

# The Mormon Review

Books and culture from an LDS Perspective



## Music From Across the Divide

Sara Groves, *Tell Me What You Know* (INO, 2007)

Sara Groves, *Add to the Beauty* (INO/Epic, 2005)

Sara Groves, *All Right Here* (Integrity Media, 2001)

Sara Groves, *Conversations* (Integrity Media, 2001)

By Troy Keller

Sara Groves is a singer-songwriter of Evangelical Christian music that (to my untrained sensibilities) seems a step above the common fare of popular music, both what is available on the local radio station and in the LDS artists section of Deseret Book. Her sound is both soulful and upbeat and even at times earthy and honest in a Carole King kind of way. But what sets her apart, both within her genre and more broadly, is her skill at delivering Christian messages. In my view, it is this element of theme that most qualifies her for a listen by LDS consumers of lyrical music who may welcome an alternative to the more secular (and generally more vapid) topics sung about in mainstream popular music.

The moral dilemmas tackled in Sara's music will seem

familiar to Mormon listeners. They touch on such standard Christian fare as forgiveness of others and of one's self, improving one's relationship with God and growing from life's trials. But notwithstanding her music's accessibility thematically, she sets herself apart through her skill in approaching these subjects, oftentimes employing narrative or rhetorical devices to make her point. For example, in one of her songs, "Less Like Scars," she uses a series of similarly structured couplets to express the effect of Christ's influence in her life by showing contrasts.<sup>1</sup> In one of the verses, she sings:

*Less like a prison, more like my room*

*It's less like a casket, more like a womb*

*Less like dying, more like transcending*

*Less like fear, less like an ending*

*. . . And in your hands the pain and hurt*

*Look less like scars and more like*

*Character*

If not new insight, this is good use of rhetoric. The linguistic toggle in perspective between life without eternal perspective versus life with is

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flipped on and off, line after line. One quickly gets the point, as she intends, that a life of experiences that includes a relationship with Christ is superior to that same life without him.

In another song, “Rewrite this Tragedy,” she looks at stepping back from relationship ruts and seeking to re-make them in Christ.<sup>2</sup> The lyrics begin with a quick hook using the life-as-a-play imagery suggested by the title. She sings:

*Tonight I forgot a line in the play that you and I have been rehearsing since the day we met.*

*It made me put down my script and look around a bit and wonder how we came to play these parts.*

She continues the play imagery through the rest of the song, telling her listener that she is re-writing the tragedy that is their life together and to “hold on” because she is “changing all the scenery,” but not to worry because Christ will make a better story of their relationship than they can. Not bad stuff. And I’ll admit that the song’s focus on redeeming relationships, not just individual lives, is music to my LDS ears.

If there’s a downside to Sara Grove’s style, it is that her music is unabashedly personal, having an autobiographical feel that sometimes pushes it over the line into sentimentality.

For instance, she produced a song about her experiences visiting the aftermath of genocide in Rwanda, which perhaps inevitably is a bit ponderous, though kudos for even attempting to take on a topic like that in a pop song.<sup>3</sup> At the lighter end of the spectrum, she has a song titled “Tent in the Center of Town,” which bounces along telling about a traveling revival that townspeople at first confuse for a circus but then are drawn to by the spirit.<sup>4</sup> My favorite line goes, “if you are blue, Jesus is calling you—to the tent in the center of town.” A little silly, though I won’t say it’s not fun.

Sara Groves of course hails from the other side of the so called sectarian divide between the Evangelical and Mormon faiths. However, it is hard to find evidence of any great differences in her music. In fact, there seems to be little that requires cultural translation. It is possible this is due to a conscious effort to make her music broadly acceptable, but more probably it is simply the case that lyrical music does not lend itself to discussion at a technical enough level to where doctrinal differences can get in the way.<sup>5</sup> That said, there are certainly occasional references and phrases in her lyrics that do not show up in LDS discourse. For example, in her song “All Right Here,”<sup>6</sup> she sings:

*And I'm not God, I'm a girl - I confess*

*That I don't have a sea of forgetfulness*

The reference to a sea of forgetfulness stumped me the first time I listened to the song. But a quick Google search revealed it to be an Evangelical expression based on a statement in Micah 7:19 to the effect that the Lord will cast our iniquities into the sea. In another song in which she touches on the theme of avoiding artificiality in one’s life and seeking one’s true nature, she repeats in the chorus the statement: “The glory of God is man fully alive.”<sup>7</sup> This turns out to be an oft-used (if not fully understood) phrase throughout broader Christianity and can actually be sourced to the Catholic catechism. In further Internet searching, I did not find a better explanation for its meaning than that suggested by Sara’s song.

Sara Grove’s capable messaging of course is not necessarily an advantage. Popular music may in fact be at its best when it has no point to it. Tom Petty’s carefree sound is timeless because the lyrics basically stay out of the way. But within the genre of Christian pop, in which music is purposefully didactic and so succeeds or fails based on how skillfully it delivers its message, Sara Groves may be as good an artist as the genre has to offer.

I, for one, hope she continues producing music and living the Christian life that inspires her.

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Groves, "Less Like Scars," *All Right Here* (Integrity Media, 2001).

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<sup>2</sup> Sara Groves, "Rewrite this Tragedy," *Add to the Beauty* (INO/Epic, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Sara Groves, "I Saw What I Saw," *Tell Me What You Know* (INO, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Sara Groves, "Tent in the Center of Town," *Conversations* (Integrity Media, 2001)

<sup>5</sup> There are exceptions of course. It's hard to imagine anyone from outside the LDS faith making any

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sense at all out of "If You Could Hie to Kolob".

<sup>6</sup> Sara Groves, "All Right Here." *All Right Here*, (Integrity Media, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Sara Groves, "Just Showed Up," *Add to the Beauty* (INO/Epic, 2005).

