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# Spread the Word

## Soul Appetizers: Reaching Out and Connecting with Music

By Joseph Fortner

*Speak to one another with the words of psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing hymns and psalms to the Lord with praise in your hearts. – Ephesians 5:19 (Good News Bible)*

Music has long been a part of our worship as Christians. Indeed, many of the most beautiful works were composed for services, or as an accompaniment to the liturgy. I remain in awe that a man considered “mediocre” and the third choice to be director of the Boys Choir in Leipzig, Johann Sebastian Bach, went on to write an immense body of religious and liturgical works as part of his job duties – indeed, 100 cantatas in just two years – many of which remain part of our lives.

As important as music is to our worship services, it also can serve as a gateway. For some, the draw of music may encourage them to come to church without much further prompting. Yet music can also be an incidental doorway towards faith-related inquiries, as well as a means to engage “non-churchy” people in conversations which may open their hearts to God’s message and “walking in His grace.” (More about that in a bit.) Whether it is Bach’s *B Minor Mass*, Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, Verdi’s *Requiem*, Handel’s *Messiah*, Bach’s *Christmas*

*Cantatas* (yes, I'm a bit devoted to the man from Leipzig), Leonard Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Faure's *Requiem*, or Gounod/Bach's *Ave Maria*, each can engage listeners into discussions about the music, liturgical texts and meanings. Many of these pieces are well-known to people not otherwise involved in religion, yet their (divinely) inspired content offers an opportunity to gently invite companions into a deeper discussion of faith.

Such opportunities are not limited to classical music. Perhaps surprising in an age often considered highly secularized, if you listen carefully to popular, nonreligious music, you may find lyrics which, directly or indirectly, lead toward a discussion about faith and God. Those songs – whether rock, blues, pop, country, jazz, or whatever – can easily lead to discussions with those are neither religious nor interested in classical fare.

As is true in so much evangelism, you just have to listen. Consider, for instance, two tunes by the '60s supergroup, Blind Faith. In just two songs on its sole self-titled album, Steve Winwood and Eric Clapton combined to describe a journey. In "Can't Find My Way Home," Winwood, who writes that he is "near the end and ... ain't got the time," asks his subject to "come down off your throne," proclaiming, "You are the reason I've been waiting so long." Two songs after this musical plea by a lost soul, Clapton responds by "finally [finding] a place to live, in the presence of the Lord."

You can move to other genres and find similar topics for discussion with your colleagues. "Shelter Me," a blues song by Buddy Miller and covered by several artists (my favorite being by Tab Benoit), offers images of thunder, dark waters rising, mountains falling, and war. Yet, the singer "fear[s] none of these things" as he asks the Lord to "shelter me . . . underneath your wings." In "Anyway," country singer Martina McBride observes that while all we build, dream, or love can be lost, "God is great," and you should sing, dream and love "anyway." Whether it's "This Road" by Thea Gilmore, the jazz standard "Lonesome Road" by Nathaniel Shilkret and Gene Austin, or "Nobody's Born With A Broken Heart" or "Ragged Company" by Vermont's own Grace Potter, each song offers fertile ground for discussion about God's messages in a wide variety of settings, all within the context of music and styles that avoid raising instinctive hackles by those put off by religious messages. (Parenthetically, if you have not heard Gilmore's "Sol Invictus" on her Christmas album, *Strange Communion*, find it. You are in for a treat.)

A contemporary artist whose faith journey could easily be the subject of an evening of listening and conversation is Gordon Sumner, aka "Sting." His early works reflected a writer downright hostile to religion and God. Tunes such "O My God" while he was with The Police, "All This Time" and "When the Angels Fall" from *The Soul Cages*, and "If I Ever Lost My Faith In You" or "Saint Augustine in Hell" from *Ten Summoner's Tales*, reflect someone who has "lost [his] belief in the holy Church," as well as doubting God: "Father, if Jesus exists then how come he never lives here?."

Then something happened. Over time – perhaps beginning with his version of "Gabriel's Message" recorded for a charity Christmas album – Sting has asked questions about the soul and has come closer to his faith. See, for example, "Let Your Soul Be Your Pilot." This quest culminated in "Dead Man's Rope," a powerful song from the album *Sacred Love*. There, Sting describes his journey, beginning with his walking away in emptiness, in anger, in pain, and "from life itself." Over a rhythm that seems to reflect his constant walking, Sting sings that this had "led [him] to this place," where he is "suspended between [his]darkest fears and dearest hope." He continues,

*Yes I've been walking, now I'm hanging from a dead man's rope  
With Hell below me, and Heaven in the sky above,  
I've been walking, I've been walking away from Jesus' love.*

After a quiet bridge where "the hand of an angel" reaches down, Sting finds the "sweet rain of forgiveness," and begins walking in Jesus's grace. In doing so, he concludes:

*All the days of my life I will walk with you,  
All the days of my life I will talk with you,  
All the days of my life I will share with you,  
All the days of my life I will bear with you.*

Why is all of this of interest to evangelists, especially of the Vermont variety? Because Sting's songs – whether we focus on his 30-plus years of music on tunes within particular albums – is an opportunity not just to enjoy

music with companions but to open the door to discussions about this man's journey from overt hostility to religion, to his acceptance of Jesus's love. That the conversation involves popular music and a musician not identified as "religious" may open doors that otherwise might never even be cracked.



*In the photo, vocalist Holly Fortner leads "We Three Kings" at St. Mary's in the Mountain's 2017 Carol Sing.*

Finally, what is the most fun way to introduce the larger community to some of the joy within our faith? Invite your friends and neighbors to join in and hear our music. If your parish is having a concert – whether of religious or secular music – broaden your invitations beyond those who show up to your services. If you are having a Carol Sing this Christmas (as we are at St. Mary's in the Mountains in Wilmington, on Dec. 1), reach out to the entire community to join in singing traditional carols and Christmas songs. If you plan to have special music in connection with Palm Sunday or Easter, the potential audience should include music lovers who might not normally enter your red doors. If you welcome everyone to join in the event, you might find that some in attendance become intrigued, and that a door may open to a conversation about faith.

"Music is the art of prophets and the gift of God," said Martin Luther. That art, and that gift, is not limited to overtly religious music, nor just to those who come to church every Sunday. With a little joyful discernment, God's message in God's gift of music can be found in every style. Even better, by listening with others and engaging them in conversation, you may quickly find that your discussion of "oldies" or Gypsy Jazz leads to a place where the Holy Spirit may open your colleague's heart.

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