

Catholic rocker Matt Maher finds cross-over appeal among evangelicals

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Growing up Roman Catholic in Newfoundland, Matt Maher never imagined that his childhood interest in music would lead to a career as a Grammy-nominated, chart-topping Christian rocker — let alone a crossover artist featured on Christian radio and in evangelical worship.

After he stopped going to Mass as a freshman in high school, Maher wasn't even sure about his own faith. The idea of maintaining a personal relationship to God seemed a foreign concept.

"Where I grew up, evangelical Christianity really hadn't made any strides," said Maher, now 38, describing the mainline religious culture of his wind-swept Canadian homeland.

Listen to any of his catchy, guitar-driven pop-rock anthems, such as his new single, "Lord, I Need You," and it's clear God is never far from Maher's mind these days.

Maher's 2009 album, "Alive Again," reached No. 6 on Billboard's "Top Christian Albums" chart, and he's received two Grammy nominations for songs co-written for Christian singer Chris Tomlin. He just launched a five-month North American tour in support of his new album, "All The People Said Amen."

"Lord, I Need You" is already climbing the Christian radio charts, proving that Maher's lyrics strike a chord with Protestants too.

Maher said one of the things that reignited his love for Catholicism is what he describes as its “all-encompassing worldview” that welcomes people from all walks of life. He said the same principle drives his songwriting, and the title of his new album is intended to spread this message of “unity” and “community.”

“The arms of St. Peter’s are really big,” Maher said. “The art is supposed to reflect that.”

Maher is one of the most successful Catholic artists to cross over into mainstream Christian rock and find an audience among evangelicals, said David Wang, a Catholic rock musician and lead singer of the Canadian band Critical Mass.

“The evangelicals are seeing that it’s the same style of music they’re used to hearing, but with a little more depth to the lyrics,” Wang said, adding that it used to be “unheard of” for Christian radio stations to play music by Catholic artists. He pointed to Maher and American singer-songwriter Audrey Assad as prime examples of what he described as a burgeoning trend.

Jonathan Mason, an evangelical who plays bass in a group called the Andy Needham Band, said he often plays Maher’s songs when he performs at worship services.

“I don’t look at the lyrics of his songs and see things that contradict what I believe,” said Mason. “He’s just a great songwriter. He’s very Christ-focused.”

Maher said he didn’t find Jesus until 1995, when he moved to Phoenix to study at Arizona State University. His cousin started taking him to Mass, and one night she suggested they go to a youth group event organized by members of the parish.

Maher said he was shocked to see people his age talking about how their love for Jesus had changed their lives for the better. Maher recalled feeling very confused. “I thought, what is this, a cult?”

Turns out, it was a meeting of charismatic Catholics, part of a movement called the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Many observers have likened charismatic prayer sessions to Pentecostal revival meetings.

He went back to Mass and youth group meetings over the summer, though he still had “no clue what was happening on a spiritual level.”

But one night that fall, it all clicked. On the weekend of his 20th birthday, Maher watched his new friends perform a skit called, "The Broken Heart," about a young girl who gets a new heart from God after giving hers away to a young boy.

As he watched, Maher experienced what he called a "profound awakening."

"I was standing in the back of the room and I burst into tears," Maher remembered. Not long after, he started writing worship songs for the group's prayer sessions and devoted himself to performing Christian music.

Jody Rieber used to attend worship nights with Maher in Phoenix. She says his music always evoked "an emotional response" in her and it still does now.

"Whenever I hear his live tracks or concerts, it seems like he's doing the same thing, just on a larger scale," she said.

Maher said he believes God called him "to write music with Protestants and be in ministry with them" as a means to strengthening his own faith.

Maher's wife, Kristin, is a Methodist, and the two are rearing their 20-month-old son, Michael, in the Catholic Church. They also take him to Methodist services on Sundays, too, so he can experience both traditions.

None of Maher's current tour mates, singer-songwriter Chris August, or the six members of the band, Bellarive, are Catholic.

"What's fantastic about it is we're all Christians from different denominations and we're learning to understand each other," Maher said. "It just means that we're writing about mysteries that we don't fully understand."