

Aussie Invasion Continues in US With Musical Missionaries

What's happening Down Under? It's a revolution invading the globe, as Australia's Planetshakers and Hillsong ministries continue to shake up Christian music, evangelism and church-planting models. Yet what began more than two decades ago with globally recognized worship songs such as "Shout to the Lord" and "Power of Your Love" has now become a full-fledged "Aussie invasion." But how is the world's smallest continent still making such spiritual waves?

"It's a paradox of the nature of God to use us from so far away to be a voice to the nations," says Joel Houston, leader of the Sydney-based Hillsong UNITED band and co-pastor of Hillsong Church NYC in Manhattan. "It's also our culture—Australian wanderlust—to get out and travel much further."

Planetshakers, co-founded by pastors Russell Evans and his wife, Sam, also cuts a wide swath internationally with conferences, speaking engagements and band tours. Evans attributes his global vision to his grandparents and parents, who were missionaries to Southeast Asia.

"It was inevitable that I would want to play a part in bringing Jesus to the world," he says. "If a part of Planetshakers' ministry can bless someone in another part of the world, great! We see that as a great honor, that a bunch of Aussies can help a brother or sister in another country. We want to share what God has blessed us with."

Shaking America

Planetshakers has experienced exploding growth since its first Awakening conference in 1997 in Adelaide, South Australia, attended by 300 delegates. In 2004, the Evans' planted a

church in Melbourne with 12 believers that has since soared to more than 8,000 members.

“The church has grown and the ministry has been blessed because we believe Jesus gives us authority to go into all the world and make disciples,” Evans says. “In the early days of Planetshakers Awakenings, we would hear stories of young people returning to their churches and, as a result of the encounter they had with God at the Awakening, their youth group would double and sometimes triple over the next few months.”

These conferences have attracted about 25,000 young people, Evans reports, and major events are planned for 2014 in Melbourne, the U.S. and Asia.

The ministry’s worship band has released 20 albums and supports two teams touring globally. In the U.S. this year, it performed in January to a packed house at The Rock Church in San Diego and organized summer concerts in Hawaii, Los Angeles and Seattle.

Partners in Song

While Planetshakers and Hillsong minister along similar paths, they don’t compete but rather complement one another in spreading the gospel. Brian Houston, founder and senior pastor of Hillsong Church in Sydney, has spoken at Planetshakers Awakening conferences and at the church, and Evans has reciprocated at Hillsong.

“Australia has been blessed by Hillsong music,” Evans says. “What Brian Houston, Geoff Bullock, Darlene Zschech and Youth Alive pioneered back in the day has blazed a great path. I think our differences are based on the different DNA of our respective churches. [Hillsong] is a lot older and more established than us. We are still evolving and learning things as we go.”

Evans emphasizes that he is not interested in planting lots of churches but rather in supporting and encouraging existing ministries through music, conferences, speaking and books.

On the other hand, Hillsong's 25,000-member mother church in Australia builds a different model, planting churches in London, Cape Town, Paris, Kiev, Moscow, Stockholm and, more recently, New York. Since late 2011, Hillsong Church NYC has grown to 4,000 members, reports Joel Houston. "God blesses, and it doesn't make a lot of sense," he says.

Hillsong UNITED just completed its Welcome Zion tour in 12 cities in the U.S., attracting upward of 90,000 attendees. The band's new album, *Zion*, zoomed to No. 1 on the iTunes chart in March.

"The reaction to the tour was very encouraging," Joel Houston says. "People were energetic and engaged in worship for three hours. It was awesome. There were hundreds of decisions to accept Jesus."

Amid the success, megaministries such as Planetshakers and Hillsong have been hit in recent years by increasingly negative stories in secular media. Evangelicals aren't held in the highest esteem in Australia, where only about 7.5 percent of the population attends church regularly. And Christianity is not considered part of the country's free-spirited and laid-back lifestyle.

Nevertheless, God is overcoming cultural obstacles and moving in power.

"We are starting to see the Holy Spirit move like never before in our church," Evans says. "We want the church to represent the church in the book of Acts—that is, with miracles, salvations, feeding the poor and building the community."