

Daniel Amos and Me: The Power of Pop Culture and Autoethnography

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Nearly everyone I know has a relationship with something in popular culture, whether it is *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, amassing *The Astonishing X-Men* comics, or collecting every version of every *Star Wars* movie. Relationships and pop culture: couldn't that make an autoethnography?

This is a short version of my relationship with a band, Daniel Amos. I am not in Daniel Amos. I don't know the members of the band (although I am Facebook friends with them now). I first heard them in 1982 serendipitously. Or maybe it was destiny. Either way, they opened my eyes to the wonders, doubts, and excesses of my life, critiqued my faith, and brought me joy. I feel like I know them, and they me. Thirty-one years after first hearing them, I realize our relationship is one of the longest I have had. We grew up and are growing older together.

Popular Culture Autoethnography?

Pop culture and autoethnography: two terms seemingly at odds with each other. On the one side stands popular culture studies, with its interrogations of music (Albiez), television shows (Stern), video gaming (Dunn & Guadagno), movie genres (Carroll), characters (Herrmann, "C-can") – including individuals who become "characters" (Herbig 133) – and its examinations of power and discourses in popular texts, broadly defined (Stern, Manning & Dunn). On the other side sits autoethnography, the narrative first-person examination of the self, used as a jumping off point to interrogate cultural practices (Holman Jones, Adams & Ellis). One examines culture and identity from the outside in, the other from the inside out. Do the twain meet? We could say, "No," leave it at that, and go our disparate ways. No fuss, no muss.

This answer, while convenient, does not work. Pop culture impacts our identities indelibly and profoundly (Bennett). In media studies, millennials are called “digital natives,” since they are comfortable with and have domesticated technology (Tyma). We *all*, however, are pop culture natives, and have been for generations. Like people with synesthesia who can see sound and taste color, we are embedded in popular culture. It impacts our emotional states and our differing tastes. Popular culture helps us define who we are, what we believe, and influences whom we befriend.

Similarly our identities help define what we believe is worthwhile pop culture and what is not. I am not talking about the supposed divide between high and low brow culture (Gans). (And, as an aside, wouldn’t high-brow cultural theorists be disgusted with *both* pop culture and autoethnography?) Rather, I am implicating our identities as one determining factor for our beliefs about pop culture and our pop culture choices. We scan our pop culture surroundings, accepting some things and filtering out others. (Of course, our filtering mechanisms are not perfect. I still recognize Justin Bieber songs when I come across them accidentally on the radio.) Our identities and identifications with popular culture artifacts assist in our creation of self. Our identities and pop culture have a long-term recursive relationship.

One way across the chasm is through examining our primary identities, the star groups we belong to and owe loyalty to, and “our most significant social and professional roles as well as the most compelling and meaningful experiences of our lives” (Krizek 148). My primary identities and music are intricately related.

The Double

My double’s sitting in another world.
 My double’s laughing in the heavenly places.
 I am his double here, I can expect
 We’ll be together when time is no more.
 -- Daniel Amos, “Double”

Two confessions regarding my primary identities. One: I became a Christian in 1978 in junior high. It was an easy decision. I did not want to go to hell. We were Plymouth Brethren, an extremely conservative congregationalist denomination.

Women must wear head-coverings, which I sarcastically called “head doilies.” King James Version of the Bible only. Women and children were to be silent. No women in leadership. No drinking. No smoking. No dancing. No card playing. No pastor (too authoritarian). No music during weekly Communion. No rock music. Their message: “Yes” to Jesus, “No” to everything else. Christian apocalyptic eschatology, such as the rapture and the *Left Behind* phenomenon, started with the Brethren. In comparison, this denomination makes most Southern Baptists seem liberal.

Two: I discovered punk rock around the same time. I still identify as “punk” (Herrmann “Never”). I played bass with my brothers Fred (guitar), and Jim (drums) before I left for college, and we jammed when I came home for the holidays, but we never melded the way bands that get regular jamming time together do. Still, we came up with a name, “The H-Factor,” with the “H” for “Herrmann.” We wrote lyrics to a few songs: “Jumping Jack Lalanne Flashbacks” and “Phil Collins Is Chasing Me,” both of which abused the crass commercialism of the 1980s. I was immersed in punk and post-punk, with records by The Sex Pistols, The Cure, Black Flag, The Police, The Clash, PiL, etc. Or, as they referred to in my church, “THE DEVIL’S MUSIC!” I straddled two worlds. I lived a double life. I was a doppelgänger.

The Christian Bookstore

You play old music.
 Well some of it’s a bore.
 To me it’s all irrelevant,
 Like Haight Street and love beads.
 -- Daniel Amos “Memory Lane”

1982: As my brother Fred and I enter the Christian bookstore, my flat feet hurt. The walk is about two miles from home. The carpet under my soles feels wonderful. The store is quiet, except for some praise music. Heading toward the records, we walk past familiar best-selling books by Hal Lindsay and Billy Graham. Flipping through the albums, I sigh. As Johnston noted of his own experiences of the time, “Traditional Gospel, popular and easy-listening forms of

CCM [contemporary Christian music] dominated the shelf space” (118). Christian radio was the same.

Anything construed as different or potentially offensive was not played or displayed at the bookstore. Platitudes and jingoistic lyrics filled the songs. Mainstream Christian music was, as Fred would say with dismay, “A bunch of happy crap.” There’s Jimmy Swaggart, Michael Card, Scott Wesley Brown, and Sandy Patti...what we considered, “Old people music.” I am a sophomore in high school and my friends listen to punk, metal, and new wave. They are rocking. I am too, but I feel guilty about it. I’m not *supposed* to like secular music. My church said so. Worse, all the Christian music I encounter is a variation on Kumbaya. *Why can’t Christian music rock? Why is it so lame?*

I walk up to the counter, behind which stands a bespectacled man in his fifties.

“Jeez, he’s not going to be any help,” I think. He’s looking at me with the suspicion a young, not-quite-normal-Christian teenager feels when looked at by his elders. My ripped jeans and purple rat-tail hair probably aren’t helping. I steel myself.

“I was wondering if you had any music that’s, ah, different.”

“Have you heard of David and the Giants?” he asks.

“Yeah. I was hoping for something *quirkier*.”

“I have Daniel Amos.”

“Who’s he?”

“Not a he. A band. Someone special-ordered two records by them, but returned them. He said Daniel Amos played country, and this can’t be them, because it is too, um, *queer*. I’ll give them to you half price, since they’re opened,” the clerk explained.

He hands me two albums. The first, *¡Alarma!: The ‘¡Alarma! Chronicles’ Volume I*, shows a photo of the band with their eyes smeared out. The second has a photograph of a male mannequin standing in front of a window, his blank eyes

staring at me, with the words *Doppelgänger: The 'Alarma! Chronicles' Volume II* along the bottom.

“Alarma Chronicles? What’s that all about? And what’s with the eyes?” I think to myself.

“I’ll take ‘em.”

Doppelgänger

When we get home, I put on *Doppelgänger*. The music starts. It is playing backwards, and stays that way. I am reminded of the supposed satanic backwards masking on secular records by Led Zeppelin and Queen. Then Terry Taylor speak-sings over the backward music.

“We are the anti-men, we are the masked men. Resting together, cavity, stuffed with straw. Figure without shape, shadow without nuance. Impotent power, the empty men.” (Daniel Amos “Hollow”)

“This is *really* weird,” my youngest brother Jim says.

“Yeah,” I agree. “It’s cool. I think some of those lyrics are from T.S. Eliot. I read him in English last year.”

We keep listening. It is like no Christian music I had experienced. The music is angular, edgy, and disjointed. The straight rock songs are raw and full of power. These guys can really play. The cacophony speaks to me. *Doppelgänger*, with its strange metaphors, odd lyrics, weird background vocals, and emotional complexity was to become my all-time favorite album. I’d discovered alt-Christian rock.

Hard Questions...

Mainstream Christian music at the time was geared to what my brothers and I called “the old and the brain dead.” It didn’t talk to me about what was happening in my family and church. Christian platitudes were not useful. Unlike the easy, carefree Christian music at the time, life was not easy and carefree. It was chaotic.

The feel good god, and the lord of science
 Democracy’s blind and bewildered giants
 The hammer and the sickle and the modern appliance
 All the staggering gods.

-- Daniel Amos “Staggering Gods”

We had hard questions. Not just because we were teens creating our own senses of identity. Our father’s business failed. Our parents got divorced. They got remarried. Our stepmother was a junkie (Herrmann “Father’s”). We experienced economic turbulence, falling in and out of the middle class. We were the neighborhood “freaks” with outdated clothing. Our cars were repossessed. The utilities got shut off. Our stepfather’s business failed. We lost our home (Herrmann, “Losing”). A pipe bomb left on the porch of a suburban home, murders our friends, leaders in our church. The crime remains unsolved (Genzlinger; Herrmann, “Walking”). I staggered through high school and college. Within five years I lost trust in the financial system, the American Dream, the police, my parents, the church, and the government. A clean-cut Christian artist singing, “Jesus loves you” did not cut it. In fact, it pissed me off. Staggering gods, indeed.

...And No Easy Answers

These lyrics are literate, based on William Blake, T.S. Eliot, *The Book of Job*, and *Ecclesiastes*, a depth honoring the mystery of the spiritual, rather than putting God in Western civilization’s rational box. They tell stories and ask insightful questions, without providing answers. “Vanity, vanity, all is vanity. And darkness is on the face of the deep. Who has failed, mankind or the church?” (“Hollow Man (Reprise)”). I laugh knowingly as they criticize the prosperity gospel: “I’m

one of the King's kids. I do deserve the best. The very very very very best. I'm one of the King's kids. I deserve the best. I wanna...a new car! Oh! Rock on Jerry!" ("New Car"). They sing about televangelistic abuse and the uselessness of materialism ("I Didn't").

I choke with laughter when they metaphorically use the golden arches for the gates of heaven ("Mall"). I smile conspiratorially as they poke fun at the prophecies for the future: "I thought by now I'd walk the moon, and ride a car without no tires. And have a robot run the vacuum, and date a girl made out of wires" ("Eighties"). They question the media's exploitation of women ("Real Girls"). They open my eyes to social consciousness, taking on sexism in the workplace: "Those good ol' boys say she's a little flirt. A dirty joke, a little feel. It's all in fun, no one is getting hurt" ("Working"). I cry with their more personal songs about disintegrating families, broken promises, and the death of loved ones "...now you're the catch in my throat" ("Flash"). This is not the normal Christian fare. *And they can really jam.*

I wander through the Christian bookstore using my new technique for finding alt-Christian music. I'm no longer looking for artists, but alt-Christian record labels: Star Song, Rooftop, Light, Forefront, Solid Rock, Refuge, Alarma! I've got limited funds, and label shopping pays off. I've discovered The Choir experimenting with haunting, textured music. The 77's meld new wave with blues rock. Steve Taylor pushes the limits of synth pop. Jerusalem pounds out metal. However, I always return to Daniel Amos.

Shrinking Man

Flash forward to the late 1980s: I'm no longer a practicing Christian, yet still find myself purchasing Daniel Amos albums. I can't help myself. I buy the textured *Fearful Symmetry*, playing both sides on my college radio show. I find *Motorcycle* in Tower Records, and pop it my DiscMan and rock the commute home. I discover *Mr. Buechner's Dream* in a used bookstore discount rack. I find their first album. *Son of a gun! They were a country band!*

Time passes. I work a job I loathe. Off work, I am drunk or otherwise altered. I am stuck in place. Directionless. Empty. I am uneasy, disturbed, and as much as I try to push out and drown out the uneasiness in my soul, it keeps pecking at me

like Poe's big black bird. After years of ignoring the stirring in my own soul, I pull out Daniel Amos. They are singing about me.

Life's hysterical.
 You're holding on the best you can.
 You're incredible,
 Incredible shrinking man.
 -- Daniel Amos "Incredible"

At that moment, I make a decision. It was time for a new beginning, a clean break, and a fresh start. It was time to renew my spiritual side, to get in touch with my beliefs, to begin my quest to find out who I was. Within two weeks I quit my job, pack my belongings, move from New Jersey to Chattanooga, and attend church regularly for the first time in a decade. I decide to be the best Christian I can be, which means dropping all the pretentious and soul crushing legalism of my Brethren upbringing. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, "I'm no exemplar of a Christian, but I'm doing the best I can" (38).

Miracles

Fast forward to 2010. A Facebook post pops up in my news feed. Terry Taylor, Daniel Amos' lead singer is in financial straits. People are asking for donations so he can keep his home, and pay his family's medical bills. I *know* what that feels like. I have been there, and it is gut wrenching. I donate, even though I am unemployed, because Terry has been a part of my life for thirty years.

Turns out a lot of people feel the same way and donate too. I watch Christianity, as it is supposed to be practiced in action, as people shower their care, appreciation, and donations on the Taylor family. I am reminded of the old hymn lyrics: "They will know we are Christians by our love."

Then it happens. I cannot believe it, and I have to catch my breath. I read the announcement again to make sure I am not delusional. Daniel Amos is going on tour. I *never* thought I'd *ever* see them live. On June 14, 2011, I take my brother Jim to a small Missouri church.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Terry Taylor says, laughing. “Man these guys got old!” For the next two hours, they jam, and so do we. I catch Jim laughing.

“What are you laughing about?”

“I *just can’t believe* I’m sitting here, watching this band play songs from when I was eight years old.”

“I know exactly what you mean.”

Two years later Daniel Amos releases *Dig Here Said the Angel*, their first album since 2001. I order it as soon as it goes on sale, as well as the newly released double-disc set of *¡Alarma!*. It arrived two days ago. I burn it to my MacBook. I burn a copy for my car. After all these years, they still speak to me like an intimate friend.

I closed my eyes and I ran like the wind.

I had all my hair and perfect skin.

-- Daniel Amos “Waking”

Coda

My primary identities maintain an indelible hold on the person I am, the choices I have made, and what I believe about social and economic justice, faithfulness, and human relationships. They developed, in part, through the alt-Christian music in which I was embedded. I am still a Christian, but different. No longer a fundamentalist, the Sermon on the Mount now defines my religion and politics.

Daniel Amos is not just part of my pop culture surround, but a part of me. They do not merely speak *to* me. Sometimes I think *through* and *with* their music, lyrics, and the stories they tell within them. Songs that make me laugh, and cry, and dance. They are deeply connected to my primary identities: the Christian me, and the post-punk me. Daniel Amos did not save my soul, but their music changed my life.

I chose to autoethnographically explore my relationship with Daniel Amos in this piece, but I could have chosen any number of popular culture artifacts that

speak to me: Humphrey Bogart movies, the old and re-booted versions of *Battlestar Galactica*, my collection of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comic books. We all have music, movies, television shows, comics, and a multitude of other popular culture artifacts that touch us deeply, that lift us to the heights of happiness, the apex of anger, or the depths of despair. Popular culture and autoethnography: the possibilities are endless, and there is interesting and important scholarship to be done by combining the two.

Start writing.

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