

mormonartist:

A Sign We're Arriving

ESSAY BY **JON OGDEN** | JONBLOGDEN.COM

Like hundreds of thousands of starry-eyed teens since the Beatles mopped the States with their gleeful ditties, I joined a rock band in junior high school. And like hundreds of thousands of starry-eyed teens since the Beatles, we were altogether unqualified for the part. We performed a few incoherent covers — U2's "With or Without You" (a song two octaves beyond my vocal range) and Pink Floyd's "In the Flesh" — but we really aimed to write our own stuff.

So when I wrote my first song for our band — a masterpiece that in one earnest verse rhymed "broad sword" with "fjord" — I felt a sense of elation. I decided that if I could write rock songs with Church-approved lyrics, or even better, lyrics that channeled my testimony, I could revolutionize the world; I could tug thousands of listeners toward Mormonism.

It wasn't a bad impulse, but as I began crafting churchy songs and listening to EFY music for the first time, I noticed (with some exceptions¹) that even though I *wanted* to listen to and write overtly Mormon music, I mostly kept listening to the melodies and rhythms and metaphors of secular artists. I certainly wasn't morally opposed to the stuff on the EFY albums, nor

was I listening to secular music to rebel (unless Paul Simon or Cat Stevens is rebellious listening). What my introduction to EFY music did, more than anything, was cause me to question what good Mormon art is.

It's a complex question, one I'm still wrestling with to this day and will likely wrestle with for a lifetime. It's also the central question that this magazine, *MormonArtist*, works to answer. These interviews and articles, at their core, have been exercises in pinpointing what good Mormon art is.

Additionally, there's an argument in the magazine title's design, intended or not, that has helped me better understand how Mormons should approach art. The bolded word **artist** in the design raises an intriguing question: What makes someone a Mormon**artist**? While there are likely hundreds of answers to that question, I believe that Mormon**artists** are Mormons who create art with the primary intent to push at the frontier of the worldwide artistic endeavor (meaning that *as artists* they value aesthetics, inventiveness, etc. over didacticism), while Mormon**artists** are Mormons who create art with the primary intent to win converts or help troubled teenagers.

There's potentially a lot of overlap between these two terms. In many cases art created with

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¹ Peter Breinholt's "What About," Jon Schmidt's "Waterfall," and Tyler Castleton's "One Voice," among others, stand out.

an overt agenda is also inventive and artistically compelling (think about “Because I Have Been Given Much” or “I Know that My Redeemer Lives,” among many other hymns). It’s clear from hundreds of examples that being a **Mormonartist** doesn’t mean shying away from Mormon topics. It just means that while creating art, the **Mormonartist** favors artistry over orthodoxy. **Mormonartists** — and I’d put some overtly Mormon artists like Mack Wilberg in this category — hope that their art will lead people to goodness and that in turn it will lead them to the Church, but they don’t produce art primarily for the purpose of winning converts — they seem intensely and primarily interested in artistry. This is a good thing.

We Mormons have the same expectations of Church members in almost all other professions. We expect, for instance, that dentists will favor dentistry over promoting religious orthodoxy while they are at work. To illustrate, we don’t expect dentists to give the missionary discussions to clients strapped, mouths agape, in the dentist chair. Nor do we expect accountants to slip copies of their testimonies in with their client’s tax returns. Dentists and accountants may be inspired in certain instances to share their beliefs, but we generally don’t expect such acts to be a mainstay of their professions. We shouldn’t expect it from artists either.

While the dentist and accountant analogies admittedly have some flaws — working with teeth or numbers is morally neutral in ways that creating art can’t be — I

believe that Mormon culture will produce better art the more we (consumers and creators) long for **Mormonartists**. I believe this in part because it seems that President Kimball had **Mormonartists** in mind in his legendary (at least in artistic circles) talk, “The Gospel Vision of the Arts.”

When President Kimball envisioned the day when our artistic talents will flourish until “the eyes of all the world will be upon us,” he couldn’t have been calling for more **Mormonartists**. If the world generally rejects our orthodoxy, they won’t be sold on a piece of art simply because it conveys our orthodoxy with terrific clarity. They will be drawn to it, as they were drawn to Shakespeare and Milton, because the artistry is nonpareil. Like Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the content of the art President Kimball envisioned might very well be religious in nature, but it will not be lauded because it mirrors the common religious tenets of the time. It will be lauded because, like *Paradise Lost*, it will contain brilliant psychological insights and because it will push at the frontier of a long artistic tradition. Such art, again, will not be primarily concerned with preaching orthodoxy as much as it is concerned with artistic innovation. “Make it new” has been the motto, whether realized or not, for all memorable artists throughout history. All memorable artists have caused us to see the world anew.

When President Kimball said that “if we strive for perfection — the best and greatest — and are never satisfied with mediocrity,

we can excel,” he was likely referring to artistry. When he said, “to be an artist means hard work and patience and long-suffering,” he was likely referring to what it takes to achieve true artistic talent, not what it takes to accurately convey orthodox messages. His vision was for **Mormonartists**.

I should reiterate that I’m not arguing for a retreat from Mormon themes in art. I’m thinking of the fantastic musician Sufjan Stevens, an artist who does not shy away from subtly visiting Christian themes in his songs while making innovative contributions to contemporary music (his album *Illinois* was deservedly on nearly every major list for the decade’s best albums.) The artists interviewed in this magazine have struck a similar balance in their respective genres. *MormonArtist* is a sign we’re arriving.

Finally, I’m not arguing that artists should get so caught up in their work that they soften their commitment to Mormonism. After all, whether we celebrate **Mormonart** or **Mormonart**, “Mormon” comes first. I believe that at church meetings all Mormon artists should be **Mormonartists**, the same way all church-goers put aside their profession on Sunday.

Who knows — Mormons could lead the next century in intelligent and innovative rock music. I hope that *MormonArtist* will help bring it about. The rock world is ready for a band of Mormon artists as innovative and as universally appealing as the Beatles. We certainly have the suit and tie thing down pat. ■