, 27, an ARISE organizer. "It's something new, and exactly what JPII was speaking about with the new evangelization."

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 Mahe and Booth for his gravitation to music ministry. "They taught me what it means to be a worship leader," Ndolo said, "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 sings along to the lyrics projected above the musicians' heads.

Only 25, Ndolo now does full-time music ministry at a 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).

The Portland-based Spirit and Song has been closely tied to the Life Teen movement, and has played an integral role in cultivating its young crop of 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 Mahe's recordings. (Booth is producing 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. Spirit and Song's publication contained Mass parts, along with popular holdovers from the earlier hymnals. It also pioneered the

inclusion of more praise-and-worship-style contemporary Christian songs, which were reshaping spirituality for the Catholic and evangelical children of the baby boomers.

As Booth explains, the guide quickly caught fire as a youth hymnal. Subsequent editions became a depository for new songs intended for liturgical settings like the Mass, and nonliturgical 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.”

Increasingly, Spirit and Song harnesses modern multimedia to share music with young tech-savvy listeners, said general manager Robert Feduccia. (To emphasize the point, he refers to the division by its Web address, **SpiritandSong.com**.) In an age of media ubiquity, Feduccia, 40, said Spirit and Song targets iTunes playlists in addition to Mass song sheets. “Our mission is infusing worship music, broadly understood, into every part of young people’s prayer life. If *Glory and Praise* was the soundtrack to the Vatican II reforms, 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 Publications 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.

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.”

Facing criticism

Rock, folk and pop have been influencing Catholic music since the Second Vatican Council. But for some American Catholics, the encroachment of profane musical styles into the sacred space of liturgy has been a regrettable consequence of conciliar reforms.

One of the leading critics of contemporary Catholic praise-and-worship-style music (along with its post-council antecedents) 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, don’t belong in liturgy; they’re often at odds with the sacred, prayerful aim of the Mass.

Matt Maher insists he has no fight with those who see no place for his music in the Mass. In some cases, he even agrees with them. “I’m not sure if all [of the Spirit and Song catalog] is suited for liturgy,” Maher says between sets at the ARISE conference.

Fittingly for a self-described “child of JPII” and “songwriter for the church,” Maher hopes that his compositions can stand on their own merits 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."

Still a part-time parish minister, Maher defers 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." He advises priests and parish leaders to do what's best for their parishes. "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."

The longtime director of the University of Notre Dame Folk Choir concurs. "Why choose?" asks Steve Warner. "To me, it's a false dichotomy. You end up dividing the rich plurality of Catholic music into fiefdoms." For Warner, the criteria for liturgical music have little to do with genre, and multiple styles can coexist within one parish's repertoire. What really matters, he 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 Christian music and chant pieces can uphold or break those rules.

"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 best known for composing popular, post-council pieces such as "On Eagle's Wings." 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 "Sing to the Lord," a document that 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, it also leaves room for other instruments and music within the "cultural context," provided the compositions themselves have suitable religious content.

The result has been a continuation of previous differences. Music remains among the most reliable of Catholic fault lines, and the question remains of where the church goes from here. Compounding this aura of limbo is the long-awaited new English translation of the Order of Mass. As GIA's Kelly Dobbs Mickus explains, music publishers are "in a holding pattern," biding their time until they can publish new hymnals (presumably including more contemporary materials). The Vatican gave its approval to the new translation July 25, but a representative of the U.S. bishops has said it may be two years or more before the changes are put into practice. The lead time, he said, is to allow musicians to work with the changes and for revisions to be explained to parishioners.

Even songwriters like Maher, who hasn't published new Mass parts since his first album, are holding their breath. "I've been wanting to write a new Gloria," Maher said. "I'm waiting to see where the bishops land, out of respect for their leadership and authority."

Mahrt continues to advocate a move from praise and worship to traditional sacred music. But, he says, that transition can't happen overnight. "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."

Meanwhile, Spirit and Song's Robert Feduccia defends his work. "I understand people's criticisms, I

really do. I was struck at the beautiful chant music at JP II'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."

Grace is enough

At Notre Dame, Steve Warner says he's learned not to bemoan 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," goes 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. I had left the ARISE 08 conference a day early, and I remember thinking that the following evening, the black JP II-mobile would come barreling down the same interstate, 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 Maher's single "Your Grace Is Enough." The layers of guitar rose, the first verse commenced, then the chorus' steady repetition: "Your grace is enough, your grace is enough for me." The words struck a note of surrender to the Spirit, filling me with the sense that, whatever one thinks of the music itself, the message is loud, growing louder.

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On the Web

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Listen to songs by Matt Maher at **[spiritandsong.com](#)**

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Rocking Revelation

Lyrics by Matt Maher



The End and the Beginning

Transubstantiation;

Heaven kisses Earth
We become a living tabernacle

So wisdom, be attentive;
steady my shaking mind
Let this be my reality;
more than just bread and wine

This is the end and the beginning
This is the eighth day of creation
One with saints and angels
In our song of thanksgiving

Revelation; history shows the love
Of the ancient Father;
for His one and only son
Jesus, I am not worthy;
I am a broken man
But only say the word,
and I will be healed again



I Love You Lord

I love you, Lord, I love you, Lord
I love you, Lord; you are my strength

My heart, it longs to be with you
And nothing else will ever do.
So at your throne is where I'll be,
'cause your flesh and blood consumes me,
And I am one with you.
My stronghold, my refuge,
your righteousness will see me
through.
In dark of night and thorn of sin,
I will stay close to you, my friend,
And I am one with you.
And I am one, yes, I am one,
And I am one with you.

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