

After Alleged Affair, Derek Webb and Sandra McCracken Divorce Rocks Christian Music Community

When gospel artist Amy Grant got divorced in 1999 and married country singer Vince Gill a year later, the public breakup rocked the Christian music industry, threatened to derail her career and raised questions about the personal lives of prominent Christian artists.

Now, the issue is back, this time for popular musicians Derek Webb and Sandra McCracken, who announced on April 17 that their 13-year marriage was ending after an affair.

The fallout will likely be different this time around, in part because of changes in the music industry and a growing sense among evangelicals that divorce—while a disappointment—may be inevitable for some marriages.

The alleged extramarital affair that apparently led to the breakup, however, may be more problematic.

Webb and McCracken have been seen by some as a power couple among Christian artists in Nashville, Tennessee, successfully reaching both religious and secular audiences. With three GMA Dove Awards and eight solo albums, Webb entered the music industry as a member of the Christian contemporary band Caedmon's Call, but he later emerged with a successful solo career.

His NoiseTrade music website has also been seen as an innovative space for a mixture of Christian and independent music. With eight albums of her own, McCracken also wrote songs for Caedmon's Call and for her husband.

The reaction has been mostly supportive for the couple, but Webb drew particular scrutiny over one sentence in the announcement.

"While we both acknowledge our own human sinfulness, Derek has taken full responsibility for the events which led to this decision," the statement said.

Those who know the couple say Webb was involved with another woman. According to court documents related to the other woman's pending divorce, the two were involved as early as last August, just as his latest album, *I Was Wrong, I'm Sorry & I Love You*, was released. He told the Christian Broadcasting Network he made the album for the broader Christian church.

Matthew Smith, a Nashville musician who has been friends with the couple, said Webb told him about his affair soon after it began, and insisted the relationship had ended.

"Several of us sat down with him one night in late August and confronted him about the whole situation," Smith said.

In an interview, Webb declined to give any further details. "What I'm interested in sharing publicly, I have shared," he said, "and I'm committed to the protection of my family."

Smith said McCracken filed for a divorce, which has not been finalized. They have two children. McCracken declined to comment further, citing concern for the family's privacy.

"What bothers me is that among conservative Christian circles, people would think that maybe Sandra didn't try hard enough for her marriage or that she is somehow at fault," Smith said. "Sadly, I think sometimes women get treated poorly in situations like this in the public eye."

In his album notes, Webb hinted at marriage in his song "The Vow," and introduced the song as a form of commitment. "I

wrote a song basically painting myself into a corner, which is basically what marriage is,” Webb said in the introduction, “... but there is real power in making commitments in the face of uncertainty.”

Webb has urged his fans to see him as a musician who is Christian rather than a Christian who is a musician—a departure from earlier years of catering to a Christian audience. He is considered to be an edgier artist among some evangelicals, “a truth-teller kind of guy or a prophetic voice among his fans,” Smith said.

“But,” Smith added, “not all divorce is created equal.”

While news of their divorce was shared across social media, the breakup has proven to be less explosive than Grant’s. During the 1980s to the early 2000s, Christian music was much more centralized, said Matthew Paul Turner, a Nashville-based author and former editor of *CCM* magazine.

“Christian music was more of a machine,” Turner said, noting musicians like Grant and Sandi Patty faced radio boycotts after their divorces. “Radio sort of ruled the conversation. If they weren’t going to air your song, that was a big deal and that trickled down in the rest of the industry.”

“Someone like Derek Webb isn’t dependent on radio,” Turner said.

Along with the shifts in the music industry, evangelicals have shifted views on divorce. In 1988, 10 percent of white evangelicals said divorce should be easier for couples to get, according to General Social Survey data. By 2012, that figure had more than doubled, to 21 percent.

Further, divorce is simply more common among evangelicals than it was in the past. Twenty-five years ago, evangelicals were less likely to be divorced than the average American. Today, they divorce at around the same rate, around 30 percent,

according to GSS data, up from 19 percent in 1988.

“One could argue there’s a greater tolerance,” said Larry Eskridge, associate director of the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College outside Chicago. “There’s a greater emphasis on extending grace in the evangelical community these days. And on another level, it’s become so much more commonplace than it was a half century ago.”

On the question of extramarital affairs, however, evangelicals have remained consistently opposed, with more than 90 percent saying it is wrong.

Webb and McCracken’s divorce surfaced at a Southern Baptist sexuality conference with a question addressed to Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

“You’re asking me if people ought to listen to music performed by people who have been divorced?” Moore asked at the Nashville forum. “We could be here all night.”

Moore noted the divorces of Willie Nelson, George Jones and Johnny Cash before addressing Webb and McCracken, and said there’s a difference between musicians in church and in the culture.

“Listening to that artistic contribution is not an endorsement of everything that person is about,” Moore said. “I would have a different take on this if you said these are people leading in a congregation.”

Copyright 2014 Religion News Service. All rights reserved. No part of this transmission may be distributed or reproduced without written permission.