

Jeremiah Carrasco
The Research Essay
Topic #1

Music Is An Art That Shouldn't Control Us

The world we live in today is not the same one as the one before us. Society is a constantly changing construct leaving us to adapt and conform to new ways of existing and embodying our authentic selves. In today's day it is almost impossible to live in the complete bliss of ignorance, at some point we are forced to face different opinions and feelings and create our own evaluations and thoughts about them. Whether these evaluations will be original or if they will be derived from other sources or people is up to the individual. In this climate, we need those who are willing to create their own narrative and construct their own beliefs in every aspect of life, like music. Music is an art, an expressive form people create to project certain moments, feelings, emotions, and sometimes conversations. Music is a vital part of our identity as a society, yet it differs greatly among the population. Just like a painting, music can take many forms and mean many different things to many different people, it is a somewhat subjective concept. Due to this subjectivity music can be whatever you want it to be, regardless of what the "rules" or what others might say. Many might disagree with this notion, and fight to control the art of others and place them into unnecessary boxes, boxes that can kill and diminish creativity and individualism. Despite this, there are people out there who don't give space to this outdated way of thinking, those who put their art and vulnerability on display with no regard to being placed in a box, like Montell Fish. Montell is not one to shy away from his thoughts and beliefs, in a way that diminishes his art. He has become an artist who is constantly breaking barriers and changing the way his art is viewed and perceived by different groups across the world. He is currently fighting to open the box in which society has placed christen music. It is more than a

simple genre about strict religion and holey insight. In the real world we as people go through many different moments that define us as people. It is because of these journeys we experience that we are who we are, so therefore the art we create should reflect this realness no matter the past or what those around us might think.

What Is CCM?

The genre of Christian music is one that is written to express “either personal or communal belief regarding christen life and faith” according to a generic Wikipedia definition. Traditional Christian music is associated with hymns and heavy religious messages and tends to be the style of music that used to be the main form of the gospel. As more styles of music come to light, Christian music has transformed, with more up-to-date styles and genres that offer the same lyrical potency as traditional songs. This style is referred to as CCM or Contemporary Christian Music.

The article “An Examination of Contemporary Christian Music Success Within Mainstream Rock and Country Billboard Charts” by Megan Marie Carlan, published through Pace University, breaks down CCM’s history.

CCM starts its development during the early 1970s, a time period when radical and free-spirited people also known as hippies were a very big counterculture during the 1960s to 70s, where they rejected the traditional “American” way of life. During this time, hippies started to make their way into religion, especially Christianity. It was during this big spike in religious support that CCM began its creation. Hippies took on the challenge of gospel music that was based on blatant theological messages and hymns. They created what they coined as “Jesus Music” (Prothero 132), music that was seen as a more contemporary style than traditional Christian music. The

first mainstream genre that was joined with Christianity was rock. These artists took a genre that was described by many as sinful and seen as the devil's work and transformed it into their own personal works of art that fought for the passions of religion. For a long time, the church wouldn't accept rock as a new form of Christian music, with even Dr. Martin Luther King denouncing it in a 1958 advice column, "The profound sacred and spiritual meaning of the great music of the church must never be mixed with the transitory quality of rock and roll music." However, the church finally conceded in the 1970s accepting this new contemporary way of Christian music as they knew this would broaden their worship to the youth. As the church and general society started to accept this new style that blurred genre lines, CCM started to grow and expand, from being a small church-goer go-to to being able to reach a much broader and prolific audience.

In *The Week's* 2017 article titled "Who Killed the Contemporary Christian Music Industry?", Tyler Huckabee explores CCM as a whole and creates a space to understand where CCM stands in today's society and what might have led to its decline.

Huckabee writes "Grant was especially revelatory, a comely teen whose lyrical vagaries left it a very open question as to whether she was singing about God or boys. It was a potent strategy, and it led to several Billboard-topping singles and the first Christian album to ever go platinum". This subjectivity allowed Grant to explore her art in ways that allowed millions of people to decipher it, while still staying true to her beliefs and passion for god. As Huckabee states, it was a very "potent" and smart strategy, one that put CCM on the radar. During the 90s Hip-Hop eventually made its way to the CCM genre, allowing for groups like dcTalk to become widely known. Huckabee noted that it was very common to find dcTalk on the billboards and on MTV quite often. Huckabee describes them as "a Christian band that also appealed to the culture at

large.” Kevin Max of dcTalk explains their purpose and his thoughts on Christian music today, “We were reaching out,” Max says. “We were trying to communicate to the non-believer as much as we were communicating to the believer. Today, when I listen to Christian radio and see the festivals and see what's happening in the church, I don't see a whole lot of that interactivity. Where I'm at right now, it's almost like the doors have shut on the experimenting with lyrics and images and ideas to get people interactive” (Huckabee). Max explains just how inclusive and free his group created their art to be, it was something that allowed everyone to find a space and meaning regardless of one’s faith.

The Decline Of CCM

But today we see this genius concept declining, but why? Huckabee talks with a once-prominent CCM producer, Matt Bronleewe, “As the music industry began to weather the disruptions of the digital market, labels grew much warier of those kinds of risks, says Bronleewe. “There's not much room to fail anymore,” he explains. “And failure's such a creative gift. When the ability to fail is taken away, it fuels a lot of fear. It narrows the pool of producers and writers to such a degree that there's a sameness that starts to occur.” As the digital world grew, CCM seemed to grow smaller, leaving labels to control what different artists put out. We see this shift of artists being able to freely publish what they want in a way they see fit. As Bronleewe states, fear has destroyed the movement, the fear of taking risks which was the main reason CCM was born has put creativity on the back burner. CCM was developed as a way to challenge the normal way of just conforming, it was a way to break apart from stagnant religious talks, and bridge the love of god with creativity and individuality, the two most important qualities a person can express themselves through. If CCM has declined what does Christian music present itself in today? Today we see the movement falling back on one sole style, that of worship music. Music in

which is created with the idea of being played in church and the sole purpose of worshipping god. The once genre-blurring style of music has fallen to a single stagnant genre. CCM just no longer offers the space for talent to fully just express themselves how they want and please as John Mark McMillan notes, “In CCM, if you want to sing about certain, more uncomfortable things, you won't have an opportunity” (Huckabee).

Montell Fish

In the Billboard article “HOW SINGER-SONGWRITER MONTELL FISH IS REDEFINING CHRISTIAN MUSIC WITH NEW ALBUM ‘JAMIE’ ” Neena Rouhani, Rouhani explores who Montell Fish is and the artistry he presents as he tries to transform Christian music.

Montell Fish was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to a Christian mother and a faithless father, who split early on in Montell’s childhood. Life at home for Montell was one “of deeply entrenched duality, something that came to define his identity. “I’d be at my mom’s house—no explicit video games or music, we’re going to church every Sunday, gospel music in the house. At my dad’s house, we’d do whatever,” Fish explains. “So, I always had two sides and that’s where I think I learned how to play characters” (Rouhani). Living a double life or being able to switch personas isn’t something new for Montell, as he had to constantly learn to switch certain parts of himself on and off when presented with certain environments. This ability to change and create different characters in his life comes from a place beyond just creating a specific embodiment of a story, for Montell, it’s his true feelings and emotions coming to light. Montell explains the fluidity in his persona, “I just don’t know who I am sometimes,” he goes on, “I could be really religious, then other times I could be a completely different person – I think we

all do that to some extent” (Rouhani). Montell explains this very raw and transparent feeling he deals with, which changes how he can see himself and the world around him and shows us that being religious is something that shouldn’t have to be so stagnant. Fish started out his journey as an 18-year-old YouTuber, releasing his music and vlogs to an almost entirely Christian audience. These songs and videos showcased his devotion to god at the time, leaving him to make nearly 500 videos depicting his journey, whether that was him discussing his Porn addiction in nearly 11 vlogs, or how he was using the lord to overcome many different “sinful” issues. Montell’s art back then was one ruled and governed by a devotion to condemning his own sin and creating a life that he felt god would accept. However, what has caused the shift from the masturbation and porn-condemning singer to a free-spirited pioneer releasing the music he releases today, music Montell from two years ago would most likely shy away from? Montell explains, “ I didn’t know what I was talking about,” he reflects sheepishly. “I was a monster in some senses. In other senses, it was genuine” (Rouhani). Reflecting back on his youth, Montell explains that he didn’t necessarily know what he was talking about and even in some instances he wasn’t being 100% genuine as if he was almost creating a character to fit a narrative of what he thought his life should be. He spoke and professed certain ideas due to his conformity to the religion and wanting to feel accepted by gods love. The singer has since moved away from this belief of having to hold these blatant theological theories and ideas as his truth and instead creating his own. Montell has gained his own power in opening his vulnerability, a notion that has boasted him into the spotlight, exposing him to an entirely different audience than the one he once used to have, an audience who now seems to vilify him due to the secular nature Montell has chosen for his art. Despite all of the criticism and people saying Montell has moved away from the lord, Montell disagrees, “I’m still very much a faith-centered person, and I love Jesus. But I think a lot

of my art has taken a different way of telling those stories” (Rouhani). Although his music might not align with the direct values of Christians his art aligns with what he sees within Jesus.

Montell still has his faith and still expresses his love for the lord throughout many of his songs, however, he confesses he just seems to have found a different path to express it. He has found that living his life for himself and being himself 100% is the best way for him to go. He doesn't want to shut down his own creative mind for the simple idea to make others happy, “the singer remains focused on pushing boundaries through his genre-less take on storytelling that has captured the hearts of millions. “It's just my life,” he says. “I can't hide much, and I'm just learning more and more [that] the only way you're gonna get far is if you are completely yourself” (Rouhani). The artist has become dedicated to staying true to himself and his art, he wants to create his own narrative of his beliefs whilst hoping to transform the Christian music genre under which all of his music is currently labeled.

Montell Fish and other 90s CCM artists have and are experiencing the same problems and challenges. The goal of making art is not to please those around you, it is a reflection of how honest we are with ourselves. Artists shouldn't have to fight for their inclusion within certain genres just because it doesn't fit a specific look or feel. CCM is just as Christian as gospel and should be recognized as such, regardless of its ability to genre-blur. A style of music shouldn't be confined to one specific genre, artist should feel free to express their art in whatever style just as the 90s CCM artist once did. Montell is restarting the fire of creativity within the Christian community, he is dedicated to expanding the views and art of those who love Jesus. Boxes are made to keep things within and prevent them from branching out, art does not belong in a box. Christian music can be whatever an artist can and wants to make it, it doesn't need the validation of others to be valid. Artists like Montell are slowly showing this to us once again, not

conforming to a simple black-and-white style is important. In today's society branching out and exploring what and who we are is vital, so, therefore, the goal of expanding the Christian music genre and genres, in general, is one that will greatly benefit from the creation of beautiful artistic creations led by individualism and creativity of an artist. Take a chance.

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