

INTERVIEW

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Fractured and Elliptical Sensibilities: An interview with Steve Taylor

Steve Taylor has created a unique body of work as an artist and entrepreneur. As a recording artist he's sold over one million albums and received two Grammy nominations. His latest music projects include Steve Taylor & the Danielson Foil's albums *Goliath* (2013) and *Wow to the Deadness* (2016a) – a collaboration with Daniel Smith recorded by famed punk rock producer Steve Albini, and 2021's *The Last Amen* – a live album from his former band Chagall Guevara. His resume as a music producer includes three Gold-certified albums for Newsboys (1994, 1996, 2003) and the Platinum-certified *Sixpence None The Richer* (1998), which included their #1 international smash hit 'Kiss Me'. (1999) His media company, Squint Entertainment, achieved worldwide success with a roster including Sixpence, Chevelle and Burlap To Cashmere. Taylor led the company until its sale to AOL/Time Warner.

Taylor's work as a filmmaker includes music videos, documentaries, and two theatrically-released feature films: *The Second Chance* (Sony, 2006), and *Blue Like Jazz* (Roadside Attractions/Lionsgate, 2012)). His next feature, *The Independent*, is in development with Viola Davis' JuVee. Taylor also serves as Director of the School of Theatre & Cinematic Arts at Lipscomb University. He lives in Nashville with his wife and daughter.

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'The musicological neglect of Jesus Rock,' notes John Haines, Professor of Music and Medieval Studies, 'is hardly warranted. Rock 'n' roll always had one foot in the Gospel camp' (2011: 255), going on to state that 'to query the significance of Jesus Rock is to query the significance of rock 'n' roll, arguably the most influential music of the twentieth century.' (2011: 256)

Claire Gibson, writing up the research which had informed her documentary film about Steve Taylor, *Steve Taylor Is Not Dead* (2011), reports that '[f]rom the 1970s until the early 1980s, the Jesus People movement changed from the hippie-like lifestyle to a more middle class lifestyle. As this change from its original countercultural emphasis occurred, its music began to shift into a commercially viable format.' (2009: 2) This 'commercially viable format' became the CCM (Contemporary Christian Music) industry, a multi-million pound business in the USA but one that was not sustainable in the UK, despite the best attempts by record labels at the time. It wasn't just money though: Haines points out that '[i]t had become clear by 1972 that Jesus Rock was enough of a phenomenon to be institutionalized.' (2011: 250)

Not, however, in Britain, where the phenomenon of Jesus Rock inspired Christians to form a multitude of bands who were content to play to other

Christians. Peter Banks of After the Fire states that 'bands didn't try hard enough or simply weren't good enough. It was just too easy to use spiritual "excuses" for what was poor art to be inflicted on the ticket buying Christians at sub culture events. So many labels and dodgy deals meant you could release a record easily to sell at these events. You then scrounged money off all your "prayer partners" and made a living. Personally I think it was a dreadful situation.' (Banks 2014)

As I have discussed in previous pieces for *Punk and Post-Punk* (Loydell, 2019a, 2019b), this world of amateur musicians playing makeshift concerts in churches, church halls or religious events, soon disappeared, with bands such as After the Fire signing to major record labels and playing the normal venues and tours of the music biz offered at the time.

There were, of course, dissenting voices about American CCM. In his book *Pulphhead*, John Jeremiah Sullivan writes about his trip to Creation, a Christian rock festival:

These were not Christian bands you see, these were Christian-rock bands. The key to digging this scene lies in that one-syllable distinction. Christian rock is a genre that exists to edify and make money off evangelical Christians. It's message music for listeners who know the message cold, and what's more, it operates under a perceived responsibility [...] to 'reach people.' (Sullivan, 2012, 17-18)

He goes on to talk about 'parasitism', suggesting that '[e]very successful crappy secular group has its Christian off band.' (Sullivan, 2012, 18)

But there had always been those who wanted more than CCM could offer, or those who rejected its expectations: by the late 1980s, thanks to the examples of bands such as U2, along with the professionalism and monetarization of the CCM industry, many Christian bands in the USA would seek to break out of the CCM bubble, however critically and financially successful this could be, into the wider marketplace. Steve Taylor's production and musical skills, along with his marketing acumen, would help facilitate the success of bands such as Sixpence None The Richer and the Newsboys, even though his own songs sometimes critiqued the industry that supported them: 'Controversial lyrics became part of Steve Taylor's career. His lyrics often exposed shortcomings of the institutional church. These commentaries infuriated ministers and conservative church members.' (Gibson, 2009: 4)

Taylor formed his own music and film companies, seeking artistic freedom but also, I suspect, foreseeing that CCM was not an indefinitely sustainable business model. If so, he was right: in 2017, *The Week* pointed out that

The descent of CCM is a reflection of America's waning interest in Christianity as a whole. The precipitous dropoff of CCM sales has left Christian labels and artists starting into the void alongside their pastors, scratching their heads, wondering where they went wrong. (The Week Staff)

Although '[f]or the most part, CCM artists have been content to either play it safe and hold onto their dwindling cut of America's attention span, or strike out on their own and look for other outcasts' (The Week Staff, 2017), others such as Steve Taylor have found new ways to collaborate, fund, write, create and

disseminate their art. I thought I'd interview Steve Taylor and look back over his varied and intriguing career as musician, producer, businessman and filmmaker.

Rupert Loydell (RL): In previous interview articles for *Punk & Post-Punk* concerning Christian rock (Loydell 2018, 2019a, 2019b 2021), I have noted that Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) as such does not exist in the UK. It might have for a few years as a branch of USA companies but it proved an unsustainable business model. Your first albums *Meltdown* (Taylor 1984) and *On the Fritz* (1985) were very much part of the CCM world. Could you tell us how you arrived there as a musician and recording artist?

Steve Taylor (ST): Soon after college I took a trip to Los Angeles from my hometown of Denver, Colorado at the recommendation of a former Warner Bros.-affiliated music publisher who'd heard my demo tape and set up meetings with a number of record labels. The music was a punk/new wave hybrid that the A&R reps I met with found intriguing, but they couldn't wrap their head around the lyrical content, which didn't have any ready parallel in their world and would, they felt, be offensive to most listeners due to the many references to Christian belief and practice. So I decided that while I was in L.A. I should meet with a few Christian record labels to get their response, which ended up being, 'We *don't* like your music... and your lyrics would offend our listeners.' But about a year later the head of Sparrow Records, an independently owned Christian music label, heard my very first live performance of two songs at a showcase and immediately offered me a record deal.

RL: Your biography on Talkhouse states that you 'quickly gained a reputation as a "controversial" artist, using [your] lyrical ability to sharply criticize other Christian beliefs and practices that he believed were incompatible with Biblical Christianity' (anon 2021), Howard & Streck note that 'Steve Taylor spent much of his time and energy probing the underside of the church' and that your 'early songwriting was [...] focussed on challenging what [you] perceived to be the questionable practices of the church' (1999: 141), whilst *Cross Rhythms* more kindly called you 'Evangelical rock's court jester' (Cummings and Vink 1994). I'm intrigued about the notion of critiquing the church as a member rather than from outside. Doesn't membership simply mean you are complicit in what you are criticising?

ST: Does it? If you're a member of the Labour Party, are you not allowed to criticize its leaders? Christianity is a big tent encompassing beliefs and practices I find antithetical to the teachings of Jesus. But the New Testament is full of family feuds – the Apostle Paul was both a founding member and one of its harshest critics.

RL: Christians often seem caught between the idea of music as an art form and as a delivery method for religious comment or instruction. Howard & Streck note that 'the herky-jerky rhythms of eighties new wave and the frequent punning sometimes detracted from Taylor's message' (1999:141) whilst Bruce Adolph suggests that '[r]evolutionary, quick wit, lyrically pushing the envelope and

deeply committed as both a musician and Christian person. Steve Taylor's frenetic stage performances are appreciated worldwide, his thinking man's lyrics (often times satiric) are a breath of fresh air.' (Adolph 2000). What do you think about the relationship between music and lyrics?

ST: I take them both seriously and spend a lot of time trying to make sure the lyrics work with a particularly melody. But I'd agree with Howard & Streck that what seemed like a good idea at the time doesn't always age well. I teach a songwriting class at a university, and I'll occasionally use my own work as examples of both what to do and what not to do. Songwriting as a delivery method for instruction is certainly not unique to Christian music – protest music led the anti-war effort in the sixties – but some practitioners do it better than others.

RL: Can we pick up on those herky-jerky rhythms? Tell me about your punk and new wave influences. I know you like the Clash, so I guess you feel that music has a role in changing the world through what is sung? Or at least making people think? Squeeze, who I know you have toured with (and were off to see in concert when I contacted you about doing an interview), are renowned for their clever lyrics.

ST: Crazy enough, I woke up this morning thinking about those two bands specifically. I've been listening to Squeeze for three days straight since their show at Nashville's Ryman Auditorium last Sunday night, and then 'Clampdown' by The Clash (1979) came up randomly on a playlist. Both were British bands that came into prominence in roughly the same era, and they're two of my all-time favorites... with very little in common. Punk rock put attitude over craft. The Clash had both in equal measure, whereas Squeeze is exquisite craft with little to no attitude. As I've gotten older, I'm more impressed with craft and less with attitude. Attitude is easy. Craft is hard.

RL: It wasn't just new wave in the mix was it? I'm thinking of the track 'Jim Morrison's Grave' on your album *I Predict 1990* (1978a) which opens with the lines 'Am I a pilgrim / or another souvenir hound'. I know that song was also a critique of fame and the way fans make pilgrimage to his grave in Paris but I am assuming you are also a fan and that the video you made there was the result of your own pilgrimage? (1987b)

ST: I liked The Doors, and I particularly liked Jim Morrison's baritone voice. But my pilgrimage was less fanboy and more cultural anthropologist: I'm fascinated by the tortured artist syndrome, which Morrison seems to have embodied as much as any rock star. I get the impulse: it's an easy attitude to cop and a hard one to shake.

RL: Can I also ask you about 'I Blew Up the Clinic Real Good' another track from the same album? (1978a) It's satirical stance seemed to get you into all kinds of trouble, including the album being removed from sale and the cancellation of a tour. I'm always amazed at how illiberal people (I guess I mean some Christians in this instance) can be about certain topics (abortion being one such topic) and

how unable they are to allow people to hold different points of view. I always compare it to people who play golf expecting footballers to abide by the same rules. Without diving into a theological debate about morals and their application to all humans, I wondered what you were attempting to do with that song, apart from critiquing extremists blowing up and picketing abortion clinics, and what you felt about it in retrospect?

ST: Another example of 'it seemed like a good idea at the time'. The amount of hypocrisy on both sides of the abortion issue is staggering, but I'm not sure that song added much to the debate beyond pointing out that ends don't justify means.

RL: In 1991 you released one of my favourite albums of yours, *Chagall Guevara* (1991), a band album that felt like a new start, musically and lyrically. It seemed to draw on grunge as much as new wave and more traditional rock, did not seem to be explicitly religious in any shape or form, and was released by MCA. Tell me about Chagall Guevara.

ST: Chagall Guevara was partially borne out of the frustration we three founding members – Dave Perkins, Lynn Nichols and myself – had experienced during our time in the minefields of the Christian music industry, which had devolved from a handful of scrappy independent labels to a lucrative collection of corporately owned enterprises in the U.S. I think we all wanted to escape its gravitational pull, so we formed a rock band with no agenda other than to be artistically ambitious and (hopefully) commercially successful. Our album came out in 1991, about four months before Nirvana's 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' (1991), so while I can't say we were influenced by grunge, we had many of the same influences as grunge bands of that era.

RL: Chagall Guevara received some critical success but in an interview with *Cross Rhythms* you reflected that you were 'surprised at the number of people who didn't have a clue what most of our songs were about. I think that perhaps we wrote as much for each other as we did for the listener, which may have made some of the lyrics a little obscure. We had no lyrical agenda, so whatever light was present came in through the back door.' (Cummings & Vink 1994) There's a sense of disappointment evident there and, I guess, at the way the band quickly folded?

ST: The experience of being in Chagall Guevara changed everything for me: it brought my wife and me to Nashville, it made me a better artist, and the highs and lows of that experience hopefully made me more empathetic. As a solo artist, I was used to fans having a high level of engagement with the lyrics and coming to shows knowing all the words. That didn't seem to be the case as much with Chagall Guevara, even though we spent serious time crafting the lyrics to say exactly what we wanted. But, of course, the crowds were smaller and the lyrics more opaque, so I suppose it's no surprise. We all felt pretty beaten by the time the band folded. Part of it was self-inflicted, with differing ideas of what was required to succeed, especially when it came to touring. But mostly we experienced what happens to a lot of bands when a major label comes with

money and promises they can't or won't keep. It took awhile to get over the shock of not breaking through to a wide audience, as we all thought we had the goods. Which is probably why we've reformed as of 2020 with a live album – *The Last Amen* (2020), a studio album of new and unreleased tracks entitled *Halcyon Days* (2022), and a reunion concert this summer at Nashville's famed Ryman Auditorium, all made possible by a suprisingly successful Kickstarter campaign at the height of the pandemic.

RL: Your 1993 *Squint* album and *Liver* in 1995 in many ways felt like a solo continuation of the band's work, but also a return to satire. Tracks like 'Jesus Is For Losers' and 'Easy Listening' can't have endeared you to many in your CCM target audience?

ST: My tombstone will likely read 'Killed By Optimism': I honestly thought those songs would be bigger hits. My experience with fans, especially those who are fellow Christians, is that they're generally quite open to criticism since they're used to hearing Sunday sermons. But my place within the Christian Entertainment Industrial Complex has always been a little tentative, and when it comes to Christian radio play, I'm a non-entity.

RL: Moving on, there's a suggestion that by the end of the 1990s you were acceptable and mainstream. In 2000, John J. Thompson suggested that 'Steve Taylor had become one of the most respected individuals in the Christian music industry. As an artist and producer, he'd set the standards for integrity, vision and relevance' (2000: 202), whilst several years later you were regarded as 'a pillar of the Nashville Christian music community, [although] there was a time when he was its Marilyn Manson, Dr. Dementos, and Eminem rolled up into one.' (Beaujon 2006: 95)

That doesn't quite sit with your statement, in the same piece, that '[m]y entire career has been an attempt to navigate between the expectations of the Christian labels (and of course there has been a lot of changes and evolution happening in Christian labels over the last 15 years) and my experience on pop labels' (Adolph 2000). I wondered how you felt, or feel, about that acceptance? And what those 'changes and evolution' have been? Also about ideas of 'integrity, vision and relevance'.

ST: I recently saw the Anthony Bourdain documentary *Roadrunner* (Neville 2021), which included an interview he'd done in 2015 with Iggy Pop, who is as close to a punk rock legend as it gets, and obviously someone Bourdain admired. Bourdain asks him what was making him happy at that moment in his life. And I'm expecting a suitably punk rock answer from Iggy Pop, but instead he flashes a warm smile and says 'Being loved and appreciating those people who are giving love to me.'

Now that is not a very punk rock reply. But I'm guessing it's partly responsible for Iggy Pop having made it to 74. In watching the documentary, it seemed like Bourdain, who took his own life at 61, seemed far more invested in the punk rock mythos as a chef/author/TV host than Iggy Pop. Go figure.

All that to say: there is a fork in an artist's path through life where you either get grateful or bitter. I'm grateful I can still make music and have anybody still care.

RL: In *The Rock & Roll Rebellion*, Mark Joseph made an amazing suggestion that 'Taylor found acceptance in the very community he was mocking because he attacked from the social, theological and cultural right wing. Evangelical Christians have long been open to – and sometimes have even welcomed – attacks from their style of living from somebody accusing them of not being conservative and Christian enough, as Taylor did.' (Joseph 1999: 211) Is there an element of truth in his suggestion that many Christians are masochistic in this way and enjoy being berated by those who are (apparently) even more legalistic and right-wing? If people really do miss or did miss the satire is it all counter-productive to what you are or were trying to say?

ST: I think that statement is more indicative of the author's perspective than my own. Christianity has never fit snugly within any political party's agenda I'm aware of. And neither have I.

RL: One thing that I am sure contributed to a greater acceptance is your production work and video making for many other artists, including the Newsboys (Taylor 1996) and Sixpence None the Richer (Taylor 1999). Could you tell me about that sideways move into production first? How does CCM regard videos?

ST: My work with other artists was mostly borne of my exhaustion with the constant self-promotion necessary to sustain a career within the music industry. It was so nice to have no other agenda than to serve the artistic ambitions of my friends in the various bands I produced or made music videos for.

RL: Some of the early videos for your own music were played on MTV, despite them being quirky and – I think I am right in saying – pretty low budget. Could you tell me about your own take on the visual side of music promotion? I know your wife is a painter, and that you have always considered the visual dynamics of live performance, whether that's as natty new-wave anti-clone in an abstract-patterned suit or a hair-flailing rock-god in Chagall Guevera, striking all the right poses.

ST: I've always had an interest in fashion and the visuals that can accompany a music release. I earned the equivalent of a film minor at Colorado University in Boulder. but my training there was almost exclusively oriented toward the avant-garde, a perspective that quickly degenerates into parody when placed under academia's microscope. And while most of my film classes helped me not-at-all when trying to write and direct feature-length movies, they were actually quite valuable in creating the more fractured and elliptical sensibilities needed for most music videos.

RL: By the early 2000s you had left or appeared to have left music and were not only making videos but working on a feature film, *Blue Like Jazz*, which you not

only directed but helped write too. (Taylor, 2012) It's a much subtler satire and gentler romcom drama than much of your previous work, although it still deals with ideas of faith, doubt, rules, regulations and social expectations. It manages to be rebellious, witty, anarchic and spiritual all in one – the latter being the reason, I suspect, it didn't get mainstream release in places like the UK, where we don't really have things like christian colleges (or universities).

Why did you decide to adapt Donald Miller's book of the same title (2003), and what were your expectations for the film's critical and audience reception? I know at the UK premiere how much laughter and appreciation there was from the audience, yet it seemed to disappear without a trace over here.

ST: Don's memoir so closely paralleled my own experience in college that I was bound and determined to be the one who adapted it for the big screen, which turned into a seven year odyssey that took me to the brink of bankruptcy. I'm still really fond of the movie and what it accomplished: it premiered at a major film festival (South By Southwest), got some good reviews (along with some not-so-good ones), had a nationwide theatrical release, and, I think, broke some new ground in similar ways to my first music albums. But its audience was much more niche than I'd anticipated, and, as with my music, I underestimated the amount of hostility a movie like that could generate from both a conservative churchgoing audience and a mainstream audience that's highly allergic to anything that's not outright dismissive of Christian faith.

RL: So, you've got a new Chagall Guevera album in the works, and managed to retrospectively release a live band album, *The Last Amen* (2020), to fans. Before that there was a new band, Steve Taylor & The Perfect Foil, who quietly released *Goliath* (2014) and then mutated into the collaborative band Steve Taylor & The Danielson Foil, who released *Wow to the Deadness* (2016a) and *Wow to the Liveness* (2016b). I heard Steve Albini was involved?

ST: Yes, I'd first worked with Steve when he recorded Chevelle's debut album *Point #1* (1991) for the record label I founded in the late nineties (Squint). He'd also worked a fair bit with Daniel Smith, so the band camped out at his Electrical Audio studios in Chicago for one of the best week's of my life and we made an EP that we're all really proud of. And it came on the heels of the *Goliath* album, which is another album I'm really attached to. Making rock music in this era is quite different than it was in the late twentieth century – it's now niche music that no longer drives the culture, and even bands that previously set high artistic standards are discovering that any innovations within the genre are now more incremental than revolutionary.

RL: So, what else have you got in the pipeline, or are you about to buy a pipe and slippers?

ST: I like being both a maker and a teacher, so I hope God grants me many more years to do both.

RL: Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions.

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