

British Worship Bands Reach Unlikely Mainstream Crowds

Groups such as One Hundred Hours lead worship among non-Christians in bars across the U.K.

A Christian praise track has been an unlikely feature in one of the summer's most popular films and a hit TV show.

Andy Hunter's "The Wonders of You," on the British DJ's debut album, Exodus, was part of the backdrop for The Matrix: Reloaded trailer and included in an episode of ABC's spy thriller Alias—though the lyrics on the techno tour de force are clearly vertical: "Who is like You? Who is like the wonders ... the wonders of You?"

Hunter is part of a new breed of worship leaders, singers and musicians who've been taking their praise music beyond church—and into film scores, popular TV shows, London theaters and student bars.

Beneath the giant neon displays of London's Piccadilly district, a small West End audience has been warming to a different light. They've been listening to classic tunes by the likes of Paul Simon and Fats Waller—alongside worship songs.

Presenting this unusual program of folk-rock anthems is established worship leader Dave Bilbrough. He's been singing popular tunes and sharing stories in epic singer-songwriter style at a little theater in fashionable Jermyn Street.

Some punters have probably gone along expecting a conventional

worship set. Others have brought their unchurched friends. Regular theatergoers have come out of curiosity. But whether they've realized it or not, they've all found themselves in a worship environment—"unplugged."

Other Christian singers have made an impact by working in the wider music scene. When heavenly sounds filled the corridor at a secular rock festival, musicians walking past the open door couldn't resist. Curious to check it out, they discovered a group praying with spiritual passion—and just joined in.

Those musicians had been getting ready to go on stage, but suddenly found themselves having devotions with the London Community Gospel Choir (LCGC), Britain's best-known gospel act, who was on the same bill.

"It presented an opportunity to witness to these guys about our faith," said LCGC leader the Rev. Basil Meade. This 65-strong choir navigates the murky waters of pop music—not to preach, but to be itself at worship.

Meade believes there's power in just doing what they do—and doing it well. "People will recognize you for what you are and realize there's something special about what you do," he said.

This choir was "crossover" material before the term was widely used. It has moved outside church circles and received recognition in the wider showbiz world. It has appeared at rock, blues, classical and jazz festivals, singing in theaters and arts centers.

Propelled into a place it never dreamed of occupying, the choir evolved from a bunch of bright young singers from

various black churches to a national institution. Eventually it became a familiar face on British television—working with a host of household names including Stevie Wonder, Tom Jones and Elton John.

LCGC recently marked its 21st anniversary with a “live” recording of its funky, feel-good sound at London’s Abbey Road studios, where The Beatles created some of their greatest work.

Hurriedly assembled for a youth event, another group—this time a humble four-piece worship band called One Hundred Hours—didn’t have such a great future in mind.

But when they’d play their guitar-driven rock at youth groups—mixing secular “Brit-pop” songs with compositions by British worship pioneers Delirious and Matt Redman—they felt “something was happening” during the worship.

After praying about it, they realized there was a deeper purpose for them. At a Youth With A Mission conference in Scotland, group members said the praise became very intense, and a powerful prayer time took place. Since then, intercessory worship has been their calling card.

But their bookings haven’t been confined to “nice” Christian venues. They’ve played amid the drink and smoke of college bars, where unsuspecting students have sung along to praise songs. “People are designed to worship,” said lead singer-guitarist Tré Sheppard, whose wife, Tori, adds dramatic background vocals to the band’s chunky sound.

“Christianity is not this alien thing we’re trying to force on them. We just missed what we’re designed for,” he added. “I want to appeal to that rather than thinking, ‘You bad people need saving.’ People know they need saving. They know they’re screwed up. We want to say there is hope—and hope rocks.”

As worship winds its way from behind church walls to the wider world, Christian singers and musicians are beginning to live out what the band Delirious—who blazed a trail in reaching mainstream audiences with worship music—sings about in their popular anthem “Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble?”—“open up the doors and let the music play, let the streets resound with singing.”

Clive Price in London