

## Shout to the Lord: Making Worship Music in Evangelical America

Andrew Mall  
*Northeastern University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/yjmr>



Part of the [Other Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mall, Andrew () "Shout to the Lord: Making Worship Music in Evangelical America," *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*: Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17132/2377-231X.1158>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in Yale Journal of Music & Religion by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact [elischolar@yale.edu](mailto:elischolar@yale.edu).

Ari Y. Kelman

***Shout to the Lord: Making Worship Music  
in Evangelical America***

New York: New York University Press, 2018.  
224 pp. ISBN: 9781479844685.

Based on four years of ethnographic research comprising scores of interviews with worship leaders and songwriters, as well as fieldwork at worship conferences and church services, Ari Y. Kelman's monograph *Shout to the Lord: Making Worship Music in Evangelical America* describes the variety of forces at work in producing evangelical worship music in the United States. As such, Kelman's analysis includes examinations of songwriting practices, the leading of worship services, and the infrastructures that enable the distribution, intermediation, and consumption of evangelical worship music. Kelman has chosen a thematic organization: after an opening chapter that addresses worship music's discursive formation, he critically addresses these topics in succession (i.e., songwriting, worship leading, and the music industry). Historical narratives are present, but this is neither a chronological history nor a historiographical intervention; rather, Kelman provides historical details throughout the book that suit the theme of each individual chapter. For example, in chapter 2, he centers the convergence of contemporary worship music's stylistic elements during the Jesus People Movement, an evangelical counterculture that started in California in the late 1960s, coinciding with changes in Catholic liturgies following Vatican II. Later, in chapter 4, he returns to the same era to discuss the background and emergence of Christian record labels and the Christian music industry.

Writing from a background in American studies, education, and Jewish

studies as the Jim Joseph Professor of Education and Jewish Studies at Stanford University, Kelman deftly navigates the ontological and epistemological minefields of interdisciplinary scholarship in chapter 1 by drawing on insights from across the spectrum of disciplines within Christian congregational music studies to consider how white U.S. evangelicals define worship music—and, by extension, evangelical worship itself. In doing so he complicates what he reveals to be overly simplistic concepts, contributing to the book's thematic through-lines. For example, Kelman explains that scholars have tended to distinguish between contemporary Christian music (or CCM, mainstream Christian pop) and worship music, which are relatively undifferentiated stylistically, by focusing on their utility: the former serves primarily as entertainment in public venues and private listening, while the latter focuses a congregation's attention on the object of worship during a church service. But, as he demonstrates, those boundaries have become more and more porous over time: listeners are increasingly experiencing moments of worship in their everyday lives and encountering worship music on the radio and on recordings (private listening) or at concerts and conventions. And, as Kelman shows us in chapter 4, major CCM artists such as Michael W. Smith are increasingly turning to worship music as an important component of their careers.<sup>1</sup> As entertainment turns toward worship, Kelman speaks of worship songwriters and

leaders who find themselves confronted with the possibility of worship turning toward entertainment—that is, of their songs and music becoming conflated with worship instead of facilitating it.<sup>2</sup> The challenge, as Kelman writes in the introduction, “is how to write, perform, or produce songs that serve the needs of worshippers without falling prey to the false equivalence of music and worship.” Kelman encounters this tension in several different contexts: among student musicians in a training program perfecting their musicianship and worship-leading skills while learning to remove themselves from the congregation’s focus (chapter 3); songwriters struggling to write lyrics best suited to direct a congregation’s attention to God without resorting to empty or rote theology (chapter 2); or record label executives building infrastructures to support songwriters and churches within the larger for-profit record industry (chapter 4).

In a similar manner, Kelman complicates a commonly held understanding about congregational identity and worship: that music—particularly singing together for a transcendent purpose—brings people together in ways that other expressive and collective activities do not, enabling congregations to establish a collective identity through which individual congregants experience belongingness and community. Instead, Kelman demonstrates that the transcendence that evangelical worship enables is individuated, in both its experience and its expression. While the institutional structures of a church’s congregation and its traditions enable its members to learn how to achieve transcendence when worshipping—much as Tanya Luhrmann describes in her work with members of a Vineyard church learning

how to hear God when praying<sup>3</sup>—songs that are most effective at supporting worship enable individual congregants to focus their attention inward, not on their church neighbors or on the worship leader, in order to encounter the divine. As Kelman explains, this is partly doctrinal: evangelical Christianity privileges an immediate and intimate relationship with God, and worship music is most effective within this model when it effectively absents itself from that relationship.

In chapter 1 of *Shout to the Lord*, Kelman explains that his analysis of worship music is influenced by the “production of culture” perspective developed by sociologist and popular music scholar Richard Peterson.<sup>4</sup> Scholars writing from this perspective focus “on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved,” and they do so in many fields of cultural production.<sup>5</sup> In popular music studies, the production of culture perspective has generally given rise to a top-down approach in explaining the influences of (e.g.) corporations, infrastructures, and marketplaces on everyday musical life within capitalist contexts. Strangely, however, Kelman does not explicitly acknowledge criticisms of this approach despite incorporating some proposed interventions into his application of it. Most significantly, from my perspective, is Keith Negus’s pivot from the production of culture to the culture of production, acknowledging the integrated relationships between practices of production, distribution, intermediation, and consumption.<sup>6</sup> As Negus writes in an earlier piece, “production does not take place simply ‘within’ a corporate environment created according to the requirements of capitalist production but in relation to

broader cultural formations and practices that may not be directly within the control or understanding of the company.”<sup>7</sup> Kelman does not incorporate a top-down perspective; if anything, he capably demonstrates that, in the case of worship music (and following Negus), the production of culture is not a one-way process spearheaded by capitalists but rather a messy network of competing forces, priorities, and interests created by participants and stakeholders playing a variety of roles.

The final chapter of *Shout to the Lord* describes several integral components of the commercial infrastructures that support the production, distribution, intermediation, and consumption of worship music. For example, one strand of chapter 4 addresses the record label EMI Christian Music Group’s tentative steps in the 1990s to invest resources into what was then the comparatively unproven commercial market for worship music. Another strand addresses Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI), which sells blanket licenses to churches that project or print copyrighted song lyrics (as well as other restricted uses). His description of CCLI clarifies the fact that many worship music songwriters make a living licensing their songs, benefiting from the same copyright and intellectual property practices that benefit the largest entertainment conglomerates. And throughout the book, as I have already noted, Kelman examines how songwriters and worship leaders navigate a variety of (sometimes competing) expectations on the part of their audience or congregation, the marketplace for worship music, and their own intentions for worship. The impact of capital and capitalism is difficult to overstate, in other words. Kelman does

not fall into a false dichotomy between commerce and worship (similar to the well-trodden false dichotomy between commerce and creativity), instead positioning the two as (relatively) comfortable companions within the worship music industry. Despite acknowledging the Frankfurt School criticism of culture industries via Adorno, however, Kelman does so relatively uncritically. But if the worship music he discusses frames the worship experience of literally millions of white U.S. evangelicals, and if the production of this worship music is inseparable from the contexts of capitalism, then he (and we) should be more concerned about the role capitalism plays in a worshipper’s relationship with God. Capitalists accumulate power through the consolidation of resources; capitalism’s power lies in normalizing this relationship. Scholars have pushed back against this normalization in a variety of cultural, economic, political, and social contexts; surely we should also be addressing religious contexts with a similar degree of critical inquiry.

Several case studies, which would have been interesting and valuable if presented wholly, are instead broken up and spread throughout the book to serve its larger thematic project. This includes contemporaneous accounts, such as a profile of Chris Tomlin and an interview with Sara Groves, both songwriters and worship leaders, as well as discussions of historical cases, such as the role of Maranatha! Music, an early distributor of contemporary worship music that was affiliated with Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel, in supporting songwriters in the 1970s. But it also means that other cases and interviews are presented to illustrate a single theme (and are thus confined to a

single chapter) even though they might be relevant to others; thus, readers learn about Louie Giglio's Passion Worship Conferences in the context of contemporary worship music's institutionalization (in chapter 4), while Passion's influence on songwriting and worship leading is tangential, conflated into those contributions made by (prominent Passion member) Chris Tomlin. And a few obvious case studies are left out entirely: for example, Kelman barely addresses Hillsong, the Australia-based global megachurch whose impact on modern worship music is at least on par with that of Passion.<sup>8</sup>

The fact is that Kelman's themes are mutually dependent and co-constitutive, and the organization of the book thus reflects its subject's overall complexity. One cannot wholly understand worship songwriting, for example, without taking into account the fact that many songwriters earn a living licensing their songs through CCLI. Similarly, the phenomenon of high-production-value worship services at megachurches like Willow Creek targeting "seekers" is not wholly comprehensible without considering the popularization

of worship music on commercial radio, the success of CD compilation series like *WOW Worship*, and the investments of major labels such as EMI Christian Music Group (now Capitol CMG)'s website *Worship Together* throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>9</sup> There is no perfect way to order these case studies in a book that is thematically organized, yet Kelman's writing avoids tedious doubling-back and rereading of his material. Readers with a particular interest in any one of his themes (songwriting, worship leading, or the music industry) would benefit from reading the corresponding chapter first without fear of missing crucial narrative components; those who choose to read the book linearly will find that each chapter builds on the preceding ones in subtle yet satisfying ways. Overall, *Shout to the Lord* is a fine contribution to the growing literature on Christian praise and worship music.

Andrew Mall  
Northeastern University  
a.mall@northeastern.edu

---

## NOTES

1 Complicating these porous boundaries even further, April Stace writes about churches that use secular popular music (such as recordings by the rock band AC/DC) in worship services in *Secular Music, Sacred Space: Evangelical Worship and Popular Music* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

2 Monique M. Ingalls describes a similar tension among evangelical worship leaders and observers; see *Singing the Congregation: How Contemporary Worship Music Forms Evangelical Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 18.

3 Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

4 Richard A. Peterson, *The Production of Culture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1976).

5 Richard A. Peterson and N. Anand, "The Production of Culture Perspective," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30/1 (2004): 311. Jennifer Lena and Vaughn Schmutz provide a thorough overview of the production of culture perspective, including several examples of its use in many different contexts, in "Cultural Production and Circulation," *Oxford Bibliographies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199756384-0195>.

6 Keith Negus, *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1999). In a review article, Marco Santoro explains that other criticisms of the production of culture perspective tend to charge that it "neglects cultural meanings and processes of interpretation; and . . . lacks a critical stance toward culture, the economy and culture industries"; see "Culture As (and After) Production," *Cultural Sociology* 2/1 (2008): 17.

7 Keith Negus, "Cultural Production and the Corporation: Musical Genres and the Strategic Management of Creativity in the US Recording Industry," *Media, Culture & Society* 20/3 (1998): 360.

8 For more on Hillsong, see Tanya Riches and Thomas Wagner, eds., *The Hillsong Movement Examined: You Call Me Out Upon the Waters* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

9 <https://www.worshiptogether.com>