

Life of a Song

Like a Prayer — Madonna's hit teased and tested America's faultlines on race, sex and justice

The singer's 1988 song threw everything into the mix — but her sponsors were displeased



Madonna in the video for 'Like a Prayer'



David Honigmann MAY 28 2019

You are Madonna. It is 1988. Your career has gone up like a rocket (three rough-and-ready but charming dance singles; the blockbuster of “Like a Virgin”; the role of your life — in multiple senses — in *Desperately Seeking Susan*) and is now coming down like a stick (*Shanghai Surprise*). You have just turned 30, which in the 1980s makes you, as a female singer, ancient. Your ration of fame appears to be definitively over.

What do you do?

What Madonna did was this. Based on some musical sketches by Patrick Leonard, her long-time producer, she concocted a single that combined funk, gospel, rock and Catholic guilt. “I’m down on my knees,” she sings, suggestively. The two of them threw everything into the mix: a guitar solo from Prince, a rock trio, church organ and a full gospel choir.

A great single, back then, was worth having — but the pinnacle of fame for a popular musician in the 1980s was to appear in a Pepsi advertisement. David Bowie and Tina Turner took the cola shilling. Michael Jackson’s hair famously caught fire during filming. Madonna signed up to hers in 1989 to coincide with “Like a Prayer”, so that it would give a synergistic boost to the launch of the single, its album and the accompanying world tour.

But just after the relatively saccharine Pepsi commercial started to be shown (during the audience behemoths of the Superbowl and *The Cosby Show*), she also released [her own video](#). This one was very different: involving police brutality, the arrest of an innocent African-American, Madonna in a church kneeling at the feet of a black saint who then comes to life; a lawn of flaming crosses. Everyone who wanted to take offence, took offence. The black saint was widely misinterpreted as being a black Jesus, which caused even more offence. More explicitly even than the song, the video teased and tested America’s perennial faultlines on race and sex and injustice.

In those days the Catholic church still wielded immense cultural power, as Sinéad O’Connor would find four years later when she tore up a photo of the Pope on television and received threats of violence from everyone from Frank Sinatra downwards. The video for “Like a Prayer” sparked calls for a boycott of the singer

(to which the Pope himself added his name) and of Pepsi. The company dropped Madonna like a hot potato, allowing her to keep her \$5m fee. Taking the money and retaining her credibility must have felt like heaven.

The success of the song, and the album of the same name, gave Madonna's career a shot of longevity. It set the scene for her second imperial phase, during which she chose new collaborators with exquisite care and a molecularly attuned ear for the zeitgeist: Lenny Kravitz for the roughhouse "Justify My Love"; William Orbit for the trippy bleeps of "Ray of Light"; Mirwais for the jerky electro-funk of "Music"; Stuart Price for the disco fantasia of *Confessions on a Dance Floor*; Maluma and Swae Lee for 2019's globetrotting *Madame X*. But she always, from time to time, came back to Leonard.

Madonna's music is generally too idiosyncratic to be successfully covered — these are generally great records rather than great songs. But "Like a Prayer" fared better. Versions include heavy metal (We Are the Fallen), dance (Meck and Dino, with various remix versions; Loleatta Holloway) and Glee (the cast of *Glee*.) The best cover is probably also the earliest: the English musician Wes Stace, under his alias as John Wesley Harding, performed it on an EP in the manner of an early Elvis Costello outtake. If Ryan Adams's musical career did not exist, it could be cloned in its entirety from this single moment.

But the best version *tout court* is Madonna's. Not the one that appeared on the single or the album, but Shep Pettibone's "churchapella" remix. Here "[Like a Prayer](#)" is decluttered so that all that remains is the gospel choir and the percussion. (If Baz Luhrmann had used "Like a Prayer" in *Romeo + Juliet*, it would

have sounded like this.) The words and melody are to the fore. And she takes them to church.

You are Madonna. It is 2019. Your performance at the Eurovision Song Contest is slated — by people who don't think you should perform in Israel at all; by people uneasy at your reducing the Arab-Israel dispute to kitsch; by people who think you missed all the notes. And yet the song you lead on is "Like a Prayer" — still a talisman.

What are your memories of 'Like a Prayer'? Let us know in the comments section below.

['The Life of a Song Volume 2: The fascinating stories behind 50 more of the world's best-loved songs'](#), edited by David Cheal and Jan Dalley, is published by Brewer's.

Music credits: Sire/Warner Bros; UMOD (Universal Music On Demand); Legacy Entertainment Inc — OMP; Columbia; Warner Music Group — X5 Music Group

Picture credit: Unimedia/REX/Shutterstock

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2019. All rights reserved. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.

It seems we're having a problem loading comments for you. Apologies. Hopefully it's temporary, but if you continue to experience this difficulty, please contact help@ft.com.