

Serious thinking about rock and soul

by Steve Beard

It has become an annoying cliché to be reminded how much things have changed in the United States since September 11. Be that as it may, it seems that for a little while at least, we were a nation that had been shaken into re-examining and rethinking its priorities. How important are day-timers when you can't make time to kiss your kids goodnight? What can we be sure of in this life? When was the last time you got right with God?

In light of some of these probing questions, I was watching a country music awards ceremony on television not long ago when Alan Jackson stunned the audience with his tribute to 9-11, "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)."

"I'm just a singer of simple songs/I'm not a real political man/I watch CNN/but I'm not really sure I can tell you the difference in Iraq and Iran," sang Jackson. "But I know Jesus and I talk to God/and I remember this from when I was young/Faith, hope, and love are some good things he gave us/and the greatest of these is love."

Some might find Jackson's song an understandable breach of protocol (after all he mentioned Jesus) since country music has always been fertile turf for a guilty conscience and a dash of sawdust religion. But that is not the kind of sentiment you would expect from a well-worn rock star.

"We need to go back to the way it was 30 years ago, when everybody had Grandma and Grandpa, and we were willing to pass moral judgments about right and wrong," said Steven Tyler, 53, the lead singer of the famously hedonistic rock band Aerosmith.

Tyler is aware that his comments will be shocking coming from someone who has partied hard with the best of them. "But (September 11) brought me to my knees," he responds. "It made me change. When that second airplane hit the building, we all changed. We need to get back to some serious thinking," he told the Detroit Free Press.

SERIOUS THINKING, INDEED

One is invited to do some serious pondering about the new solo album from Mick Jagger, the lead singer of the world-famous Rolling Stones. One of the best songs on the album is a duet called "Joy" that Jagger sings with U2's Bono (with guitar from The Who's Pete Townsend).

"And I drove across the desert/I was in my four-wheel drive/I was looking for the Buddha/And I saw Jesus Christ." Jagger says that Jesus smiled at him and told him to make some noise, jump for joy, and remember what He had said.

"My soul is like a ruby/And I threw it in the earth/But now my hands are bleeding/from scrabbling in the dirt/and I look up to the heavens/and a light is on my face/I never never never/thought I'd find a state of grace." Without wanting to make too many unnecessary inferences, it would be safe to say that St. Paul could not be faulted for believing that Jagger's lyrics conjured up memories of his experience on the road to Damascus.

Rolling Stone magazine asked Jagger about the intriguing song and his state of spirituality. "Of course, I have a spiritual side. Everyone has one. It's whether they're going to lock it up or not," Jagger stated. "Our lives are so busy that we never get any time to be, first, reflective, and then afterward, to let some sort of spiritual light into your life." He goes on to clarify the meaning of the song: "It is about the joy of creation, inspiring you to a love of God. Not that I want to explain my songs, really."

It would be a mistake to make too much or too little of Jagger's seeking/knocking/finding song (it is followed later on the album by "God gave me everything I want"). Nevertheless, those who have eyes to see should be aware of the way in which our culture is searching and probing and praying under its breath.

So how does one account for the sentiments expressed by Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and the Rolling Stone's Mick Jagger? Midlife crisis? Latter life realism? That is not always clear. After all, it seems as though our entire culture has a thirst for transcendence.

When MTV was looking for a band to perform at their televised New Year's Eve bash, P.O.D. (Payable on Death) got the job to rock around the clock at midnight-the highest profile slot.

The turbo-charged band of pierced and tattooed believers sold one million copies of their new album *Satellite* in one month after its September release. P.O.D. even prayed and fasted before they began recording the album. "The purpose of fasting was for focus, and-to tell you the truth-nobody was even supposed to know we did that...We just wanted to experience something together, as a band. But that was not supposed to be public knowledge," confessed bass player Traa. "We're not a religious band-we're a spiritual band. Yes, we have a personal relationship with God, but we're not trying to convert anybody to live like us. We're just a rock band."

Perhaps, but there is much more to it than all that. "There's so much going on in the world," observes singer Sonny Sandoval, "I don't think the kids want to be yelled at and cussed out. People want to come together. They're searching for answers. We learned how to express our faith and our love in a way that kids could embrace, that wasn't preachy."

P.O.D.'s high-energy hit "Alive" touches upon the universal spiritual longing we have to know and be known by God: "Sunshine upon my face/A new song for me to sing/Tell the world how I feel inside/Even though it might cost me everything/Now that I know this, so beyond, I can't hold this/I can never turn my back away/Now that I've seen you/I can never look away."

P.O.D. is one of those rare rap-n-metal acts that has taken the hard rock scene by storm. In its review of their album, *Rolling Stone* said: "If P.O.D.'s religious devotion inspired them to turn out the most soulful hard-rock record so far this year, then maybe more new-metalheads should get down with God."

THE WORLD'S GREATEST BAND

During their halftime performance at the Super Bowl in New Orleans, U2 gave fitting tribute to the Americans lost on September 11. As the names of the victims were displayed over a huge backdrop, the lead singer Bono began to pray Psalm 51:15: "O Lord, open my lips, so my mouth show forth thy praise. O Lord, open my lips, so my mouth show forth thy praise." U2 then launched into a stunning version of "Where the streets have no names." Their recent album, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, has garnered praise from every quarter of the music scene, but many observers are also noting epiphanies at their live shows.

In writing her review of a U2 concert for the *Chicago Sun Times*, Cathleen Falsani observed: "I drove 200 miles this week to go to church in a gymnasium at the University of Notre Dame. With 11,000 strangers. And one Irish preacher with a familiar face."

She goes on to confess, "in light of recent events that have sent me-like so many millions of others out there-diving back toward a place we call faith, the lyrics [Bono] sang were imbued with new meaning. It was sacred, joyful, healing. Like how church is supposed to be." What an utterly fascinating observation found within the culture section of a mainstream newspaper.

Some Christian observers have also testified to similar mystical experiences.

"I found myself singing the songs, very aware of God's gracious presence," testified Randy L. Rowland, a pastor from Seattle, about his time at a U2 concert. "At times during the concert, I found myself praying in the gaps between songs or during instrumentals."

"When the concert was over, I realized that I had been involved in worship even though I hadn't really expected to worship," related Rowland in the pages of *Worship Leader* magazine. "I hadn't been all that conscious of what I was being caught up in, but there I was, worshipping the risen Lord at a rock concert."

According to the Barna Research Group, a majority of people who attend Christian worship services leave without feeling that they've experienced God's presence. Less than one-third of the adults feel as though they truly interacted with God. Stunningly, one-third of the adults who regularly attend worship services say that they have never experienced God's presence at any time during their life. According to George Barna, "The research shows that while most people attend church services with a desire to connect with God, most of them leave the church disappointed, week after week. Eventually people cease to expect a real encounter with God and simply settle for a pleasant experience."

So what happens when people settle for the pleasant experience at church and discover the real encounter at a rock concert? I am no theologian, but I would say that God is up to something very interesting.

TAKING THE TIME WITH A FRIEND

The London Sunday Times Magazine ran a fascinating article not long ago about Noel Gallagher from the mega-huge British band Oasis. When the subject of his friendship with Bono of U2 came up, Gallagher confessed that he peppered the rock legend with questions about religion.

"Look, you believe in it all," Gallagher said to Bono. "I'm Catholic same as you. Can you explain it to me?" He told the Times that Bono sat down for two hours and explained his faith. Gallagher was bold and wise enough to even ask how a wealthy rock star prays. I am not sure what Bono said during the conversation, but Gallagher remarked that, "He made tons of sense."

According to Gallagher, Bono sent a package a few days later to Noel and his girlfriend Sara that included Philip Yancey's book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* "And [Bono's] dad had just died," Gallagher remarked. "How difficult must that be? Takes time out because two people were interested. What a guy."

What a guy, indeed. It all comes down in the end-no matter if you are a rock star, business executive, mother, teacher, or youth pastor-as to whether or not we are able to take some time out and entertain the questions of a longing heart. It can make all the difference to an anguished soul, especially when it seems like the world stopped turning.

Steve Beard is the editor in chief of Good News. For more on faith and pop culture, check out his website at www.thunderstruck.org.