

Article

# “A Fun and Funky Disco Pastiche”: David Crowder Confronts Evangelical Performance Anxiety

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**Abstract:** Within evangelical communities, “worship” and “performance” are often diametrically opposed, with the latter instantly evoking damning connotations of pretense or artifice. This leads many artists to utilize a strategy of disavowal to legitimize their music-making as worship—erasing the “performance” category in order to highlight the ultimate worshipful aim of their actions. David Crowder, especially during his lengthy tenure with the David Crowder\*Band (DC\*B), places performative elements front and center through calculated uses of sound in live performances and on recordings. My analysis in this essay will focus on the ways that David Crowder legitimates “performance” as its own distinct musical space, using a dialectical move to navigate the performance/worship problem by *emphasizing* its divide rather than simply trying to erase it.

**Keywords:** evangelicalism; worship; performance; liturgy

## 1. Introduction

In discourses around contemporary worship music, there are a host of well-documented, deeply felt, and seemingly intractable disagreements about style, genre, instrumentation, and congregational participation. But regardless of where one finds oneself in the contemporary worship landscape, “performance” is a frequent and powerful scapegoat. Within evangelical communities, “worship” and “performance” are often diametrically opposed, with the latter instantly evoking damning connotations of pretense or artifice. As Marcell Silva Steuernagel says in the opening line of his excellent book on the subject: “‘Performance’ is a bad word in church. Drop it into a conversation about music in worship and listen as voices rise and echoes of the ‘worship wars’ of the 1990s bounce around the room” (Silva Steuernagel 2021, p. 1). And as artist and theologian Deborah Sokolove has observed “words like ‘entertainment’ and ‘performance,’ as well as ‘boring’ and ‘traditional,’ are used as weapons, hurled accusingly at various styles of preaching and worship that the speaker doesn’t like or doesn’t agree with” (Sokolove 2019, p. xi). Similarly, fan-worshippers invest themselves in “worship” as the appropriate outcome of musical encounters. In explaining why the band Jesus Culture was his favorite at a worship event I attended, Josh, a 22-year-old from Tennessee, explained that “it didn’t feel as if it were a concert when they performed but more of a worship atmosphere that I really appreciate”. So deftly negotiating this performance/worship divide is an essential maneuver for worship leaders and recording artists working in the worship genre.

And, of course, this tension is not exclusive to contemporary white evangelical contexts. Anxieties about musical skill, agency, and bodily presence are written into the source code of Protestantism from its earliest days, and these concerns have simply been renewed in the past several decades as churches figured out ways to embrace new forms of mass-mediated pop- and rock-based music. Anthropologist Glenn Hinson articulated this tension well in cataloging his experiences among African-American gospel artists:

All of these saints, and countless others like them, use the word “perform” to suggest spiritual theatricality. Often cloaking the term in verbal italics, or



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prefacing it with a disparaging “just” (as in “they weren’t real; they were *just* performing”), they speak of “performance” as the enactment of a put-on role for the purpose of “entertaining” an audience . . . To *perform* is thus to *pretend*. And to pretend, Rev. Harris suggests, is to be insincere. “When you’re saved”, he continues, “the whole thing changes . . . [Then] it’s not performing. It’s not acting. It’s being sincere”. Saints say that sincerity destroys the pretense of “performance”. Because when singers are sincere, when they are living the life that they sing about, they don’t *need* to perform. They don’t need to “put anything on”. Their sincerity—their authenticity—will carry the message. (Hinson 1999, p. 237)

As Hinson and Silva Steuernagel each describe in their respective contexts, many artists utilize a strategy of disavowal to legitimize their music-making as worship—erasing the “performance” category in order to highlight the ultimate aim of their actions. This is why ethnomusicologist Monique Ingalls, in her dissertation on contemporary praise and worship music, uses the Derridean formulation of “performance under erasure”, even placing the word itself in strikethrough lettering to indicate the ways in which this category can be actively undermined by those worship leaders and musicians who dare to invoke it (Ingalls 2008, p. 202).

I have written elsewhere about the importance of worship as a “vanishing mediator” in which the performing bodies of the worship leaders, musicians, and even the congregation themselves are made to disappear through the act of worship (Busman 2021). In this essay, however, I want to examine an artist that presents a radically different approach to the performance/worship divide by deploying notions of “performance” and “worship” strategically and in tandem. Instead of erasing performance, David Crowder, especially during his lengthy tenure with the David Crowder\*Band (DC\*B), places performative elements front and center through calculated uses of sound in live performances and through recordings. Drawing on my own ethnographic research among evangelical worshippers and worship leaders, a close reading of several David Crowder\*Band recordings from their first decade together, and the idea of “inherent transgression” from philosopher Slavoj Žižek, this essay will analyze the ways that David Crowder legitimates “performance” as its own distinct musical space, allowing him to navigate the performance/worship problem by *emphasizing* its divide rather than trying to simply erase it.

## 2. Historical Context

One of the core premises of my argument in this essay is that the primary domain for the construction and contestation of the performance/worship divide is the sounds of music-making itself. The specific parameters for this are intimately bound up with the development of contemporary praise and worship as a genre, so first, a small bit of historical context is required. The so-called “worship wars” have been examined in numerous musicological, historical, and theological analyses of contemporary evangelicalism, but in short, during the 1980s and early years of the 1990s, American evangelicalism was racked by a series of debates centered on the spiritual and strategic value of pop- and rock-inspired musical forms (Nekola 2009; York 2003; White 1997). As the advocates of contemporary praise and worship emerged from the worship wars with the upper hand—perhaps most famously with Michael Hamilton’s announcement of the “Triumph of Praise Songs” in Christianity Today in the summer of 1999—it became clear that the relevance-focused “contemporary worship” crowd, as identified by Ruth and Lim, now held a kind of musical neutrality as a core tenet of their worship ontology: that is the idea that music provided an attractive and “relevant” but ultimately neutral container for Christian messages (Ruth and Hong 2021). If musical “styles” or “forms” are inherently devoid of moral or spiritual content, then one needs simply to fill these musical containers with Christian texts in order to make them appropriate for Christian use. This represents one important strand of reactions to the worship wars, whereby every imaginable genre suddenly spawned a

hyphenated Christian counterpart: Christian hip-hop, Christian metal, Christian punk, Christian reggae, et cetera.

But simultaneous with its increasing congregational use on the grounds of its neutrality, contemporary praise and worship music was also becoming one of the most popular subsets of the Christian recording industry, representing 9% of the total Christian market share in 2009 and nearly 15% by 2014 (Gospel Music Association 2015). At the time of writing, “worship” songs—that is, songs written and adopted for congregational use and recorded by artists whose primary identity is connected to congregational worship leading—occupied 4 of the top 10 spots on the 2022 Billboard Year-End Hot Christian Songs chart. And as with any genre trafficking in millions of units per year, the artists who rose to the top of the worship charts tended to be the most stylistically middle-of-the-road: following a standard four- or five-piece band format with the leader on acoustic guitar, and mimicking a light rock/adult contemporary sound with a basic, four-chord harmonic palate. So at precisely the same moment that contemporary praise and worship music was building theological momentum on the grounds of its musical-stylistic neutrality, it was also establishing for itself a strongly defined musical-stylistic identity of its own through record sales and radio play. The result of this is that “worship”, as a category of music-making, has a sound. That is to say, because of the establishment of normative stylistic markers within contemporary praise and worship as a genre, the activity of worship actually has its own sonic signature. And because worship has its own distinct sound, its status can be challenged in purely sonic ways.

This is where David Crowder comes into the picture. Crowder got his start as a worship leader during his time as a student at Baylor University in Waco, TX, USA in the early 1990s. Troubled by a campus-wide survey that showed the majority of Baylor’s students were not attending church regularly, Crowder and his classmate Chris Seay founded University Baptist Church in 1995 with Crowder serving as the first worship pastor. The following year, Crowder recorded an album with his worship team titled *Pour Over Me* and attributed simply to “UBC Worship”. The album was released independently with no distribution, but it caught the attention of another Waco-based pastor named Louie Giglio who was in the process of creating a national worship gathering of college students that would eventually become the Passion Conference. With Giglio’s help and encouragement, Crowder began to gain national exposure as a worship leader and songwriter. He recorded another independent album of original songs, *All I Can Say*, in 1998, and in 2000, the David Crowder\*Band officially signed a three-album deal with sixstepsrecords, a new subsidiary of Christian label Sparrow Records (then owned by EMI Christian Music Group) that had been founded by Giglio to support his growing Passion Conference organization.

### 3. The David Crowder\*Band

From their earliest commercial releases, David Crowder\*Band (DC\*B) demonstrated an interest in expanding the scope of the worship genre by foregrounding and deconstructing the assumed genre neutrality that I have just been discussing. Their recordings and live performances frequently invoke a jarring diversity of styles consisting of cover songs, sampled sounds, and new material, and these drastic changes in musical style are often accompanied by purposeful sonic gestures that foreground a conscious acknowledgment of the alternate musical environments in which these songs are otherwise inscribed (Busman 2019). Their first major label album, *Can You Hear Us?* released in February 2002, shipped to customers with a bonus disc of live performances called simply *The Green CD*. The opening track is a nearly seven-minute live version of “Make A Joyful Noise/I Will Not Be Silent” from their earlier independent release, *All That I Can Say*. While faithful to the underlying text of the song, this live performance traverses several strikingly different sonic palates in fairly rapid succession, leading a UK reviewer from *Cross Rhythms* to remark:

[W]hile being immensely gifted at bringing people into a place of worship before God, DC\*B also manage to be playful with their music. For example, the opening song “Make A Joyful Noise/I Will Not Be Silent” begins as a reflective acoustic

cry of worship, segues seamlessly into a fun and funky disco pastiche, and finally builds to an awesome full-on rock praise climax. It doesn't sound like it should work, but this band pull it off, and it makes for a fantastic (and quite moving) listening experience. (Gallagher 2004)

And this whipsaw, bricolage performance is not unique among DC\*B's live releases from this period. "I Need Words/God Of Wrath" from *The Yellow CD*, a bonus disc shipped with their follow-up album *Illuminate* in September 2003, follows a similar three-part structure from "acoustic cry" to "fun and funky pastiche" and then finally to "full-on rock praise climax". From the start, Crowder fervently pleads his way through the opening strains of "I Need Words", the first track on *Can You Hear Us?*, with only a sparse fingerpicked acoustic guitar and some subtle string pads underneath. But about two minutes in, the music takes a sharp turn introducing an angular drum machine and prominent hip-hop record-scratching, which serves as an introduction to the song "God Of Wrath". This song builds continuously to a rock climax built on the song's bridge until the seven-minute mark, when the band abruptly drops out and Crowder re-enters with the simple fingerpicked acoustic guitar texture from the start. This time, Crowder solemnly pleads his way through the "God of Wrath" bridge with enthusiastic singing contributed by the congregation until the song finally comes to an end about a minute later. This three-part structure exhibited by these early live performances will be considered in more detail below, but I think it lays bare a sophisticated dialectical maneuver that is essential to Crowder's entire project under scrutiny in this essay. Additionally, this colorful and creative approach to their live performances instantly set DC\*B apart from their early 2000s worship music peers.

And it was not simply the freedom of live performance that unleashed this particular brand of genre experimentation. Three of their next four albums between 2004 and 2009 would be followed up with a short-form EP release that reinterpreted materials from the album with a new sonic frame. In 2005, they released *Sunsets & Sushi: Experiments in Spectral Deconstruction*, which presented a collection of subtly glitchy but recognizable remixes of the singles from *Illuminate* (2004) that were clearly inspired by the surfeit of shimmery "indietronica" from the early 2000s. In 2006, they released *B Collision or (B is for Banjo), or (B sides), or (Bill), or perhaps more accurately (. . . the eschatology of Bluegrass)*, which provided a kind of electro-bluegrass gloss on some highlights from *A Collision (or 3 + 4 + 7)* (2005). And in 2010, DC\*B released *Summer Happiness*, which provided stripped-down acoustic versions of the shimmery full-band arrangements from *Church Music* (2009). A particularly jarring example of this comes from the middle of *B Collision* in which Crowder undertakes a cover of Del McCoury's "I Can Hear the Angels Singing", in a duet with a circuit-bent Speak & Spell toy. The organic and cybernetic elements of the performance are placed in direct contrast with one another as human and robotic voices are primarily accompanied by a droning console organ, a loping, out-of-tune barroom piano, and the occasional pluck of a banjo. In each instance, these "remix" albums reinforced the idea that the songs on each recording were mutable, situated texts that could be performed in a whole host of different ways.

The albums and live shows also take pains to lay bare the process of constructing the performances by including explicit tutorials for the unconventional sound sources therein. Countless videos in promotional materials and on social media showcase the band pausing in the middle of a set to demonstrate their robotic drummer, lovingly christened "Steve-3PO". In fact, Steve became such an integral part of the live show that several DC\*B fan sites went so far as to list him as the band's "only robotic member". Similar demonstrations proliferate for the complex looping and beat-making rigs utilized by drummer Jeremy "B-wack" Bush during shows or for a band-modified neon-green keytar that became a mainstay of the DC\*B live show beginning around 2007.

By laying bare for their audiences the unique ways that they create the unconventional musical sounds on display, DC\*B consistently foregrounded the most performative aspects of their music. However, it is worth noting that even in these explicit gestures to perfor-

mance, DC\*B still generally avoids the language of “performing” or “performance” when describing their music-making in this style. This grows partly out of a wholistic worship lifestyle philosophy most clearly articulated by Crowder in his 2005 book *Praise Habit*, but regardless of their consistent savvy in navigating this contested space, DC\*B are still bound by the prohibition against engaging performance as such.

#### 4. Guitar Heroes

As a follow-up to *Remedy* (2007), the only album in this five-year run not to have a remix companion EP, DC\*B released a live CD/DVD combo “Club Tour” edition which included more than an hour of concert video from live shows in New York City and Atlanta, a fifteen-minute “On the Road With David Crowder\*Band” documentary short, and some video demos and text resources to help fans and musicians learn to play the songs included on the album. In a clip from the included concert footage, Crowder pulls out a Guitar Hero controller before beginning their song “... neverending...” at the Hammerstein Ballroom in New York City. He then explains to the audience how this new “instrument” will be included in their ensuing performance:

This is our drummer, B-wack ... He’s taken your common, everyday Guitar Hero controller—some might say a toy—and he’s turned it into none other than a professional musical instrument. [plays loud, distorted guitar noise] ... Actually, it’s just really the two buttons. I think anybody could probably play it. A little music theory real quick: an educational moment for us. This green button, this’ll be your one chord. [plays chord] Oh, that’s nice. And this’ll be your five chord. [plays chord] Necessary. And this’ll be your four chord. [plays chord] What more do you need New York? Three chords and the truth! [applause] Actually we got crazy and threw in the six. That’d be the blue button right there [plays chord]. (Remedy Club Tour—Live, David Crowder\*Band 2008)

In this explanation, not only does Crowder demonstrate to the audience how his circuit-bent Guitar Hero controller works, he also foregrounds the musical materials necessary to construct a song in the first place, getting a few self-deprecating laughs by exposing the simplicity of his own songwriting. In the following song, the audience engages Crowder’s performance through stereotypical rock concert gestures, including jumping up and down and pumping their fists.

One might assume that such clear gestures toward performance would radically inhibit the audience’s ability to experience Crowder’s music as “worship”. Crowder has clearly unmasked himself as a performer and has even shown the audience the hidden inner workings of the music they love. Contemporary worship “concerts” are already very confusing spaces because of the ways that they attempt to collapse traditional sacred/secular boundaries. Mike, a worship leader at one of the satellite campuses for a Raleigh/Durham, North Carolina, USA megachurch, said of his congregation, “The generation under us only knows [the] Passion [Conference] and arenas full of people. For them, to worship means lights and sounds”. And another worship leader I spoke with even suggested that people sometimes tried to feign a certain type of overly demonstrative spirituality because they wanted to “look like people do in [worship music] videos”. And while many scholars have noted the increasing “concertizing” of the worship space, that is the ways in which concert idioms of light and sound production have been adopted into the church, less noted is the reverse effect. Ethnomusicologist Maren Haynes has observed that especially among 18- to 25-year-olds, the popular music concert space is already seen as sacred, and teenagers just as frequently cite their favorite artists/bands for their spiritual potency as for their musical prowess. Churches, then, have simply “built a pedagogy of worship around the demonstrable embodied responses for popular music” by “desiring the somatic responses in worship that mirrored the passion [worship leaders] perceived during popular music concerts” (Haynes 2017, pp. 211–12). For evangelical Christians, many of whom are constantly on guard against corrupting influence, these blurred boundaries can be troubling, because one is never sure what is authentic worship and what is idolatry.

And DC\*B's *Remedy Club Tour* album plays directly into this tangle of uncertainties: a live document of a prominent worship leader playing worship songs in a concert setting in prominent secular music venues.

### 5. Inherent Transgressions

But to some extent, it is his explicit naming of these most performative aspects of contemporary worship music that enables his audience to worship in the first place. In this context, Crowder's self-conscious performance acts as what philosopher Slavoj Žižek calls an "inherent transgression", which he sees as endemic to so many ideological structures under late capitalism. Particular structures of power, especially legal power, not only *allow* for particular violations but sometimes actively *solicit* particular violations of the law as part of reinforcing their power and legitimacy. These inherent or solicited transgressions provide a kind of *jouissance* to the transgressor at the same time as they serve to ultimately reinforce the power of the legal system. Initially similar to the Bakhtinian idea of the "carnavalesque", one might think of employees gathering at the pub after work to complain about their boss or about the oppressive corporate culture. In their irreverence and critique, they believe that their complaining is a subversive act that takes back the rhetorical power which has been denied them during the workday and ultimately undermines the boss's authority. But it is precisely this collective act of blowing off steam that enables them to come back to work and undergo these indignities again the next day. Without a safety valve such as this, the workers might actually rise up against the oppressive work conditions rather than simply complain about them. Thus, it is precisely because of these overt violations of the social hierarchy that the hierarchy is allowed to continue unabated.

However, in *The Plague of Fantasies*, Žižek pushes this carnivalesque inversion even further by drawing out its implications through a Hegelian dialectic formulation:

However, the point of 'inherent transgression' is not only that resistance is immanent to Power, that power and counter-power generate each other; it is not only that Power itself generates the excess of resistance which it can no longer dominate; it is also not only that . . . the disciplinary 'repression' of a libidinal investment eroticizes this gesture of repression itself . . . This last point must be further radicalized: the power edifice is split from within: in order to reproduce itself and contain its Other, it has to rely on an inherent excess which grounds it—to put it in the Hegelian terms of speculative identity, Power is always-already its own transgression; if it is to function, it has to rely on a kind of obscene supplement. (Žižek 1997)

In this radicalized formulation of the concept, one begins to see the implications of Žižek's claim for the performance/worship divide under consideration here. It is not simply that "performance" is a necessary outgrowth of or counterweight to "worship" as a category, but rather the realization that *worship itself* is always already divided and that the obscene supplement of performance is inextricable from worship's power. In other words, if worship were not always already grounded in the excesses of performance, it would not function as worship to begin with. Or, perhaps, to use a more biblical image, "worship" and "performance" are a bit like Jacob and Esau. Twinned in the womb, worship comes into this world clinging onto performance's ankles, and though it will eventually be the brother that bears the name of God's people, it comes by its hereditary birthright power in less-than-transparent ways.

Which brings us back to David Crowder. Throughout their recorded and live musical output, the David Crowder\*Band includes and even highlights "performance" as a clearly delineated mode of engagement within their music. And because the moments when David Crowder is holding a Guitar Hero controller are so explicitly understood as performative, the congregation can rest easy that the songs in which he is holding an acoustic or electric guitar are properly worshipful. Later episodes from the same Hammerstein Ballroom concert clearly demonstrate this effect among those gathered for the Remedy tour dates. As the imposing sonic parody of "rock 'n' roll" represented by the Guitar Hero controller

is replaced by the more “neutral” pop-rock sound of the reverb-heavy acoustic or clean electric guitar, those in the audience clearly get the message that this is finally a song conducive to worship. Rather than jumping around, clapping along, or pumping their fists as they did in the previous song, the audience responds here by lifting their hands and closing their eyes in reverence.

This is precisely the dialectical function accomplished in the “three-part” song structure I highlighted above. By including a “fun and funky disco pastiche” in the middle of an otherwise worshipful song, Crowder is not adding some new performative element into the mix. Rather, he is simply making explicit a pre-existing emergent property contained within musical worship itself: the inherent transgression that constitutes worship’s power. And if the movement from a sparse “acoustic cry” of worship to a self-consciously performative genre parody is a kind of calculated negation of worship as a style category, then its eventual return with the “full-on rock praise climax” is the dialectical negation of the negation in which the fantasy of performance is traversed, and a new universal order of worship is established; and this time, it can be free (however temporarily) from the looming threat of further negation. As both musical gesture and dialectical movement, this unfolding is necessarily temporal and bears a not-accidental similarity to the story of salvation itself. By allowing performative pastiche to occupy the middle of the three-part song structure, he gives the worshipful praise climax the indisputable final word.

## 6. Conclusions

In some initial research I have conducted regarding the circulation of contemporary praise and worship music on the streaming platform Spotify, I found it striking that David Crowder was one of the few “worship” artists to consistently appear on user-created playlists alongside artists from other mainstream genres. I speculate that this is because Crowder is one of the few artists who explicitly makes music for congregational use, but consistently positions it on albums and in live performances that explore other sounds, genres, and musical configurations. And in this way, Crowder’s output comes to stand in as a map of the worship listeners’ own internally divided preferences, already including all the disparate elements that might be assembled in a playlist and allowing or even encouraging the plug-and-play format. By opening up space for explicit “performance” elements in his music, Crowder not only releases the worship anxiety *within* evangelical communities, he also invites contemporary praise and worship music into broader circulation *outside* the traditional boundaries of these communities by allowing it to make contact with previously unexplored corners of the popular music ecosystem.

While Matt Redman famously opined that getting back to the “heart of worship” would involve stripping away all the distracting or potentially hazardous performance elements and even fading away the music itself, David Crowder is intent on allowing this de(con)structive work to happen in full view of his congregation. Crowder understands that he needs to clearly gesture at or even actively build a wall first so that as the gathered crowd watches him tear it down, they can be assured of his sincerity. Then, as he publicly transitions from performer to worship leader, he allows the congregation to experience themselves transitioning from audience to congregation. Rather than placing “performance” under erasure, the David Crowder\*Band opens up spaces where “worship” itself may be placed under erasure before emerging again on the other side even stronger than before.

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