



Pastor's Update

Mike Housholder & Merv Thompson, Editors

LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

295 Jordan Creek Pkwy ■ West Des Moines, IA ■ June 3, 2005

By Pastor Merv Thompson

"Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

For some obscure and, to some, even unfathomable reason, I have developed a fascination with the 1950's. I am not quite sure why I find this rather neglected period of history so compelling; perhaps it is because I finished high school in 1959, perhaps it was reading David Halberstam's book entitled The Fifties, perhaps it was some kind of nostalgia that tends to afflict rapidly aging people. Grabbing moments where they occur, I have been reading and gathering data which may, or may not, become a book.

Many historians and social commentators tend to denigrate the 50's, calling the period boring and uninspired. Perhaps it was because our president at the time was a quiet and reserved general who played golf a lot, and then was followed by a much younger man who promised to restore "vigor" and "get the country moving again." But it is my thesis that there was indeed very much happening in the Eisenhower years, something revolutionary which would explode later on. The tumultuous 60's and 70's could never have happened without the dramatic changes in the 50's.

It will be my further assertion in this writing project that one of the best ways to understand this historical moment is to look closely at the music of the day. During the 1950's music underwent a paradigmatic shift, virtually no music which was on the charts in 1950 would have made it in 1957. A possible title for my aforementioned book might be something like this: 1955-1959; When Music Rocked The World.

To appreciate something of the nature of the change which took place, Halberstam cites Leonard Bernstein, the famed American composer and conductor who made an astounding statement, "Elvis Presley is the greatest cultural force of the twentieth century. He introduced the beat to everything and he changed everything; music, language, clothes, a whole new social revolution." We may dismiss some of this as hyperbole, but it gives us some sense of the radical shift that was taking place.

This pervasive interest in the 50's has also led me to a more relevant question for the Christian church, for our church. Was the change in music in the 50's somehow influential in the rise of contemporary Christian music in the 70's and even today? My unequivocal answer would be—absolutely. I doubt very much we would have the kind of music we have today in our worship if the upheaval had not happened in the 1950's.

I was the pastor of a congregation which was a pioneer in the use of "contemporary Christian music," beginning in 1970. Our definition of contemporary Christian was music that most people listened to all week long but with Christian words. In those days the "pickins" were few and far between, and we had to make it up as we went along. But so much of the music and worship was predicated on the music and the patterns of the 50's. My two colleagues, Handt Hanson and Walt Kallestad, helped us make this

seismic shift.

By way of better understanding how the 1950's remade music and culture, let me describe a few of the more important changes which took place.

During the 1950's the middle class became predominant. Consider the contrast with the 1930's when the Depression pressed down upon the nation. By 1959 half of the families in the U.S. were described as middle class. Fortune Magazine described the period as "an economy of abundance." Thirteen million new homes were built, 11 million of them in the suburbs. Of course this created huge amounts of discretionary money, which was crucial to the rising importance of new music. It also led to developments like West Des Moines later on which has given birth to Lutheran Church of Hope.

An accompanying phenomenon of the 1950's was the rise of "teenager" as a distinct social class. Up until this time teenagers were most often viewed as economic necessities by families, earning money, helping on the farm, taking care of younger children. But now for the first time teenagers were not an economic asset, so they tended to form social bonds with each other. Soon teenager culture was shaping the larger culture, especially the music. Much of the music of the 1950's has been described as "music by teenagers for teenagers." A major symbol of this change was that of the automobile. As teens gained access to cars, this provided them the freedom to be free from adults. In the car they could listen to any music they desired, travel where they wanted to go, and gather together with friends. Drive-in restaurants and theaters proliferated. Certainly a teen culture has enormous influence even today.

During the 1950's music called "rhythm and blues," (R & B) came into prominence in the wider society, emerging from a segregated world. Much "rhythm" music had African roots, but the "blues" were strictly an American creation, arising during the horrific days of slavery. R & B was music with a beat, often molded and shaped by gospel music, its origin being the black church. As millions of African Americans moved to northern cities from the oppressive race climate of the south, their music came into view. Such artists as Fats Domino, Ray Charles, Chuck Berry, and Little Richard changed the face of music. Rhythm and Blues music continues to have a huge influence on music of today, including contemporary Christian.

Inextricably connected with the changing music was the stirrings of the Civil Rights Movement. In 1954 the Supreme Court in its landmark ruling in "Brown vs. Board of Education," declared that segregated schools were unconstitutional.

In 1955 a very brave Christian woman named Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. This led to a bus boycott under the leadership of a rookie pastor with a newly earned PhD. named Martin Luther King Jr. Much of the music of the later 1950's symbolized a coming together of black and white cultures, albeit in uncertain and often confusing ways. Contemporary Christian music could never have arisen without unleashing the power and creativity of the black community.

Technology changed the way music was created and delivered. Radio had been the primary vehicle for most of the century, but now with the invention of cheap transistor radios, radio and its music became ubiquitous. Juke boxes were found almost everywhere. Les Paul, who recorded with his wife Mary Ford, built the first solid body electric guitar in 1952 and created the first modern recording studio, complete with mixers, monitors and microphones. How important are these developments to contemporary Christian worship today?

Another form of music gained enormous influence in the 1950's which continues to this day, that of folk. Folk music gained popularity through the first half of the century, often as protest music, exemplified by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and the mysterious Ledbelly. (If you don't know about him, Google Ledbelly.) However most folk music tended to be left-wing, often radical, even communist leaning, and its leaders were blacklisted for a time in the Joe McCarthy early 1950's. But later in the decade folk music came roaring back, this time in the mainstream, led by such groups as the Kingston Trio, Peter, Paul, and Mary, Simon and Garfunkel, and of course the enormously influential Bob Dylan. Hootenannies broke out on college campuses everywhere. Folk music became one of the first venues to find its way into contemporary Christian music, led by people such as John Ylvisaker, Ray McKeever, and Ray Repp. For instance, [Bridge Over Troubled Waters](#) by Simon and Garfunkel was the theme of the 1970 National Youth Convention.

Perhaps the most important development in the musical shift of the 1950's happened in a tiny recording studio in Memphis, Tennessee. Sam Phillips had a dream, to find and record a white singer who could sing black music, and then make a fortune. One day out of the blue a young truck driver named Elvis walked into this studio and for \$5 made a record to give to his mother for her birthday. Several months later Phillips invited him back to record a song and the resulting music creating the new phenomenon called rock and roll. Elvis and Phillips joined rhythm and blues, country, gospel, and hillbilly (called rockabilly) into a brand new genre. One year later, in 1956, Elvis Presley had eight number one songs, something which will never be duplicated again. When he appeared on the Ed Sullivan show that year, he attracted 82.6% of the television audience. Music would never be the same again, for better or for worse. Another of Phillip's finds, Johnny Cash, also produced music with country and gospel roots.

Amazingly, by 1959 the era was over. The music of the 50's was over. A song called [American Pie](#) would describe the day the music died, when Buddy Holly and two others were killed in a plane crash near Clear Lake, Iowa. Another writer gives a broader view, "By 1959 Elvis was in the army, Little Richard had gone into the ministry, Jerry Lee Lewis was in disgrace, Chuck Berry was in jail and Buddy Holly was dead." This period of history was history.

A new era was just on the horizon; a new black record company was being formed in motor town, Detroit, called Motown, some groups were harmonizing beach music in Southern California and a group called the Silver Beatles (trying to emulate Buddy Holly and the Crickets) were playing in church basements in Liverpool, preparing to lead what came to be known as the "British Invasion." But the Fifties were over.

During the 1960's some of the popular music moved into the church, but rarely. It ended up being the early 70's before significant change was noticeable. Some will remember the initial stirrings, [Put Your Hand in the Hand](#), [Michael Rode The Boat Ashore](#). From Christian musicals we found [Day by Day](#) from Godspell, songs from Natural High and [Tell It Like It Is \(Pass It On.\)](#) Andrae Crouch gave us [Jesus is the Answer](#), Michael W. Smith created [How Majestic Is Your Name](#), Noel Paul Stookey of Peter, Paul and Mary wrote [The Building Block](#), Ray Repp gave us [I Am the Resurrection](#), the Second Chapter of Acts sang [Easter Song](#), and John Ylvisaker had several songs, including [Borning Cry](#).

I still have significant work to do. I would like to continue to learn more about the 1950's, the causes of this radical shift in music and the impact of that change. I would also like to learn more about how contemporary Christian music came to be so pervasive today, and how it is connected to the music of the 50's, If anyone reading this [Update](#) has insights or thoughts, please let me know. You may just point me to the idea, web site, book or article that can bring about that "aha" moment.