

Lifespan of worship music short and getting shorter

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The most popular worship song in churches these days is “Build My Life,” from Bethel Music, the megachurch-based worship music hit machine based in Northern California.

Sitting at No. 1 on the top 100 worship song chart from Christian Copyright Licensing International, which licenses worship music, “Build My Life,” first released in 2016, is an outlier in worship music, where hit songs are here today and gone tomorrow.



Mike Tapper

A new study—“Worship at the Speed of Sound” from Southern Wesleyan University professor Mike Tapper and colleagues—found the lifespan of a hit worship song has declined dramatically in recent years.

In the mid-1990s, a popular song like “Refiner’s Fire,” or “In Secret” had a lifespan of about a dozen years, rising for four to five years before hitting a

slow decline. Two decades later, that lifespan has dropped down to three to four years, with songs like “Even So Come” or “Here as in Heaven” rising rapidly, then disappearing, according to the study, based on 32 years of CCLI data.

In an interview, Tapper said he and his colleagues, including Marc Jolicoeur, a worship pastor from New Brunswick, Canada, had been seeing the increased pace and churn rate of new music and wanted to quantify it. Tapper, chair of the religion division at Southwestern Wesleyan, already had been studying the lyrics of worship songs when he got ahold of the CCLI data.

Tapper said the pace of new music, driven by technology, which allows new songs to be distributed far and wide quickly, has played a role in the declining lifespan of songs. So has the high quality of songs being produced, he said, which gives church leaders an overwhelming number of options.

“It is hard to say ‘no’ to great songs,” he said.

Walking a fine line

Tapper and his team are trying to walk a fine line. They’re glad people are writing worship songs and are eager to sing God’s praises. But they worry about the unintended consequences of turning worship music into a disposable commodity—something Tapper says reflects the influence of the broader culture on churches.

IN CHRIST ALONE

Words and Music by KEITH GETTY and STUART TOWNSEND



While some songs buck the trend—like “In Christ Alone,” which turns 20 this year, or “10,000 Reasons,” which is still going strong after a decade—many songs disappear.

“It really does seem that we are on a rampage in terms of the quest for novelty kind of in our broader culture,” he said. “And evangelical churches are keen on reflecting that culture.”

Chris Walker, pastor of worship and arts at Covenant Life Church in Grand Haven, Mich., also suspects the churn of worship music reflects the way Americans consume media in general, where “everything is immediate and has a short shelf life.”



Chris Walker

“They feed the algorithm because they are part of the cycle,” he said. “I could see that in churches that are always singing new songs and seeing what sticks. That’s not a bad thing.”

Walker's church, which is part of the Christian Reformed Church, uses mostly contemporary songs during worship, but they mix it up with some hymns. They take what he called a "slower church" approach to worship and are not in a rush to use the newest songs.

A few times a year, Walker will put together a playlist of songs and send them to the team that helps plan worship at Covenant Life. That list will include brand-new songs but could also feature older songs people want to bring back. So, it might take six months or more for a new song to make its way into worship, he said.

Recently, the church brought back two older songs for Palm Sunday. Both were popularized by Chris Tomlin, one of the nation's most influential worship leaders, two decades ago: "You Are My King" and "We Fall Down." And both really connected with the congregation. The song choices bucked church music trends, said Walker.

"In a lot of churches, a song has to be either 300 years old—or it has to be three days old," he said. "The middle ground is purgatory."

Fear of missing out

Will Bishop, a former church worship leader and now assistant professor of worship leadership at Mississippi College, said his students often feel anxious and worried they are missing out on the next big thing in worship music. They essentially have "FOMO"—the fear of missing out—when it comes to worship songs, he said.

Bishop said he tries to remind aspiring worship leaders not to overwhelm the people in their churches with new music.

"We want to move on to the next shiny thing, but our people can only absorb new songs so fast," he said.

When Bishop began leading worship, he had access to a hymnal and then to lists of new worship songs from publishers. Now he has endless options, with more coming each day.

“Spotify is the new hymnal,” he said.

Steven Guthrie, a former church musician turned theology professor at Belmont University in Nashville, wonders if the decline of hymnals plays a role in the pace of new worship music. In the past, he said, church musicians had hymnals filled with hundreds of songs for every occasion in a church’s life at their fingertips. Now, as many churches have abandoned hymnals, musicians are trying to fill that void.

While new songs are important, said Guthrie, there are some downsides. Songs can create community, he said, something that takes time and is hard to do when songs disappear so quickly. Songs are also no longer passed down from parents and grandparents to younger generations—and there isn’t time for a song to work its way into people’s hearts, he said.

When his mother was dying, Guthrie said, he and his sisters stood for hours at her bedside, singing one hymn after another that they had memorized—all songs their mom knew.

“Sometimes I think, ‘What are my kids going to sing by my bedside?’” he mused.