



June 2008

Dear **MARS HILL AUDIO** listener,

Every day, we each face the challenge of trying to make wise decisions about how we will live. Some of these decisions are self-evidently important: whom to marry, what job to take, how to educate our children. Sometimes such decisions involve obvious moral dimensions, but if they don't, we are usually satisfied to chart our way guided by utility or personal preference.

But what if our preferences in amoral matters have been shaped by cultural habits that are seriously (but not obviously) out of alignment? What if our standards of practicality, our sense of what constitutes "common sense," reflect (yet conceal) a set of distorted values deeply embedded in the matrix of everyday life? What if the conventional assumptions about living well that are embodied in our culture's institutions and practices are at odds with the divinely established pattern of human well-being?

Since **MARS HILL AUDIO** was launched in 1992, I have been committed to helping Christians examine the meaning of contemporary cultural events and trends, and to think more thoroughly about how the Christian account of creation and redemption has profound cultural consequences often contradicted by our conventional experience. While my work relies on many academics in pursuing those ends, I believe our work is not of mere academic interest, but is in fact eminently practical. That is, it has ramifications for the practices that constitute our lives. The effort to grow in wisdom for the sake of greater obedience is the most practical project to which one might commit.

The selection of interviewees for our audio products is based on the belief that individual cultural events, trends, and artifacts need to be understood and evaluated in the context of longer-term patterns of belief and practice. As I wrote in one of my scripts a few years ago: "We cannot understand the meaning of this moment in our culture's life apart from some knowledge of the story that has preceded it. Cultural phenomena are not static and frozen bundles of meaning. They carry momentum. They came from somewhere, and they are going somewhere, and we can't be wise about where they are likely to be going if we are ignorant about the trajectories they are fulfilling. So that's why a lot of my guests talk about things that happened in the past rather than what's being described on CNN or on the cover of *TIME*."

This is not to say that stories covered on CNN or in *TIME* or even in *People* or *Entertainment Weekly* aren't important. Rather it means that the significance of such cultural episodes can only be discerned in the context of a much bigger narrative.

Let's take a very concrete example: the recent media kerfuffle about the appearance in the June issue of *Vanity Fair* of a photo of 'tween celeb Miley Cyrus, an ambiguously

provocative photo taken by superstar celebrity-portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz. In case you've forgotten, Ms. Leibovitz, a cultural institution in her own right, produced the image for a famous *Vanity Fair* cover in 1991 displaying a very pregnant and very naked Demi Moore, as well as the iconic 1980 image for a *Rolling Stone* cover of John Lennon (also naked) curled around (fully clothed) Yoko Ono, a shot taken only hours before Mark Chapman's. A photo by Annie Leibovitz is regarded as a Cultural Event.

The image in *Vanity Fair* of Miley Cyrus (also apparently nude, though modestly draped with a sheet) has evoked intense media scrutiny and widespread parental anxiety over the apparently important question: Has this wholesome role model been stained by this arguably provocative photo? I'm sure there are Christian moms who were asking this question, since there are many Christian moms glad to have Miley Cyrus on their side in the battle against the sluttiness of 'tween culture.

Let me suggest that these moms are, to put it bluntly, missing the point, and that if the Christian communities to which they belong fail to encourage them to see their present anxiety as short-sighted, both they and their daughters are in deeper trouble than they know.

I have to confess to ignoring the Miley Cyrus/Hannah Montana phenomenon for a long time. For those of you who have successfully ignored it until this very minute, some introductions are in order. Miley Cyrus is the daughter of Billy Ray Cyrus, county singer/songwriter whose fame was first established in 1992 with a hit single, "Achy-Breaky Heart." I vaguely recall videos of Cyrus performing this crowd-pleaser, in which his stage presence combined elements of Elvis, Englebert Humperdinck, and (thanks to his hair) Fabio.

About the time "Achy-Breaky Heart" was establishing Cyrus's celebrity, his daughter was born in a Nashville suburb and given the name Destiny Hope Cyrus. This seems a portentous name for a kid whose cheerful smiles soon resulted in the nickname (complete with childish pronunciation) "Miley." When she was 9, she showed an interest in pursuing her father's business, and by 12 she was auditioning for a big part in a new Disney Channel series, *Hannah Montana*.

Now this is where the story gets a little more complicated (feel free to take notes); the shape of the complication explains some of the deeper cultural disorders behind the recent *Vanity Fair* furor.

Miley Cyrus (now 15) plays the lead character on *Hannah Montana*, a character named Miley Stewart. Stewart has migrated west from her humble Tennessee origins to live in Malibu, to pursue her dreams as a superstar singer known to the public as Hannah Montana. Hannah Montana is thus a persona, an alternate identity assumed by Miley Stewart. Miley Stewart is also a character, performed by Miley Cyrus. What makes it even more reflexive is that Miley Cyrus performs in concert as Hannah Montana, bypassing Ms. Stewart entirely. One might ask if Miley Cyrus is really a celebrity pop sensation, or whether she just pretends to be a pop sensation when she's in character. This confusion is central to the disorders encouraged by celebrity culture.

Then there are the story lines of the show, which publicists say is about the challenges of wanting to be treated like a normal teenager while surrounded by limos, expensive clothes, and screaming worshippers (exactly why this might be instructive to kids, I'm not sure). But, as critic Meghan O'Rourke observed at Slate.com, "[W]e don't see all that much of Miley being a real person, going to school, riding the school bus. Instead, the show is really about being a pop star. . . . [The show] teaches kids to understand their own experiences—about growing pains, about being honest with their parents, and so on—through the narrow lens of teen celebrity." O'Rourke concludes that "the entire show is a canny celebration of pop culture masquerading as a story about hope and family life."

The question moms (and dads) need to be asking is not whether Miley/Miley/Hannah is going to go all Britney on them, but whether their six- and seven-year-old daughters really benefit from having as a guide to growing up a performer playing a performer playing a performer. Just as the most important lesson taught by *Sesame Street* is that learning must be fun, so the most important lesson taught by *Hannah Montana* may be that growing up is about learning how to *perform* one's life, how to define your identity as a desirable commodity, how to assemble and project the brand called Me.

The culture of celebrity and personal performance which permeates our society is profoundly destructive. It's not simply that being well-known for simply being well-known (in Daniel Boorstin's classic formulation) is a thin and vapid achievement. More fundamentally disordering is the way in which the deeply sensed notion of "identity as performance" promoted in the culture of celebrity undercuts the very idea of reality or real life; more than the work of nihilistic philosophers, the prominence of performers in our society nudges us toward referring to "reality" (with the ironizing quotation marks) rather than to Reality.

The literature on the culture of celebrity and its consequences is vast, and I've interviewed a number of writers about this and related themes for the *Journal* (e.g., Neal Gabler, Joshua Gamson, Mark Crispin Miller, Todd Gitlin, and Thomas de Zengotita, among others). A recent book by Mark Andrejevik suggests that so-called "reality TV" adds to the cynicism promoted by the backstage knowingness nurtured by much of our media about the media. In *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (2005), Andrejevik suggests one reason for the popularity of this genre: "In its very format, reality TV caters to the savvy awareness that reality itself is contrived. The recent phenomenal success of professional wrestling testifies to the power of this appeal. It highlights and concedes the contrived nature of sports as entertainment. Rather than inviting viewers to suspend their skepticism and lose themselves naïvely in the game, it frees them up to lose themselves in the action precisely because they don't have to drop their skepticism. This time of reflexivity seems increasingly prevalent, not just on television but in film and advertising. It thematizes and exploits the decline of the big Other by catering to the canny skepticism of the viewers. . . . This is the paradox of reality television, even as it promises access to the real, it facilitates the process of derealization."

Note that both Andrejevik and O'Rourke used the word "canny" in describing the ethos of *Hannah Montana*, professional wrestling, and reality TV. The canniness promoted in these sorts of shows is not the wise-as-serpent shrewdness our Lord commends, but the

dispiriting blend of sensation and ennui which leads to what Mark Crispin Miller calls the “hipness unto death.” It’s not a sensibility we should encourage for pre-adolescent girls, or for anyone else. But it’s a terribly easy mentality to absorb, unless we have some alternative point of reference actively, tangibly represented in our lives.

In a culture of celebrity and performance, the existence of reality becomes dubious and persons aspire to be desirable commodities. In a setting in which image and desire are common currencies, and not occasions for self-discipline, young girls will understandably want to display themselves sexually in public: on their MySpace page, at school, or (if daddy’s famous enough and scheming enough to manage your image for you) in *Vanity Fair*, with the remarkable skills of Annie Leibovitz rendering the goods artfully.

I started this letter talking about the challenge of making wise decisions concerning how we will live. It is easy to forget that many decisions are not simply moral choices, but *meta-choices*, choices about the terms in which we define moral meaning. The great challenge for Christians is not that our culture discourages moral behavior, but that it redefines the framework of morality in a way that we might fail to recognize. This redefinition is especially radical when questions of self and identity are concerned, which is why the culture of celebrity and performance is not just a noxious annoyance.

There are a lot of Christian leaders and organizations trying to help believers live morally *without* challenging the context of our cultural disorder. A huge Christian entertainment business has sprung up, complete with its own celebrities—people (many no doubt sincere believers) performing their lives so as to help us be more committed to our values. (See Daniel Radosh’s recent *Rapture Ready! Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture* [2005] for more details than you ever wanted.) But the enthusiasm so generated has a short half-life, and spiritual experience thus becomes captive to gimmicks full of (in John Newton’s words) “boasted pomp and show.”

MARS HILL AUDIO is pursuing a very different strategy. We are trying to help believers swim upstream in this culture, resisting the prevailing currents driven by worldly preoccupations. We do this by encouraging an understanding of the context for cultural diagnosis. We think that this is a very important project, and that our effort along these lines is providing a unique service to the Church. On our *Journal* and other products, listeners will consistently hear some of the most penetrating cultural analysts, voices rarely heard in other Christian media. If you share our commitment to promoting wisdom in a time of cultural confusion, if you’d like to see our work thrive so that more Christians could be likewise informed, please consider making a generous donation to help support our work. We can’t continue without your help.

Gratefully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Myers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ken Myers