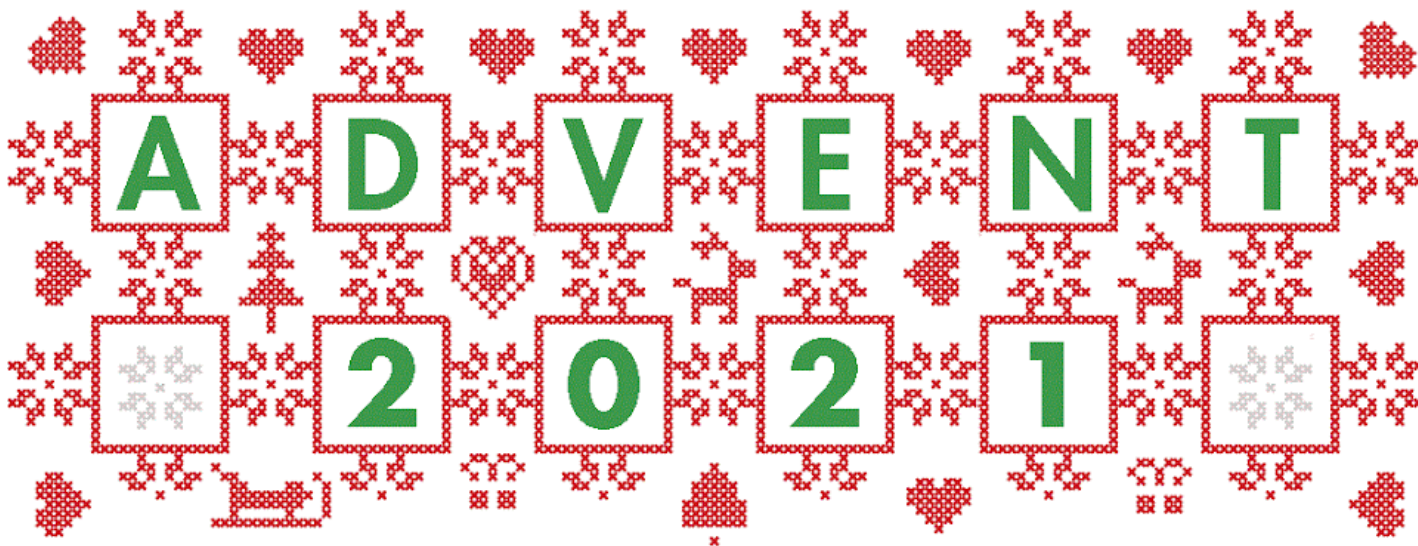


# Essay Daily



Thursday, December 6, 2018

## Dec 6: Matthew Vollmer's Notes for an Essay on Special Music

Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. —Philippians 4:8

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Begin, maybe, with a description of Aunt Melinda, who was pretty and sweet but couldn't help herself from laughing at people in church when they sang, specifically those who were called upon—or who nominated themselves—to deliver "Special Music," which was a part of the service where a visitor or congregant came to the front of the church and—with or without accompaniment—sang. It wasn't ever supposed to be funny. Still, Aunt Melinda never failed to laugh. There was something about somebody standing in front of a group of church members and belting out a solo—or two people singing a duet, or three people singing in a trio, and so on—that she simply couldn't take. I was never sure why, but I figured that it had something to do with the idiosyncratic distortions that a face in mid-singing often required—the raising of the eyebrows, the widening of the eyes, the stretching of the mouth. Then there were the sounds themselves: strained screeching, whining sopranos, thunderous baritones, off-key squelches. All of these elements conspired, in one way or another, to make Aunt Melinda laugh. She'd laugh if she averted her eyes. She'd laugh if she lowered her head. She'd clamp her mouth shut but her eyes would water. She'd try to suppress the laughing and in suppressing it begin to shake, to tremble, and then her entire pew would vibrate. Aunt Melinda was not malicious. She was not unkind. She simply couldn't help it. Laughing at singers was simply beyond her control.

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Remind readers how the "special" in "Special Music" means "set apart." Significant. Esteemed. How it might be nice, on some level, to think that this—or had been—an appropriately titled event. Sometimes it was. Sometimes it wasn't.

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Explain how I came from a musical family? How my grandfather played the clarinet in a jazz band—albeit secretly,

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because it would disappoint his God-fearing parents, who certainly disapproved of the secular music, and probably distrusted the transgressive nature of improvisation. How my great aunt Dot—a jolly, chubby diabetic who kept Fruity Pebbles and chocolate mint ice cream bars in her kitchen—taught “Voice” for years at Southern Missionary College, in Collegedale, TN, where, after she retired, an auditorium was named in her honor. Maybe mention that LP of Aunt Dot we had, of her singing hymns in a quivery contralto? And the LP we owned of the band my Uncle Don played and sang with called the Wedgwood Trio, which some people joked was the Grateful Dead of Seventh-day Adventist bands. How my dad sometimes sat down and pounded out the one hymn he’d memorized on our piano, how he always sang bass during song service, and sometimes retrieved a trombone from a black case in our attic and blew low, lumbering melodies from its bell.

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Then there was mom. Who served as the pianist for her church—for forty years. Played hymns during song service. Played that little melody everybody sang quietly after the invocation. Accompanied anybody who was singing or playing an instrument for special music. Played for preludes and postludes. Practiced upcoming hymns at home every week. Rarely played simply for pleasure, or to pass the time, or to express herself, though she did play with precision and feeling. Rarely, if ever, missed a note. Knew a few classical songs by heart, would gladly sit down to play minuets and the like. But never played rock or pop or jazz or blues. Rarely played anything other than “sacred” music. Asked her once to help me play the theme song to the movie “Chariots of Fire” and with her ears and hands and our record player she figured out the first few bars, wrote these notes on a blank sheet of music. Years later, I purchased the sheet music to a Hall and Oates song at a local music store. Couldn’t make heads or tails of it. Too many sharps. Asked mom for help. She tried to play the song. Failed. Then laughed. She, an accomplished pianist, could not, for the life of her, negotiate rhythm and blues. The more wrong notes she struck, the more she laughed.

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Should I say my mother’s laughter was a kind of song? A kind of special music? Amazing that any one person could have so many laughs—the air-compressor wheeze, the explosive guffaw, the witch-cackle, the woo-hoo-hoo, the ha-ha-ha, the hee-hee-hee, the silent body tremble. Amazing, yes, but sometimes grating, since these laughs were often quite loud, and arrived with a frequency that was unmatched by any other human being I’d ever met. “Well,” she might say, were I ever to complain, “Would you rather have a mean momma?” Maybe then talk about how I was naturally inclined to mimic other people’s voices and the sounds that came out of their bodies, and as it turned out, I could reproduce each of my mother’s laughs with a near-perfect fidelity, and whenever I did so, in her presence, it only made her laughing worse, because hearing me mimic her was—from her perspective—pure hilarity? Every laugh I imitated inspired her to laugh a different laugh, which I then reproduced, creating a loop of real laugh, echo laugh, real laugh, echo laugh, until we came full circle.

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Every day after school, my sister and I took turns practicing piano. Mom timed us with oven clock. If we “messed around,” or played anything other than our assigned music, she’d add minutes. I was lazy. Cheated by using visual memory and a half-decent ear. My piano teacher—a woman named Jennifer who ate candy bars during lessons and whose sleeveless dresses revealed the lurid flesh of her arms—played the notes and I watched her fingers and memorized patterns. This was easier than identifying notes, which seemed boring and lifeless and too often failed to reveal the secret of the music. Fingers, though. Fingers were alive and moving. Fingers I could trust. So I did.

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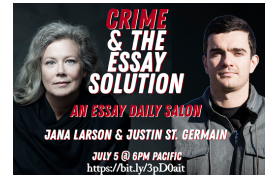
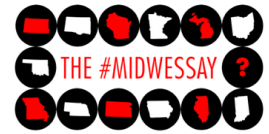
Talk about how people who sang for “Special Music” in church were only sometimes actual musicians. My friend Raylene, whose nostrils flared when she sang, was not a musician. Elder Burke—a retired pastor, with slicked-back, jet-black hair, and a tiny mustache (the kind a Maitre D’ at a French restaurant might wear), was not a musician, per se, but he sang voluminously and often made himself—simply by talking about how much he loved Jesus and wanted so badly to see him—cry. Sigmund, a diminutive German who sold a nutritional supplement called Barley Green—a vile-smelling powder that many Adventists in the 1980s stirred into glasses of water or juice and guzzled, sometimes pinching their noses, believing the beverage to have cancer-canceling properties—often treated church members to instrumentals on his violin, which he played with a stern and earnest passion. He seemed like a musician, sort of. He certainly seemed like he wanted people to think he was. He dedicated every song not to God—but to his mother.

Anybody who wanted to perform “Special Music” could, as long as they had the desire. Which maybe made it not so “special” after all? Then again, who among our congregation would dare deprive another human soul of expressing oneself, through song, to God, in the public sphere of our church? As it turned out: nobody. Listeners might wish that the song would hurry up and finish itself. They might note that the particular arrangement did not sound pleasing to the ear. They might observe that the singer made weird faces or gesticulated or bobbed their heads or relied too heavily on vibrato. But there was nothing to do but wait until it was over, and contribute to the hearty chorus of “Amens.”

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At some point, introduce Ellen G. White. Begin with the fact that she was a 19th century prophetess who, with her husband, co-founded the Seventh-day Adventist church, to which nearly every person in my immediate and extended

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family belonged. At the age of nine, Ellen had been walking home from school with her twin sister, when a classmate called her name. Ellen turned, and her classmate hurled—apparently for no other reason than meanness, though some said the act was inspired by Satan, who knew that God had already chosen Ellen as his messenger and wanted to interfere—a rock, which struck the prophetic-to-be squarely in the nose. Ellen spent the next three weeks unconscious. Though she would recover, she would remain ill for years, and battle health problems for the remainder of her life. At nineteen, however, she experienced the first of what would henceforth be many visions, during which she would be shown a great many things about what human beings should shun, and which included: butter, sugar, flesh food, secret vice, bicycles, novels, and photographs.

Of music, Mrs. White wrote that it “was made to serve a holy purpose, to lift the thoughts to that which is pure, noble, and elevating, and to awaken in the soul devotion and gratitude to God. What a contrast between the ancient custom and the uses to which music is now too often devoted! How many employ this gift to exalt self, instead of using it to glorify God! A love for music leads the unwary to unite with world lovers in pleasure gatherings where God has forbidden His children to go. Thus that which is a great blessing when rightly used, becomes one of the most successful agencies by which Satan allures the mind from duty and from the contemplation of eternal things.”

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I remembered hearing—or having heard, at some point—that the melodies of many of the beloved hymns we sang had originated as songs sung in bars, by drunks. Was this true? Apparently not. According to the internet, John Wesley and Martin Luther did not appropriate the melodies of “drinking songs” in order to write their hymns. Then again, William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, did. According to Helen Hosier, who wrote *William and Catherine Booth: Founders of the Salvation Army*, Booth’s argument was simple: “Why should the devil have all the best tunes?”

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Explain how, as a kid, I’d been taught that every possible human experience should be subject to close—if not microscopic—scrutiny, and that products of this world—songs, T-shirts, books, movies, magazines, TV shows, and amusements of any kind—might and very well *could* be spring-loaded booby traps laid by the devil. So deeply had this idea been embedded, it’d become hard-wired in my brain. I’d hear a song and immediately pass judgment, thinking *oh, that’s bad!* I knew singing about something served to elevate it. All singing, then, was a form of worship. Sing about something sad, sing about something earthly, and you just might be singing something Satanic.

Another danger? You would become like whatever it was that you exposed yourself to; for instance, if you listened to too much Metallica, you might grow your hair long and start bellowing things like: “Our brains are on fire/ with the feeling to kill/ And it won’t go away/ until our dreams are fulfilled.”

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Sometimes, though, I’d hear a song and think: *that’s bad and I like it*. And then, with a certain hopefulness: *but maybe it’s not that bad?*

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Of loud, brash singing, Ellen White wrote, in *Selected Messages, Book 2*, “the Holy Spirit never reveals itself... in such a bedlam of noise. This is an invention of Satan to cover up his ingenious methods for making of none effect the pure, sincere, elevating, ennobling, sanctifying truth for this time... A bedlam of noise shocks the senses and perverts that which if conducted aright might be a blessing.”

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Rewind to May 5th, 1985. I’m sitting with a tape deck and old clock radio in the sun porch of our house: a sixteen-windowed room that allowed a 180 degree view of the rhododendron grove in the cove at the base of a mountain where we lived. The clock part of the radio was analog: that is, it had an hour and minute and second hand. It had a tuner—a little wand that slid along a row of numbers. I turned the dial, scrolling through static until I found a station that happened to be playing Casey Kasem’s Top Forty. Can’t remember why—maybe because I wasn’t allowed to purchase popular music—but I decided to press the “record” button on the tape deck. The number one song that week was “White Horse,” an electro/synth-pop/post-disco number by a Danish band named Laid Back. Even now, when I hear those fuzzy, stuttering beats and that loping bass, I return to that day when I lay mesmerized upon a carpet checkered with dark and light green squares. Where had my parents gone? Were they outside gardening? Mowing the lawn? The only thing that mattered: they weren’t there to stop me.

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How did I pay for the first cassette tapes I ordered using my Columbia House membership, which promised 12 albums for the price of a penny—not including, of course, “shipping and handling”? Can’t remember. Must have written check. At fourteen? Did I have a checking account then? Maybe. First batch of tapes included: Whitney Houston, New Kids on the Block, Duran Duran, The Cure, R.E.M., Terence Trent D’Arby, George Michael, Information Society, D.J. Jazzy Jeff & Fresh Prince. Remember lining up the cases so that all the labels faced me and I could therefore admire them. How I stared at them thinking, *these are my tapes*. Savoring the sense of ownership. Feeling validated. That, in the end, I was



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a person who had actual tapes. Tapes were cool. Was I cool? Might I be? I hoped so, maybe. But only unless it didn't mean I didn't end up like the people who, in one of Mrs. White's first visions, were traveling along a narrow pathway of light, took their eyes off the Savior, fell into the darkness below, and never came back.

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Talk about MTV. How, at the house in the shadowy cove where my family lived, we didn't have cable—the lines didn't run out that far. So, no MTV. Therefore, whenever I encountered the channel, my eyes glazed over. Discuss vivid memory of standing in the master bedroom of a couple who were my parents' friends—Ellen and Leon—and how the video to Michael Jackson's "Beat It" appeared onscreen. Those initial notes: synth-gongs signaling something ominous. The howling ruffians leaping off a loading dock. The manhole cover sliding open. The white dude with the feathery hair and a toothpick dangling from his mouth. Michael Jackson on a bed, hugging a pillow, emerging later in that red leather jacket. The dance fighting. How even though Michael was, like me, boyish and fragile-looking, he'd mastered his body in a way that was inexplicable. I, on the other hand, had not. No matter how often I tried to use the reflection of the glass windows of our church to see myself moonwalk, I never quite mastered MJ's fluid effortlessness.

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Note this, at some point: the vast majority of Seventh-day Adventists do not dance. They don't slow dance. They don't square dance. They don't waltz, clog, or salsa. As Mrs. White said, "The true Christian will not desire to enter any place of amusement or engage in any diversion upon which he cannot ask the blessing of God. He will not be found at the theater, the billiard hall, or the bowling saloon. He will not unite with the gay waltzers, or indulge in any other bewitching pleasure that will banish Christ from the mind." But Adventists do—or did—"march." Our church held socials in the fellowship hall where people marched in unison to rousing band music blasted from a portable tape deck. Our leader was the aforementioned Elder Burke, the one with the pencil-thin mustache and head of jet-black hair, who cried when he talked about longing to see the face of Jesus. Elder B. might have carried, while he marched, a baton. At any rate, he was a vociferous and jubilant leader—one we all eagerly followed.

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Not once have I ever seen my parents dance together. The only members of my family on both sides who ever danced earnestly were Effie and Luther, my now dead great uncle and great aunt. They lived in Greenville, South Carolina, in a little brick house across the great big field that separated their home from my grandparents'. For years, Luther sold vegetables out of a van. Then he went to bed for ten years. Had a hernia, and his particular condition had allowed his intestines to end up inside of his ball sack, which my father had once seen and said was—as improbable as this sounds—as big as a basketball. When Luther wasn't in bed, he was a silly old man, one who repeated the same half dozen lewd jokes he knew and afterwards laughed hilariously, which would always prompt Effie to swat him with the back of her hand or a dish towel and say, "Luther! NOBODY wants to hear ANY of that." On Christmas day, before Luther retreated to bed for a decade, we would walk from my grandparents' house and across the field to Effie and Luther's, to eat roast beef and biscuits. Luther would open the lid of a cabinet in the living room and place a record—"Jingle Bell Rock"—on a turntable. Then he and Effie would dance. Impressively so, for their ages, or so I always thought. They had rhythm. Luther would spin Effie around. Their hips would swing. Everyone would laugh and clapp. This kind of dancing—to a Christmas song whose "rock and roll" seemed comparably quaint when compared to the heavy beats and suggestive nature of contemporary music—seemed acceptable in everybody's eyes. But nobody else joined in.

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How dad wouldn't look when mom danced. I had to agree: it wasn't pretty. It was, in fact, a parody of dancing that had, over the years, become a parody of itself, as if my mother was celebrating her refusal to take dancing seriously. She bit her lip. She snapped her fingers. She gyrated. Dad shielded his eyes with a hand. Mom put her hands on her hips and said, "You don't like to watch me dance?" Dad would say, simply, "No, I don't." And mom would laugh hysterically.

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Explain how, at the Seventh-day Adventist boarding school I attended as a teenager, students weren't allowed to have radios or 8 tracks or tape or CD players. Somebody once got in trouble for using a U2 song during the end-of-the-year slideshow. But students could play Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart," as long as it was being used as the soundtrack to the anti-drug skit our school performed at least once a year—a didactic, pantomimed melodrama about a boy, who, after engaging in a heated fight with his father, leaves home, and is soon embraced by a group of teens wearing all black, and who take the cardboard signs hanging from their necks—each Sharpied with various drug names, like "PCP," "ANGEL DUST," "WEED," "COKE," and "SNUFF"—and transfer them to the neck of the boy, and then clasp their hands together and form a circle around him, which the father and the boy attempt to break through but can't, at least not until they both fall to their knees in prayer, at the exact moment when "Total Eclipse of the Heart" reaches its dramatic crescendo. And then the circle of students collapses, and the father and son embrace.

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How certain kids at my boarding school—my roommate Scott, for instance, who used to stare at himself in the mirror

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with pursed lips and growl about how he looked just like Simon Le Bon—got to a point where they felt so guilty about their music consumption that they burned entire tape collections. I remember someone saying that they could hear screams—they were faint, but definitely audible—as the cassettes melted. The spirits of demons, maybe, that had once possessed the music, now fleeing the flames. Or just the whistle of air through holes in burning plastic.

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How, if my mom came to pick me up for home leave or an open weekend at my boarding school, I'd play a mix tape featuring rock songs I'd learned, through trial and error, that she wouldn't complain about. I always included The Cure's "Just like Heaven," because I'd played it before in her presence and never heard her say, "What in the world is this," or "This is about to drive me crazy," or "I can't hear anything but drums." She never actually came out and said that drums were, in and of themselves, *evil* but I figured this was what she probably believed, didn't even want to ask for fear of hearing that yes, drums were bad, had demon-summoning powers, could put you in a trance, could mesmerize, and one who is mesmerized is one who is not in control of one's mind, and if one isn't in total control of one's mind, then who is? The answer being, of course, probably, maybe, actually—Satan. But what if you just liked the *sound* of a song? Just liked the way it sounded? And what if this song, say, was a love song? Love songs were nice, right? Love came from God, didn't it? Technically, yes, but you also had to ask, as always, what the singer was striving to glorify. It was a question avoided asking myself, back when I was fifteen and enamored with The Cure, and with the band's lead singer and songwriter, a pale, mascara-and-smear-lipstick wearing chap who sported a haystack hairdo—an artfully disheveled mop of dyed black hair that looked not unlike he'd been electrocuted—and who wore big black baggy sweaters and black jeans and giant white high top sneakers and whose stage presence was not unlike an awkward nine-year-old girl who wanted to dance but was too shy. The Cure played dark, dirge-y funereal music. They played shamelessly upbeat pop songs. But they also had songs with lyrics like, "I'll nail you to the floor and push your guts all inside ow-how-out" and had albums with song titles like "Pornography" "Torture" and "The Snakepit" and "Screw" and, most problematically, "The Blood," a track from the album *Head on the Door* that featured flamenco-style acoustic guitar, a song that I forced myself to skip when I played the CD, despite how cool that rollicking guitar sounded, because it contained the lyrics "I am paralyzed by the blood of Christ/ though it clouds my eyes/ I can never stop." Though I had no way of knowing that the song was actually about an alcoholic beverage called "The Tears of Christ," I worried that this was The Cure's official take on the actual blood of Christ, that it contained paralyzing properties, a theory that seemed at odds with what I'd been taught, and which I believed: that the blood of Christ washed away my sins.

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As a senior in boarding school, I discovered the first and longest letter my father had ever written to me—a letter I read once and never saw again because he never actually delivered it and—I presume—threw it away. This was back when I'd first taken to borrowing my father's clothes—especially his old flannel shirts—proudly thinking, *I'm as big as dad now*. I'd been rummaging through his sweaters in a dresser drawer when I found a folded stack of notebook paper—I remember it was lined and light blue and that each page was just a little bigger than the palm of my hand. I don't remember how the letter started, whether he said, "Dear Son" or used my name in the salutation, only how strange it was to see so much of his handwriting in one place at once. I'd always admired his signature, thought his handwriting "looked better" than my mother's, which was a bubbling hodgepodge of cursive and print, a fact which never made much sense to me because she was the artist, she was the one who could paint and sew and draw. By this point in my life, my mother had written me volumes: daily notes in my elementary school lunchbox, cards on holidays and birthdays, weekly letters sent to my boarding school mailbox, the envelope flaps decorated with stickers she saved especially to decorate her correspondence. If my father, who preferred real-time conversation, had ever written so much as a single phrase on so much as a birthday card, I couldn't remember. And yet here in my hands were pages of words and sentences, all addressed to me. I can't remember if the letter was complete, since it would make sense for an unfinished letter to remain unsent, nor can I remember any one line in particular, only that the gist of it was that my father had seen a stack of CDs in my room, and out of curiosity had looked through them, and what he'd seen had troubled him. He didn't know much about rock music, didn't listen to or keep up with any contemporary secular music that I knew of, and preferred, when listening to the radio, to listen to old time gospel, or to preachers who sermonized with great, gasping fervor. But he knew about Guns 'N Roses. He said he'd known I listened to rock music, but hadn't guessed that my tastes ran so dark. Can't remember much about the letter, except that it composed a thoughtful kind of admonishment, expressed anxiety about that darkness seeping into my life, and if it was true that there was nothing more important than a relationship with Christ, he couldn't see how Axl Rose fit into the equation. And though I couldn't articulate a valid response, years later I asked him about the letter and why he'd never sent it. He said he didn't know. That it wasn't the only letter he'd written to me. That maybe, in the end, he'd written those letters more for his own sake than for mine.

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Was I really supposed to only listen to sacred music? It wasn't that I disliked it. I loved the album *Angel Band* by Emmylou Harris. I loved to belt out "Blessed Assurance." I loved the song "Borrowed Angel," by the Anita Kerr Choir, which my father put on the Hi-Fi on Friday nights, as the sun was going down, and whose velvety harmonies helped us welcome the Sabbath hours. Even so, didn't the writer of Ecclesiastes say "there was a time for everything"? Didn't that contradict Paul's instruction to "be joyful always"? Was such a thing as being "joyful always" even possible? What kind of preternaturally gifted human could praise God in *all* circumstances? Sure, Job had done it, but he was, like, the

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best of the best, and God had known that from the beginning, which was why he gave Satan permission to drain the man's wealth and kill all ten of his ten children plus his servants, and to afflict him with boils. God knew Job would praise him no matter what. And he did. And so was rewarded in the end.

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One thing I couldn't deny, and never did: singing was always the best part of worship. For instance, on Friday nights, after vespers at my boarding school, our chaplain would announce that anybody who wanted to sing could stay for a while afterwards. After a group of us convened, our chaplain would lead us outside, into the night. We'd follow the bobbing blob of his flashlight as we walked down Academy Drive—the strip of unmarked asphalt that wound from Reeves Station Road to our school—and then we'd stand at the sign that bore our school's name. There, we formed a circle, and if we were lucky we got to hold the hand of someone we liked, perhaps even adored, and our chaplain would ask us what we wanted to sing, and someone would shout out the title of a song, and then someone else would start us off, maybe too high at first and someone else would suggest a lower key, and we'd start again. I always hoped we'd sing "Pass It On," and we always would. "Meet me in heaven," we'd sing, "we'll hold hands together." And there, under the stars, next to my friends, my chest would swell, and the song would help me believe—at least for a little while—that such a thing just might be possible.

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*Matthew Vollmer is the author of [Future Missionaries of America](#), [Inscriptions for Headstones](#), [Gateway to Paradise](#), and [Permanent Exhibit](#). He teaches in the English Department at Virginia Tech.*

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