



Signs of a crossing

Local arts organizations blur the lines between Christian and secular art

by : Andrew Cedermark

The Welcome Wagon's front man Vito Aiuto wore a black wool cap rolled up to expose his ears, framing a scraggly beard, a look somewhere between hipster and monk. The snap buttons on his rose-embroidered cowboy shirt rose to his neck. An acoustic guitar wound tightly around his chest, he faced his wife, Monique, The Welcome Wagon's other singer. She occasionally, and softly, rapped a plastic mallet against the glockenspiel. Seven singers stood shoulder to shoulder onstage, flanked by a keyboardist, a guitarist and a bassist.

For those in attendance, The Welcome Wagon concert at The Haven at First and Market seemed like a normal night of music. But it wasn't. Because when the members of The Welcome Wagon are at home, in Brooklyn, they aren't a band as much as they are a singalong crew, with instrumentation. And they don't often play clubs: Most of the time, they perform at Resurrection Presbyterian Church, where Aiuto, a reverend, also preaches. The group's self-titled, debut record was well-received by critics—secular ones—and produced by one of folk rock's leading artists, Sufjan Stevens, and released on his label, Asthmatic Kitty.

There was a time when the "Christian" label would've made fans of secular music roll their eyes. But the sanctuary at The Haven at First and Market was packed to the gills with concertgoers paying 10 bucks a ticket, a not insignificant price for a show by a little-known folk group on a boutique indie rock label at a non-venue attached to a homeless shelter.

That the show was such a success is testament to a growing trend in town, where art made within the Christian community is increasingly drawing a secular crowd—and is indistinguishable from secular art. Locally, the melding of religious and secular arts communities can thank groups like the New City Arts Initiative, the Garage, and Bifrost Arts.

These groups, their ties to faith invisible, serve up some of the most vital art in town, pushing back against the widely-held notion that the church, today, is a cultural regurgitator or a voice against risqué, challenging art. So locally, at least, you can forget about religious crusades against the Dung Mary and David Wojnarowicz's ants on a crucifix, or Marilyn Manson versus the Pope. And forget about the dramatic oils of glowing Jesus atop a mountain. As with The Welcome Wagon, you might not know from the look, the sound, or the taste of it. But that may be Christian art you're consuming.

A room of its own

A couple of years ago Paul Walker, the rector at Christ Episcopal Church, was walking down North First Street with Kate Daughdrill, an artist in the church's fellowship program for recent college graduates. "She wanted her own space for a project," says Walker. "We were walking by The Garage, where the previous music director here used to park, and she said, 'What about this space?'"

With a fake hardwood floor, the small space became one of Charlottesville's most lively galleries for emerging local artists and touring bands. Except perhaps for its pitched roof, there is nothing that codes The Garage as a Christian



The Garage and New City Arts Initiative brought The Welcome Wagon, a Brooklyn-based folk rock band run by a reverend and his wife, to The Haven at First and Market in late March. The band's music features religious themes in the gospel tradition, but its album—and the concert at the Haven—was well-received by secular listeners and critics.

space—its website mentions no church affiliation. In the tiny structure there are no crucifixes. You leave events there without hearing a call to worship at Christ Episcopal on Sunday. When there's music, you put a buck or two in a jar and pass it along. Sam Bush, a music minister at Christ Episcopal and a songwriter with local folk-rock act the Hill & Wood, now curates the gallery and says that The Garage's relationship with the church has been very "supportive, yet undemanding."

Why, then, would a music minister run a space like The Garage at all? "On a foundational level," says Bush, "what The Garage is about is bringing people together. It's funny to talk about, because there's never been an agenda. I'm not really sure what The Garage is. It's basically a gift to the community for people to do what they want with it."

Across town, All Souls is a two-year old congregation based on Jefferson Park Avenue. Similar to The Garage, its pastor Winn Collier says that All Souls supported an artist-in-residence, the songwriter and musician Brendan Jamieson. (Because the church is small that position has since morphed into something more). "We wanted to free Brendan up to do his art, and do it in our city," says Collier. "Not at all to serve our internal community."

This kind of freedom of programming stands in stark contrast to what Bush, 25, says he experienced as a young person of faith. In the 1990s, he says, a lot of the artistic opportunities for people in the church felt like evangelical tools, more about spreading the word of God than celebrating unrestrained self-expression. "The Church tried to imitate culture, and what you had were all these cheap imitations of good things," he says.



Paul Walker, rector at Christ Episcopal Church, says that the church has long been a patron of the arts, commissioning sacred art like Tiffany stained glass (background). But the Garage, a no-strings-attached patronage of art for art's sake, is "new to us," he says.

were making really good work, were Christians, but were being very thoughtful in their work. But their work wasn't all message-driven. It was just really good."

New City Arts uses an ambassadorial model that would fight what Lovett calls "fragmentation," or rifts in the community. The fight against fragmentation takes conversation, which New City Arts facilitates. (In addition to regular conversation events, Lovett is collaborating with the Piedmont Council for the Arts on a pastor's forum for the spring.) But improving the conversation between different far-flung regions of the community takes actual resources.

One is shelter. So like The Garage, the New City Arts Initiative runs a gallery out of the WVTF and Radio IQ studios on Water Street. Also like The Garage, that gallery space has served as a springboard for emerging local and regional artists, often in collaboration, to showcase art. And in its bright office on the top floor of the Haven, New City Arts earlier this year installed a resident artist, Patrick Costello.

Though Costello was raised Catholic, he is not what you'd think of as a "Christian artist." He doesn't regularly go to church or identify as an active Christian. But Lovett says the thematic content of his art—broadly, it explores the life cycle, and where people and nature intersect—echoes Christian values. "Patrick may not identify himself as a Christian," says Lovett. "But he identifies with a lot of our values, like generosity and Shalom," a word used in the International Arts Movement to refer to a quest for "wholeness."

"Patrick's work in particular tries to work through the elements of the everyday, and how it relates to the broader cosmos. The church talks about that all the time," says Lovett.

So The Garage is, in one sense, a reaction to that artistic climate. "We want bands that people think are weird. We want art that is challenging," says Bush.

Providing patronage for the arts "grows out of our understanding of who God is, that God is the God of creation and beauty," says Collier. "Part of God's character is to create things that are good."

Maureen Lovett is the arts director for the New City Arts Initiative. The local nonprofit is an offshoot of the International Arts Movement, an organization founded to "gather artists and creative catalysts to wrestle with the deep questions of art, faith, and humanity." The International Arts Movement was founded by the New York-based painter Makoto Fujimura who has said in a recent interview that major critics have told him that, if he did not identify as a Christian, he would be among today's leading artists.

Lovett, who is a UVA graduate, interned there before helping to found New City Arts locally. "IAM provided more of a network, so I was able to see people who

As a rector who also studied poetry at UVA, Walker understands art as more than just an evangelical tool: "Art is, theologically speaking, like the grace of God—it's without contingency or qualification. So we don't do exhibits or support the arts as a means to an end, so-called Christian art that would be used for evangelism or even something like beautification."

Walker says that arts patronage isn't new to Christ Episcopal: The church recently produced a book about its gorgeous stained-glass windows designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany. But The Garage represents a crossing of the line, from supporting sacred art for the sake of the church, to supporting art for the sake of the community at large.

"This kind of patronage is new to us," says Walker.

Building interest

Ken Myers was an arts editor at NPR's "Morning Edition" through the early 1980s, but lost his job when the station cut much its fine arts programming. In the early '90s he founded Mars Hill Audio, a locally-produced audio periodical featuring interviews and other cultural content that today has a circulation of about 6,500. "I wanted to try to encourage people of faith—Christians in particular—to be more thoughtful about culture," says Myers, who also has a degree in religion from the Westminster Theological Seminary.

Myers quotes The New Republic art critic Jed Pearl, who says that a broad interest in being creative, matched with a widespread ignorance about art's formal qualities, has created an environment of "laissez-faire aesthetics." (And not just in churches, he notes.) "I think there is a lot of noise made by Christians about culture," he says. "But the level of discernment, deliberations, and involvement is pretty low."

The result is that churches will sustain an interest in "culture" for defensive reasons. "There is a concern that the church is becoming really, really marginalized," says Myers. "To avoid being marginalized, we need to demonstrate that we're interested in things that other people are interested in."

But if the arts are a public aspect of community outreach for churches—even if an organization's church flies under the radar—they are an equally important part of engaging parishes. In his 2003 book *All in Sync: How Music and Art Are Revitalizing American Religion*, the Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow writes that it was against all odds that communities of faith survived the 20th century. Women joined the workforce, families moved all around and people started living longer.

And yet, congregations remained steady. In 2001, as in 1971, four in 10 people claimed to have attended a church service in the previous seven days. Wuthnow's study found that most Americans believe that those interested in the arts are more likely to pray, and that art can deepen the spiritual experience. In short, those with an interest in the arts are likely to take spiritual growth seriously. Churches nationwide have been taking note.

One such church is All Souls. Collier says that his congregation just finished a program called "The Art of Lent." During Lent—the 40 days leading up to Easter—members of the church made art that was displayed as if the church was a gallery. The art ranged from poetry and painting to performance art. Collier says that little of it could be recognized as an expression of faith.

Lovett too says that she's been involved in a group, led by Trinity Presbyterian Pastor Wade Bradshaw, of around 20 artists—old, young, mixed-race, mixed-gender—who are trying to maximize their creative potential using *The Artist's Way*, the book by Julia Cameron. "It's not a Christian curriculum," she says. "Conversations have been about self-doubt, or a higher power. It's almost like AA for an artist."



JOHN ROBINSON

Isaac Wardell runs a music nonprofit called Bifrost Arts. On Bifrost's compilation albums, popular secular musicians perform Christian hymns and spirituals. "There's no reason that making good music and being in the church should be mutually exclusive," Wardell says.

Collier says there are theological reasons for supporting creativity—which he prefers to “art,” which can be alienating. At the mass, Collier printed a manifesto of sorts, subtitled, “Does God Care About Elvis and Mona Lisa?” The answer, he says, is yes. “If you open up the Bible to Genesis, one of the first things you pick up about God is that God is creative.”

Noticing that what He made is good, God moves on to the next thing, separating heaven from earth, light from dark, gathering the waters, and making plants, fruit and beasts to enjoy and eat it all. Then he rests. “In Eden,” Collier wrote, “God did not make trees that were merely functional, bearing fruit that was blandly nutritious. God crafted trees that were ‘pleasing to the eye and good for food.’”

Staying safe

Myers put his finger on a central question in “Christian art:” If a church adopts arts programming, it faces the possibility of backfiring if that interest in art is “a kind of public relations display for your church. That’s likely to be perceived by people who really care about art,” he says.

Says Lovett, “The broader issue that we address is that the arts, in contemporary church, have been labeled as ‘good’ if they’re either ‘safe’ or ‘useful.’ Our hope [with the New City Arts Initiative] is to instill the belief that art can be good and useful and true in itself, and that there are these values of generosity and hospitality that the church holds as true.”

Dave Zahl echoes that sentiment. About four years ago, he founded Mockingbird Ministries with a few friends in New York City who wanted to do something both creative and faith-related. They threw a few ideas against the wall to see what’d stick. What did was a website, which re-launched after Zahl moved the organization to Charlottesville last year. On the website writers “basically looks at how theology plays out in everyday life.”

Art, he says, is a powerful tool in that search. “I’m just interested in seeing how the same themes that occupy people who wouldn’t think of themselves as religious—how those are the same things that Christianity is bound up with.”

He notes that Christian art often takes two paths. “A lot of Christians will take something that’s good and try to produce some antiseptic version of it that suffers in comparison. That’s the more evangelical way to do it.”

“Then there’s the more Catholic or Orthodox way, which is to elevate the sacred so far above the profane that never the twain shall meet. Which I find is as equally devoid of connection. It’s a human tendency, but it’s one that the church suffers from particularly,” he says.



Maureen Lovett is the arts director for the New City Arts Initiative, an organization based in The Haven at First and Market that uses the arts to connect disparate portions of the local community. In addition to supporting a resident artist, New City Arts runs a gallery out of the WVTF and Radio IQ Studios, on Water Street. Although its board of directors is ecumenical, says Lovett, New City Arts is “not a Christian organization.”

Wardell started hosting interfaith singing events, which drew a crowd that was half-religious, half-secular. And then

Perhaps the most obvious example of these values —“safe” and “useful”—is in contemporary Christian music. “I always cared about church music,” says Isaac Wardell, Director of Worship Arts at Trinity Presbyterian and founder of the nonprofit Bifrost Arts. “I always thought it was kind of a shame that church music was so bad. You can turn on anything from ‘Seinfeld’ to ‘South Park’ to ‘Saturday Night Live,’ or make a joke at a bar and everybody gets it.”

Wardell was born to a pair of UC-Berkeley graduates who hopped on the “Jesus People” train of the 1970s, traveling the country in a Volkswagen van. That generation’s “Jesus music” is credited with planting the seeds for today’s Contemporary Christian Music.

Today, Wardell’s brother is a classical ballet dancer. A lifetime pop music lover, Wardell took a degree in music composition to New York, and used that expertise for studio work with the likes of Sufjan Stevens and Blitzen Trapper. Of his and his brother’s career choices, says Wardell, “Neither are real common things in suburban late 20th-century evangelical culture.”

Compelled by the power that church has to get people singing together, and while living in New York,

something funny happened: People started singing together. Wardell discovered Charlottesville after taking the act on the road. He says about 50 people showed up to sing together in town.

"We would blow into these towns where we didn't know anybody. I've been touring for 10 years—I'm fully aware of how it works when an independent band starts touring. But we did 50 dates, and everywhere we went, we would have 50 [to] 100 people come out to these events that were not even publicized."

Soon parishes were showing interest, ponying up some funding, and Bifrost Arts was born as a recording project. To date Bifrost—named for the bridge in Norse mythology that connected earth to the land of the gods—has released two compilations of religious music (a third is forthcoming) featuring artists of secular interest like the songwriters Damien Jurado and J. Tillman, as well as Sufjan Stevens. Wardell says interest was icy at first, but sales have since thawed, rising to 30,000 copies.

Wardell's intention isn't to alienate people who aren't indie rock fans. His goal is to bridge the gap between contemporary secular taste and Christian music. Referring to how Christian music has been a "dividing line" between Christian and secular cultures, Wardell says. "I think it's a real shame what happened in the last 50 years, maybe somewhat in the last 200 years, in America. If there's one thing that people of faith, people that aren't of faith, all have in common, it's our capacity to experience beauty."

You're Welcome

Wardell was able to offer The Welcome Wagon funding that helped the group float a trip to a recent Bifrost conference in St. Louis, with a stop in Charlottesville along the way. The band's route brought them through a variety of venues, from church venues like the Haven, to an Elk's Lodge in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to Johnny Brenda's, a midsized Philly club with a two-floor bar area that surrounds the stage.

If all the work that these local organizations are putting in goes toward, as Zahl says, erasing the line between Christians and non-Christians, the effort is well on its way. Successful shows like The Welcome Wagon's makes one question whether the future for "Christian artists" is rosier for modern artists than it was for, say, U2, who could only hint at their faith or else get sunk by the "Christian rock" label.

Meanwhile, if there is nothing that marks a place like The Garage as Christian, Bush says that what it achieves—bringing people together to celebrate the weird things people create—is in its execution about as close to Christ as it gets. The space is operated under the principle that, says Bush, "People operate more fully in freedom than under any given agenda."

Bush also says it's close in keeping with one of Saint Augustine's famous dictates: "Love God, and do what you want."