

Piracy in Southern Gospel Music

With insight from Daniel Ball, Scott Fowler, and Gerald Wolfe

Daniel J. Mount

This month's interview doesn't focus on one artist. Instead, we take a look at a problem that many artists confront—illegal sharing of their music. I contacted several Southern Gospel artists for their views on the issue, and I'll let them explain how illegal file sharing impacts them in their own words.

I asked the artists if they thought that audio piracy was a major problem in Southern Gospel. All the artists who responded agreed that it was a problem, but they also concurred that it is not as big a problem in this genre as it is in other genres.

Daniel Ball of the Ball Brothers said: "I'm really not sure how big the problem is, but I do know there is a problem there. We have had people at the product table tell some else standing at the product not to buy a cd because they will "burn" them one. (This has only happened a few times, and it seems the people had no idea it was wrong)."

Gerald Wolfe of Greater Vision said that at this point, the problem was not as much a financial problem as it was a spiritual problem: "I don't think it is a 'major' problem yet, financially speaking, but any time Christians are involved in illegal activity, I think it is a 'MAJOR' problem, from a spiritual point of view."

Legacy Five's Scott Fowler agreed, saying: "I don't know how prevalent audio piracy is in our business, but I assume it will only get more pervasive as our audience embraces current technology. With the advent of mp3 players, iTunes and computer technology, it is certainly easy to do. Audio and video sharing is a copywrite infringement and illegal. As such, people should not participate in it."

I asked the artists how they felt about people sharing clips of their music. Scott Fowler said that sharing "a clip of a song or video" didn't personally bother him, though "sharing a song in its entirety is wrong."

Daniel Ball actually encouraged it, provided the person asked permission first: "If someone asks permission to post clips, we always say 'yes.' It's free advertisement."

Gerald Wolfe, however, took a somewhat different approach. In response to a question asking if it made any difference to him if fans shared a clip of a video or song, he said: "The short answer to that question is 'yes,' but the entire answer is that my opinion of it doesn't matter. It is a question of whether or not Christians follow the guidelines of Federal Copyright Law concerning transmitting material that is protected by the



Daniel Ball



Scott Fowler

Copyright Law. Christians are admonished by scripture to obey and follow the laws of the land.”

Though it might appear that Daniel Ball and Gerald Wolfe gave opposite responses, there is one point worth keeping in mind. Ball directed his comments to fans posting song clips *with permission*, while Wolfe was referring to unauthorized distribution of song clips.

I raised the issue of unauthorized video sharing on sites like YouTube. Though the issue of unauthorized music sharing has been around for several years, the technology and infrastructure to enable unauthorized video sharing is somewhat newer.

Daniel Ball said that since the Ball Brothers weren't yet selling a video project, video sharing hadn't been a problem for their group yet. He added that groups “need to be careful to find way to use new developments such as 'you tube' to our advantage.”



Gerald Wolfe

Gerald Wolfe, on the other hand, has encountered some problems with YouTube. He said: “A few songs from one of our DVDs had been posted on the website without proper licensing, and I had to ask the 'poster' to remove them from the site. After I explained the copyright issues to him, he quickly and gladly removed them from 'You Tube.'”

I also asked the artists if they thought video and audio piracy affected their group, and if so, how. Scott Fowler summarized the impact clearly and concisely: “There is not a gospel artist on the road today that could stay there without their merchandise sales. If there were no road sales....there would be no groups on the road. It is a big part of our budget.”

Daniel Ball agreed, though the Ball Brothers haven't seen as much direct impact yet. He said: “Anytime someone illegally copies a project instead of buying it, it take money directly out of the artists pocket. Not to mention songwriter, publisher and record company. I don't think we can measure the impact it's had on our group because we're fairly new. In other words, we can't compare sales records with before and after the digital music revolution.”

Gerald Wolfe gave an extensive answer to this question. While it is a little too long to reproduce in its entirety, here are some of the most pertinent excerpts:

I believe every group, soloist, record company, songwriter, publisher, and ultimately every lover of Gospel music is effected by the illegal sharing or copying of music. I really believe that most people who participate in illegal sharing do so out of ignorance of what they are actually doing. Most people don't think they are "stealing" by uploading or downloading music without paying for it, or by copying a friend's CD or Video. If they really believed what they were doing was wrong, I don't think they would do it. After all, most people who listen to Gospel music are Christians, and they know that stealing is not just illegal... it's just simply wrong....

Most people never think about how much is involved in putting together a professional recording and how many people are depending on the sales of the CDs and DVDs for their

livelihood.... Artists, or their respective record company, invest tens of thousands of dollars before a CD is ever produced. The studios, engineers, musicians, and producers are all paid "up front", before a recording is ever completed. Then, photographers and graphic artists are employed to put together a CD or DVD cover. After that, the recording goes through the "mastering" process, which adds additional cost to the production budget. All of that happens before ONE CD is sold. The manufacturing process is the last stop before the CDs or DVDs are ready to be sold. When all is said and done, tens of thousands of dollars have been spent, but nothing has been sold.

The artist or record company now has product which can be sent to retail stores or sold on the artists' product table at their concerts. Honestly, most Gospel artists depend HEAVILY on their product sales to meet their budgets. Without the sales of CDs and DVDs, I don't know of too many artists who could stay on the road. I know we couldn't.

He added that many songwriters depend on royalties for their livelihood, and they don't receive any royalties when their songs are illegally distributed. He said that even if there is no intent to steal, this is stealing. He said:

If I borrow a person's car for a year without their permission and even though all I do is drive it... I don't sell it to anyone else, or rent it out... I just drive it... I think I would have a hard time convincing a judge, or anyone else, that I didn't steal the car. That same reasoning applies to illegal sharing or copying.

The challenges presented by the era have forced artists to be innovative in coming up with ways to make the actual CD more valuable. Daniel Ball mentioned that one of the things the Ball Brothers has done is improving their CD inserts: "One thing that we are trying to do to combat that is offer a higher quality cover with more information on the inside. If a person "burns" the cd, they will be missing the extra pictures and info on the inside of the cover."

Illegal file sharing is here, and it's an unfortunate side effect of the digital era. But although this article focused on some of the problems, the digital era also offers artists many opportunities. I have personally purchased quite a few projects after hearing sound clips that I would not have otherwise purchased. Although Southern Gospel faces many challenges in this era, there are also many opportunities to spread the Gospel in new and innovative ways through digital media.