

A Sound From Down Under

Australia's Hillsong Church may be on the other side of the world, but its music and ministry style have affected every continent. We talked to Pastor Brian Houston about the global impact of Aussie faith.

It was 11 on a Sunday morning when Elva Hoene visited Sydney's Hillsong Church for the first time. Clutching her daughter's hand in anticipation, the visitor from Germany stepped into the sunlit foyer.

The place was abuzz with activity—children squealing, coffee brewing and music drifting through the sanctuary doors. She couldn't believe it. After years of singing the renowned worship songs back home, she was finally here. She knew the morning would have a profound impact on her.

But on this day, it wasn't the worship or preaching that stirred her the most, it was the welcome from the volunteers and a beautiful detail at the entrance to the church—a long, red carpet and a glass sign that simply said, "Welcome Home." The tears welled. For the longest time, Hoene hadn't felt the warmth she was experiencing that day. *I finally feel like I am home*, she thought.

Hoene, like millions of others, had heard about Hillsong from her small church. She had sung the popular worship songs "Shout to the Lord" and "Mighty to Save," watched the YouTube preaching clips and attended with thousands of others a Hillsong United worship event in Amsterdam. But it wasn't until she took the 9,940-mile trip to Sydney that she experienced the heartbeat of the ministry—to invite people into God's presence.

For two decades, Hillsong has captured the attention and imagination of Christians worldwide with their inspiring praise and worship. From the slums of Rio de Janeiro to the

bustling streets of Stockholm, millions—more than 11 million in fact—have bought, downloaded and listened to Hillsong music.

Since its first release in 1988, Hillsong has recorded more than 60 albums, including live worship, and kids and youth CDs. They have been distributed in 80 countries and collected more than 30 gold and platinum awards in Australia and the U.S.

According to John Coleman, vice president of Integrity Music, the demand for Hillsong music has exploded. “The congregational anthem ‘Mighty to Save,’ with a recent Dove Award for Worship Song of the Year, is the second most popular song in American churches today,” he says. “*Across the Earth*, the latest release from [the church’s youth ministry] Hillsong United, debuted at No. 1 on the American Billboard gospel charts.”

For senior pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston, the praise and worship flowing from Hillsong is an expression of the church’s heart—to “connect people with the living God,” as its mission states. In Sydney alone, Hillsong ministers to some 21,000 people in three main campuses and 14 extension services. Last year, a fourth campus opened in Brisbane. Internationally, Hillsong has churches in London; Kiev, Ukraine; Moscow; Paris; Stockholm; and Cape Town, South Africa.

And while church planting all over the world is not on the agenda for this megachurch, its pastors have become multimedia missionaries, beaming their TV program to 180 countries. The Sydney-based International Leadership College trains more than 900 international students each year. Meanwhile, thousands flock to the church’s annual Colour Your World women’s events and Hillsong Conference, which drew 20,000 attendees last July.

A Local Church at Heart

Yet leaders say the scope of the ministry is a sign of what God wants to do through His church, not just one congregation. "The church across the earth is incredibly valuable," says Darlene Zschech, a Hillsong worship leader whose music helped bring the church international attention. "And God is using it to be His felt presence to the broken and suffering ... to be His hands and feet. My prayer is that people everywhere will fall in love with the potential of their local church."

It's this love for the local church that continues to drive senior pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston, who have woven community action and social justice into the fabric of the ministry. Recently the church launched One for Another, an umbrella organization for its compassion ministries.

In her book *Heaven Is in This House*, Bobbie Houston writes that God wants to turn His church into a tangible expression of heaven on earth. "His church is not a building," she writes. "It is not a program or an event, not a gospel television program for that matter. It is not even a Sunday or weekend service that gathers believers. His house is the tangible framework that embraces and cherishes His people and causes them to flourish in life."

Although initially struck by the church's worship ministry, author John Beveré says the Houstons' passion to reach a hurting world has made the strongest impact on him. "Each time I come away from Brian, Bobbie, their team and the church with a greater desire to reach hurting humanity and represent Jesus with excellence," says Beveré, who has spoken at several Hillsong conferences.

U.S. congregations have grown "in amazing ways" as a result of Hillsong's worship and "the excellence [the Houstons] exude in representing Jesus and reaching the lost," Beveré adds. "I don't believe the American church would be where it is today had it not been for the influence of Hillsong."

In Australia, that influence can be felt across all denominations—most notably in the Assemblies of God (AOG), a denomination independent of the U.S. church that has grown from 10,000 people to 215,000 in the last 30 years.

Keith Ainge, national ministries director for what is now known as the Australian Christian Churches, suggests Brian Houston's leadership and the influence of Hillsong has made a significant contribution to this growth. "When Brian became national AOG president in 1997, he brought a fresh vision and leadership to the movement," Ainge says.

"His example and that of Hillsong raised people to a new level of commitment, which has impacted the worship, the way the church is run and the culture of Australian churches. Despite the decrease in the established church in the last decade, churches like Hillsong have increased."

But for all its influence in Australia and across the world, Hillsong is, and always will be, a local church, Houston says. "I have always been passionate about 'the church'—not just our church, but the global church and the potential of the church to help people—to make a difference and shout God's fame," says Houston, who grew up as a pastor's son in Wellington, New Zealand.

He met Bobbie when he was 20 and she was 17. They married in 1978 and left New Zealand a year later to join the ministry team of Sydney Christian Life Centre, run by Brian's father, Frank Houston. After planting two churches, they pioneered Hills Christian Life Centre in 1983.

Young and full of vision, the Houstons rented a public school hall in the sparsely populated suburbs of Northwest Sydney, known at the time for only two things—market gardens and the largest Holden car dealership in Australia. It was a good place to build a church, the Houstons thought.

So they did what they knew to do: They set up chairs and an antiquated sound system. “Even though we were small and had a piano with missing keys and a piano accordion, I remember the worship being so anointed and feeling like God was in that school hall,” recalls Donna Crouch, executive pastor for Hillsong CityCare.

“The music back then was quite raw,” Zschech adds. “It was rough, like any new church. We had this funny array of lovely people who sang—we could never get a choir together. The agenda was to worship. Come as you are and do your best. That hasn’t changed.”

Phil and Lucinda Dooley, pastors of Hillsong Cape Town, remember a great sense of fun and adventure. “As a young person, I thought our senior pastor was so cool,” Phil Dooley says. “He had a very hip mullet and a long handlebar moustache. In fact, I think Brian and Bobbie both had mullets.”

“The church was full of life and passion, vision and strong leadership,” Lucinda Dooley adds. “And you never knew what was going to happen next.”

The Song Heard Around the World

What did happen next was extraordinary. It was the late 1980s, and the church had been growing exponentially—moving from the school to a warehouse and eventually to an entertainment complex.

It was during this season of growth that the Hillsong Conference was established, and Brian Houston encouraged Geoff Bullock, the church’s worship leader at the time, to start writing songs. “I always believed God had given me a passion for a church that would influence people through music that reflected the heart of the church,” Houston says.

With the vision in place, Bullock and Houston began writing

songs: "Geoff's were great; mine were forgettable," Houston says.

Soon after, in 1988, Hillsong released its first album, *Spirit and Truth*, followed closely by *Show Your Glory* in 1990. But it wasn't until 1996 when the church released *Shout to the Lord*, that global recognition came. "It was a great, yet difficult time," reflects Zschech, who wrote the album's title song. "Just prior to recording the album, our worship pastor stepped down.

"I just remember sitting on my driveway on a very hot Sydney day eating lemonade ice blocks with Brian and [my husband] Mark saying, 'What are we going to do?' Brian just turned to me and said, 'You'll have to lead the album.' I told him I couldn't. His only reply was, 'Yes, you can.'"

That week, Zschech apprehensively led the team in the studio and recorded the album, which was produced in partnership with Integrity Music. Soon after its release, the album hit the Christian music charts in the U.S. "I remember getting a call from [Willow Creek pastor] Bill Hybels at the time who said, 'This song ["Shout to the Lord"] is stunning,'" Zschech recalls. "It just went crazy. Letters began pouring in from all over the world."

What began as a cry from Zschech's heart, written on the keys of her mother's old piano and presented to the worship team apologetically, has now been sung by more than 35 million people worldwide and translated into 80 languages.

Nominated for Song of the Year at the 1998 Dove Awards, the worship anthem has been performed at the White House, the Vatican and in 2008 by finalists in the popular reality show *American Idol*. In 2009, the compilation album by the same name was certified gold, selling 500,000 units.

Although *Shout to the Lord* was clearly a turning point for the

church, there were other highlights—the growth of their two conferences; the launch of Hillsong Sisterhood, a global women’s movement; a partnership with Compassion International and Watoto Child Care Ministries in Uganda; the opening of a 21-acre facility in northwest Sydney by the prime minister of Australia; and the planting of Hillsong churches worldwide.

And while some have viewed this growth as the result of a well-crafted marketing strategy, Brian Houston simply says, “It’s been the grace of God.”

“Honestly,” Houston adds, “we have never gone out there and tried to produce clever music or build crowds. We have just done what’s come naturally. In fact, even in our wildest dreams, I would never have thought for a second that this would happen.”

Nor could he have predicted what was to follow. In the late 1990s, a new generation of songwriters from the youth ministry began emerging—a generational transition that Houston says has been critical to the church’s longevity. Today, Hillsong United is one of the most influential worship bands in the world.

“One of Hillsong’s greatest strengths is the way they train and raise up each generation for leadership and give them opportunity,” Coleman says. “Churches are now looking to Hillsong as a model and wanting to see that kind of thing happen in their own church.”

Coleman is also quick to point out that churches need to have their own distinctive. “When the worship leaders and songwriters encounter the truth of God and His presence in a church environment, the songs are born out of that—out of the house,” Coleman says. “I think [Hillsong’s music] is testament to what’s going on inside spiritually and under Brian and Bobbie’s leadership.”

Bible teacher Joyce Meyer says the Houstons are humble,

authentic leaders. "They are not only who they say they are, they are the real deal," she says. "Without question, they have changed the music landscape in churches throughout the U.S. and around the world as both their sound and songs have become synonymous with praise and worship. Their anointed ministry helps to bring people into the presence of God in a powerful way."

But not everybody is celebrating Hillsong's success. For years, the church has been a magnet for criticism from mainstream Australian media and some church leaders. News reports and academic dissertations have taken aim at teaching that critics say is too focused on health and wealth. The AOG's Ainge believes the nation's secularism fuels the condemnation. "Australia has never seen a megachurch like Hillsong before," he points out. "And what they don't understand, they criticize."

Unmoved by the detractors, Houston remains committed to seeing people empowered. "We are always full of hope for the future," he says. "We never dreamed that Christians the world over would sing songs penned by our worship teams, or that our conferences would have multiplied thousands, or that Bobbie would lead a global sisterhood of women that are radically making a difference across the earth."

Has the vision changed? "It's the same as it's always been," Houston says. "It's about a healthy house and what that represents."

"Brian and Bobbie love God's house, God's people and a broken world—it's as simple as that," says Christine Caine, who became a member of Hillsong 21 years ago and has since founded Equip and Empower ministries. "I am secure in the fact that even though God has elevated the profile of Hillsong, they have remained true to their core of loving God and loving people," she says.

And on the day Elva Hoene visited from Germany, it wasn't the success of Hillsong United's music, the church's global recognition or the thousands who follow Brian Houston on Twitter that impressed her. It was the love of the volunteers that made her feel at home.

"I felt so honored and so appreciated as a person," she said, as her eyes welled with tears. "It was fantastic. Although it's such a huge congregation, the church has made such an impact. They noticed me. That's the church I've been looking for."

Nicole Partridge is a freelance journalist based in Australia who writes for magazines, newspapers and relief organizations. Her November cover story for Charisma featured Australian missionary Irene Gleeson. She lives in Sydney with her husband and two children.

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