

Modern Hymn Writers Revive a Lost Musical Art

Most songwriters in Nashville, Tenn., want to get their songs on the radio. Keith and Kristyn Getty hope their songs end up in dusty old hymnbooks.

The Gettys, originally from Belfast, Ireland, hope to revive the art of hymn writing at a time when the most popular new church songs are written for rock bands rather than choirs.

They've had surprising success.

One of the first songs that Keith co-wrote, called "In Christ Alone," has been among the top 20 songs sung in newer churches in the United States for the past five years, according to Christian Copyright Licensing International. It is also a favorite in more traditional venues—including the recent enthronement service for Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby.

Hearing that hymn sung by a boys' choir with a brass ensemble and thousands of worshippers was a thrill for Keith Getty, a self-described classical nerd.

"We couldn't watch it here so my mom, as soon as it came on, turned up the television on full and phoned us," he said.

The Gettys got their start writing music about a dozen years ago, when they were living in Northern Ireland.

Keith Getty, now 38, was an aspiring songwriter. His wife, now 32, was a student. She sang on his demo recordings in exchange for fajita dinners at a Mexican restaurant in Belfast. They married nine years ago and have a 2-year-old daughter, Eliza.

Keith Getty wrote the tune for "In Christ Alone" on the back of an electric bill and sent it to his friend, Stuart Townend,

another modern hymn writer. Townend wrote the lyrics and began playing it in churches in England, where people would line up to get the sheet music afterward.

Today it's often sung in churches where young people congregate, like the Axis Church in Nashville.

The Rev. Jeremy Rose of Axis, who is in his 30s, said most new songs focus on how worshippers feel about God but don't contain much theology. Older hymns often have good theology but lack a personal touch. But "In Christ Alone" has both.

"This hymn takes theology and attaches it to my day-in and day-out life and practice," he said. "It has such depth and truth put to music."

Similar to hymns such as "Amazing Grace" or "Be Thou My Vision," the song makes people want to sing along.

That's a lost art, said Mark Hosny, artistic director of the National Praise and Worship Institute at Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville.

Newer Christian music often makes the band or lead singer sound good but doesn't engage the congregation. That's missing the point, Hosny said.

"A lot of today's melodies are not singable. That's why they don't stick," he said.

Hosny recently attended a Getty concert at the famed Ryman Auditorium, which featured their hymns as well as gospel songs and traditional Irish music. Everyone was singing along, he said.

That's what hymns are supposed to do, said Dave Clark, director of creative development, publishing and A&R for Nashville-based Lillenas Publishing. They make space for people to join in.

“There is a familiarity in hymns—that even if you are hearing it for the first time, you feel like you know it,” he said.

The Gettys, who moved to Nashville in 2011, were in Orlando, Fla., recently to lead worship at the Gospel Coalition conference, which drew about 5,000 people.

One of the songs they played was one called “A Rich Young Man.” It’s an Irish tune that recounts the story of Jesus telling a rich young man to sell all he had and give it to the poor.

The song had the congregation clapping and singing along while focusing on a serious topic. It was another example of the Gettys’ gift of combining theology and practical faith, all wrapped up in a catchy tune.

“We learn our faith through what we sing,” said Keith Getty.

The Gettys plan to take a sabbatical for a few months to write more hymns. Keith Getty said he tries to write five new ideas for melodies a day, trying to find just the right combination of notes and rhythm.

He said he doesn’t just want people to sing along. He wants to connect with their souls when they sing one of his songs.

“You want them to breathe deeper. You want them to stand taller,” he said. “If you can’t do that, you have lost them.”

The Gettys find much of their inspiration these days in their collection of old hymnbooks, which stands not far from the piano in the living room of their Nashville home.

Kristyn Getty said she often thumbs through the indexes of those hymnbooks while she’s working on new lyrics and looking for ideas.

The daughter of a pastor, she grew up singing hymns in church. She said there’s something powerful in singing the same words

and music that have been passed down from generation to generation.

“Not everything you write will last,” she said. “And you won’t know which ones do, because you’ll not be here. But you hope that some of them will stick.”

Bob Smietana writes for USA Today.

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