

Bert Bos  
3274063  
Maxwellstraat 12  
6716 BX Ede  
BA Thesis English Language and Culture, Utrecht University  
Supervisor: Derek Rubin  
November 2010  
6562 words

**What if God Was One of Us:  
American Artists and Their Religious Messages**

**Table of Contents**

Introduction	page 3
Section One – Statistics	page 6
Section Two – Joan Osborne and Dishwalla	page 7
Section Three – Dishwalla	page 8
Section Four – Kanye West	page 10
Section Five – The Fray	page 12
Section Six – Madonna	page 14
Conclusion	page 15
Appendix A: Joan Osborne – “One of Us”	page 17
Appendix B: Dishwalla – “Counting Blue Cars”	page 19
Appendix C: Kanye West – “Jesus Walks”	page 21
Appendix D: The Fray – “You Found Me”	page 23
Appendix E: Madonna – “Live to Tell”	page 25
Works Cited	page 27

## Introduction

On May 15, 1994 Sting held a speech at Berklee College of Music in Boston. In his speech he spoke about the relationship between music and religion. He said the following: “What I’m trying to say here is that if ever I’m asked if I’m religious, I always reply that, yes, I’m a devout musician. Music puts me in touch with something beyond the intellect, something otherworldly, something sacred” (5). Music and religion have a strange connection. Many concerts have the atmosphere of a religious event, indeed many fans that spend a day waiting to enter an arena hoping to be as close to the artist as possible may not be very different from those who spend a day waiting to catch a glimpse of the pope. Sting is a good example of an artist who is not a Christian but who frequently uses Christian imagery in his work. As he said himself, music has a religious dimension. Music is probably the most popular form of art. For most people not a day goes by when they are not confronted with music in some form or another, be it when they turn on the radio, step into a supermarket or plug in their earplugs to listen to their iPod while travelling to work. To most people music is something they value and it is hard to find a person who has no musical preference.

Since its birth in the 1950s with rock ‘n roll pop music has gained enormous popularity. In contrast to classical music pop songs are shorter and typically have lyrics. Those songs in classical music that have lyrics are often religious songs or part of an opera. In these cases the lyrics are not taken directly from daily life. The lyrics in pop songs allow artists to express their opinion or tell a story, which was formerly only found in folk songs. These lyrics can be sung along and allow the listener to identify with the artist. The lyrics to pop songs typically deal with topics that are present in most people’s lives like life and death, love, dreams, moral dilemmas and religion. Like Sting most pop artists are anything but devout Christians, but when reading through the lyrics sung in many pop songs there is a great deal of Christian religious imagery being used. There have always been popular songs that dealt with religion. Jay R. Howard describes how in the sixties for example The Byrds scored a number one hit with their song “Turn, Turn, Turn” which was a paraphrase of Ecclesiastics 3 and Elvis Presley scored a hit with his song “Crying in the Chapel.” In the early seventies religion became a less acceptable topic. This marks the beginning of Contemporary Christian Music or CCM: from this moment on a separate circuit started to form where Christian artists could publish their work (123). In modern churches many songs are written that fall in the worship genre, music that focuses on God and is meant for Christians to sing along during a service or at home. The Christian subculture has seen a long line of artists who write songs with God as their sole subject. These songs are virtually unknown in the secular music industry and are published exclusively in the CCM circuit, played on different radio stations and sold in different bookstores. However, some Christian artists have tried to work their way out of CCM into the secular scene. The Fray is an example of such a band. Even though all the band members are

Christians they have stopped writing songs that deal explicitly with God and have started to write more mainstream pop songs to escape the closed Christian circuit, which eventually led them into the charts.

This paper analyzes American artists whose popular songs deal with religion and will show that artists convey a religious message in their songs giving them the role of pastor. It will show that in the last fifteen years artists have taken up the role of pastor. In section one first some statistics will be given on the number of Christians in the USA and secondly, the relevance of lyrics will be discussed shortly in order to build a frame of reference. In order to rank the popularity of the songs the Billboard charts will be used, particularly the Hot 100. This chart deals with singles. Within the time frame of the last fifteen years the following artists will be discussed. Section two discusses Joan Osborne. Joan Osborne's song "One of Us" was a huge hit in 1996 peaking at number 4 of the Billboard's Hot 100. Section three discusses Dishwalla's song "Counting Blue Cars" which peaked at number 15 in the Hot 100 in 1996 and remained in the charts for 48 weeks. In section four the hip hop scene will be discussed by looking at Kanye West's "Jesus Walks" peaking at number 11 in the Hot 100 in 2004. There are various Christian artists who have made their way into the charts. Section five discusses The Fray, one of these bands. The Fray scored a number 7 hit with their song "You Found Me". The last artist to be discussed in section six is Madonna and the context for this will be her 2006 "Confessions Tour" featuring the song "Live to Tell" which Madonna sang while hanging from a cross wearing a crown of thorns. These artists are all well known and popular. Furthermore, they stand for certain larger groups in which Joan Osborne and Dishwalla represent the remains of the early nineties grunge scene. Kanye West represents the hip hop scene. The Fray is a bands whose members are Christians but who choose to operate in the secular music scene. Madonna is one of those rare artists who has been around for a long time and has grown from an artist to an icon, which makes her interesting since she has managed to entertain a growing audience over a period of several decades. The focus on the last fifteen years limits this paper to the last period of pop music. The second half of the nineties saw the end of the era ruled by grunge and boybands. Pop music from 1995 to 2010 is characterized by hip hop, dance artists like Lady Gaga and Madonna, R&B and more rock oriented pop songs.

Various scholars have written on the relationship between the individual artist and religion as well as the relationship between music as a religion and the audience. Michael J. Gilmour's collection of essays titled *Call Me the Seeker* discusses the individual artist and the significance of religion to their music. Each of these essays is written by a different scholar and deals with the religious aspects of one artist. Michael J. Gilmour's own excellent essay *The Prophet Jeremiah, Aung San Suu Kyi, and U2's "All That You Can't Leave Behind": On Listening to Bono's Jeremimad* concerns references found on U2's album All That You Can't Leave Behind to the Old

Testament prophet Jeremiah and political activist Aung San Suu Kyi. Paul Martens wrote another fascinating essay concerning the religious changes found in the lyrics of Metallica, in which he describes how the band gradually started to display a more positive attitude towards religion. The other essays in *Call Me the Seeker* deal with religion in the rave-scene and country music, as well as essays on several individual artists like Nick Cave, Bob Dylan and Woodie Guthrie. One important essay in *Call Me the Seeker* deals with fan reception of Sinéad O'Connor written by Andreas Häger. Andreas Häger used an interesting approach to study fan reception. He studied her fans by subscribing to a mailing list in which O'Connor's fans discussed her actions and work. An important conclusion he draws is that fans are more taken up by O'Connor's actions than her lyrics (222). Apparently fans pay equal if not more attention to the behaviour of an artist both on and off stage than they do to their lyrics. The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (JSSR) has published a special issue dealing with popular music, religion and globalization. The authors writing in this issue cover a variety of issues relating to music and religion. Gordon Lynch for example writes on the construction of alternative religious views through popular music. His research mainly deals with Great Britain and his focus is, among others, on the Rave-scene. One other author that needs to be mentioned here is Simon Frith. He published his best-known work *The Sociology of Rock* in 1978 and has continued to write on the topic of popular music and its social relevance. Simon Frith makes a clear distinction between rock and pop music. In his book *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (1981) Frith explains that rock music "carries intimations of sincerity, authenticity, art-non-commercial concerns" (11) when contrasted with pop music. Most of Frith's writing deals with rock music rather than pop music. Unfortunately for Frith rock and pop music have become more and more fused since the nineties. Contemporary rock artists like Nickelback or Dream Theater are often as commercial as pop artists. It seems that most of the research done has either focused on individual artists or on the influence of pop music as a whole. The research done on the entire pop scene mostly deals with the influence of lyrics on topics like violence and sex on teenagers. No research has been done to establish the role or message of artists as a group when it comes to religion. This essay aims to provide some information to this topic. It is impossible to provide a clear-cut answer to this question or to find an answer that is true for every band or artist in the pop industry. Studying five artists is in no way enough to state anything that has any statistical relevance to the whole of the pop music scene. However, this paper will show that each of these artists have their own image of God and portray this and a statement can be made about these differences and their place within the pop scene.

After this introduction section one will provide some background information on the number of Christians in the USA as well as some information on the relevance of lyrics. Section two will discuss Joan Osborne and section three discusses Dishwalla both are artists who are part of the post-

grunge scene which was a major scene in the pop music in the second half of the nineties. Their songs will show a search for God through music. Section four will discuss Kanye West and the ways he uses religion to establish his own reputation. In section five a Christian band, The Fray, is discussed. Finally in section six “Live to Tell,” a song from Madonna’s Confessions Tour is discussed.

### **Section One - Statistics**

In order to be able to say something about the ways in which pop music has dealt with Christianity in the last 15 years a frame of reference has to be established by discussing the number of Christians in the USA and the changes in those numbers over the last 15 years as well as the relevance of lyrics to the listener.

The Gallup Research Organisation has been publishing statistics on religion for several decades. Their research shows that in 1995 86% of all American adults identified with some form of Christian religion and that by the end of 2009 this number was down to 78%. Their research also investigated church attendance. In 1995 69% of all American adults said they were members of a church or synagogue, while 43% had attended church in the week before the inquiry. In 2009 63% of all American adults were members of a church or synagogue and 42% had attended a service in the previous week. In later years they also asked people if they believed in God, a universal spirit or neither. In May 2010 80% of all American adults believed in God and 12% believed in a universal spirit. The Gallup Research Organisation has no numbers for 1995, but the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA) did similar research and shows that in 1995 95.8% of all American adults said that they believed in God. These numbers show that while church attendance has not changed that much, the number of people who link themselves to a church has declined. On the other hand it also shows that the vast majority of the population still believes in a god or at least a universal spirit. Religion is still relevant, and the fact that people still think that there is a god makes it relevant for musicians to sing about this.

The other issue is the relevance of lyrics. After all, if the fans do not listen to the lyrics of the songs, what relevance do they have? Various researches have been done to establish the effects of lyrics on people. J.C. La Voie and B.R. Collins as well as P.M. Greenfield L. Bruzzone, K. Koyamatsu et al have shown that lyrics are of little importance especially to children and adolescents while H. Wass, J.L. Raup, K. Cerullo, L.G. Martel, L.A. Mingione, and A.M. Sperring have shown that lyrics are of great importance and that people do listen to them. In short it is probably safe to say that there are those that attach no value whatsoever to lyrics, while others listen to them with great intent. This has probably to do with the sort of music people listen to. It would make sense for someone listening to for example Lady Gaga or dance music not to pay any

attention to the lyrics, as these types of music do not focus on the lyrics in the first place. However, those that prefer artists like Bob Dylan or Sting will pay more attention to the lyrics as they form a more important part of their songs.

These researches show that even though Christianity may be in decline people still believe in something. The researches also show that lyrics are of importance. People listen to them and while doing so give value to them. This means that when discussing the artists and their songs one needs to realize that these songs were heard by millions who heard the words and gave some sort of value to those words.

### **Section two – Joan Osborn**

In 1995 Joan Osborne sang “One of Us” in which she portrays God as a human being<sup>1</sup>, someone you might pass on the street or sit next to on the bus<sup>2</sup>. In an interview with Rolling Stone Osborne described some of the reactions she received to the song: “Some people are pissed off that I would sing a song that represents God as anything remotely human,” she says. “Others want to sing it with their church groups. And some sincerely want to point me in the right direction.” Apparently the song is ambiguous and has no clear-cut meaning.

When reading through the lyrics a key word in the entire song seems to be the word “if”. The first verse reads:

If God had a name, what would it be  
and would you call it to his face.  
If you were faced with him in all his glory,  
what would you say if you had just one question.

The word “if” here has two explanations, one is that of a possible event and the other that of possible existence. This means that Osborne might be telling us to think about the possibility of meeting God, or that she is telling us that she feels that God does not exist. In the second verse she goes on:

If God had a face what would it look like  
and would you want to see  
If seeing meant that you would have to believe  
in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets

This verse suggests that the “if” is meant as the possible event. Osborne is asking the listener to consider the event of meeting God personally and to reflect on what that would mean. The chorus

---

<sup>1</sup> The lyrics to this song can be found in appendix A

<sup>2</sup> Although Eric Bazilian wrote the song here the song will be treated as Osborne’s song since the focus is on her version and it is known by the general public as her song. In the charts it always reads Joan Osborne - One of Us. The writer is almost never mentioned.

however turns things around slightly. In the chorus Osborne sings:

What if God was one of us  
 Just a slob like one of us  
 Just a stranger on the bus  
 Trying to make his way home  
 He's trying to make his way home  
 Back up to heaven all alone  
 Nobody calling on the phone  
 Except for the pope maybe in Rome

Here it seems that Osborne is humanizing God even more and is portraying him as a God on his way home, sitting on the bus. A God who is no different from the people he created and who is lonely, nobody calling him with the exception of maybe the pope. In the final chorus the line “Like a holy rolling stone” is added which suggests that God is without a home, a restless wanderer on the face of the earth. Osborne seems to be suggesting that if God were one of us, a human like anybody else, he would have to be lonely. The lyrics also suggest that nobody talks to God anymore with the exception of the pope. Halfway through the chorus the definitive statement “he’s trying to make his way home” replaces the previous “what if.” Here Osborne states that God must be alone in heaven.

What is important about this picture is that it humanizes God. Osborne personifies God and places him next to people on the bus, a God who knows what it feels like to be lonely. In a way this can be seen as an attempt to bring God closer to people, to allow the listener to connect to God. To Osborne God is one of us, a person who knows what it feels like to be alone, to feel like slob, sitting on a bus riding home. On the other hand Osborne’s image of God is so human that it raises the question what God she is talking about. If the answer to her question “what if God was one of us/just a slob like one of us,” is that he is like one of us he is no more God than we are. After all, how can a God be a slob a stranger and lonely? To some Osborne humanization of God may go so far that he does not seem like a God anymore while to others this humanization makes God recognizable and personal.

### **Section Three - Dishwalla**

Another post-grunge band is Dishwalla who in their song “Counting Cars” picture a child on its way to meet God<sup>3</sup>. Their song shows the endless search for a feminine God who is hard to be found. The message that Dishwalla places in this song is that searching for God is important to do even when it means asking the hard questions and when it takes effort.

The first striking thing about the song “Counting Blue Cars” is the chorus where they sing

---

<sup>3</sup> The lyrics to this song can be found in appendix B



“Cause I’m on my way to see *her*” (italics added). This throws the listener off balance. In the traditional sense God is a male figure but Dishwalla is looking for a God who is a woman. This raises the question which God Dishwalla is looking for. There is no indication that Dishwalla is talking here about a non-western deity. In fact the use of the singular God suggests that they are in fact referring to the Judeo-Christian God as this is the only deity who can be referred to with the singular God and not Allah or a specific name as would be the case in Hinduism, for example. This suggests that Dishwalla is trying to portray a new image of God, his feminine rather than his masculine side.

To understand the ambiguous God in this song the verses need to be examined. In the first verse the scene is a number of children playing in the streets. A boy is described who walks down the street with questions in his mind. Two of these questions form the first chorus:

Tell me all your thoughts on God?

Tell me am I very far?

In the second verse the scene widens and we see how the singer places himself among a group of children playing a game where they count blue cars in the street. In the third verse the children return home. Apparently the weather has changed and it has gotten cold. The place where they are is reverberating with their steps and their clothes are dirty. The people they walk past stare at them.

There is a contrast in the verses between the characters and their environment. The children are surrounded by shadows, cracked streets and places where their feet reverberate off the street. All of this does not sound like a place where a child should be playing or where one would be able to receive the answers they are looking for. There is a desire to meet God while at the same time this desire seems to be frustrated. Traditionally speaking a search for God would lead one to the church and the questions would be asked to someone like a priest who would be able to provide answers to these questions. However, the reason this person is in cold, shadowy places might be because this is where the bible says one can find God. In Matthew 9:10-11 Jesus’ disciples are questioned by teachers of the law as to why their master is having dinner with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus withdrew to the dark places to find people and perhaps Dishwalla are reminding their audience that when one is looking for God one should look for him in the dark places rather than the church. Secondly, the fact that the song is written from the perspective of a child may be a reference to Jesus’ words proclaiming that the kingdom of God belongs to children as written in Mark 10:13-16. This would explain why there are children asking questions about God and not adults. The chorus ends with the line “Am I very far now” which means that God is still unfound.

In this song the right person, a child, is looking for God in the right place but cannot find her. In spite of this, this child continues to look for God and wonders whether or not it is close to finding God. The use of the feminine to refer to God and the constant search suggest that there is

some confusion as to who God is. Dishwalla is not trying to say who God is, but is showing the search for God. In this song finding God is possible. If this were not the case the song would end with a conclusion that would suggest that God is nowhere to be found or not existent, but in this case the final chorus still searches for God convinced that all that is lacking from meeting her is arriving at his place.

#### **Section Four - Kanye West**

In his song “Jesus Walks” Kanye West speaks of himself as one who searches for God and who tries to live a religious life<sup>4</sup>. In this song he confesses his sin and describes the way he is going to live his life in order to gain God’s approval. Even though it has a religious tone the concepts of repentance and deliverance that he speaks of are not entirely biblical.

The first few lines of the song set the scene. West describes how we are at war with terrorism and racism, but most of all with ourselves. In the next line he goes on to ask God to show him the way as the devil is trying to bring him down. While he raps these lines a choir in the background sings the words “Jesus walk with me.” In the first verse Kanye West describes his life. He talks about the Midwest and Chi which, according to the urbandictionary.com, is short for Chicago. He tells about “niggas” stealing necklaces and cars. He also speaks of detectives who harass him. In the last few lines he says

We ain’t going nowhere but got suits and cases

A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis

My momma used to say only Jesus can save us

Well momma I know I act a fool

But I’ll be gone ‘til November I got packs to move I hope

The first line seems to refer to his socio-economic status as in the last line he says “I’ll be gone ‘til November.” West raps here about selling coke and moving packs which again is a reference to cocaine according to the urbandictionary.com. Even though his mother tells him only Jesus can save him he still goes out to sell cocaine. His last line spills over into the chorus when he says

But I’ll be gone ‘til Novermber I got packs to move I hope

Jesus walk

God show me the way because the Devil’s trying to bring me down

Jesus walk with me.

Even though he is involved in selling drugs he still hopes and prays that Jesus will be by his side and protect him from the Devil. The chorus further reads

The only thing that that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now

---

<sup>4</sup> The lyrics to this song can be found in appendix C

Jesus walk

And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs

Jesus walk with me

I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long

West seems to be repenting here. He admits that he has done wrong but he hopes that God will still want to talk to him. The purpose for this talk seems to be that the Devil is attacking him and that he does not want to fall. In some sense he is distancing himself from what he said in the first verse. He confesses his sins and hopes that God will take him back. A striking thing about the chorus is that the choir sings “Jesus walk” instead of “Jesus walks.” The use of the imperative rather than the indicative mood suggests that West is ordering Jesus to walk with him.

West continues his confession in the second verse. Here he describes how Jesus walks with the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers and even strippers. He goes on to say that rappers are role models and that he wants to set a good example. His example is that he needs Jesus the way schools need teachers. That means that he is saying that he needs Jesus in order to learn. The reference to Kathie Lee and Regis Philbin confirms this. Kathie Lee needed Regis as a platform to be a successful host and they had a successful program together but in both examples there is no aspect of a saviour, which is the aspect that is stressed in the Christian faith when talking about Jesus. In Romans 3 verse 23 and 24 Paul describes how salvation is only possible through grace. Christians need Jesus as their saviour and not as a teacher. Kanye West states that songs that talk about God or Jesus will not be played but that he hopes that making this song will take away his sins even if it means receiving less airtime. He closes the second verse with the words:

And bring the day that I'm dreaming about

next time I'm in the club everybody screaming out

Jesus walk.

West's dream is not salvation, it is that people will know his song and sing along and that Jesus will save him from the things that bother him, from the Devil who is trying to bring him down. Kanye West's song is not a classic repentance song. It is a song that asks Jesus or God to save him because West is singing about Jesus. Kanye West orders Jesus to walk with him. He is hoping to receive salvation through his own actions where the bible talks about salvation through Jesus without any possibility for humans to add anything to that. In Ephesians 2 verse 8-9 it reads that no man is saved by works, only by grace. Kanye West is preaching in this song, but his message is not strictly Christian.

### Section Four - The Fray

In an interview with Stan Friedman The Fray explain how they used to play worship music but decided to make to switch to the secular market to be able to relate to a wider audience. They themselves are still Christians and still try to share this in their lyrics. This perspective is important when examining their song “You Found Me” because it raises some controversial questions surrounding God<sup>5</sup>. First of all, The Fray show an unconventional image of a God who smokes. Secondly, their words could be considered sacrilegious because the lyrics ask a lot of seemingly disrespectful questions. Thirdly, they do not provide any answers but only the conclusion of God finding us in the chorus with the line “you found me.”

In the first verse the scenery is set when God is found on the corner of 1st and Amistad on a location where “the west was all but won.” According to [urbandictionary.com](http://urbandictionary.com) the west refers here to the city of Denver where the members of The Fray grew up. First and Amistad is an intersection in Denver where a church is located. However, Amistad is also the Spanish word for friend. This adds another meaning: he found God as his first friend. Finding God is significant in itself. In Dishwalla’s case the song is a journey trying to find God without any result. Here God is found smoking a cigarette. This is an interesting one that raises a great deal of controversy online because a lot of Christians have a hard time imagining God smoking. In this case it might just be to set the scene of a God found on the corner somewhere in the streets smoking his last cigarette. Upon finding God the first words spoken are “Where you been?” Apparently the person finding God here is in some way frustrated with God. When we meet someone we usually ask them how they have been, but when you have missed someone or someone was absent when you needed them the first question would be “Where you been?” God’s reply is simple: “Ask anything.” This leads to second verse, which asks the questions. The question asked comes down to a simple one: where were you when I needed you the most? At the end of the verse 1st and Amistad is mentioned again which this time refers to a church. In times of need people go to a church to pray and here the words are “all I needed was a call that never came/to the corner of 1st and Amistad.” One can almost imagine the lead singer praying in front of the church waiting for God to talk to him. After the first two verses the scene is that of an angry person questioning God to his face. In the chorus the tone changes. It reads:

Lost and insecure, you found me, you found me  
 Lying on the floor surrounded, surrounded  
 Why'd you have to wait? Where were you? Where were you?  
 Just a little late, you found me, you found me

---

<sup>5</sup> The lyrics to this song can be found in appendix D

The reason for the anger is provided in the first line; this person is lost and insecure. More importantly, God finds him, not the other way around. In that sense the scene has some resemblance to the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15 where the father stands outside waiting for his son to return home. It might seem like the son finds the father, but the father has been on the lookout for his sons since the day he left, so really it is the father who finds the son. Furthermore, the person is “on the floor surrounded” which in this context may refer to being confined and not being able to move out of that situation. Again the questions are asked to God but there is some form of an answer as well in the last line. God comes, albeit a little late. In verse three the singer reflects on his situation and concludes that these feelings of loneliness come to every person. He sings that “everyone ends up alone” and continues to describe losing a girl who knew him for who he really was. His final line describes his insecurity again when he sings “No way to know how long she will be next to me.” The bridge, which is usually the place in a song where a turn is made, is another rant against God. First the scene changes slightly, the morning comes, but even with this changed scenery the singer still blames God that he has been trying to talk to him for years and years. The last song to the bridge is the sum of his anger: “You got some kind of nerve taking all I want!” Here the full perspective of the song is shown. The singer presents himself as a modern day Job. The book of Job in the bible tells the story of Job, a wealthy man, blessed by God. In a test God allows the Devil to take everything from Job, which angers Job. He cries out to heaven with all his questions, but no answer is given until God comes down and talks to him. He is silenced when questioned by God and though he receives no answers he is satisfied completely by meeting God and says

My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.  
Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes. (42: 5-6)

At the end of “You Found Me” the singer concludes two things in his final line “Why’d you have to wait to find me, to find me?” The first is that the questions still stand. He found God but that did not answer all his questions. He still does not understand why God took so long. The second conclusion is that God did find him. Despite his loneliness and his questions God finds him. The message The Fray is trying to communicate here is that it is okay to ask difficult questions to God but that you may not receive the answers you are looking for. What you will find is that God finds you before you find him.

### Section Five - Madonna

Madonna's song "Live to Tell" has been around for some time<sup>6</sup>. It was first published as a single in 1986 and reached number one in the Billboard Hot 100 in that same year. The first versions of the song had no religious connotation. In her 2006 Confessions tour she chose to sing this song while hanging from a cross. She changed the meaning of the song to make it about helping those in need as a Christian should do.

In an interview included in Rikky Rooksby's *The Complete Guide to the Music of Madonna* she said about this song "I thought about my relationship with my parents and the lying that went on. The song is about being strong, and questioning whether you can be that strong but ultimately surviving." The song indeed seems to be about truth and lies and about keeping secrets. The chorus has two parts. In the first Madonna sings

A man can tell a thousand lies  
I've learned my lesson well  
Hope I live to tell  
The secret I have learned, till then  
It will burn inside of me

She has seen that lies are not very helpful in life, she learned her lesson. She then says that she hopes that will be able to share the secrets that burn inside her. These secrets have something to do with ways to live a good life. In the second part of the chorus she sings that the truth is never far behind. She is condemning the lies she speaks of in the first part of the chorus. In the bridge she says that she has to share this secret or otherwise people will never learn or know. Nothing in this song directly indicates any religious message. When Madonna included this song in her 2006 Confessions Tour she decided to present the song with a new twist. She performed the song while hanging on a cross and wearing a crown of thorns. This was received with quite some criticism around the word. In a statement released by Warner Bros. Records and published by, amongst others, Red Orbit she said:

I am very grateful that my show was so well received all over the world. But there seems to be many misinterpretations about my appearance on the cross and I wanted to explain it myself once and for all. There is a segment in my show where three of my dancers 'confess' or share harrowing experiences from their childhood that they ultimately overcame. My 'confession' follows and takes place on a Crucifix that I ultimately come down from. This is not a mocking of the church. It is no different than a person wearing a Cross or 'Taking Up the Cross' as it says in the Bible. My performance is neither anti-Christian, sacrilegious or

---

<sup>6</sup> The lyrics to this song can be found in appendix E

blasphemous. Rather, it is my plea to the audience to encourage mankind to help one another and to see the world as a unified whole. I believe in my heart that if Jesus were alive today he would be doing the same thing. My specific intent is to bring attention to the millions of children in Africa who are dying every day, and are living without care, without medicine and without hope. I am asking people to open their hearts and minds to get involved in whatever way they can. The song ends with a quote from the Bible's Book of Matthew: 'For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me and God replied, "Whatever you did for the least of my brothers... you did it to me.' Please do not pass judgement without seeing my show.

Along with the crucifixion there are also images of children in Africa displayed on the backdrop. Before the bridge Madonna comes down off the cross, after the bridge she lies facedown on the ground with her arms stretched out beside her. Several verses from Matthew 25 are displayed on the backdrop. Contrary to what the backdrop displays the verses are parts of Matthew 25 verses 35, 36 and 40 and form part of a sermon that Jesus held on his second coming and how he will separate the people from one another. In her statement Madonna refers to her own crucifixion as a variation on the biblical command to take up your own cross as it says in Matthew 16:24. In this part Jesus tells his disciples that following him will not be easy and that if they want to follow him it will cause them to suffer. That is why he tells them to take up their cross and follow him. Madonna connects this message to Jesus' sermon of his second coming and explains it as a statement of faith to hang on a cross and tell people to take care of those in need. The secret she speaks of in her song "Live to Tell" has become the message to take care of one another and the bridge now speaks of a responsibility to take care of those in need. Like Kanye West Madonna uses biblical images and words here to preach her own message. The use of a cross and verses from the bible create the illusion that this is a biblical duty. Madonna's message here is that each man and woman should take up their cross and take care of those in need. Madonna is preaching here. She is explaining the bible to others and showing her image of God but her words are no true to the bible. Her use of the bible makes her message seem more credible, but she twists to words to justify her own actions and to support her own cause.

### **Conclusion**

In an America where the number of Christians slowly declines artists who sing about God have a special role. As popular artists they reach more people with their music than most pastors do. Their popularity provides followers who take their words seriously. Thus, artists who spread a religious message become modern day pastors. Each of the artists discussed here shared some image of God. The people listening to their music will listen to their words and this may influence

their perception of God. This means that artists have an enormous amount of power in their hands. What they do or do not say about God can determine how people look at God. For Christian artists trying to say something about God it is important to check their lyrics with the Bible to make sure their lyrics are true. However, the listener may not be familiar with the artist they are listening to which places an additional responsibility with the listener to be critical of artists. Both Kanye West and Madonna use Christian language to make a statement but this does not mean that their message is a Christian message. In fact, a close study of the lyrics has revealed a non-Christian message. A pastor is checked by elders to make sure his words are true. When pop artists sing religious songs nobody is appointed to check if they are true. So when people accept these songs without critical thought they become a gospel. For the artists discussed here Joan Osborne shows the image of a human God who perhaps is so human that he has lost his divinity. Dishwalla is on a big search for a vague God. Kanye West tells the listener that salvation comes by doing things for God. The Fray ask questions to God but show that God finds them and Madonna tells us that being like Jesus is hanging from a cross and looking after people who are in need of help. These are five different views on God but to an audience who see five artists who each talk about God they may come across as simply five sides to the same God. As a result who and what God is becomes more and more diffuse.

In society there is really nobody who has the authority to correct those artists who proclaim an unbiblical message and it is therefore up to the listener to be critical of the artists they listen to and judge for themselves. In a way it is a result of the post-modern times that the individual can create their own image of God by simply choosing the images that suit them best. Artists themselves have a responsibility as well to realise the position they are to make sure that their words are accurate. Every person has their own image of God, but when quoting the bible artists have to make sure that their words are at least true that source. Artists should realise the position they find themselves in and take up this responsibility.



**Appendix A: Joan Osborne – “One of Us”**

## Verse 1

If God had a name, what would it be  
And would you call it to his face  
If you were faced with him in all his glory  
What would you ask if you had just one question  
And yeah yeah God is great yeah yeah God is good  
yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

## Chorus

What if God was one of us  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Trying to make his way home

## Verse 2

If God had a face what would it look like  
And would you want to see  
If seeing meant that you would have to believe  
In things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints and all the prophets  
And yeah yeah God is great yeah yeah God is good  
yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

## Chorus

What if God was one of us  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Trying to make his way home  
He's trying to make his way home  
Back up to heaven all alone  
Nobody calling on the phone  
Except for the pope maybe in Rome

And yeah yeah God is great yeah yeah God is good  
yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah

Chorus

What if god was one of us  
Just a slob like one of us  
Just a stranger on the bus  
Trying to make his way home  
Just trying to make his way home  
Like a holy rolling stone  
Back up to heaven all alone  
Just trying to make his way home  
Nobody calling on the phone  
Except for the pope maybe in rome

**Appendix B: Dishwalla – “Counting Blue Cars”**

## Verse 1

Must of been mid afternoon  
I could tell by how far the child's shadow stretched out and  
He walked with a purpose  
In his sneakers, down the street  
He had, many questions  
Like children often do

## Chorus

He said,  
"Tell me all your thoughts on God?"  
"Tell me am I very far?"

## Verse 2

Must of been late afternoon  
On our way the sun broke free of the clouds  
We count only blue cars  
Skip the cracks, in the street  
And ask many questions  
Like children often do

## Chorus

We said,  
"Tell me all your thoughts on God?  
"Cause I would really like to meet her.  
And ask her why we're who we are.  
Tell me all your thoughts on God,  
Cause I am on my way to see her.  
So tell me am I very far -  
Am I very far now?"

## Verse 3

It's getting cold picked up the pace

How our shoes make hard noises in this place  
Our clothes are stained  
We pass many, cross eyed people  
And ask many questions  
Like children often do

Chorus

"Tell me all your thoughts on God?  
'Cause I would really like to meet her.  
And ask her why we're who we are.  
Tell me all your thoughts on God?  
'Cause I am on my way to see her.  
So tell me am I very far?"  
Am I very far now  
Am I very far now  
Am I very far now

## Appendix C: Kanye West – “Jesus Walks”

Intro

Yo, We at war

We at war with terrorism, racism, and most of all we at war with ourselves

(Jesus Walk)

God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down

(Jesus Walk with me) with me, with me, with me [fades]

Verse 1

You know what the Midwest is?

Young & Restless

Where restless (Niggas) might snatch your necklace

And next these (Niggas) might jack your Lexus

Somebody tell these (Niggas) who Kanye West is

I walk through the valley of the Chi(cago) where death is

Top floor the view alone will leave you breathless Uhhhh!

Try to catch it Uhhhh! It's kinda hard hard

Getting choked by the detectives yeah yeah now check the method

They be asking us questions, harass and arrest us

Saying "we eat pieces of shit like you for breakfast"

Huh? Yall eat pieces of shit? What's the basis?

We ain't going nowhere but got suits and cases

A trunk full of coke rental car from Avis

My momma used to say only Jesus can save us

Well momma I know I act a fool

But I'll be gone 'til November I got packs to move I Hope

Chorus

(Jesus Walk)

God show me the way because the Devil trying to break me down

(Jesus Walk with me)

The only thing that that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now

(Jesus Walk)

And I don't think there is nothing I can do now to right my wrongs

(Jesus Walk with me)

I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long

Verse 2

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers even the strippers

(Jesus walks with them)

To the victims of Welfare for we living in hell here hell yeah

(Jesus walks with them)

Now hear ye hear ye want to see Thee more clearly

I know he hear me when my feet get weary

Cause we're the almost nearly extinct

We rappers are role models we rap we don't think

I ain't here to argue about his facial features

Or here to convert atheists into believers

I'm just trying to say the way school need teachers

The way Kathie Lee needed Regis that's the way I need Jesus

So here go my single dog radio needs this

They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus

That means guns, sex, lies, video tapes

But if I talk about God my record won't get played Huh?

Well let this take away from my spins

Which will probably take away from my ends

Then I hope this take away from my sins

And bring the day that I'm dreaming about

Next time I'm in the club everybody screaming out

Chorus

(Jesus Walk)

God show me the way because the devil trying to break me down

(Jesus Walk)

The only thing that that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now

(Jesus Walks)

And I don't thing there's nothing I can do now to right my wrongs

(Jesus walks with me... fades)

I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long

**Appendix D: The Fray – “You Found Me”**

## Verse 1

I found God on the corner of 1st and Amistad  
Where the West was all but won  
All alone, smoking his last cigarette  
I said, "Where you been?" He said, "Ask anything"

## Verse 2

Where were you when everything was falling apart?  
All my days were spent by the telephone that never rang  
And all I needed was a call that never came  
To the corner of 1st and Amistad

## Chorus

Lost and insecure, you found me, you found me  
Lying on the floor surrounded, surrounded  
Why'd you have to wait? Where were you? Where were you?  
Just a little late, you found me, you found me

## Verse 3

But in the end everyone ends up alone  
Losing her, the only one who's ever known  
Who I am, who I'm not and who I wanna be  
No way to know how long she will be next to me

## Chorus

Lost and insecure, you found me, you found me  
Lying on the floor surrounded, surrounded  
Why'd you have to wait? Where were you? Where were you?  
Just a little late, you found me, you found me!

## Bridge

The early morning, the city breaks  
And I've been calling for years and years and years and years

And you never left me no messages  
You never sent me no letters  
You got some kind of nerve taking all I want!

Chorus

Lost and insecure, you found me, you found me  
Lying on the floor, where were you? Where were you?  
Lost and insecure, you found me, you found me  
Lying on the floor surrounded, surrounded  
Why'd you have to wait? Where were you? Where were you?  
Just a little late, you found me, you found me!

Why'd you have to wait to find me, to find me?



**Appendix E: Madonna – “Live to Tell”**

## Verse 1

I have a tale to tell  
Sometimes it gets so hard to hide it well  
I was not ready for the fall  
Too blind to see the writing on the wall

## Chorus

A man can tell a thousand lies  
I've learned my lesson well  
Hope I live to tell  
The secret I have learned, till then  
It will burn inside of me

## Verse 2

I know where beauty lives  
I've seen it once, I know the warm she gives  
The light that you could never see  
It shines inside, you can't take that from me

## Chorus

A man can tell a thousand lies  
I've learned my lesson well  
Hope I live to tell  
The secret I have learned, till then  
It will burn inside of me

## Alternative chorus

The truth is never far behind  
You kept it hidden well  
If I live to tell  
The secret I knew then  
Will I ever have the chance again

Bridge

If I ran away, I'd never have the strength

To go very far

How would they hear the beating of my heart

Will it grow cold

The secret that I hide, will I grow old

How will they hear

When will they learn

How will they know

## Works cited

- Clark, Lynn Schofield. "Introduction to a Forum on Religion, Popular Music, and Globalization." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45.4 (2006): 475-479.
- Council on Communications and Media. "Impact of Music, Music Lyrics, and Music Videos on Children and Youth." *Pediatrics* 124.5 (2009): 1488-1494.
- Dishwalla. "Counting Blue Cars." *Pet Your Friends*. A&M Records, 1995.
- Fray, The. Interview with Stan Friedman. *Into the Fray*. The Fish. 23 September 2010  
<<http://www.thefish.com/music/interviews/11618063/Into-the-Fray/>>.
- Frith, Simon. *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1981.
- Gilmour, Michael J, ed. *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*. Ed. Michael J. Gilmour. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.
- Gilmour, Michael J. "The Prophet Jeremiah, Aung San Suu Kyi, and U2's *All That You Can't Leave Behind*: On Listening to Bono's Jeremiad." *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*. Ed. Michael J. Gilmour. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005. 34-43.
- Greenfield, P.M., Bruzzone, L., Koyamatsu, K., et al. "What is Rock Music Doing to the Minds of Our Youth? A First Experimental Look at the Effects of Rock Music Lyrics and Music Videos." *Journal of Early Adolescence*. 1987;7(3):315-329.
- Hagedorn, Katherine. "'From This One Song Alone, I Consider Him to be a Holy Man': Ecstatic Religion, Musical Affect, and the Global Consumer." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45.4 (2006): 489-496.
- Häger, Andreas. "Under the Shadow of the Almighty: Fan Reception of Some Religious Aspects in the Work and Career of the Irish Popular Musician Sinéad O'Connor." *Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music*. Ed. Michael J. Gilmour. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005. 215-225.
- "Hot 100." [www.billboard.com](http://www.billboard.com). 2010. Billboard. 30 Augustus 2010  
<<http://www.billboard.com/charts/hot-100>>.
- Howard, Jay R. "Contemporary Christian Music: Where Rock Meets Religion." *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.1 (1992): 123-130.
- La Voie, J.C., Collins, B.R. "Effect of Youth Culture Music on High School Students' Academic Performance." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 1975;4(1): 57- 65.
- "Live to Tell." *Confessions Tour*. Madonna. 2006.
- Lynch, Gordon. "The Role of Popular Music in the Construction of Alternative Spiritual Identities and Ideologies." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45.4 (2006): 481-488.

- Martens, Paul. "Metallica and the God That Failed." Call Me the Seeker: Listening to Religion in Popular Music. Ed. Michael J. Gilmour. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005. 95-114.
- Meizel, Katherine. "A Singing Citizenry: Popular Music and Civil Religion in America." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 45.4 (2006): 497-503.
- Newport, Frank. "This Christmas, 78% of Americans Identify as Christian." Gallup. 24 December 2009. 6 October 2010. <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/124793/This-Christmas-78-Americans-Identify-Christian.aspx>>.
- Osborne, Joan. "One of Us." *Relish*. Mercury Records, 1995.
- Owers, Ann. "Holy Roller Joan Osborne Finds Salvation in God and Good Sex." *Rolling Stone* 730 (1996): 44. Academic Search Elite. Web. 6 Oct. 2010.
- Rooksby, Rikky. *The Complete Guide to the Music of Madonna*. London: Omnibus Press. 2004.
- Sting. "The Mystery and Religion of Music." *Billboard* 106.22 (1994): 5.
- The Bible. New International Version.
- "United States (General)." The ARDA. The Association of Religion Data Archives. 6 October 2010. <[http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country\\_234\\_5.asp](http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/countries/Country_234_5.asp)>.
- Urban Dictionary. 3 November 2010. <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/>>.
- Warner Bros. Records. "Madonna Releases Statement Explaining Crucifix Scene From Confessions Tour." Red Orbit. 21 September 2006. 3 November 2010. <[http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/665624/madonna\\_releases\\_statement\\_explaining\\_crucifix\\_scene\\_from\\_confessions\\_tour/index.html](http://www.redorbit.com/news/health/665624/madonna_releases_statement_explaining_crucifix_scene_from_confessions_tour/index.html)>.
- Wass, H., Raup, J.L., Cerullo, K., Martel, L.G., Mingione, L.A., Sperring, A.M. "Adolescents' Interest in and Views of Destructive Themes in Rock Music." *Omega*. 1989/1988;19(3):177–186 72.
- West, Kanye. "Jesus Walks." *The College Dropout*. Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004.