

Infinite Playlists

How to Have **Conversations**
[**Not Conflict**] with Your Kids
About **Music**

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[with notes by
Nathan Stocker]

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Publications

Infinite Playlists: How to Have Conversations [Not Conflict] with Your Kids About Music

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introduction

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“I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll”

OK, I’LL ADMIT IT. I love 1980s Rock ‘n’ Roll. Not the fluffy, pre hip-hop, pop stuff, but the heavy distortions, consuming bass, and low driving drums that cause your heart to change rhythm. Give me Boston, BTO, Aerosmith, and the Scorpions and I’ll be pounding out the beats to “Hurricane” on the steering wheel of my car. They just don’t write ‘em like that anymore!

This genre of music had always intrigued me. However, the reawakening of my Christian faith after college caused a dilemma. How could I listen to music and groups that were not considered “Christian” by the mainstream church?

Like many of you, I had stuffed my admission of the love of all types of music; I threw away many of my favorite college animal house classics and replaced them with Michael W. Smith, Newsboys, and Rich Mullins. I was a “new creation.” I did not want to be reminded of my life as the “old creation.” For me, the modern, secular artists and songs that I loved did not even get a listen once the Spirit set my faith on fire!

When Christian music became an official genre in the 1980s, there was an obvious difference in lyric and feel from songs topping the Top 40 charts. Scripture verses replaced

seductive poetry, and major chords and folk percussion replaced minor chords and screaming guitars. Keyboard: good. Electric guitar: bad. And that is how I thought.

Secretly, however, when no one was around, I would sneak a dose of Van Halen's "Eruption" like a junkie taking a hit of hash behind the garage of his father's house. I felt dirty and somewhat evil. But the cool melodic guitar solo of Pink Floyd's "Comfortably Numb" stroked my musical heart-strings and I couldn't get enough. *How could this music be bad?* I thought.

Fast-forward to today. As of this book writing, I have a thirteen-year-old son who also loves music in its many forms. He is a better natural musician than I will ever be. He hears a drumbeat or guitar solo and can imitate it move by move, almost without error. (Honestly, it makes me sick and proud all at once!) He is a passionate music lover.

Accompanying my son's passion is a natural curiosity that most musicians possess. Let me explain. As musicians, we love music—all music. True, there may be styles and influences that we favor over and above others, but if we are honest, we love to sift through the sand of notes and beats to discover the jewels that make any genre glisten.

My son is no different. He loves discovering new (and old) guitar solos and fills. He loves to pound out the simple beats of The Cars and the more complicated drum fills from David Crowder. He has also discovered the joy of downloading music and now has the world of music at his clicker-tips!

With his insatiable appetite for music, I knew that eventually his taste and exposure to non-Christian music would prompt *the question*. What is *the question*? It came violently

at me from him over the phone when he was twelve. He was on a vacation with my parents in San Francisco when they happened to venture into the Virgin Records store located on Stockton Street. This megastore houses thousands and thousands of music choices. When I picked up the phone, I could hear the thumping of Gwen Stefani in the background.

“Dad?” Nathan said.

“Yeah, Nate. What’s up? Where are you?” I asked.

“Grandma and I are in the music store and I have to ask you a question.”

I knew he wanted to buy a CD. I was expecting him to ask me my preference between Audio Adrenaline and Relient K (two very cool Christian bands) so I said, “Let me guess; you want to know if you can get a CD.”

“Yes!” he said. “Which is better? Van Halen or Def Leppard?”

I’m convinced that electric buzzing sound I heard was my brain short-circuiting. *Van Halen or Def Leppard? How could I have raised such a rebel? Where did I go wrong? This must have been his mother’s fault!* The words reverberated in my head.

In that moment, I knew that Nathan and I had to have a talk about music choice. I realized I needed to come to grips with my response as a parent to the desires and interest my son had for certain kinds of music. Hence this book.

Because music is such a touchy subject to many people both inside and outside the church, I want to be clear as to the purpose of this book. Let me start from the negative. The purpose of this book is not to convince you or your child to hate and reject “secular” music. Conversely, this writing is not to convince you or your child that only “Christian” music is the way to go. My goal in writing this book is threefold:

- ✦ First, it is to provide you, the parent, with some understanding of God's purpose for music.
- ✦ Second, it is to offer guidelines that will help you and your child decide which music is acceptable and healthy and which is not.
- ✦ Third and ultimately, my goal is to help foster healthy conversations between you and your child—conversations about music, honoring God, and the importance of correct decisions when it comes to music and media.

Nathan and I have worked through (and will continue to work through) an agreement that we believe honors God and allows one the freedom to choose music based on a framework that is both biblical and respectful. The principles and guidelines shared in this book work for us. They may or may not work for you, but again, having open conversations with your child is the goal, not an imposing set of rules.

One last caveat: Unless specified, I am not promoting specific artists, bands, songs, or genres of music. Most of the examples are just that—examples.



track 1

"Don't You Forget About Me"

Music: A Gift from God

*I will sing a new song to you, O God;
on the ten-stringed lyre I will make music to you.*

—PSALM 144:9

*I have no use for cranks who despise music, because
it is a gift of God. . . . Next after theology, I give to
music the highest place and the greatest honor.*

—MARTIN LUTHER

I CAN REMEMBER IT LIKE it was yesterday. I was in third grade; a snot-nosed, porky kid who loved pizza and hated the fact that popularity eluded me. Though I tried to cover up my uncoolness with bad jokes and a worse circle of friends, my status as outsider could not be shaken. I remember asking God why He did not make me popular. Why could other boys, on whom the girls and teachers focused, shoot baskets and run fast, but I could do neither? In misery, I would retreat to the comforting sounds of my John Thompson piano-lesson books and pound out “Edelweiss” from *Teaching Little Fingers That Play*. (Yes, I earned all of the gold stars for achievement.)

After trudging through that year, it became evident to me that while I would never be able to keep up with the football stars of my class, I played music . . . and I loved it. While other families were raking leaves or playing football on a Sunday afternoon, my family gathered in the living room around the piano singing everything from bluegrass to 1940s hits. My mother’s fingers danced on the piano keys as my dad hammered out chords on the banjo. I usually strummed the guitar or standup bass while my brother and sisters sang out the verses of “Ma, He’s Makin’ Eyes at Me!” (If you know that song, you’re older than I thought.)

My parents used this family time to practice for their side job, which was to provide nightly entertainment at a pizza joint called Shakey’s Pizza Parlor. On occasion, and as a gimmick for tips, they would prop me up on a stool as I played the only three-chord banjo song I knew, “Little Brown Jug.” The

gimmick worked and we would come home with more grocery money and pizza than we could imagine!

After one such occasion, I went to school the next morning and noticed that something had changed. I was no longer the unknown, chubby kid. The most popular circles in the school talked with me and invited me to eat at their lunch table, the ultimate statement of popularity! Come to find out, the evening before, the most popular kid on campus ate at Shakey's and heard me plunk out my three-chord tune. He thought it was the coolest thing a third grader could do and told all of his friends. I was in. I was popular and the other kids truly appreciated that I had this gift called *music*.

I do not share this story to say that being a musician will make you popular. That is like saying being a politician will make you president or being a chef will make you Emeril Lagasse.

To me, that was my first realization that music was not just another created thing that God wove into the fabric of my being. In that moment, when someone else recognized the music in me, I knew that this was given to me *extrinsically*—from outside of myself.

Today I still hold this gift with trembling hands. I realize that the music I play is not mine but God's. I realize that the best use of this music is to give it back to Him as an offering and not to use it as a self-aggrandizing badge. Music is mysterious and at the same time obvious. It is simple yet complex. Each time I play it or sing it or hear it or dissect it, music teaches me something new—something new about life, about myself, about God, about others, about relationships, and about the world; music is a teacher.

Smokey Robinson is, perhaps, the most renowned entertainer in the music business. For more than forty-five years he has written and/or performed four thousand songs including “Tears of a Clown,” “Just to See Her,” and “Shop Around.” Without hesitation, Robinson readily acknowledges God as a key part of his life. “I’m not a religious man,” he says, “but I have a great relationship with God.”

With the ups and downs of the music industry, Robinson quickly came to understand that there is a deeper, spiritual part of the human experience. “Do you think you’re just flesh and blood, and that’s it?” he asks. “I feel that . . . all the music I’ve ever done is a gift from God.”¹

.....
A gift is something given
voluntarily without payment coming
back to the giver.
.....

A gift is something given voluntarily without payment coming back to the giver. It is a sign of favor toward that person. It is an extension of love to the receiver. A true gift is completely free, no strings attached, no conditions or reservations. This is the type of gift God gives us through music.

God Himself values music as an expression of favor. Zephaniah 3:17 declares, “The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.”

That verse hit me like a sound wave from heaven. God Himself sings! Picture that. God sitting down at the piano, the tips of His fingers gently rest on the keys as He contemplates His love for you. As those thoughts of you scroll

through His mind, a gentle smile etches His face. He cannot contain Himself any longer. He cannot hold back that which has welled up inside. The expression of His favor for you erupts from His vocal chords as He lets the air of heaven flow from His lungs in a joyous chorus of melody over . . . you. He sings over you and me with rejoicing!

When I was a little boy, cowering under my parents' covers during a thunderstorm, Mom would calm me with, "It's OK, thunder is just God's voice singing a duet with the lightning." I always thought, *Why does He have to sing so loud!*

If God uses the gift of music personally, we better take a serious look at how we receive it, how we use it, and how we enjoy it.

Why God Gave Us Music

God gave music to the world for many reasons.

First, God gave us the gift of music as one of the vehicles through which we praise Him. Music is a response to what God has done for His people. It helps us respond to God's goodness and glory in a way unlike anything else. When God brought the children of Israel back from captivity, they worshipped Him, making music to His Name. Isaiah 51:11, says, "The ransomed [people] of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing."

Take a quick journey through the psalms and you will see the constant call to praise the Lord with music all along the way:

Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. (Psalm 33:2)

It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High. (Psalm 92:1)

Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. (Psalm 149:3)

Whoa! Did you catch that last one? “Let them praise his name with *dancing*.” The d-word! I list that verse not for the sake of controversy but for another example that the arts, in all their *forms*, have been given to us as a gift to worship Him. Certain *expressions* of each form—whether music, dance, or PowerPoint backgrounds—should be used with careful discernment, because we want to offer our best to Him.² However, I digress.

.....
Music is for our enjoyment, both
personally and communally.
.....

Second, music is for our enjoyment, both personally and communally. Have you ever had one of those days? You know the ones I’m talking about. The “sleep through alarm, skip breakfast, late to work, forget the executive meeting, secretary quits, computer crashes, kids in the principal’s office, collection agent calling, burn dinner, argument with the spouse, kids yelling, can’t wait to go to bed” days? We’ve all had them. I can smell them coming when I look at my overstuffed date book. Call it therapy, call it crazy, but on those days, the amount of music I listen to increases exponentially! On days like that, light jazz fills my office. On days like that, praise and

worship music fills my car. Music calms my inner beast and soothes my soul. God has given me the gift as a companion to enjoy and to share with others. Johann Sebastian Bach once said that music is “an agreeable harmony for the honor of God and the permissible delights of the soul.”³

Not only is music an agreeable harmony for oneself and with God, but it is also a way of bringing people together. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul focused on the Christ-follower’s life and gave specific instructions that help us maintain healthy relationships. Among the instructions is how we are to live and worship together in Christian community. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes,

Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(Ephesians 5:19–20)

Our response to God’s goodness and the connection that we have with other believers is the joining of our voices together and the making of music to Him; beautiful, joyful music that praises Him for what He’s done and who He is. We celebrate together through music that He is the only God of the universe and that He is the Creator of it all. Everything! Things physical and things spiritual. Rocks, trees, spirits, air, music; it all flows from the hand of the Almighty.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who

does not change like shifting shadows. (James 1:17)

Unfortunately, many who call themselves Christians do not see the world this way. They see labels, they see stigmas, and they see unredeemable black-and-white lines. As a result, they miss out on so much beauty in life and succumb to a belief that this life is just the waiting room for heaven.

Have you ever been in a waiting room? Uncomfortable chairs, unadorned walls, a receptionist locked behind a glass cage, a few fake and dusty plants, and cheesy elevator music leaking out of the sagging, used-to-be-white paneled ceiling. *Yuck!* These are the people that give true Christ-followers a bad name. These are the people who look like they’ve been weaned on a dill pickle.

Play the black-and-white label too far and you’ll end up like the monks in the Middle Ages that completely removed themselves from society in fear that they might become tainted with “the world.” Cue evil music.

God never intended for Christians to live cloistered. This world is beautiful, a masterpiece painted by the Master Artist Himself. Every blade of grass, every flutter of a baby’s eyelash, every melody from the heart of an artist gives testimony to God’s creative greatness. The issue we need some discernment

Nathan’s Note

Music is something that I can’t understand. I don’t know why it soothes my soul and the truth is, I don’t care why or how. I only know that it does and that’s enough for me. When I’m totally bored, happy, or angry, I play music. Music helps me to express and/or release my emotions. Who wouldn’t want something like that in their life? I mean, come on!

about, especially in the music world, is the misuse and abuse of what God intends for good.

Author and speaker Louie Giglio wrote,

I think that all music—not just Christian music but all music—is worship music, because every song is amplifying the value of something. . . . There’s a trail of our time, our affections, our allegiance, our devotion, our money. That trail leads to a throne, and whatever’s on that throne is what we worship. We’re all doing a great job of it because God has created us to be worshipers. The problem is that a lot of us have really bad gods.⁴

Understanding the dynamics of the spiritual battle behind music is instrumental in keeping both parent and child safe from the Devil’s harmful influences.

The Devil at Work

The Devil’s primary objectives are to defame God, to oppose Him at every turn, and to destroy God’s work in the world and in people. The Devil will, by any means possible, do everything in his power to accomplish his goals. The Bible describes him as a predator on the hunt for prey:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

While he is powerful, he is not original. He does not have

the ability to create anything new. Only God can do that. The Devil’s tactic is to take what God has given as a gift and distort it for his own purposes.

Take, for example, the distortion of the gift of sexual intercourse. Sex is a gift that God created for people’s enjoyment, to populate the earth, and to give Him glory. It is only to be experienced within the context of a marriage relationship. Satan uses this great gift, distorts its purpose and meaning, and causes many to stumble and fall, destroying families and individuals. Thousands of pornography Web sites are available to anyone with Internet access and a desire for getting a sexual fix. Countless opportunities for “casual sex” are available on many school campuses and every darkened street corner.

Unfortunately, our society now sees this misuse of sex as normal, and the created life that results from that union is considered expendable. What God intends for good, Satan distorts. What God gives as a gift, Satan tries to destroy.

.....
What God intends for good, Satan
distorts. What God gives as a gift,
Satan tries to destroy.
.....

The Devil has many titles in the Bible but the one that seldom gets a spotlight is noted in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. (Ephesians 2:1–2)

Satan is called “the ruler of the kingdom of the air.” Many theologians suggest that the air talked about here refers to the means through which communication happens. Speaking, singing, writing, texting—these are all forms of communication that the Devil twists and confuses to disrupt healthy relationships.

I remember writing an e-mail to a colleague asking a question about a song that was used in worship the week prior. A few minutes after I hit the send key, the person to whom I wrote the e-mail stormed into my office and demanded to know why I was accusing him of blasphemy. I was confused. I thought it was a cool song and wanted to use it for an upcoming event. He read into the e-mail something that was not intended.

I’m sure you’ve been speaking with someone and have completely missed the point of what they were saying. Maybe you were told by your spouse to pick up the kids from school but did not hear the words “at 3:15.” By 3:30, your children were devastated that mommy and daddy had forgotten them. This mishap ripples through your relationship with your family. To your spouse, this simple misunderstanding actually looks like you intentionally dismissed a request.

The Devil rules the air. Anything that we hear from “the air” is in his crosshairs to disrupt. What we hear from the TV, movies, radio, music, Internet—communication of any sort—is used by him to create chaos in our relationships with others and ultimately with God. How many times have you had a conversation with your child and he or she interprets what you said differently from what you intended? If you are like me, this happens often. Many theologians believe that

this misinterpretation is the work of Satan, trying to confuse the communication lines to create conflict.

True or not, one thing we know for sure: God’s gift of music, with its heart pounding rhythms, sweet poetry, and flowing melody, is an easy target for Satan.

As parents, we need to be aware of Satan’s power, but not threatened by it. God has already conquered Satan. His days of prowling are limited and he knows it. The beautiful aspect of God’s grace is that we are under God’s protection and He has given us His Holy Spirit to keep the work of Satan from taking hold in our personal lives and in our families. As it says in 1 John,

You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them [evil spirits], because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

Recap

- ✓ Music is a gift that is given to us by God! He Himself takes to song when He thinks about His love for you and me.
- ✓ God gave us music as one of the many ways that we can praise Him. He also gave it for our pleasure.
- ✓ As with any gift that God gives, the Enemy twists it and makes it ugly.