

Living Pure in an R-Rated Culture

What was once thought of as vulgar is now standard fare in Top 40 music and on TV, radio and film. HOW can we reverse the trend in modern media?

They emerged in the late 1990s as the recording industry's hottest new group. They had already captured the attention of music lovers around the country with a plethora of big hits, including "Say My Name" and "Bills, Bills, Bills," both released in 1999.

But it was the group's sexy, youthful appeal and 2001 hit song "Survivor" that catapulted them to the top of every music chart in the industry. Today, they have sold more than 40 million records.

Beyoncé Knowles, Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams, the three 20-somethings who make up the singing sensation Destiny's Child, have made it big. In late 2000 they settled a bitter breach-of-contract lawsuit with former members of Destiny's Child and have since acquired international acclaim as one of the world's most successful all-girl groups.

But somewhere along the way, the trio traded their message of empowerment and success for a more steamy, provocative sound.

With street-savvy sexual lyrics, seductive clothing and overtly suggestive dance moves as signature trademarks, Destiny's Child continues to dominate the pop and R&B scene. However, many parents and others see a sharp contrast between the group's public profession of faith in Jesus and the songs

they sing. The words to the contemporary chart-buster "Lose My Breath" from their 2004 release *Destiny Fulfilled* illustrate the critics' point:

"Can you keep up? / Baby boy / Make me lose my breath / Bring the noise / Make me lose my breath / Hit me hard / Make me lose my breath... Ooo, I put it right there made it easy for you to get to / Now you want to act like you don't know what to do / After I done everything that you asked me/ Grabbed you, grind you, liked you, tried you / Moved so fast baby now I can't find you."

Why are young people buying the group's apparently contradictory message? In his book *Faith, God and Rock & Roll*, author Mark Joseph explains. "In the confused sexual ethos of the post-AIDS era, Destiny's Child seemed to be a perfect reflection of the pop culture group zeitgeist that was able to marry a somewhat virginal sexual ethic with an up-front and frank sexual posturing," he writes.

Experts say it's the beat of the music that draws people, but it's the lyrics that influence culture; they teach society how to live. Popular music and other mediums help to shape a person's worldview, and what he sees as reality when an adult or young adult is often contrary to core values learned early in life.

The line between quality entertainment and raunchy programming is becoming increasingly unclear with the release of television's new fall lineup. MTV's gay channel, Logo, launched in 2005; sex-driven reality shows dominate prime time; and films that are rated PG-13 today are worse than R-rated films from 10 years ago.

If Destiny's Child is too steamy for some listeners, then Jessica Simpson in her movie debut as Daisy in The Dukes of Hazzard is scalding. The movie is a remake of the 1979 popular television series.

The bikini-clad Simpson heats up the screen opposite Burt Reynolds, who portrays Boss Hogg. Simpson discarded her virtuous, good-girl facade for the sensual allure of a vixen.

Vulgar language, violence and sex scenes found in the media are cause for alarm among many believers and proponents of quality entertainment. In this report, Charisma examines the impact of media on culture and what the church can do about it.

Media Madness

If current research is any indication of American's fixation with the media, then we are obsessed. Nielsen Media Research indicates that in 2003 we spent nearly eight hours per day watching television. And when we're not slouched in front of a TV set or scouring the Internet, we go to the movies.

According to the Motion Picture Association (MPA), total box office sales grossed more than \$9.5 billion in 2004, up 25 percent from just five years ago. Summer releases-films that appear in theaters from May to August-account for nearly half the year's movie sales, grossing some \$ billion.

Music is a multibillion dollar industry too. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) says Americans spend a total of \$12.2 billion per year on music of every genre imaginable: rock, rap/hip-hop, R&B, urban, country, pop, New

Age, classical and more.

But the consequences of America's indulgence are far-reaching. Not only does it cost consumers huge amounts of money to pay for entertainment, but also it robs families of valuable time together. That's a high price for consumers to have to pay. Still, for some people, listening to suggestive lyrics or watching gratuitous sex on television and in the movies is standard fare.

Industry watchers insist there is a reason many Americans, including Christians, become complacent about their viewing and listening habits.

"We want to stretch out on the couch because we're too tired to do anything about [the media]," says Randy Sims of Christian Worldview, an organization created to train believers to engage culture from a biblical perspective.

He cautions believers to be intentional about their entertainment choices for two reasons. First, the media can be destructive to one's sensibility. Second, attending movies that contain inappropriate content sends a clear message to Hollywood: "We want more of this type of fare."

"There is a spiritual dichotomy. Christians separate entertainment, politics and science from their beliefs, but God is saying, 'I have dibs on that too,'" Sims told Charisma. He challenges Christians to examine their views on religion and faith in light of biblical truth. In doing so, believers, especially younger generations, can develop spiritual discernment.

“When young people understand the biblical worldview and are able to apply it, they can take ownership of their entertainment choices,” Sims says.

April Fleming, a recent college graduate and longtime member of a Pentecostal church, knows some of the music she listens to is questionable. But when Destiny’s Child announced its farewell tour, the 23-year-old and three other friends scurried to get front-row seats for the concert.

“I like the group,” Fleming says. “I don’t do the things that they sing about in their music. But I must admit, I need to be more discerning and yield to the Holy Spirit’s conviction in my life.”

Standing in the Gap

Many Christians see the motion picture production companies in Hollywood as an evil force designed to corrupt society, but media experts say consumers shouldn’t be too quick to rid themselves of the entertainment giants. Instead, Americans should use their financial muscle and other methods to lobby film and television producers, record companies, and writers in the industry.

Phil Cooke, an international media consultant, advises Christians to view Hollywood as a mission field and to treat it as such. “We don’t go to Africa and boycott, criticize, humiliate and get upset at African tribes or South American villages,” Cooke explains. “We [gain] their trust, and we become one of them.

“We develop a love relationship with them and then they learn to listen to our message. We need to do the same thing in

Hollywood.”

But in order to lobby media executives to produce shows and music void of immorality and extreme violence, Christians will have to be proactive and speak up if they want their values represented.

One thing is certain: With regard to entertainment, current research proves that the media influence culture, and the culture dictates to consumers, many of whom are believers, what to wear, what to listen to and how to live. For the most part, it’s a message inconsistent with the gospel.

As a result, Christians, especially teens, risk their credibility and sometimes have little or no impact on peers. In fact, research indicates they sometimes abandon their own godly beliefs.

Cooke challenges consumers to help reverse this trend by “voting with their dollars” as well as speaking out against offensive material. He suggests that readers take the following steps:

Pray for Hollywood. Numerous Christians who work in the entertainment industry share their faith in unique ways. They need other believers to pray for the countless entertainers, actors, actresses and singers in need of spiritual revival.

Support quality films. “Go see good movies, instead of just criticizing bad movies,” Cooke advises. “If Christians see a movie weeks after it releases, it won’t matter that much. But if we show up the first weekend a good movie comes out, it’ll have a big impact on Hollywood,” he says.

Write to network executives. According to industry watchers, Christians would probably write more letters to network executives if they knew the difference a letter makes. But they say believers shouldn't quote Scriptures and rant about the Bible because the Bible means nothing to some executives.

"Tell the network you thought the language was inappropriate because it aired early when your children were still up. ... Be rational, be intelligent and be supportive. Tell them about the shows you do like," Cooke says.

Join the Hollywood Prayer Network. A ministry created by professionals in the field, the Hollywood Prayer Network-with the help of 3,500 Christians-mobilizes global prayer for the entertainment industry.

The group enlists churches, parachurch organizations and individuals from around the country to pray for every aspect of the entertainment industry. Intercessors pray for workers involved in film, television, music, the Internet, and the news media, and they pray for actual film and television projects. To become an intercessor, visit .

Get involved in the industry. To influence pop culture and the media at ground level, Christians will need to pursue careers that lead to opportunities in the entertainment industry. Christian universities and colleges that offer programs in broadcasting, film and other media-related fields include Biola University in La Mirada, California; Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, California; Oral Roberts University in Tulsa, Oklahoma; Regent University in Virginia Beach, Virginia; and North Greenville College in Tigerville, South Carolina.

Hollywood executives and record companies create offensive material because they don't have a religious worldview, Cooke says. In fact, the entertainment industry is becoming increasingly disconnected from Middle America.

Entertainment professionals seem to have the idea that everybody uses profanity, engages in violence, and has illicit sex, and their scripts reflect that bias. But the voting results of those who went to the polls in 2004 indicate that Americans are more conservative than Hollywood has realized.

Believers can help media reconnect with mainstream America, Cooke says. But he and others insist the body of Christ must be willing to stand in the spiritual gap if there is to be lasting change.

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