



Love Letters in Shades of Punk

by Erika Marksbury

Aaron Anastasi has been asked not to wear his lip ring when he leads worship. Some people, he's told, might find it a distraction. But the M.Div. middler's ministry is to those who wouldn't, those who see it and are intrigued that someone who looks like him (and like them) also loves the church.

The ring is a witnessing tool for him, as is the tattoo of his last name that stretches across his back. The "t" is painted as a cross—partly because Anastasi, as every Greek teacher he's studied under has told him, means "resurrection," and partly because it raises questions. His spiky black hair—now that last year's streaks of pink have faded—seems to some more like an invitation, or a reassurance, than a distraction.

"My heart is really toward the freak kids," Anastasi says (using "freak" in an affirming and self-identifying way), "the ones who feel outcast from the church. That's my target for the way I look and act, and for my music."

So from informal ministries with surfers in his native Huntington Beach, California, snowboarders in Vail, Colorado, and skateboarders in Atlanta, Georgia, to more organized mission projects with youth in Bolivia and Brazil (which he sort of fell into on a backpacking adventure), Anastasi has been seeking to "build relationships of grace. I think grace is above all what these kids need, and above all what God is about."

He begins to build those relationships by finding kids who have either "felt excluded from the church or become convinced that Christianity just isn't relevant to their lives." He finds them, often, coming together around music. A singer, songwriter, and guitarist who began playing 15 years ago for his church youth group, Anastasi knows how to connect on that level. He recently founded Unsent Letters, a band that bridges the sacred/secular music divide.

"Most of these kids love music," he says, "the style of music that I listen to and the style that I play as well. I think music speaks to a culture; it's almost a language to our culture and can be a really effective tool for Christ."

Anastasi reaches out first by making himself vulnerable. On any given Saturday night (when he's not touring the southern or eastern states, playing at churches, retreats, or other venues), Anastasi can be found at a local club or coffeeshop, alone or with a few other musicians, offering in song his faith and his life to those who listen, and probably in a way they haven't heard before.

On these nights, a nearby table holds stacks of his first three solo CDs—*Star Seven* (1998), *Here I Stand* (2000), and *Worship* (2002)—which feature a "punk/alternative-driven" sound to lyrics like "You have spoken/I am broken/before you I soak in/all I can/of your love/because your love/transforms me."

Unsent Letters's first release, *The Princeton EP*, is due out this spring. With it, Anastasi hopes to "expand the audience of ministry" by filling it with songs written from his experiences of trust and doubt, hope and fear, heartbreak and loss. Anastasi wanted to share experiences that everyone, "even people who didn't come for the blatantly Christian stuff," can identify with, and so he sings to an old love: "You knew the outcome/You knew the end/but you decided/to lead me on again/You knew the outcome/Your heart gone astray/but you decided to lead me on anyway."

Performing live, Anastasi tries to relive the emotion that went into writing the songs and to invite the audience into that emotion with him. "My music is pretty serious," he admits. "But I don't mind baring my soul if I feel like it'll make a positive change in someone's life."

And it seems to be doing that. Keeva Kase, M.Div. senior and drummer for Unsent Letters, has seen it.

"Aaron is very willing, long after a show has ended, to spend time with anybody who might need to talk," Kase says. "A few weeks ago we played in Cleveland, a couple hundred people were there, and after the show he just sat down and listened to them, and talked with them, whoever wanted to spend time with him. The band gets loads of emails expressing how much the music means to people, but I think his openness also means a lot to them."

When Anastasi makes it home to the West Coast, he and his dad sit together, each with a guitar in his lap and one songbook between them, and they strum some old Beatles songs. Anastasi remembers receiving his first guitar when he turned 13, a birthday gift from his dad, and laughs at his then-disappointment that an acoustic wouldn't let him play like his favorite heavy metal bands. But now that his own music is ministering to "freak kids" across the country, he seems content.

"I've poured my life into this. I want to do it forever." ■



Visit www.aaronanastasi.com or www.unsentletters.com for concert dates or to hear samples of Anastasi's music.



Photos: Eddie Nabhan