



# The Beautiful and the Darned

*By Michael Hicks*

---

**A Meditation on Lex De Azevedo's  
*Pop Music and Morality***



*They say that spring  
Means just one thing  
To little love birds;  
We're not above birds —  
Let's misbehave!*  
—“Let's Misbehave,”  
Cole Porter, 1927.

**T**here is nothing new under the sun, lamented Solomon. Surely *Pop Music and Morality* (North Hollywood: Embryo Books, 1982) by Lex De Azevedo, like the mischief it seeks to expose, is part of the nothing that is new. Yet it is a book that is not altogether unthoughtful, and it can help one think. Fortunately, like most gift books, it has good wide margins in which to inscribe one's thoughts. And like most gift books, between the margins it is a little book indeed. But it is a book that should not be dismissed lightly. It must be dismissed heavily. For this book is another ill-

dispatched spear in the crusade against the life of the senses, a holy war that has gone on at least since the Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.

In this war De Azevedo clearly considers himself the unsung hero, devoting the first twenty-eight pages (one fifth of the book) to reflections on his own career. Trained in MOR (middle-of-the-road) commercial music, including work in movies and television, the author saw the light when he and Doug Stewart were impelled to create a “new art form”—the Mormon pop musical (p. 18). The anecdotes in this autobiographical section of the book give priceless insights into a man who has found in Mormon audiences a legitimate counterweight to tainted Hollywood money. And his commentary shows not only how mixed are his feelings toward commercial music—he is constantly repenting of it but never able to transcend it—but also how confused are the blueprints for the Mormon musical empire. Indeed, though De Azevedo gives himself credit for originating this “new art form” with *Saturday's Warrior*, he also claims, “I do not consider myself an ‘artist’” (p. 27). By now our past should have taught us that art forms without artists are dangerous toys. In such art forms, which are always ultimately controlled by despots and clerics, music exists as an “effective means of indoctrination” (p. 41) because “music communicates feelings. . . . And it is our emotions and feelings which really govern our lives and our actions” (p. 37). Certainly music can be and has been used to indoctrinate and govern by emotional wooing. (As the young Napoleon slyly put it: “Of all the fine arts music is the one which has the greatest impact on the emotions, the one which legislators should encourage most.”) But in the face of such manipulation the proper response is to resist action propelled by emotion in favor of action based on reason, covenant, or propriety. De Azevedo's response, in the best tradition of the propagandist, is to concoct more overtly emotional music, a flood of sound that will govern people better, more purposefully, more morally, more Mormonly. For, as he writes, “I have chosen music as my weapon” (p. 27).

But there is still this book—somebody had to write it. De Azevedo, the professional pop musician, felt the call. This book is his self-purgation for being part of the decadent pop scene (which, in a refigured state, he now intends to erect in Mormondom.) Given the author's assumptions, the book proceeds quite logically and coherently to indict all abuses of the divine indoctrinator. The line he follows is this: Music powerfully affects the body, emotions, and mind; since it is so powerful it may be used to corrupt or ennoble; the words of today's popular songs reveal an increasingly evil intent; they should be shunned. As in many such treatises, two problems of method stand out.

First problem: De Azevedo forages for immoral, satanic, anarchic, and drug allusions in both well-

**Marriage  
is not the  
triumph of love  
over lust but  
the amalgama-  
tion of "lust"  
into a broader  
conception of  
"love."**

known and obscure songs from all categories of contemporary music. He lumps together lyrics from the Captain and Tennille, Bob Dylan, the Dead Kennedys, and the Oak Ridge Boys, as though they represented samples from a single uniform culture of decadence. (See his explicit rejection of taxonomy, p. xi.) But punk and country, to name just two examples, are relatively self-contained cultures; to indict the esoteric texts of one of these is hardly to indict a general "pop" culture. And De Azevedo feels that by bringing to light lyrics that are not generally known, he is exposing a peculiarly insidious influence. But the obscurity of some of his sources argues against the breadth of their influence, not for it. Clearly, some of the vicious popular music he cites is just not popular. (How many people do you know who have ever heard of China White? Hint: it's a popular group.) De Azevedo is a conspiracist. The less obvious things are, the more suspicious. The less evidence exists, the more devious the cover-up.

Second problem: The author clearly believes that immorality is in the heart of the perpetrator. Yet if the intent of a song is ambiguous, De Azevedo has the power to make it plain. For example, in recent lectures he has castigated the lithe, androgynous Jehovah's Witness Michael Jackson for "Beat It." Says De Azevedo, despite the song's preachy lyrics, its vivid anti-gang-war video, its use in Reagan's anti-dope campaign and, above all, the express testimony of Jackson himself, "Beat It" is a masturbation song (get it?). A bishop when the book was written, De Azevedo probably had an understandable fixation on "self-abuse." But here, as in so many places he judges intent against evidence. With a knowing guffaw, the author looks for (and "finds") double entendre in even the blandest lyrics. Whenever the pronoun *it* appears in a song, De Azevedo interprets it to mean one controlled substance or another: dope, a penis, sexual intercourse, or VD. And at the opposite extreme, if a singer sings lyrics from, say, the devil's point of view—as in the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil"—De Azevedo cannot get past the mere words to uncover any deeper moral intent. So on the one hand the author cannot accept the lyrics as they are, on the other hand he fails to make more of some lyrics than what the words say. How does he decide when to read between the lines? The rule is simple: whatever allows him to detect and to purge. When intelligent criticism fails him, fault-finding becomes the method.

I could just as easily do the same with his book, combing through it lyric by lyric, title by title, song by song, critiquing his judgment of the message and the intent of each word. But that is a nice parlor game, one to indulge with friends after the book is read and the margins are full. The real burden for us now is to detect and critique De Azevedo's message and intent. For

what this book delivers in its concept of morality is a classic of what I call *denatured Mormonism*.

In denatured Mormonism, Eros has not only been ousted from heaven, he has been banned on earth. Sexual desire is carnality, sensuousness is sensuality, devilishness. Sex overwhelms, embarrasses, and frustrates—it cannot be from God. When sexuality is transformed into words, music, or dance, veiling its face as it were, it teases all the more. In denatured Mormonism sex, its chemistry and its mystique, are just part of the devil's plot.

A favorite rhetorical implement of denatured Mormonism is the opposition of "love" to "lust." De Azevedo himself uses it: "The dividing line between noble, uplifting 'love' songs and degrading 'lust' songs can be very subtle at times" (p. 86). In the typical formulation "love" is a kind of holy concern, while "lust" is sexual desire. Love is compassion; lust is "mere" passion. So simply have love and lust been divided in denatured Mormonism.

Our whole system of marriage—the cultural sanction of sexual intercourse and its effects—shows contempt for the dichotomy of love and lust. Marital love must be preceded and accompanied by a strong sexual desire—a kind of lust for the partner (to use the denatured Mormon term). And sexual passion must be accompanied by care and respect. Marriage, perhaps Mormonism's highest value, is not the triumph of love over lust but the amalgamation of "lust" into a broader conception of "love." Marriage is, in part, a covenant to maintain that amalgamation and breadth of love with one's spouse. (If I may appeal to the Mormon-Masonic image of the compass, the idea is that appetites and passions, which are amoral at worst, must be kept within the bounds the Lord has set—the covenant.) Erotic sensations must not be repressed, but indulged with one's mate in the euphoria of intimacy and intercourse. The nuptial celebration itself, in which the couple is blessed by the community henceforth to enjoy one another bodily (and to create other bodies), is essentially an erotic ritual, not a reluctant concession to the devil.

Solomon wrote a huge erotic song about marriage and its pleasures, to celebrate the sexual relations he was (apparently) so adept at. Although some Mormons, including Joseph Smith, find the book "uninspired" (i.e., wish that more "plain and precious parts" had been expurgated), we have it in the canon—so far as it is translated correctly. But today, Carly Simon sings "Nobody Does It Better"—another of the "it" songs De Azevedo scorns—and we threaten to ban it. The difference in our attitudes may be accounted for in several ways. First, Solomon is older, hence more "sacred"; the weight of history and tradition tip the scales to his side. Second, Solomon is a man; a woman singing about sexual relations, however obliquely, stirs in the dominant male a

certain terror of his own love/hatred of Eve, the temptress who is “the mother of all living.” Most importantly though, children listen to Carly Simon and never read Solomon. She sings openly, while Solomon sleeps between the pages of scripture. The popular song constitutes for denatured Mormons a far more dangerous eroticism, for it admits eros to the company of the unmarried (where in spirit he has always been).

If the Garden of Eden tale says anything, it is that what is forbidden becomes our obsession. And sure enough, the affections of marriage forbidden to the unmarried have always cropped up in popular music. Reading *Pop Music and Morality* I was struck by how tired many of the “daring” lyrics of today really are. The most flagrant “it” song of the twentieth century is Cole Porter’s 1928 “Let’s Do It” (Birds do it / Bees do it / Even sentimental fleas do it . . .). “Just a Gigolo,” “Forbidden Fruit,” “Love for Sale,” and the astonishing “I Want To Be Raided by You” (“I’m a night club queen / And rather obscene / And I want to be raided by you”) had all appeared by 1930. References to “making love,” a long-standing double entendre, abound in the music of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Billy Joel’s “Only the Good Die Young,” which De Azevedo calls “a sermon for immorality” (p. 56), is hardly more blatant than “Let’s Misbehave,” a 1928 hit for Irving Aaronson and His Commanders.

#### Joel

Come out Virginia  
Don’t let me wait  
You Catholic girls  
Start much too late  
But sooner or later  
It comes down to fate  
I might as well be the one

#### Aaronson

You could have a great career  
And you should  
Only one thing stops you dear—  
You’re too good  
If you want a future darling  
Why don’t you get a past  
Cause that fatal moment’s come  
at last.

De Azevedo complains about Olivia Newton John’s “Let’s Get Physical” but apparently sees no connection between its sentiments and those of Ellington-Gaines’s “Just Squeeze Me” (which De Azevedo’s mother, Alyce King, recorded in 1947). The roaring twenties’ Helen Kane popularized “I Want To Be Bad” (“When you’re learning what lips are for / And it’s naughty to ask for more / Let a lady confess / I want to be bad”); her mantle has lately fallen upon groups like Vanity 6 (a modern parody of the 1920s group The Three Girl Friends), in their “Do You Think I’m a Nasty Girl?”—though even the lascivious Kane could not approach the confessions of Vanity’s lyrics (“I’m looking for a man who will do it anywhere / Even on the limousine floor”).

The treble clef that adorns the dust jacket of *Pop Music and Morality* resembles an inverted question mark, an interrogative to which the first response is: “there is nothing new under the sun.” When we, with Solomon, have stopped asking “what’s new?” we might ask “what’s wrong?”

Although I agree with De Azevedo that many modern lyrics promote or at least acquiesce to infidelity and extramarital indulgence—and this is true of lyrics going back to the origins of song itself—many erotically allusive song lyrics, if not most, are inherently neither promiscuous nor illicit. They celebrate love and desire, which in the abstract are intensely moral. (The issue of that enormous genre “pornography”—literally “prostitute writing”—I leave for another occasion, except to note that by definition pornography revels in two things: promiscuity and profit.) Permit me to cite Parley Pratt, who explained in unmistakable terms the goodness of erotic desire:

*In all these things man has mistaken the source of happiness; has been dissatisfied with the elements and attributes of his nature, and has tried, and sought, and prayed, in vain to make himself into a different being from what the Lord has wisely designed he should be. The fact is, God made man, male and female; he planted in their bosoms those affections which are calculated to promote their happiness and union. That by that union they might fulfill the first great commandment; viz: “To multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it.” From this union of affection springs all other relationships, social joys and affections, diffused through every branch of human existence.*

This statement by a man who aspired to the Solomonic order of marriage represents pure (forgive the pun) unadulterated Mormonism.

When the passions are indulged in song that is without immoral (i.e. covenant-breaking) intent, the passions themselves are transformed into another language, a code with a definite unique structure. Sex becomes song and is released through that sensuous medium and not through its natural systems. (This is as true of nineteenth-century art music as of modern pop. As one musician recently remarked to me, “In Tchaikovsky there’s an orgasm every six minutes.”) As such, erotic song becomes a useful counterpoint to marital relations and a legitimate vessel for the unconsummated passions of the unmarried. For in Mormonism the unmarried are wholly destined for marriage by their religion, either the reality or the fantasy of its consummation. To the extent that songs embody the “infinite longing” of romance and, specifically, romanticism, they corporealize the dreams of young Mormons, for whom marriage equals exaltation. For married Mormons they make flesh the continuing quest for youth, immortality, and, in godhood, fertility. Erotic songs add a layer of polyphony to the act of marital love; through recordings they confer an aural halo about the marriage bed, a veil, a canopy to the rites enacted there.

All of which brings us to the subject De Azevedo carefully avoids: pop music. He does talk about something he calls “music,” an amorphous emotional power. Indeed he seems to feel that he

**Sex becomes song and is released through that sensuous medium and not through its natural systems.**

**Despite its name, "popular music" is only tenuously the people's, for it springs not from the people but from the merchants.**

is penning a true aesthetics of music (as though a hermeneutics of song were not enough). His conclusions are scattered vagaries lifted from but bearing no relationship to a vast landscape of Western musical philosophy. Among them are: rhythm is music's real power—a point he makes first by effusion ("I love rhythm! It is much of the fun . . . of music," p. 32) then by citation of pop scientific studies, among whose conclusions are (1) anapestic meters weaken muscle tissue, and (2) Bach's B minor Mass "harmonize[s] with the natural vibrations of our bodies." One could quickly respond to these assertions by saying that (1) the characteristic anapestic meters of much martial music (not to mention the heroic anapests of the Greeks) seem rather to strengthen the muscles, and (2) our bodies do not consist of a uniform frequency—a "natural rhythm"—independent of will and changing chemical compositions.

But these details are not near so important as De Azevedo's larger flawed conception. Not only does he treat meter, rhythm, and pulse as though they were all the same thing (a fault we try to correct in music fundamentals classes), but he fails to observe that pulse and pitch *are* essentially the same thing, their differences being only phenomenological, wholly contingent upon man's perceptive abilities. What we perceive as pitch is a pulse too fast to be comprehended as such; what we perceive as pulse is a pitch (frequency) too slow to be perceived as such. But because this book is, after all, a pop treatise, it will not do for its author to consider such things. It is more important to conclude his discussion of music's power with a platitude that seems to be drawn from the wells of pop religious cliché: "Music has found so many uses and purposes because of one simple fact. It can influence people's lives" (p. 35).

The author is what we call in aesthetics an emotionalist. To him "words communicate ideas; music communicates feelings" (p. 37). This dichotomy springs from one of those false dialectics of the "love vs. lust" variety. For words and music are not mutually exclusive in their effects. Both words and music depend on sonority and syntax—even De Azevedo defers to that old saying, "music is a universal *language*" (p. 37). Words, not just music, can communicate feelings, as poets all know; and music, as all musicians know, communicates ideas—not verbal ideas, of course, but musical ideas, which though they speak to a different region of the brain, are ideas nonetheless.

If music can communicate either ideas or feelings or both, then it is, as De Azevedo clumsily esteems it, a sacral power to be used only with the wisdom and grace of Solomon. Why then did the author choose pop music in particular as his "weapon" in the moral conflict of the ages? Because, as he believes, pop is "the language of the people" (p. 27). But despite its name, "popular music" is only tenuously the people's. For the

style that De Azevedo trusts even to embody religious sentiment springs not from the people—in all the proletarian or folk senses of the term—but from the merchants. Pop music, if anything at all, is an industry, a product that is its own commercial. The music is manufactured by trained craftsmen to create specific effects. In folk art, people's art, techniques arise from necessity, forms emerge from the naive and simple visions of the folk consciousness. In popular art the techniques of aristocratic art are coopted into the domain of the middle and lower middle classes. The techniques, devoid of the weight of ideas that once necessitated them, are extrapolated and manipulated as pure "style." By technological media the masses are given an appetite for these glossy facsimiles of culture, then invited to consume (at "affordable prices"). When De Azevedo proclaims himself a musician of the people he tries to belie the very condescension by which he manipulates others through musical effects. The premise is: the people cannot indoctrinate themselves, someone must do it for them, that is, do it to them. De Azevedo uses pop music precisely because it was made to be *used*. It is not the music of the people, insofar as "people" constitutes a collection of persons, but of the mass. It is an art not created by them but for them—an art, indeed, that creates them.

Pop music does have moral consequences, but intrinsically, structurally, not really in the prattle of its lyrics (which function as music anyway, rarely as significant statements). If there is a coherent genus of music that can transcend the self-contained cultures of punk, country-western, and even *Saturday's Warrior*, its dominant trait is redundancy. This is not simply repetition, but needless, obnoxious, vain repetition. The catalog of pop technique is small indeed, and used to the uttermost: an emphasis on pulse (the essential redundancy), slow harmonic rhythm, indulgence in primary chords and chord progression formulae, endless strophism, and the ubiquitous, captivating refrain, known affectionately as "the hook." All this redundancy works catechismically, constraining thought into proven patterns, inducing a sense of predictability in the mind of the masses, a sense that may feel like prophecy. Pop music is the inverse of experimental music, that growing realm of art that seeks to widen perception, comprehension, and speculation. Pop is the art of the tried method. As such it can and should be useful as a healthy, occasional recuperation from thought. But at the moment it proceeds from antidote to steady diet it becomes for the listener true self-abuse.

This abuse can appeal to modern Mormons for several reasons. First, the tendency of pop music is to gravitate to the fundamental tones and to the rhythmic fundamental, pulse. This seems to symbolize the "recurrence to fundamentals" mentality, the constant urgings back to basics. Second, the notion of "orthodoxy," of holding to

standards of thought and of avoiding speculation, may be easily adopted as an aesthetic caveat, a premise whose dictates pop redundancy satisfies. Finally, redundancy itself has been redefined. That is, the needlessness of reiteration has been reinterpreted as necessity, according to the oft-repeated dictum, "we learn by repetition." Though we remember by repetition, we *learn* by perceiving. We may cross the familiar river a thousand times, but we learn when day breaks on the shore and we wrestle with angels. Learning requires constant exposure to the new, negating the bitter oppression of the routine. If I may paraphrase Ortega y Gasset, we arrive at each new truth with hands bloodstained from the slaughter of a thousand platitudes.

It is redundancy, not music *per se*, that is the most effective means of indoctrination, and which becomes so formidable a piece of De Azevedo's arsenal. The object of this weapon is the human mind. And it is De Azevedo's concept of the mind that is most frightening. In his universe the mind is a stage that sits silent and bare until its owner decorates and populates it with images. It is a near vestigial organ—static, blank, passive. It receives, it is something to be filled, not something to produce and act (p. 64). To the propagandist, in this book as elsewhere, it is messages which have moral consequences, not processes. That is, the means to shape the architecture of the mind are irrelevant, so long as the proper ends are accomplished, the proper content instilled. That redundancy deadens the mind's power to conceive for itself, if for no other reason than boredom, accounts for De Azevedo's ultimate faith in pop music. For his book is part of a now vast ideology that attempts to redesign the mind—not to mention the body—along utilitarian lines.

That ideology includes most of the pop industry itself. Both it and the author see music as a tool of indoctrination. And this in a way justifies De Azevedo's attempts to negate the preeminent messages of pop (without necessarily justifying his occasional hysteria). But between religion and pop more than a war of words is at hand. The chief conflict is between systems of authority. In any one of the separate subcultures that savor pop techniques, the cultural heroes—singers, mostly—dominate by the most primitive and hence potent essence: charisma. The crowds that have congregated around solitary figures like Sinatra and Elvis (consider how their names gain authority by being reduced to single words) or around groups ranging from the King Sisters to the Rolling Stones are following the impulses of charisma. Charisma draws the faithful into an essentially spiritual kingdom and governs by spiritual methods. Institutions, which tend to substitute routine for charisma, insisting that the office gives dignity and authority to the person and not the person to the office, are understandably jealous of pop stars. Musical idols seem

effortlessly to master their followers while churches for example, go great lengths to sustain a far less energetic devotion.

Along with these conflicting systems of authority go conflicting myths: one, the myth of the pure, prophetic saint. Though the saint has had to suffer from his myth a reputation for a sort of vacuousness and dearth of passion, the artist, particularly the "popular" musician (taking Liszt and Paganini as prototypes), has had to endure a Faustian reputation and the perennial suspicion that his spiritual powers must be the devil's wages. The artist sells his soul to Satan, the saint sells his soul to God—though only in the artist's case does the loss seem notable. So goes the tale we have all been taught in our mother culture's lap.

In a way the tale is true. The bureaucratic priest and the charismatic singer have both emptied themselves to attain something larger than individual being, both feeling that only by becoming elements in a larger system can they gain individual worth. Their souls consecrated to abstractions and their bodies consecrated to the media, they become living images of the fantasy of their followers: to escape from the body and from choice. The audience congregates for a vision of life devoid of the basic terror of aloneness, the fear of existing merely in a torso or a skull, distinct, separate from all else that exists, if it does exist. The content of the message, what the words mean, is a pretext, in popular religion as in popular musical life. The light that attracts like insects is the meaning of the system itself: largeness, comprehensiveness, absorption.

The author of *Pop Music and Morality* speaks in his quaint way of the desperation everyone feels, as well as the indecisiveness and the hypocrisy. His religious music—that "middle of the road pop sound"—and his treatment of secular pop articulates a peculiar doublemindedness: he is at once professional pop musician and persecutor of pop; composer for the people and servant of the industry; traditionalist and reformer; artist and non-artist. In his failure to face his professed subject, the music, he probably appeals to the evasive in all of us. For when confronted by all the real questions we may end up like Solomon, acquiring and lamenting, building up and destroying, writing and writing and writing only to conclude that all is vanity. De Azevedo's book symbolizes what so many of us achingly want to be: slim, casual, ambivalent, thoughtless, chaste. The book is one of the many manuals by which we learn to see the oneness of pop culture and pop cult. Each is a distinct antidote to being what a human is, yet each is a shadow of a larger, deeply human structure of bad faith. The provocation is mortality, the authority is feeling, the method is redundancy, the dream is extinction.

*MICHAEL HICKS is an assistant professor of music at Brigham Young University.*

**Charisma draws the faithful into an essentially spiritual kingdom and governs by spiritual methods.**