

# That Form Overwhelms Content

by Gene Veith 5-22-12

I have spared you my *American Idol* reflections up to this point, that show being one of my pop-culture vices, but a recent performance was so emblematic that I cannot help but comment upon it. Joshua Ledet, arguably the best singer in the contest (who made the top three but, unfortunately, got voted off before this week's finale), sang as his personal choice John Lennon's "Imagine." Now that has to be one of my least favorite songs, a treacherous anthem to atheism. Joshua, though, has made much of the fact that he's all about the church, his father being a pastor, and singing gospel songs or non-gospel songs with gospel stylings every chance he gets. He sang "Imagine"—"Imagine there's no Heaven; it's easy if you try/No hell below us; above us only sky"—not to go against type, though, but, according to what he was telling the judges, because of its uplifting and inspirational message! He obviously didn't understand what he was singing. The reason, I would suggest, is because the music *sounds* uplifting and inspirational—in a peculiarly sappy way—and that overwhelms for most listeners the nihilistic lyrics.

This is the same principle demonstrated by the *avant garde* East German playwright Bertolt Brecht who wrote with musical collaborator Kurt Weill the song "Mack the Knife" for his play *The Threepenny Opera*. You know the song, which has become a "standard" of light jazz and lounge crooners. It's got a light swinging tune. But notice the words, all about how a shark has teeth that are razor sharp and is like Mack, who will kill you with his blade. The melody is sunshiny and peaceful, but the lyrics are dark and violent. Brecht was purposefully playing form off against content. Usually, the two go together, mutually re-enforcing each other. But Brecht was trying to write a song in which the two go in opposite directions. In his experiment, he believed that the form would overwhelm the content, that audiences would pick up on the happy melody and consider it a happy song with the disturbing lyrics having no impact! And he was right, as evidenced every time "Mack the Knife" gets played in an elevator or as Muzak in a shopping mall.

This is important to realize when it comes to contemporary Christian music. The assumption has been that to make Christianity relevant and to communicate with the culture, all we have to do is take "secular" forms—rock, metal, hip-hop, whatever—and put Christian words to it. But Brecht's experiment with "Mack the Knife" and Joshua Ledet's performance on *American Idol* prove that it's not so simple. Death metal with Christian words will come across as and will have the effect of death metal, with the Christian words hardly registering. Form is not neutral. Form will drown out the content.

What we need from contemporary Christian artists (musicians, painters, filmmakers, authors) is not slavish following of other people's styles, attempting to Christianize them; rather, we need original *styles*, ones that can carry the Christian message and that other people will imitate (thereby promulgating, even unintentionally, the Christian content).