

Whatever Happened to Upbeat Praise Songs?

As I write these words, I'm listening to some beautiful, slow worship music. How wonderful! How glorious! How many times I have encountered the Lord with the help of such songs, lying on my face in tears of adoration and awe. What a Savior! What a God! I will never tire of singing these Jesus-exalting, Spirit-empowered songs.

But I've noticed something missing in the midst of my ministry travels. In some of the meetings, every song is slow. Every song seems like the last, with little variety. And as much as I've enjoyed beautiful times of worship in meetings like this, I've also found myself asking, "Where is the joy and celebration? Where are the songs you can dance to and jump to? Where's the time for breaking out and breaking free?"

I'm not talking about working things up. I hate hype and emotionalism. Even more, I hate manipulation.

I'm talking about a contagious joy that is captured in the lyrics and the music. I'm talking about something that transcends happiness, that transcends a lively beat. I'm talking about what Peter calls an inexpressible and glorious joy (1 Pet. 1:8).

And while we can find that joy in slow worship songs (or even without music at all), we can find it in a unique way in upbeat praise.

It lifts us out of ourselves into another realm. A realm of celebration. A realm of freedom. A realm of liberation.

Sometimes our worship can be so somber (not just reverential, but somber). The songs almost drone on. And I wonder, *Are these a reflection of our emotional state? Perhaps we need a*

change? Perhaps a change in music would help?

Before I came to faith in 1971 as a heroin-shooting, LSD-using, hippie rock drummer, music was front and center in my life. Hard rock music. Heavy and loud music. Cream and Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin.

I saw the Who perform the rock opera *Tommy*. I saw Zeppelin four times. I saw Hendrix twice. I saw the Doors and Janis Joplin. I saw Jethro Tull four times and Ten Years After four times. And almost every day of the week, our little rock band would practice and jam, fueled by drugs as we did.

What a change it was for me to start attending a little, Italian Pentecostal church in Queens, New York. The men wore jackets and ties and the women wore dresses. And instead of an ear-shattering rock band, there was the pastor's wife, playing hymns on the piano.

And it was singing those little hymns with their silly rhymes that I encountered the love of God and the joy of the Spirit. As a result of that, in one moment of time, on Dec. 17, 1971, I was set free. No more needles! No more drugs! I was a new man.

As a follower of Jesus, music has remained important to me, to the point that I wrote a book about it last year. It was titled *The Power of Music: God's Call to Change the World One Song at a Time*.

In the book, I look at the impact music has had on the world, for better or for worse, encouraging the church to use music to its full potential for the Lord.

And that's why I write this article: I'm burdened to see the fullness of joy in our worship and praise. I'm especially burdened to see it break out in the midst of the younger generation where joy can be a precious commodity.

To be sure, there is something unspeakably profound about singing contemporary, slow worship songs like “Revelation Song” or “You Won’t Relent” or “What a Beautiful Name” or “Way Maker.” It is especially wonderful to do this with thousands of other believers. What a taste of heaven it brings!

It is the same with the classic hymns of old, like Charles Wesley’s “And Can It Be” or John Newton’s “Amazing Grace.” The words remain transcendent.

But what about those cut-loose, explode-out, joy-filled songs of praise? They too take us into unique places in the Lord.

In the old days, in that first church, it was hymns like “Power in the Blood” or “When We All Get to Heaven.” (Yes, I went from Zeppelin and Hendrix to songs like these.)

In more recent decades, I think of songs like “So Good to Me” (this still gets me dancing and shouting and leaping and spinning) or “This Is How We Overcome” (this really does help us overcome) or “Shouts of Joy” (try listening to this without tapping along).

The music itself changes the atmosphere, and when it is joined to powerful lyrics, our innermost beings can be changed.

That’s why people rise to their feet spontaneously when Handel’s Messiah culminates in the “Hallelujah Chorus.” The combination of the lyrics and the music and the Spirit is compelling. It is the same with joy-filled praise.

Of course, some of you reading this article have no idea what I’m talking about, having never encountered the Lord in worship. I earnestly pray that you will.

Others are asking yourself as you read, “I wonder what churches he’s attending? We’ve got plenty of joyful celebration in our midst.”

Still others, who come from a more liturgical background, are

having difficulty relating to the types of services I'm describing.

But others know exactly what I mean, and as you're reading, the light has gone on.

It's time to bring back the joyful songs!