

“Boy’s Club”: A Gender-Based Analysis of the CCLI Top 25 lists from 1988-2018

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the problem of gender representation in contemporary worship music industry. An in-depth, data-driven study of the Christian Copyright Licensing International (CCLI) top 25 lists since 1988 shows that women are vastly underrepresented, while collaborations between men dominate the charts. As the industry has developed, women have struggled to hold not only the #1 spot, but any spot on the top 25 list. Contemporary worship music has evolved significantly over the past 30 years, and yet 1994 was the last time a woman held the #1 position on the charts. Even though they have written powerful, accessible music, music by women is often unreachable due to industry standards and methods of exposure. Scholars have studied the history (Ruth & Lim 2017, 2021), theology (Thornton 2021; Cowan 2019), and practices of contemporary worship music (Nekola 2013; Ingalls 2018), but a thorough examination of the gender of the songwriters over the past decades has not been completed. Using data analysis and discussion on industry processes, this paper offers key insights into how women have contended with the evolving industry.

Keywords: Contemporary worship music, women in music, Evangelical women, worship, industry

Introduction

It was an early morning in 1978 when Laurie Klein sat alone in her mobile home, strumming her guitar with a bible beside her. During a difficult time of her life, Klein found encouragement during her morning devotionals. This particular morning, she felt deprived of anything in her to sing and prayed for Jesus to provide a song if she was to sing. The words tumbled out of her mouth: “I love you Lord, and I lift my voice,

to worship You.” She scribbled down the lyrics in case she might want to sing them again (Myrick, 2019). After she sang the song for her husband, he suggested that she share it with a local pastor. Since then, according to Klein, the song has “quietly made its way around the world” (Boley, 2001, p. 94).

The telling of this song story can be seen as a part of the data presented in this paper; in fact, this chorus became one of the most sung Christian songs in the world. In April 1994 Klein’s song “I Love You Lord” ranked #1 on Christian Copyright Licensing International’s (CCLI) Top 25 list USA, a chart that largely represents the songs that White American Evangelical churches are singing the most.³¹ Here, it is important to note that the CCLI charts in Christian music represent the weekly songlists of many congregations who report to this national body, which administers the copyright licensing.³² Therefore a CCLI #1 position indicates a widespread participation by Christians singing this song, but can also be viewed as recognition of a song’s popularity. In the Christian music world, this is the equivalent honour of a #1 ranking on a Billboard Top 100 chart. Although many songwriters, like Laurie Klein, have reached the famed #1 position on the CCLI Top 25, these songwriters generally have not been women: April 1994 was the last time a solo woman held the #1 spot.³³

This raises various questions: why aren’t there more female songwriters represented on these charts? When did the exclusion for women songwriters begin? Why has it not been addressed? Who does this industry chart really represent? How have the various changes in the industry in the last decades impacted the participation of women songwriters? The question of whether women are underrepresented in the CCLI charts (and if so, why) is complex, but will be explored within this paper.

Instead of being penned during early morning devotionals, many popular songs today are written in intentional collaborations as part of a highly competitive industry. As the contemporary worship music industry has developed, it has become increasingly commercialized with men subsequently coming to dominate the Top 25 list. Women have not only struggled to hold the #1 spot, but *any* spot on the Top 25 list.

³¹ In general, CCLI does not cover gospel music, and most of the artists they feature are White. This leads to a list that is most used by White congregations, and therefore only represents a portion of contemporary worship. For more on this, see: Bjorlin, D. (n.d.), Consumerism and Congregational Song, *Centered in Song (blog)*, Center for Congregational Song, <https://congregationsong.org/tag/david-bjorlin/>.

³² CCLI publishes different lists depending on the country. Throughout this article, the US charts are examined.

³³ In December, 2017, Brooke Ligertwood shared the #1 position with Ben Fielding for cowriting “What a Beautiful Name.”

Therefore, the CCLI data represents the industrial complex of contemporary music, but also its system of developing songs for the global church's participation. The thesis of this article is that the decline in ranking songs by women songwriters began at the turn of the century, when the contemporary worship music industry became commercialized in such a way that it excluded women from participating. Thus, the industry has become dominated by collaborations among men, with little recognized input from women.

Background to Contemporary Worship Music Songwriting

The culture around songwriting has developed radically since the seeds of contemporary worship movement first emerged around the 1960s. Following the sound and tone of the era's pop music emerged music from The Jesus People movement. These songs were characterized by the hippie, grassroots atmosphere of the time and followed the musical example of artists like Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 60). Responding to the demand for the Christian music, in the 1970s contemporary worship music was commercialized by groups such as Maranatha! Music (Perez, 2021, p. 180). A large repertoire of contemporary music became available, and worship "sets" of back-to-back songs became a staple in Christian worship services. Leaders planned services that led the worshipper through a variety of affects towards an intimate encounter with God (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 61). Throughout these developments, women like Karen Lafferty and Amy Grant contributed songs to an ever-growing canon of repertoire. As this worship movement began to industrialise and transform, it grew in popularity and accessibility. This emerging industry identified, recorded, produced, and marketed artists who created music for churches. By the 1990s, contemporary church music was globally acknowledged as a worship movement, with significant influence from African American contemporary gospel music groups (Lim & Ruth, 2017, p. 67) as well as ones from England and Australia (Ruth, 2017, p. 3). At the time, many churches were engaged in "the worship wars," clashing over divided preferences for traditional music (as characterized by organs and choirs) and contemporary music (led by praise teams with drum kits). By 1999, Michael Hamilton had published an article declaring contemporary worship music the winner of the worship wars (Hamilton, 1999).

Over the past 20 years, ensembles from megachurches such as Hillsong and Bethel have come to define the industry. These churches develop countless musicians and

artists in their kids and youth ministries, and increasingly retain the power of production and distribution. Writing music for their own services and performance contexts, they are able to select and promote songs that already “work” as measured by their congregations. Through tours and conferences, they have brought contemporary worship music to thousands of churches around the world, where it has now become a dominant musical language. With the rise of social media and online streaming platforms, these churches built their brands, staying connected with communities who eagerly anticipate new music (Thornton, 2020, p. 49). Parallel to secular pop stars, many worship songwriters also achieved celebrity status, filling stadiums during elaborate tours and selling millions of albums every year. These key figures have defined contemporary worship music and are instrumental in its development beyond a grassroots movement to a successful music industry.

This essay provides a closer look at who these worship songwriters are, through an in-depth analysis of the CCLI Top 25 lists between 1988 and 2018. Specifically, this project examines how women have been represented on the CCLI Top 25 lists, and what factors contribute to their experience and representation. It draws on Jada Watson’s methodology for data-driven research of gender representation on popularity charts, using her coding system and analytical method to track gender related trends over time (Watson, 2019, p. 539). Ultimately, this essay aims to expose how the changes within the contemporary worship songwriting industry, including the surging importance of the megachurch, have led to an increasingly homogenous group of songwriters, and limited the capacity for songwriter women to thrive.

Literature Review

Despite the movement existing since the 1960s, scholars did not start researching contemporary worship music until the mid 2000s (Ingalls, 2018, p.10). Researchers from various disciplines have outlined its theology (Lim & Ruth, 2017; Cowan, 2019; Longhurst, 2015, pp. 158-172) and practice (Ingalls, 2018; Evans, 2006; Busman, 2015). A significant body of research has also developed around the commercialization of the industry, including the way that it has developed as a recording industry (Nekola, 2009; Mall, 2012; Thornton, 2015), its global impact through touring and media (Wagner, 2014, pp. 59-73; Evans, 2015, pp. 179-196; Ingalls, 2016, pp. 293-308), and its reliance on media and technology for success (Nekola, 2013, pp. 117-136; Nekola, 2015, pp. 1-21; Thornton & Evans, 2015, pp. 141-160). This research

makes it evident that the industry operates in the same way as much of popular music: through widespread marketing, and the commercialization of artists and groups.

The CCLI Top 25 list, on which this research is based, has received attention in several academic publications. For example, *The Message in the Music* (2007) featured essays that analyzed the 77 songs that had appeared on the CCLI Top 25 lists. Margaret Brady's historical-critical analysis of the song musical styles is featured in this collection, which highlights how contemporary worship music responds to trends in popular music (Woods & Walrath, 2007). Another analysis of the changes in contemporary worship music can be found in Matthew R. Sigler's 2013 article that examines the CCLI Top 25 list (Sigler, 2013, p. 445), tracking recent changes in charting songs. Outside of academic contexts, the United Methodist church has assembled a team to analyze the theology of the CCLI Top 100 songs. In putting together this project, the United Methodist church acknowledged the immense impact of this list on congregational singing.³⁴

Daniel Thornton's book titled *Meaning-Making in the Contemporary Congregational Song Genre* (2021) is the first volume to devote significant time to the experiences and output of CCLI songwriters. In this work, Thornton (2021, p. 42) highlights the deficit of female songwriters, noting the discrepancy between the high number of women church attendees and the low number of women songwriters. Given that literature on the experience of songwriters within the industry that fosters them is only a recent development, issues related to representation of women within this male-dominated field is not widely available. There is some research on the experiences of women in contexts where contemporary worship music is present, such as Tanya Riches' chapter "The Sisterhood: Hillsong in a Feminine Key," which articulates the ways Hillsong (as one of the main music producers) supports and promotes the work of women in all spheres of life and work, contrary to public perception. Explaining how Hillsong supports women in its various communities, Riches notes that women have made substantial contributions as preachers (Riches, 2017, pp. 85-105). Similarly, Kate Bowler's book, *Preachers Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Woman Celebrities*, examines how conservative evangelical women are often limited in their influence by virtue of not being able to preach in many contexts, but describes how

³⁴ The team, which was active from 2015–2017, included: Taylor Burton-Edwards, Kim Chapman, Nelson Cowan, Keum Hwang, Jackson Henry, Laura Jaquith Bartlett, Swee-Hong Lim, Robert McMichael, Janice McNair, and Lester Ruth.

they have managed to gain incredible social and theological influence regardless. In particular, she outlines how major Christian woman musician celebrities such as Amy Grant and Rebecca St. James influenced significant social movements and Christian culture, using their status and music to impact audiences (Bowler, 2019, p. 140).

Biographical information on leading Christian worship songwriters like Amy Grant and Darlene Zschech is available in volumes such as *Jesus Rocks the World* by Bob Gersztyn (2013). However, questions around the development of songwriters, their history and background, have not received the same attention by scholars.

Importantly, there is a clear lack of scholarship on the representation of women in the contemporary worship music industry. This research seeks to begin to fill this gap by providing an overview of how women songwriters have been represented in contemporary worship music, using the CCLI Top 25 as a source for data on popular songwriters.

Industry Contexts: CCLI and Contemporary Worship Music

After having provided an overview of the available scholarly literature, I will next address the industry context that contemporary worship songs are born into by describing the CCLI ranking system. As noted above, contemporary worship music receives active engagement weekly from churches around the world who worship using these songs during congregational gatherings. Singing songs during corporate worship often requires intentional permission seeking for copyright laws not to be broken. Though regulations differ from country to country and the reporting structures are national, the global body that administrates this copyright internationally is CCLI.

The history of this organisation is long and somewhat complex. In 1984, after learning of a \$3.1 million lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Chicago, Oregon pastor Howard Rachinski began to apply the concept of “Permission of Use” to churches worshipping with contemporary worship music. This allowed communities to obtain blanket permission for “non-commercial” copying activities, and the concept eventually turned into “StarPraise Ministries.” As churches rapidly signed on, it became clear that a need was being met: communities were eager for a third-party organization to facilitate the copyright process. StarPraise had assumed an important role for Christian music, similar to secular Publishing Rights Organizations such as ASCAP (the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers) and BMI (Broadcast Music, Inc.). In

1988, StarPraise Ministries was incorporated under its current name, Christian Copyright Licensing International. In some ways, CCLI is distinct from secular Publishing Rights Organizations, however, songwriters need to be affiliated with one such organization to receive performance royalties under US copyright laws. Throughout the 1990s, CCLI expanded to cover Canada, parts of the UK, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. In the 2000s, it expanded to resource more European countries, Singapore, Brazil, and Korea. As of 2016, CCLI issued licenses worldwide with more than 250,000 churches using them for copyright permissions ("History," n.d.).

CCLI requires churches to pay a fee for their license based on congregational size, and then to report which songs the congregation is using across a 6-month period. With this information, CCLI pays royalties to copyright holders based on how much their song is being used ("FAQ," n.d.). Starting in 1988, CCLI began publishing a semi-annual report with the top songs that churches are using in their services. This list was first published with the top 25 songs and has since expanded to the top 100 songs. The list of current top songs has become a significant way that worship leaders find new songs for worship services (Bjorlin, n.d.). As the industry has developed, songs that rank on the Top 100 list have, increasingly, come to be produced by a major publisher or otherwise marketed to reach a maximum number of worshippers. This is evidenced by the way that administrators for songs in the 1980s and 1990s were mostly independent, whereas large organizations such as Capitol CMG that are most prominent as administrators today. As Bowler and Reagan note,

Rather than focusing on local or denominational music, churches could now ask: what songs do people want to sing in church? What worship songs are popular? CCLI created a pulse on the most popular worship songs in the country, raising awareness of the national market for worship music that was emerging. (Bowler & Reagan, 2014, p. 202)

Because the lists are used to build a global worship repertoire, songs that reach the CCLI list are encountered more often, leading to more frequent singing in churches, a higher reporting of use, and subsequently to repeated occurrence on the Top 100. In other words, the cycle is self-reinforcing. Further, songwriters and publishers are more likely to try to recreate the sound and theology of songs on the Top 100 list, to find

similar resonance with listeners, and hope it will achieve similar success on the charts. Because of the wide influence of CCLI, songwriters whose songs are represented there will be sung more, and their careers will advance further than songwriters who do not have similar exposure on the Top 100 list.

Analysis: Gender Representation on the CCLI Top 25 - Materials

This study uses a dataset that contains the Top 25 songs from each CCLI report issued between October 1988 and December 2018, which represents a total of 60 reports and 1525 songs. Because many of these songs reappear between lists, it is important to note that there have been 130 unique songs on the list, repeated over 30 years for a total of 1525 songs (i.e. the list does not include 25 new songs each time it is published). The data for this project was collected based on a spreadsheet of top 25 song titles over time that was developed and maintained by Lester Ruth and Daniel Jesse,³⁵ which I expanded upon by adding categories for songwriters, collaborations, publishers, and gender. All the biographical information included here (such as gender, group type, etc.) was curated by the author.

As noted, the project is based upon Jada Watson's data analysis methodology (Watson, p. 546), which codes variables to determine gender related trends over a designated period of time. Watson's methodology draws upon the work of Marc LaFrance, Lara Worcester, and Lori Burns, using three gender variables instead of two: male (solo or group), female (solo or group), and male-female (group) (LaFrance et al., 2011, p. 558). The CCLI dataset contains records for each of the 1,525 charting songs and includes the song's title, rank, copyright date, songwriter name(s), songwriter gender, ensemble type (solo, duo, trio, group), publisher, number of male songwriters, number of female songwriters, and total number of songwriters. These pieces of information, captured in a spreadsheet, were then analyzed to reveal trends over the 30-year period studied here. Following the format of similar such quantitative studies, this paper firstly presents the data, followed by a discussion section where the data will be analysed and interpreted. Like the work of LaFrance and Watson, this research has been structured to reveal gender-related trends, in this case found on the CCLI Top 25 lists between 1988 and 2018, but not outside of this period.

³⁵ While CCLI initially compiled top 25 lists, they now report the top 100. For the purpose of consistency in this research, the top 25 songs from every year have been used.

Gender Representation on the CCLI Top 25 Chart

Table 1 (below) summarizes all the songs on the CCLI Top 25 lists from October 1988 to December 2018, revealing that 74.3% of the songs that have been on the CCLI Top 25 chart since 1988 have been written by men, 17.9% of the songs have been written by male-female collaborations, and only 7.8% of songs have been written exclusively by women. While the third category theoretically includes all female collaborations, there has never been an all-female collaboration on the CCLI Top 25.

Ensemble Type	# of songs	% of songs
Solo men or all male collaborations	1133	74.3
Men-women collaborations	119	17.9
Solo women or all female collaborations	273	7.8

Table 1: Percentage and Number of Songs by Songwriter Type

To understand the overall breakdown of gender representation in the Top 25 over time, the graph in Figure 1 maps the distribution and number of charting songs by male artists, female artists, and male-female collaborations over time. Solo versus collaborative works will be explored later in the article. This line graph shows that at the beginning of the study period, the numbers of songs grouped into men, women, and collaborations were the most gender equal in the entire study period, with the smallest percentage difference between songs written by men and women (only a 10% difference). Throughout the 1990s, the number of male songwriters stayed consistent, while the number of solo female songwriters began to decline on the charts. Although this was just a slight decline (from 30% to 28%), the space they previously occupied was filled by collaboration songs.³⁶ Beginning in the early 2000s the number of songs by women decreased significantly over the course of 5 years, dropping from 28% in 2000 to 8% in 2005, while the songs by men increased from 68% in 2000 to 88% in 2005. This decline in representation of women on the CCLI chart after 2000 was not unique to contemporary worship music; other studies such as LaFrance's study of Top 40 airplay and Watson's study of Billboard's Hot Country Songs chart reveal a similar decline of female artists in this period (LaFrance et al., 2011, pp.

³⁶ The number of collaborations throughout the 1990s was inconsistent, often having one collaboration per chart for a percentage of 4%. In 1988 there were 13% collaborations between men and women, but at many other points in the 1990s, there were 0% male-female collaborations.

562-63; Watson, p. 546). By 2010 there were consistently high numbers of songs written by men-only, consistently low numbers of songs written by women-only, and the same low number of male-female collaborations. By the mid-2010s, the number of songs by women decreased further to the period low of 4%, but interestingly, the number of songs by men also decreased. Songs by male-female ensembles filled this gap, increasing to 28% of the charting songs by the end of the period. By the end of the 2010s, the number of male-female collaborations was increasing, and the number of male-only songwriters was declining.

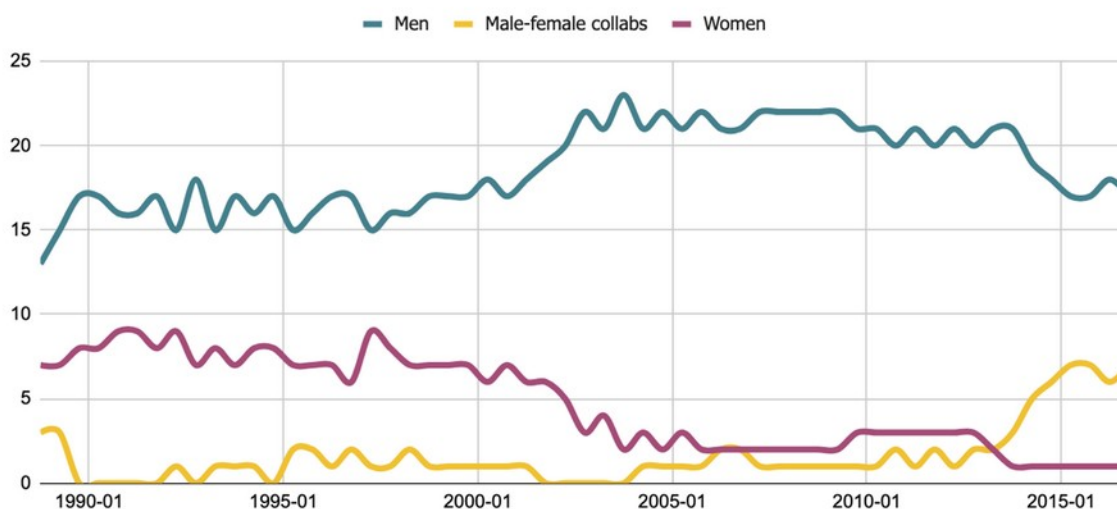


Figure 1: Gender Frequency Distribution of Top 25 (1988-2018)

The number of songs by women decreased gradually over the course of this three-decade period. While the first chart in 1988 featured seven songs authored by women-only, by the final year of this period (2018) just one song by a woman writer remained in the Top 25. The number of songs by men reached an all-time high in 2003 at 92%, but also declined gradually to the end of the period to 72%. Though they still clearly dominate the chart in every year of this study period, the decline in the number of songs by men is likely correlated to the increased number of collaborations between men and women. Overall, the percentage gap of songs between men and women was 46.2% on the first chart recorded in 1988 and more than doubled to 94.4% in 2018. This percentage gap reached a record high in October, 2013 of 95.2%, here indicating the largest discrepancy in representation between men and women. The number of collaborations between men and women has risen significantly since 2013, though not close to the level of songs written exclusively by men, whether solo or collaboratively.

While the rate of women charting on the CCLI Top 25 is significantly declining perhaps even more striking yet is the way that women have been absent from the #1 position. Figure 2 (below) maps the distribution of the #1 song position between 1988 and 2018. Songs tend to reappear on this list, and sometimes may receive the #1 position multiple times.

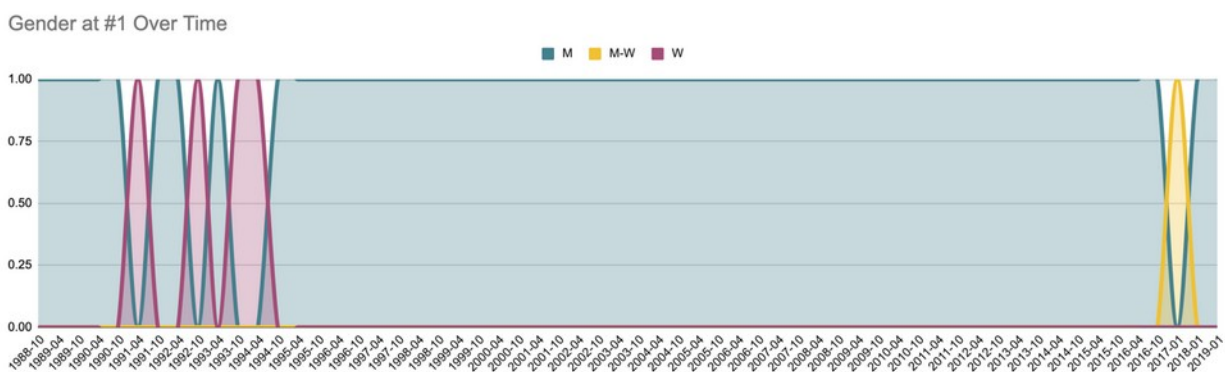


Figure 2: Songwriters by Gender at #1 Over Time

Women songwriters held the #1 spot a total of four times throughout the 1990s. Perhaps more critically, this represents just two different female songwriters who held this position: Leona Von Brethorst with “He Has Made Me Glad” on the October 1993 chart, and Laurie Klein’s “I Love You Lord,” which charted three times between 1991 and 1994. Since 1994, however, the #1 position has been dominated exclusively by men, with only one exception: in 2017, the male-female collaboration of Brooke Ligertwood and Ben Fielding took the #1 position for their song “What a Beautiful Name.” Of the 25 different songwriters whose songs have appeared in the #1 position, only three of them (12%) were women. Five different men (Chris Tomlin, Matt Redman, Jesse Reeves, Ben Fielding, Jonas Myrin) have held the position for more than one song, but no women have held the position for multiple titles. While some women have been represented in collaborations, these writer teams generally do not gain the number 1 position multiple times, and it is therefore still solo males and exclusively male collaborations that hold the majority of the #1 positions.

Collaborations on the CCLI Top 25 Charts

As noted, one of the most striking differences between the CCLI Top 25 charts in 1988 and 2018 relates to the role of songwriter collaborations. This section outlines the

trends regarding this data more fully. Figure 3 (below) tracks the authorship of songs, mapping songs by one songwriter against those written in collaborations.

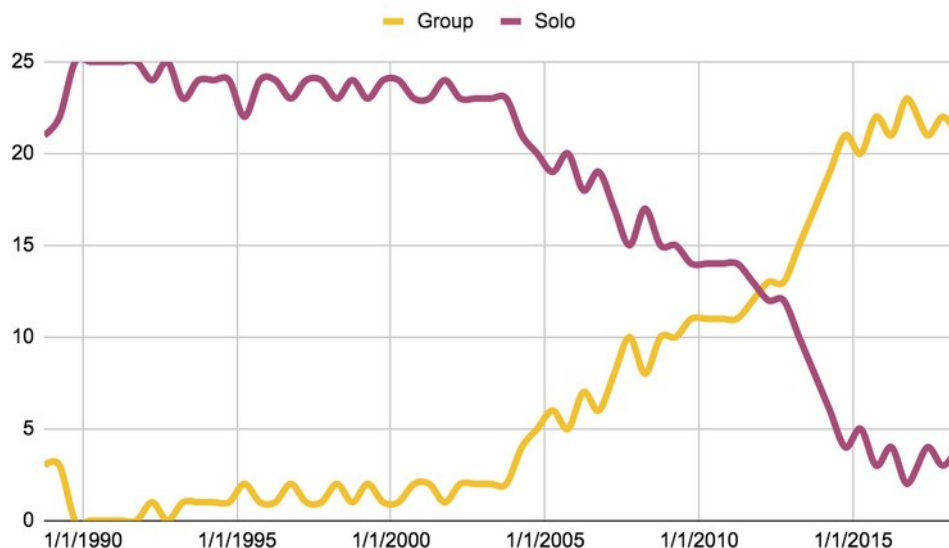


Figure 3: Group vs. Solo Songwriters From 1988-2018

Figure 3 outlines how songs by solo writers have decreased, and songs written in collaboration have increased. In the late 1980s and 1990s, most songs were written by a solo songwriter, with a small number written by a duo. Until the early 2000s, the number of songs by solo writers was consistently high, with a low number of collaborations. This began to shift in 2003, with a substantial decline in solo writers and significant increase in collaborations over the following 10 years. In 2013, another significant shift in the songwriter credits occurred when a larger number of songs were written in collaborations than by solo songwriters. After 2013, the number of songs written in collaborations continued to increase, with the number of solo writers declining to only one per chart. Between 2013 and 2018, “Revelation Song” by Jennie Lee Riddle was the only song on the Top 25 listing just one songwriter.

The prominence of collaborations on the Top 25 charts requires some consideration, with particular attention to how women were represented in these teams. From 1988 to 1993, when there were collaborations on the chart, women made up 50% of the collaboration. That number reached a record low in 2012 when only 3.1% of writers in collaborations were women. At the end of 2018, this number increased slightly when 9% of writers in collaborations were women. Most of these duos represented in the data from the 1990s were husband/wife teams, such as Wayne and Cathy Perrin. In

contrast, the collaborations on the 2018 Top 25 lists are often between artists from different labels and across continents. While there are still some husband/wife collaborations, many male-female team collaborations now come from outside of familial contexts.

Below, Table 2 summarizes the one male-one female collaborations over this period, revealing eight of the 11 collaborations were between husband/wife teams.

Song Title	Year	Songwriter #1	Songs	Songwriter #2	Songs	Family?
"There's Something About That Name"	1970	Bill Gaither	2	Gloria Gaither	2	Yes
"Because He Lives"	1971	Bill Gaither	2	Gloria Gaither	2	Yes
"Let There Be Glory and Honour and Praises"	1978	James Greenelsh	1	Elizabeth Greenelsh	1	Yes
"When I Look Into Your Holiness"	1981	Wayne Perrin	1	Cathy Perrin	1	Yes
"Great is the Lord"	1982	Michael W. Smith	2	Deborah Smith	1	Yes
"Blessed Be Your Name"	2002	Matt Redman	7	Beth Redman	1	Yes
"Indescribable"	2004	Jesse Reeves	6	Laura Story	1	No
"Glory to God Forever"	2009	Steve Fee	1	Vicki Beeching	1	No
"Holy Spirit"	2011	Bryan Torwalt	1	Katie Torwalt	1	Yes
"How He Loves"	2015	John Mark McMillan	2	Sarah McMillan	1	Yes
"What a Beautiful Name"	2016	Ben Fielding	5	Brooke Ligertwood	2	No

Table 2: Husband/Wife Collaborations

In the case of each song writing pair, either each collaborator appears in the Top 25 the same number of times, or the man has appeared more frequently for a higher number of songs.

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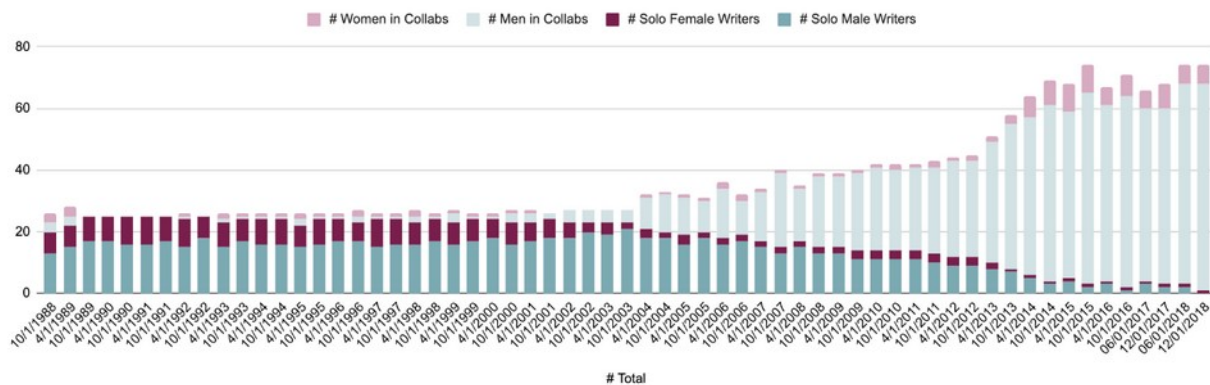


Figure 4: Gender in Collaborations Over Time

Figure 4 outlines the total number of men and women songwriters represented on each chart, presented here to indicate the overall authorship and movement. The numbers are consistent with more male than female songwriters and very few collaborations until 2003. From 2004, a spike in collaborations can be seen, with large numbers of men collaborating but with only a few women involved. After 2004, as mentioned earlier, the number of solo songwriters gradually decreased as the number of collaborations increased. Critically, between 2004 and 2014 there was a high number of individuals in collaborations, but very few were women. The lowest number of women in collaborations was 3.1% in 2012; but gradually increased to 12.3% in 2017, and 8.2% in 2018.

Because of the decrease over time of solo writers on the Top 25 list, women are increasingly only represented in male-female collaborations, and they are less prominent than men in the collaborations formed. Thus it is not uncommon to see one woman's name alongside four or five male names as collaborators on a Top 25 song.³⁷ It is important to note that since 1988, no all-female collaborations have occurred on the CCLI Top 25; the 7.7% women on the list are exclusively solo women. Further, there have only been two songs that have had more than one woman collaborate on them: "Forever (We Sing Hallelujah)," written in 2013, and "Tremble," written in 2016. Women songwriters have gradually been eliminated from ranking solo song-writing positions, as well as from collaborative song-writing positions.

³⁷ Some examples include "Lord, I Need You," cowritten by Christy Nockels, Daniel Carson, Jesse Reeves, Kristian Stanfil, and Matt Maher, or "Build My Life" written by Brett Younker, Karl Martin, Matt Redman, Pat Barrett, and Kirby Kaple.

To better understand how the landscape of contemporary worship music has changed over the last 30 years, a comparison of gender representation between 1988 and 2018 is presented below (see Figures 5–8).

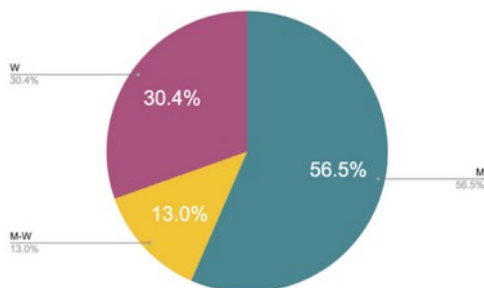


Figure 5: 1988

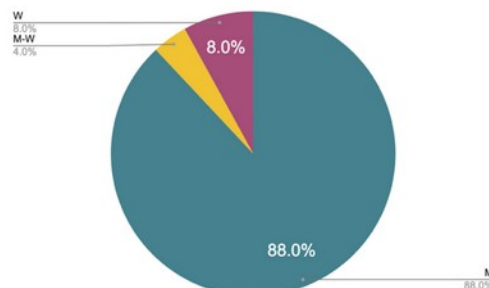


Figure 7: 2008

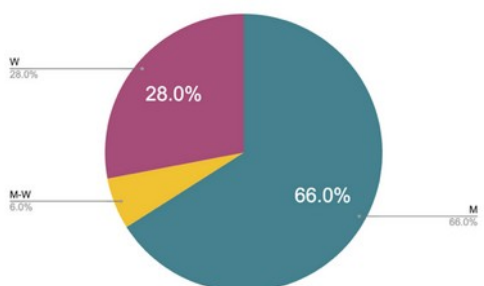


Figure 6: 1998

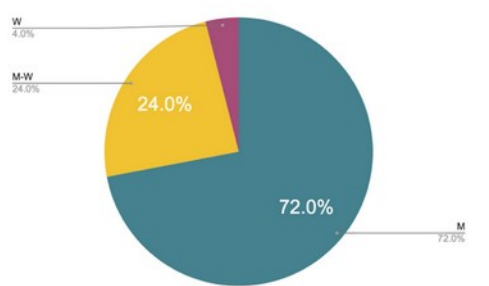


Figure 8: 2018

In 1988, 30% of the songs on the Top 25 list were written by women. Another 13% were written by male-female collaborations, and 56.5% were by men. One decade later in 1998, 28% of the songs were by women, only a small decrease from the previous decade. By this year there was a reduction in collaborations to 8%, with 66% of songs written by men. A significant shift had occurred another decade later by 2008, where only 8% of the songs were written by women, with 88% by men. Further, one decade later in 2018, only 4% of the songs were by women. Another 24% were authored by male-female collaborations, and 72% were by men.

In summary, over the period 1988 to 2018, songs by women or with contributions by women dropped by 26%. Because the occurrence of collaborations has changed so significantly since 1988, a closer examination of male/female collaborations reveals that they were 37.5% women, and 62.5% men in 2018, without a single occurrence of a women-only collaboration, but several male-only. This comparison is further evidence that collaborations among men are dominating the charts, with women being represented unequally in male-female songwriting teams.

Discussion: Gender Inequality

The findings of this study indicate that gender inequality is a significant issue in the contemporary worship music industry, as in other genre and chart cultures (LaFrance et al., 2011, p. 558; Watson, p. 546). This problem was prominent in the early years of CCLI and has only grown substantially worse over the course of the three decades that followed. Several key observations from the analysis support this point:

- 1 The CCLI Top 25 list has changed from being dominated by solo songwriters in 1988, to containing only one solo writer in 2018;
- 2 The majority of songs on the Top 25 list are collaborations among men;
- 3 The majority of collaborations between one man and one woman have historically been between family members (such as husband/wife teams);
- 4 Women collaborations with other women do not appear on the charts, and increasingly women represent less of the solo songwriters;
- 5 A woman did not hold the #1 position between 1995–2018, except for a male-female collaboration in 2017. In contrast, this period represents 19 men.

This article has demonstrated the problem of the gender inequity in the Christian worship charts; a trend that cannot be attributed to one single cause but is likely the culmination of several larger contributing factors. It is also important to acknowledge that the CCLI charts are not representative of the *entire* global church; denominations also use songbooks and many churches do not participate in the reporting processes. Therefore, particularly in America this organisation represents a subset of the contemporary worship scene; arguably overrepresenting White evangelicalism and its influence on more mainline congregations. Since the CCLI lists represent what White evangelicals sing, one particular disadvantage for Evangelical women is that, in many cases, they must contend with a complementarian theology that seeks to limit their roles outside the home (Barr, 2021, p. 111), as evidenced in the way that Laurie Klein's husband was the one to encourage her to share "I Love You Lord" more widely. It is possible that men may be used by women in more conservative contexts to "authorize" the creation and use of songs by the wider church. Communities (as in churches, denominations, labels, distribution houses) which maintained a complementarian theology may struggle to endorse a lifestyle of travelling, touring, and press engagements that placed a woman's primary affiliation outside the home or in authority over a man. Further, Bowler and Reagan observe the rise of celebrity culture throughout this period, which cemented music as a career and platform for

artists: “Once dominated by faceless and nameless artists, by the turn of the century, the worship music industry had transformed into a celebrity platform.” (Bowler & Reagan, 2014, p. 204) This transformation correlates with the decline of ranking women songwriters, who, like Laurie Klein, found success as nameless grassroots writers but disappeared into the background upon the emergence of celebrity platforms.

A further change to the experience of women songwriters is due to the increasing success of collaborations. Co-writing offers a potential for a wider audience through the availability of multiple platforms for promotion, and the possibility of foregrounding more widely recognized contributors while backgrounding those with less significant platforms (Thornton, p. 82). While this evidently increases marketability and platforms for songs, this also negatively impacted opportunities for female songwriters. As men find themselves on the Top 25 list repeatedly for different songs, they also continue to collaborate with the same people, and the CCLI Top 25 list risks becoming an echo chamber. The nature of these collaborations arguably formed a barrier that makes it difficult for women to break into the song-writing circles, a dynamic that is in some cases augmented by fear of men and women being alone together, as practiced through the Billy Graham rule. CCLI charting songwriter Krissy Nordhoff identified this dynamic during a phone conversation in 2020: she articulated that her experience collaborating with men has been limited by the expectation that they not be alone together. In some cases, she described entire songwriting processes that occurred over email to avoid in person or one-on-one collaboration (Krissy Nordhoff, personal communication, April 2020). Inevitably, this inconvenience to celebrity songwriter men collaborating with women may lead some men to focus their collaborations with other men. In order to change this imbalance, publishers, songwriters, radio programmers, and worship leaders and communities must commit to the creation of safe and equitable spaces for co-writing. This represents the “supply” portion of the industry; however alternatively to redress this churches can choose to intentionally select and/or promote women songwriters and their worship choruses in their weekly songlist thereby increasing “demand.”

Further Discussion: The Influence of Megachurches

Pertinent to the subject of this special edition, another significant development in the contemporary worship music industry that has impacted women has been the

emergence of worship music from specific congregations, most notably, megachurches. These multi-site communities with thousands of congregants emerged at the end of the 20th century, quickly developing a reputation as leaders in the worship music industry. Music emerging from three megachurches, in particular – Elevation, Hillsong, and Bethel (as well as their affiliated brand Jesus Culture) – have developed to the extent that their songwriters are responsible for a high portion of the songs on the CCLI lists, with 48% of the songs on the CCLI list at the end of 2018 coming from these churches and affiliate group.³⁸ The women songwriters at these megachurches have defined the community’s musical output, to varying degrees. As Tanya Riches notes of women’s roles at Hillsong, “It would be difficult to argue that Hillsong’s musical repertoire had not been shaped by the participation of women.” (2017, p. 100) The megachurch offers an outlet for women’s creativity, to such an extent that their musical expertise has defined much of the church’s artistic output. While women’s participation in megachurch worship is widespread with women filling roles such as worship leaders, singers, and instrumentalists, as the data shows, one role they rarely fill is that of songwriter.

Figure 6 tracks the distribution of songs on the CCLI top 25 lists from songwriters affiliated with the three major megachurches (Elevation, Hillsong, Bethel) and one megachurch affiliated group (Jesus Culture), and those not affiliated. It shows that megachurches rose to prominence on the charts around 2015. The first song from one of these megachurch groups charted in 1997, marking the beginning of an increase in songs from megachurches, with a sharp 60% increase between 2008 and 2018. Songs from megachurches made up nearly half of the charts between 2015 and 2018 with an average of 41% over that period, revealing the growing presence of songwriters from just four groups within the Top 25 most sung worship songs in the final two years of the study period.

³⁸ Jesus Culture initially emerged as the musical ensemble for Bethel Church, and subsequently grew into a distinct group. It now produces different albums from the Bethel Church ensemble but continues to be closely linked to the Bethel megachurch. As such, it is identified as a separate entity from Bethel but still falls under the megachurch category.

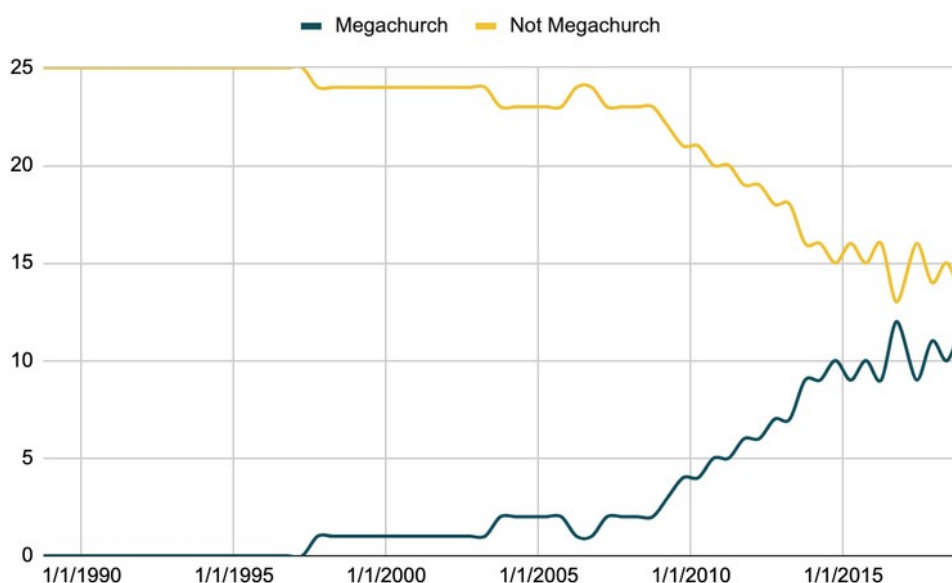


Figure 6: Representation of Songs from Megachurches on the Top 25 from 1988-2018

Representation of Songs from Megachurches on the Top 25 from 1988-2018

In many ways, the popularization of megachurch worship represents a consolidation of the market as has been experienced in other music genres across the Christian worship industry. As evidenced in Figure 6, megachurches have become a significant source of worship music on the CCLI Top 25 lists, but understanding how authorship is distributed amongst the megachurches is also critical for discussion.

Table 2 summarizes the percentage of songs by separating male, female, and male-female collaborations from each of the four prominent megachurch ensembles that appear on the CCLI Top 25 between 2015 and 2018. During this period, 31% of songs were by men from megachurches, 0.0% from solo women or collaborations between women, and 10% came from megachurch collaborations between men and women. Only 4.0% of the songs charting during this period were by female songwriters, with no megachurches contributing songs by solo women or collaborations between women. There were no solo women or female collaborations during this period. Women were thus represented in male-female collaborations, which made up 26.5% of the charts. The largest contributors were solo men or all-male collaborations, who

contributed 69.5% of the songs that charted on the Top 25 between 2015 and 2018. The megachurch ensemble with the largest contribution to the charts over this period was Hillsong, contributing 20.0% of the songs, followed by Bethel with 14.5%, Jesus Culture with 4.0%, and Elevation worship with 2.5%.

This data shows that megachurches are playing a major role in producing CCLI charting worship music, but to varying degrees in their support of women songwriters. While Elevation and Jesus Culture are both prominent ensembles with significant influence, neither of them contributed a significant portion of the songs on their own, as combined, they only contributed 6.5% of the charting songs. However, Bethel and Hillsong combined contribute 34.5% of the overall Top 25 songs during the study period, representing a significant portion of the charting songs. These two churches, then, both influence the Top 25 lists in significant ways through the songs that they contribute. Further, as leading megachurches, they model ways of developing and supporting songwriters and their collaborations.

Given the prominence of these two megachurches on the Top 25 list, their relationship to women songwriters is particularly noteworthy. Neither Bethel or Hillsong have any songs by solo women that ranked on the Top 25 from 2015–2018, nor do they have any songs by female collaborations. Of the 20% of charting songs that Hillsong contributed, only 2% were written in male-female collaborations, with the rest emerging exclusively from men. With 14.5% of charting songs contributed by Bethel, only 4% were written by male-female collaborations, the rest emerged exclusively from men. While many of these churches have strong women who lead across various roles, the data suggests that they are not appearing in songwriting credits. In this instance the songs sung by the community, and therefore its theology, are largely shaped by male voices.

	Male songwriters	Female songwriters	Male-female collabs	Total by affiliation
Elevation	2.5%	0.0%	0.0%	2.5%
Hillsong	18.0%	0.0%	2.0%	20.0%
Bethel	10.5%	0.0%	4.0%	14.5%
Jesus Culture	0.0%	0.0%	4.0%	4.0%
Non-megachurch songwriters	38.5%	4.0%	16.5%	59.0%
Total by gender	69.5%	4.0%	26.5%	

Table 2: Songwriters by Gender from Four Megachurch Ensembles, 2015-2018

Because today's CCLI Top 100 list is made up of songs that are reported to be in use, rather than songs selected by a panel of music experts or theologians, the list is not moderated based on external factors such as gender, race, age, or career status. This leads to a list that reflects how the church participates in worship via songs. Often, only the top songwriters from large churches, labels and publishers are represented on the CCLI Top 100 List. This can be taken to reflect their participation in and influence upon the global church. For women to be represented on the CCLI Top 100 list, the major publishers will need to source and develop more female songwriters, sign and support more women, and promote their music for use in churches. If the largest sources for Christian music are not releasing music by women, it becomes nearly impossible for the music of women to be listened to or sung in worship services.

Conclusion

This study showed how male songwriters have dominated the CCLI Top 25 charts for the last three decades and highlights the changes to the industry in this time. It detailed how women have not been successful in breaking into collaborations. There are a few notable exceptions, however. In December 2020, however, the number one ranking song on the CCLI top 100 told a different story. Nigerian songwriter Sinach's highly popular song "Way Maker" took the #1 position, marking her the first solo

woman to top the charts since Laurie Klein did in 1994. Is it possible that the tide is turning? Could women be more prominently featured on the charts again? Here, Sinach's overwhelming success indicates that there *is* room for songs by women on the charts, but it also raises questions about how women encounter such success. This article identified which labels, publishers, and churches are elevating these women's voices (or, alternatively, failing to elevate them). When "Way Maker" was released in 2016, Sinach was not yet signed to a major North American label and thus was not promoted by one. Perhaps her success indicates that one way to empower women songwriters is to return to the songwriting model of the early days of contemporary worship music. Before the celebrityization of worship, the results here show that songs by women appeared to be more easily sourced and more widely sung because of the gift they offered to the church, rather than because of promotion by an industry label, or their touring or publishing contract. With this model, women like Laurie Klein could continue to pen the prophetic anthems for the church, regardless of their audience and platform.

The US CCLI Top 25 list is indicative of the culture of the white Evangelical churches engaging in contemporary worship music. To further change the Top 25 list, and to empower women from within all song writing communities, communities need to prioritize supporting women as collaborators and solo writers. There are several steps already being taken in this direction: *Women Who Worship* is an annual gathering of women songwriters sponsored by Capitol CMG. This retreat was started in 2019 and encourages women to collaborate together and learn from each other ("Capitol CMG," 2019). Groups like *Porters Gate*, signed to Integrity Music through Capitol CMG, have placed a high emphasis on including women and people of colour in their songwriting and performance practice. This group may become a model for other groups that partner with publishers ("The Porter's Gate," 2019). In addition, Brave Worship is a collective started by Krissy Nordhoff, which seeks to empower women songwriters and worship leaders ("About (Brave Worship)," n.d.). Finally, the Faithful Project is an all-women song writing group that released their first album in spring 2021, highlighting the stories of biblical women (Loepp Thiessen, 2021).

When the publishers, megachurches, and labels do not put women at the fore, congregants do not encounter music by women. Churches cannot be blamed for not addressing this inequity when they have not had the opportunity to observe it, and when worship planners have not been exposed to the voices of female songwriters. In

a blog post from August, 2019, Jada Watson observes that “Repetition does not just generate “hits” on the chart, but it develops the sound and culture of musical genre and identity and shapes audience familiarity.” Because this conversation hasn’t started in most Christian circles, churches can’t recognize the unique texts and rich music that is missing when they only program music by men. Without more exposure, leaders are unable to recognize that their culture and identity have been shaped without female voices. The church’s worship would change for the better if the music of women was reclaimed as part of the culture.

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