

Religion, Culture and Gender Guides



The purpose of the Guides is to showcase the work of Manchester students on the theme of Religion, Culture and Gender in Britain, and provide creative, informative and critically informed resources on this theme.



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Religion and the Marketing Techniques of Contemporary Christian Singers

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Context

In the musical industry much stock is placed in the expression “sex sells,” especially so for female artists. Examples of this include the cover of the June, 2014 issue of *V* magazine, in which pop singers Katy Perry and Madonna posed for a "bondage-themed" photo shoot for photographer Steven Klein.¹ In an interview with *The Independent* in 2012, UK British pop artist Gabrielle openly acknowledged that female artists such as Miley Cyrus and Rihanna “know what they are doing” when they employ explicit sexual imagery in their performances and media promotions.² But how well does this assertion carry over when the musical genre in question is that of Christian contemporary music (CCM)?

CCM, a genre of modern popular music which is lyrically focused on matters concerned with the Christian faith, has recently begun gaining popularity within the UK, with the largest CCM radio station, Premier Christian Network, pulling in an estimated 149,000 listeners in the third quarter of 2014 alone;³ the genre also recently acquired its first official weekly chart in the UK in March, 2013.⁴ With CCM’s growing popularity, one must assume that the marketing strategies of the artists are working effectively, but how so? The overt sexualization of artists in mainstream

¹ Madeline Wahl, “Why It’s Unfortunate That ‘Sex Sells’ in Advertising and in Life” *Huffington Post*, June 2, 2014, accessed January 1, 2015

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/madeline-wahl/why-its-unfortunate-that-sex-sells_b_5433251.html

² Author Unknown, “Gabrielle: Miley knows sex sells” *Independent*, November 11, 2013, accessed January 1, 2015

<http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/music/gabrielle-miley-knows-sex-sells-29759694.html>

³ *Rajar*, September, 2014, accessed January 2, 2015

http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly_listening.php

⁴ Vicky Beeching, “New UK ‘Christian Music’ Chart” *Vicky Beeching*, October 3, 2013, accessed January 5, 2015

<http://vickybeeching.com/blog/the-uk-gets-its-own-christian-music-chart/>

music would appear to be in direct conflict with the comparatively conservative principles of Christianity, so how then are these artists structuring their clearly successful marketing campaigns?

Case Study

Natalie Grant: A Shining Example

To answer this question we look to the career of female CCM artist Natalie Grant. Beginning with her first album release in 1999, Grant has been at the forefront of CCM in the 21st century, winning the Dove Award for Female Vocalist of the Year for four consecutive years in 2006-2009 and adding a fifth in 2012, a year in which she also received her first Grammy nomination.⁵

While Grant's music has received much attention over the past decade, it appears that she herself appears to have diligently avoided the spotlight of mainstream media. In fact, Grant's personal life appears to have only captured mainstream attention twice since her career began: once in 2005 when she founded a non-profit organization called "Abolition International," which is geared towards helping victims of human trafficking,⁶ and once again in 2014 when she left halfway through the 56th Annual Grammy Awards in protest of the controversial nature of several of the acts.⁷

⁵ "Natalie Grant: About" *Natalie Grant*, last modified January, 2015, accessed January 5, 2015
<http://nataliegrant.com/about/>

⁶ "Hope For Justice: About" accessed January 7, 2015
<http://hopeforjustice.org/faqs/>

⁷ Jennifer Jones, "Natalie Grant responds after leaving Grammys early; Mass wedding at awards show criticized as 'political stunt' to push gay marriage agenda;" *Christian Today*, January 29, 2014, accessed January 7, 2015
http://www.christiantoday.com/article/mass_wedding_at_2014_grammys_criticized_as_political_stunt_to_push_gay_marriage_agenda_natalie_grant_responds_after_early_exit/35586.htm

The lack of a public image forces fans of CCM to form an opinion of Grant's character based on what little representation of the artist is available to them, the largest visual source being Grant's album covers.

If one peruses the various covers of Grant's eight albums, one can see that they all follow a similar template. Grant is typically shown facing the viewer head-on, with her entire body below the neck either covered or not shown.⁸ Parts of the female body that could be construed as suggestive, such as the breasts, upper thighs, or midriff, are noticeably concealed from the viewer. Grant's skin has been altered to be clear and unblemished which combined with the soft, light-colored backgrounds present Grant as a somewhat angelic figure and contribute to a forced perceival of chaste innocence by the viewer.

In this manner Grant provides a 'morally correct' antithesis to contemporary pop artists, presenting her fans with a demeanor resemblant of an aesthetically ideal Christian woman: modest and unblemished, yet still attractive to the human eye.

Contrast

Is under-sexualization a two-way street?

In addition to Grant and other female CCM artists such as Mandisa Hundley and Francesca Battistelli, male CCM artists seem to follow a similarly low-key marketing strategy. Singers such as Jeremy Camp and Steven Curtis Chapman rarely make public statements that stray from an evangelical nature, and the album covers of such artists bely the same sense of subliminal piety and moral correctness exhibited by their female counterparts. The album covers of Camp and

⁸ "Natalie Grant: Music" accessed January 5, 2015
<http://nataliegrant.com/music/>

Chapman, for example, portray the artists either staring directly at the viewer or in a state of prayer with their head bowed and arms lifted in an act of worship.⁹¹⁰ Notably, however, the album covers that feature male artists typically include more of the artist's body in the shot as compared to those featuring female artists.

Academic Theory

Ideal Woman

One theory that may explain the relatively vast amount of success achieved by CCM singers is credited to Susan Starr Sered, a researcher for Women's Health and Human Rights. Sered put forth the theory that there exists an idealized notion of what women should look like and how they should act – it is a “symbolic construct conflating gender, sex, and sexuality, and comprised of allegory, ideology, metaphor, fantasy, and men's psychological projections.”¹¹ If taken as true, this theory would suggest that the idealization of female CCM singers can be attributed to their resemblance to such biblical figures as the Virgin Mary, who is quoted as being “a model for women of all states of life.”¹²

By virtue of being chosen by God to carry and give birth to the Messiah, Mary arguably constitutes the Ideal Christian Woman, and is attributed the four characteristics of being loving,

⁹ “Jeremy Camp: Music: Albums” accessed January 9, 2015

<https://www.jeremycamp.com/music/albums>

¹⁰ “Steven Curtis Chapman: Music” accessed January 9, 2015

<http://stevencurtischapman.com/music/>

¹¹ Susan Starr Sered, “Woman' as Symbol and Women as Agents: Gendered Religious Discourses and Practices.” In *Revisioning Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree et al. (London: Sage Publications, 1999) p.194

¹² Sr. M. Danielle Peters, “The Blessed Virgin Mary and Women” last modified March 21, 2014, accessed January 10, 2015

<http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/virginmary.html>

fearful of God, knowledgeable, and full of “holy hope.”¹³ *Portrait of the Young Virgin Mary*, a painting done by Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato,¹⁴ and *Virgin Mary*, a painting by El Greco,¹⁵ both depict the young woman as modestly dressed, with unblemished skin and making direct eye contact with the viewer – very similar to the album covers of both Natalie Grant and other singers.

¹³ Author Unknown, “Four Characteristics of the Blessed Virgin Mary” *The Sacred Heart Review*, Volume 24, Number 15, October 13, 1900, accessed January 11, 2015

<http://newspapers.bc.edu/cgi-bin/bostonsh?a=d&d=BOSTONSH19001013-01.2.20>

¹⁴ Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato, “Portrait of the Young Virgin Mary” accessed January 10, 2015

<http://fineartamerica.com/featured/portrait-of-the-young-virgin-mary-giovanni-battista-salvi-da-sassoferrato.html>

¹⁵ El Greco, “Virgin Mary” accessed January 10, 2015

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/el-greco/virgin-mary-1>

Glossary

The Independent: A British national newspaper published in London by Independent Print Limited.

Dove Awards: An accolade given by the Gospel Music Association of the United States to recognize outstanding achievement in the Christian music industry.

Antithesis: A person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else.

Subliminal: Below the threshold of sensation or consciousness.

Conflating: To combine two or more ideas into one.

Allegory: A story, poem, or picture which can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning with a moral or political message.

Ideology: A system of ideas and ideals

Bibliography

Madeline Wahl, “Why It’s Unfortunate That ‘Sex Sells’ in Advertising and in Life” *Huffington Post*, June 2, 2014, accessed January 1, 2015 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/madeline-wahl/why-its-unfortunate-that-sex-sells_b_5433251.html

I used this article to provide background verification of the phrase “sex sells” in relation to females in the entertainment industry. I thought this article was particularly poignant as its primary example showcases two well-known female singers posing in a purposefully sexual manner for a photo that was intended for a magazine cover.

Author Unknown, “Gabrielle: Miley knows sex sells” *Independent*, November 11, 2013, accessed January 1, 2015 <http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/music/gabrielle-miley-knows-sex-sells-29759694.html>

I selected this article as my second verification of the sexualization of females in the entertainment industry as it contains an interview with a female singer herself acknowledging that those who over-sexualize themselves know very well that it helps increase their public appeal.

Rajar, September, 2014, accessed January 2, 2015
http://www.rajar.co.uk/listening/quarterly_listening.php

Vicky Beeching, “New UK ‘Christian Music’ Chart” *Vicky Beeching*, October 3, 2013, accessed January 5, 2015
<http://vickybeeching.com/blog/the-uk-gets-its-own-christian-music-chart/>

Although there are other primary sources regarding the release of the UK’s first Christian Music Chart, I selected this individual’s website because she provides several links to numerous primary sources and also provides five reasons why this is good news for the up and coming British CCM scene.

“Natalie Grant: About” *Natalie Grant*, last modified January, 2015, accessed January 5, 2015
<http://nataliegrant.com/about/>

“Hope For Justice: About” accessed January 7, 2015

<http://hopeforjustice.org/faqs/>

Jennifer Jones, “Natalie Grant responds after leaving Grammys early; Mass wedding at awards show criticized as ‘political stunt’ to push gay marriage agenda;” *Christian Today*, January 29, 2014, accessed January 7, 2015

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/mass.wedding.at.2014.grammys.criticized.as.political.stunt.to.push.gay.marriage.agenda.natalie.grant.responds.after.early.exit/35586.htm>

While this article details the activities of singer Natalie Grant, it also provides ample background information why Grant may have found some of the acts controversial. It further highlights one type of response from the Christian viewership and suggests why Natalie was both praised and criticized by different parties after her exit.

“Natalie Grant: Music” accessed January 5, 2015 <http://nataliegrant.com/music/>

“Jeremy Camp: Music: Albums” accessed January 9, 2015

<https://www.jeremycamp.com/music/albums>

“Steven Curtis Chapman: Music” accessed January 9, 2015

<http://stevencurtischapman.com/music/>

Susan Starr Sered, “Woman’ as Symbol and Women as Agents: Gendered Religious Discourses and Practices.” In *Revisioning Gender*, ed. Myra Marx Ferree et al. (London: Sage Publications, 1999) p.194

This chapter does an excellent job of describing the way that women are often viewed as either symbols or agents depending on how they fit into society. The theory put forth in this chapter allowed me to draw the connection between female CCM artists and the biblical iconography that allows their audience to picture them as pure and as devout as they sound in their music.

Sr. M. Danielle Peters, “The Blessed Virgin Mary and Women” last modified March 21, 2014, accessed January 10, 2015

<http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/virginmary.html>

Author Unknown, “Four Characteristics of the Blessed Virgin Mary” *The Sacred Heart Review*, Volume 24, Number 15, October 13, 1900, accessed January 11, 2015

<http://newspapers.bc.edu/cgi-bin/bostonsh?a=d&d=BOSTONSH19001013-01.2.20>

This entry nicely summed up the main qualities attributed to the Virgin Mary and goes on to further explain why Mary is regarded as having the qualities she does. The nature of the text also appealed to me as it seemed more reliable than the numerous other, more contemporary sites I found that listed the many qualities Mary was believed to have.

Giovanni Battista Salvi da Sassoferrato, “Portrait of the Young Virgin Mary” accessed January 10, 2015

<http://fineartamerica.com/featured/portrait-of-the-young-virgin-mary-giovanni-battista-salvi-da-sassoferrato.html>

El Greco, “Virgin Mary” accessed January 10, 2015

<http://www.wikiart.org/en/el-greco/virgin-mary-1>