Hearing Hubbard: Charisma, Ethics and Musical Practice in the Church of Scientology

Scientology has, since at least 1955, sought to engage celebrities—who, according to the group’s founder L. Ron Hubbard, are ‘those to whom America and the world listens’—to further itself. This includes prominent musicians such as Dave Brubeck, The Incredible String Band, Chic Corea, and the late Isaac Hayes. The church has also produced seven commercial albums. Hubbard sought to leverage popular culture and its music to spread Scientology. But, especially with the rise of the internet, the opposite has occurred; its music and musicians are routinely mocked as ‘weird’, ‘crazy’, or just ‘bad’ in the media, in chat rooms, and on YouTube.

This presentation analyses the disconnection between the intention and reception of Scientology’s music. I will contextualize examples from Scientology’s musical output with field interviews, biographical information, Hubbard’s writings, and the organizational history of Scientology to suggest that group’s idiosyncratic musical output is infused with the charisma L. Ron Hubbard. Scientologists listen to and create music according to an ethics—a worldview and a way of thinking—shaped by the study of, and adherence to, Hubbard’s writings, policies, and procedures. In other words, they ‘hear’ Hubbard in their music, something that outsiders cannot.