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## Redemptive Media: The Professionalization of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry

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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

REDEMPTIVE MEDIA: THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC INDUSTRY

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the historiographical paradigm of secularization as an analytical trope employed by historians of modern Christianity and as a discursive trope employed by evangelical participants in the contemporary Christian music (CCM) industry. The historical development of CCM from an apparently spontaneous youth revival to a thriving commercial industry has challenged underlying presuppositions that authentic religiosity requires a meaningful distinction between religious and secular music. Participants in the CCM industry have tested the malleability of this distinction by reconfiguring the boundaries between religious and secular performance to fit the shifting demands of the evangelical community and the commercial music market. By treating the distinction between religion and secular culture as a religious belief apart from academic sociocultural theories, this thesis examines its malleability in the popular discourse surrounding the genre and the business of CCM throughout its history. It focuses on evangelicals' attempts to articulate distinctions between Christian and non-Christian music wherein conflicting normative conceptions of authentic religiosity have become especially salient. Though earlier studies have portrayed these conflicts as evidence of the essential incompatibility between evangelism and commercial pop music, this thesis proposes that they have contributed to CCM's success by motivating creativity and innovation in the movement's self-conception as a redemptive enterprise in a secularized society.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

This thesis examines the commercialization, professionalization, and industrial growth of Christian popular music as a study in the American evangelical movement's continuing struggle to exert a redemptive influence on the broader secular culture while maintaining its religious identity as a subculture at odds with the world.<sup>1</sup> The genre first appeared in the 1960s with the rise of "Jesus music," the signature style of the Jesus People movement. In the course of four decades, what is now called "contemporary Christian music" (CCM) has become inextricably integrated with the "secular" music industry, incorporating many aspects of American consumer culture that the Jesus movement originally criticized.

The growth of Christian pop and its integration with the mainstream industry accompanied constant concerns over the direction of Christian pop music and the ramifications of its success. Debates fueled by these concerns among participants in Christian pop music (and non-participant critics) began with the first hints of its commercialization in the early 1970s. Over time they shaped an extensive internal discourse around CCM's nature and purpose in the lives and communities of Christian participants. This thesis explores this internal discourse with an emphasis on how it shaped, justified and interpreted major developments in the history of Christian pop. It locates within these debates a central tension in modern evangelicalism between the drive to separate from the broader "secular" culture and the drive to exert a redemptive influence<sup>2</sup> on that culture through meaningful interaction. Underlying this central conflict is the persistent need for Christian redemption to manifest visibly in the lives of Christians as a sign of their spiritual capacity to participate in the redemption of the world.

As an area where issues of religion and identity have been prominent, the history of Christian pop music can be a fruitful avenue for religious studies in the context of popular

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<sup>1</sup> The phrases "Christian popular music," "Christian pop music," and "Christian pop" are used interchangeably to refer to the genre as a whole. "CCM" can also refer to the genre as a whole, but often connotes the later forms of Christian pop that are not directly associated with the Jesus movement (as opposed to "Jesus music").

<sup>2</sup> I use the term "redemptive influence" because it allows for an array of activities that require meaningful interaction and are motivated by evangelical concerns. On the individual level, it typically means evangelism of the gospel to encourage conversion to a life in Christ. It can also encompass political involvement, social reform, production of Christian or "family" entertainment, or any other enterprise that seeks to bring an individual or group more in line with Christian norms.

culture. The enterprise of Christian pop proceeds from the presupposition that a boundary exists between the sacred and the secular, between religious culture and secular culture. The incorporation of what are often considered secular elements into sacred practices complicates the relationship between religion and secularity by blurring this boundary, if not challenging its existence altogether. Among the many enterprises initiated by evangelicals in the latter half of the twentieth century, Christian pop music is unique in the richness and complexity of the multivalent symbolism inherent in the systems it incorporates. Participants in Christian pop have needed to reconcile their Christianity with commercialism, consumerism and profit-driven corporate capitalism. But unlike other evangelical forays into the business world, they were also required to negotiate the webs of meaning embedded within the subcultures associated with popular music. The Jesus People had to differentiate acceptable and unacceptable behaviors within the youth counterculture they embraced. Rappers confronted the prominence of violence and misogyny in conventional hip-hop, while Christian goth bands and their fans had to explain how the gothic aesthetic fit into a Christian life. To preserve their legitimacy among their Christian peers (as well as their peers in secular pop music) participants in Christian pop had to articulate the relationship between their faith and their music. Controversy over how such a relationship should be established exposed the lack of an overarching consensus regarding normative conceptions of Christian life and the proper boundaries between religion and secular culture. Rapid change in the popular music industry as well as American social norms complicated attempts to establish any such consensus. These factors highlighted the fluidity, permeability, and ambiguity of the very cultural boundaries on which the movement's Christian identity depended. They called into question the place of Christianity in the world and undermined attempts to resolve the internal conflicts inherent in the enterprise.

CCM has often been dismissed as a simple phenomenon, or one with a superficial connection to American religion. But a closer look at the development of CCM can provide insight into the dynamics of conflict within American evangelicalism while raising theoretical issues in the academic endeavor to account for evangelicalism's apparent resurgence within the pluralistic society that many evangelicals have claimed to be antithetical to their faith.

### **Narratives of CCM**

Most of the academic literature on the interaction between evangelical Christianity and popular culture has paid little attention to the unique challenges that the growth of CCM as an

industry has posed to the American evangelical community. Theorists of popular culture occasionally mention CCM as an example of intermingling between sacred and secular, but few scholars have approached it as a distinct cultural movement within evangelicalism. Histories of CCM typically come from Christians who were intimately involved in the development of CCM as journalists, producers, radio jockeys, or musicians. Nearly all of these authors have also contributed to the Christian publications that serve as primary sources for this project. Their treatment of CCM is informed by normative conceptions of Christian authenticity and musical expression. Some authors rely on personal recollection or on the memories of acquaintances to reconstruct particular events, often neglecting to cite their sources. Aspects of the movement that cause discomfort for some authors may be minimized, heavily qualified or written out of the history entirely. Even narratives that are comparatively well researched and self-critical lack the theoretical perspective necessary to situate CCM in the broader context of American religion. Despite these weaknesses, insider histories of CCM are useful sources of data when approached as attempts by Christians to make sense of their experiences by articulating them in a historical narrative. They allow insight into “insider” perspectives on the movement’s history, but they do not adequately engage historical theory in the study of American religion.

William Romanowski provides the earliest significant contribution to scholarship on CCM with his doctoral dissertation *Rock ‘n’ Religion: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry* (1990).<sup>3</sup> Romanowski characterizes the rise of CCM as an interaction between the Jesus movement and consumer capitalism. His model is one of co-optation: in the attempt to co-opt commercial music as a means to evangelize American youth, evangelists instead found their spiritual message co-opted by commercial forces as a means to generate profit. In the course of his analysis Romanowski stresses the influences of commercial production and consumer demand on the creation of popular music. The content of popular songs do not mirror the experiences or concerns of their consumers so much as they reflect the end result of a creative process intended to produce an attractive commodity. This process is constrained and shaped by “impersonal forces” like financial resources, technology, market demand and promotion strategies. From the initial process of locating talent to the final stage of

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<sup>3</sup> William Romanowski, *Rock ‘n’ Religion: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry* (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1990). Romanowski has since written academic articles on the CCM industry, but they have tended to reiterate points made in the dissertation. He has since moved on to other topics in religion and popular entertainment.



distribution, mediators between artist and audience eliminate or modify cultural expressions according to cost-benefit analyses. Consumers themselves are diverse and often unpredictable, requiring producers to monitor their preferences in order to continue producing successful music. At the same time, the experience of popular entertainment informs consumer demand. The complexity of the modern creative process undermines attempts to isolate the artifact or the artist from the industry in the study of commercial music. “Commercial popular music is not merely the result of creative expression, business imperatives, or simply a means for audience amusement, but a manifestation of a cultural exchange between producer and audience.”<sup>4</sup>

Romanowski argues that the “profit-driven aesthetic” of commercial music obstructed the spiritual goals of CCM, resulting in irresolvable conflicts between “business” and “ministry.” He also emphasizes evangelicals’ preoccupation with lyrical content in Christian pop songs. Evangelicals evaluated Christian songs for theological accuracy, suitability for Christian instruction, and evangelistic potential primarily on the basis of their lyrics. This preoccupation with ministry allowed commercial CCM to take over some of the functions of the institutional church as Christian youth turned to the music for religious guidance. Because popular art is inherently transitory and shallow, CCM proved ineffectual for religious instruction. Instead, it “gradually became more like its secular counterpart and steered evangelical youth into American consumerism along with it.”<sup>5</sup>

Romanowski’s methodological observations are compelling. His narrative incorporates disparate elements of religion, popular entertainment, and consumer capitalism into a coherent story of CCM’s evolution into a professional business. But his conclusion that the tension between ministry and business sabotaged the spiritual aims of the industry is problematic. His interpretive framework of co-optation entails presupposed norms regarding Christian vitality and authenticity. By essentializing “business” and “ministry,” Romanowski construes conflict as incompatibility. The two motivations sabotaged each other, resulting in an industry that ministered inadequately and, by 1990, stagnated commercially.<sup>6</sup> However, since 1990 the industry has recovered from its slump. CCM has become more diverse and commercially

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 42-3.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, iv.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 284-5.

successful while internal tensions have remained intact. For its incorporation of the religious and professional tensions at work among the different levels of production and consumption, the dissertation is a valuable resource. As an interpretive framework, however, it does not fully capture the permeability of categories like “business” and “ministry” in the legitimating rhetoric of the CCM industry.

Jay Howard and John Streck (1999, 1996) focus on questions of CCM’s purpose to identify an array of conflicting normative conceptions among Christians involved in the CCM industry regarding the proper relationship between religion and culture. In *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*,<sup>7</sup> they adapt Howard Becker’s concept of “art worlds” to CCM. An art world involves a “network of people whose co-operative activity produces that art world’s certain type of artistic product.” This network encompasses the product’s artists, producers, distributors, audience, and critics. Applying the art world model to CCM allows Howard and Streck to connect production with every population in CCM culture. Unlike models of co-optation, the art world allows for conflicting perspectives on the art’s meaning and purpose without entailing a loss of artistic integrity. Bypassing issues of integrity allows Howard and Streck to explore the multiple theologies within CCM culture effectively as disinterested critics. Their project is significant in that it demonstrates the applicability of rigorous artistic and theological critique to CCM. While the resulting typology is somewhat imprecise and occasionally overstated, it does reveal the diversity of voices within the movement, interrogating each voice in terms of the others.

*Apostles of Rock* draws on Laurence Grossberg (1984) and Cynthia Lont (1990) to characterize authenticity and integrity as cultural fictions rather than innate characteristics of art itself. These fictions derive from presumptions of an essential nature or meaning inherent in particular cultural systems. Within that framework, interaction between cultural systems necessarily results in the dominance of one by the other. In the context of popular music studies, consumer culture comes to dominate rock music. In the process of co-optation, the original function of rock music (typically as a symbol of rebellion, counterculture, and so on) becomes displaced by the function of consumerism, which is to generate profits for the “establishment” that rock music purportedly rebels against. Innovations in artistic style appear to undermine the

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<sup>7</sup> Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999. The book is an expansion of an earlier article, “The Splintered Art World of Contemporary Christian Music” in *Popular Music* 15:1 (1996), 37-53.

consumerist aspect of its production until they become pervasive in the mainstream market, at which point co-optation is said to have occurred again.<sup>8</sup> Grossberg argues that a more productive approach views rock music culture as “a fractured unity” within which different conceptions of authenticity emerge from the construction of different social networks within the culture itself.<sup>9</sup> Howard and Streck adapt this view to their study by reducing the vocabulary of co-optation to internal cultural symbols. “Rock and roll, in other words, is an exercise in (temporal) community, with ‘authenticity’ and ‘cooptedness’ the concepts used to assign membership.”<sup>10</sup> However, corruption and declension do not follow necessarily from the integral role of the consumer market in the production and distribution of Christian pop music. Though authenticity and similar concepts require attention because they are prominent in CCM discourse, for analytical purposes they serve a more appropriate role as discursive tropes than as tools for scholarship.

Howard and Streck’s typology is an adaptation of H.R. Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* (1951),<sup>11</sup> which examines five possible perspectives on the relationship between the absolute ideals of Christ and the historically contingent truths of culture. When adapted to CCM, the question of Christ and culture becomes a question of what CCM’s function should be. Separational CCM, analogous to Niebuhr’s “Christ against culture,” considers CCM to be primarily a ministry, a tool to evangelize the unsaved and facilitate Christian worship. It seeks to maintain the clarity of distinction that characterized the Jesus movement, relying on opposition to secular culture for its sense of authenticity, and minimizing its similarities while emphasizing its differences. Integrational CCM, analogous to Niebuhr’s “Christ of Culture,” considers CCM to be primarily entertainment. It locates authenticity in the capacity to provide an attractive Christian alternative to secular songs that are incompatible with Christian principles. Transformational CCM emerges as a mediating type between the Separational and Integrational

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<sup>8</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, “The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture,” *Social Text* 8 (1983-84), 114.

<sup>9</sup> Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise: Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” *Popular Music 4: Performers and Audiences*, edited by Richard Middleton and David Horn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 255. Quoted in *Apostles*, 156.

<sup>10</sup> *Apostles*, 156, 157.

<sup>11</sup> New York: Harper & Brothers.

types. It locates authenticity in the recognition of their essential irreconcilability, exploring themes of struggle, hope and frustration associated with the modern Christian experience. Transformational performers rarely achieve a level of success comparable to artists whose approaches fit more comfortably into Separational or Integrational models, but they provide the capacity to challenge the underlying assumptions of conventional authorities and practices. It does, however, round out a more or less complete typology that locates within CCM a broad spectrum of theological responses to Niebuhr's "enduring problem"<sup>12</sup> of Christian action in the world.

The implications of Howard and Streck's work are significant not only for the study of CCM culture, but for the broader field of evangelicalism and popular entertainment. One of the more important conclusions is that tensions between separatism and integration are not detrimental to the CCM movement, but provide a driving force for innovation and adaptation. Though *Apostles of Rock* is not structured as a chronological narrative, it presents a dialectical view of history in which integration emerges in response to separation, and Transformational CCM emerges in response to their conflict. The rise of new types in response to tension does not supplant the dominance of earlier types. Separational CCM remains the most prominent (and lucrative) type, while Transformational CCM "generally does not sell." The trend is one of diversification rather than uniform progression. Howard and Streck relate the tensions that drive this diversification to a general ambivalence toward secular culture within evangelicalism throughout the twentieth century. The essential similarity suggests that CCM is not so much a hybrid between evangelicalism and popular music as it is a "cultural form that absorbs both as completely as possible." It is an art form that is entirely Christian and commercial at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of popular culture in American religious history has become more apparent in recent years, but the relevance of Christian pop music remains largely unexplored. Until the mid 1990s it was more easily dismissed as a "strange hybrid,"<sup>14</sup> a paradoxical (and

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<sup>12</sup> cf. Niebuhr, 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> *Apostles*, 199, 195.

<sup>14</sup> Carol Flake, *Redemptorama: Culture, Politics, and the New Evangelism* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1984), 184. Flake considers the lyrics in Jesus rock to be religiously superficial, while the musical style clashes with the message. She portrays Jesus rock as inherently bizarre, and an insult to rock music as well as Christianity.

perhaps self-destructive) cultural fluke. As of 2006 CCM is responsible for gospel music's position as the sixth most popular genre in America. Gospel music has become more popular than Latin music, jazz, classical and new age. Contemporary Christian pop and rock albums represent 39% of gospel music sales. "Praise and worship" albums accounted for only 10% of sales that year. Most of these albums are purchased at mainstream retail stores instead of Christian retail outlets, though the number of songs purchased and downloaded onto personal computers is increasing rapidly. CCM now represents the largest sub-genre of a nationwide gospel industry with over \$700 million in annual sales, at least one contemporary Christian radio station in every major regional market, and increasing visibility in the secular mainstream.<sup>15</sup> Churches that employ contemporary music and commercial market strategies are growing while many conventional denominations are shrinking. The genre has shown itself to be relevant to American religion and culture.<sup>16</sup> This thesis represents an attempt not only to orient the historical narrative of CCM's development in terms of the continual evangelical ambivalence towards secular culture, but to show how that ambivalence has acted as a driving and vitalizing force (rather than a mere obstacle) in the growth of CCM into the significant cultural phenomenon that it has become. The narrative that emerges can contribute to a better understanding of the theoretical questions and implications that CCM's development raises for historians of American popular culture, religion, and modern evangelicalism.

### **Theoretical Issues and Implications**

This study's focus on the evangelical anxiety concerning the ambiguity between religion and secularity requires a look at academic theories of religion that have secularization and sacralization in theories that approach religion as a bounded sphere of activity within a modern society. In this view of religion, an element that crosses the boundary – a modern rock band performing hymns during a church service, for example – often entails an act of secularization, sacralization, or both. CCM's preoccupation with religion and secularity, and the controversies

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<sup>15</sup> John Styll, "Gospel Music Maintains Market Share in Overall Market," *Gospel Music Association*, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> "Christian/Gospel Music Album Sales Rise in 2006," GMA press release, January 4, 2007; Christian/Gospel: Music that Connects," GMA Industry Overview 2007; Styll, "Gospel Music Maintains Market Share in Overall Market," *Gospel Music Association*, 2005; For more on the growth of contemporary worship music in churches, see Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

that arise from it, necessitates a historical approach that allows for competing multiple boundaries that respond to historical change.

Secularization as a progressive ascension of secular culture over religion became a viable historiographical paradigm during the 1960s. Central aspects of Western culture appeared to be emancipating themselves from the authority of institutional religion. The trend was recognizable in public education, science, law, political theory, the fine arts, and other cultural endeavors that interacted with formulations of a meaningful worldview. Scholars debated the eventual outcome of a clash between religion and secular culture as opposing, even antithetical, forces. Some sociologists posited a decline in religion's cultural relevance that could culminate one day in an entirely secular society.<sup>17</sup> The so-called "secularization thesis" sparked a debate over the nature of secularization and whether it was occurring. The debate over secularization has outlasted the original secularization thesis and continues to be relevant in a number of areas, particularly when systems of religious and secular authority interact.

Since the apparent resurgence of evangelicalism in the United States and its increasingly visible intermingling with secular elements of culture, models of religion and secularity have become more nuanced. A significant shift in the debate has been the re-defining of secularization's object from religion as a cultural paradigm to religion as a structure of authority comparable to other social structures. In this way religion retains a niche in modern society as "one relativized sphere among other relativized spheres, whose elites jockey to increase or at least maintain their control over human actions, organizational resources, and other societal spheres." Secularization in this sense entails a loss of social control relative to other sources of authority.<sup>18</sup> Conrad Ostwalt (2003) adapts this model to the arena of popular culture, arguing that the "shift in the locus of authority" facilitates a cross-fertilization between religion and secularity that he calls the "two directions of secularization."<sup>19</sup> The religious institution secularizes by increasing its conformity with secular culture. At the same time, it sacralizes popular culture by

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<sup>17</sup> Representative works include Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY, Doubleday: 1967) and Bernard Eugene Meland, *The Secularization of Modern Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1966). Meland addresses modernization in India to argue that secularization is a modern phenomenon, not merely a Western one.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Chaves, "Secularization as Declining Religious Authority" in *Social Forces*, 72:3 (March 1994), 752.

<sup>19</sup> Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 5, 27.

disseminating religious ideas “in a variety of cultural forms external to traditional religious institutions and expressions.”<sup>20</sup> The result is competition between religious and secular commitments in the same forum. Megachurches use professional (secular) marketing strategies to compete with non-religious activities like Sunday afternoon football for customer allegiance. Christian messages compete with non-Christian messages in the movie industry for dominance in the portrayal of the apocalypse, and so on. Ostwalt deconstructs the dichotomy between religion and secularity so that secular culture becomes the medium in which religion operates. He openly accepts the implication that this renders all measurable aspects of religion essentially secular in structure, because that implication does not undermine the significance or impact of religion.<sup>21</sup>

CCM is not a major concern in *Secular Steeples*, but Ostwalt considers it briefly as another possible area to apply his model. He reasons that decline in institutional influence prompts the religious laity to express themselves by sacralizing the secular means of communication available to them. He analyzes Christian pop music as “a purposeful adaptation of a secular medium for the propagation of a Christian message.” Its original purpose was to “give evangelical youth what they wanted (pop music)” within the parameters of evangelical doctrine. CCM secularized most visibly by becoming available in secular venues during the 1990s and by growing more similar to secular music in order to reach non-evangelical audiences. This has led to “confusion” and “discomfort” among evangelicals who feel that the secularization of the Christian message has gone too far,<sup>22</sup> resulting in Christian pop songs with no obvious “evangelical bent, no mention of God.”<sup>23</sup> Ostwalt construes the appearance of religious themes in secular pop music to be a parallel phenomenon. From the commercially successful Garth Brooks’ “Unanswered Prayers” to Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” and “Shanti/Ashtangi,” mainstream (secular?) artists have effected “the sacralization of the secular in which originally secular cultural forms take on sacred or religious functions through the subject

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ostwalt’ portrait of the competitive open market in which religion operates draws primarily from Lawrence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>22</sup> Ostwalt, 193-194.

<sup>23</sup> William Romanowski, “Where’s the Gospel? Amy Grant’s Latest Album has Thrown the Contemporary Christian Music Industry into a First Rate Identity Crisis” in *Christianity Today* (8 December 1997), 44-5, as cited in Ibid.

matter or presentation of the art.”<sup>24</sup> The flexible boundary between religion and secularity has become sufficiently porous to allow actors in both spheres to express religious sentiments with creative autonomy. Ostwalt suggests that this kind of secularization may increase the vitality and the authenticity of religion in American culture instead of contributing to its decline.<sup>25</sup>

While *Secular Steeples* demonstrates how sophisticated critical theory has become in dealing with concepts as nebulous as “sacred” and “secular,” it also suggests their limitations as analytical categories in constructing a historical narrative of Christian pop music. Despite their flexibility they remain at least minimally tied to essentialist notions of religion in which some things are secular (and cannot be religiously relevant unless they become “sacralized”), and some things are religious or sacred (and cannot be relevant outside religion unless they become “secularized”). Ostwalt cites Amy Grant’s successful movement from the CCM market to the mainstream with hit songs that did not reference God specifically, but contained “Christian themes if ever there were some:” temptation, struggle, love, and fidelity.<sup>26</sup> However, one of the central questions that divided Christians over the significance of Grant’s success was whether these actually were Christian themes. The experience of Jesus distinguished Christians from non-Christians, but Christians and non-Christians alike experienced temptation, struggle, love and fidelity. These were common themes in popular music. Without the “evangelical bent,” was Grant’s music any different? The extent to which the sacred and the secular were present in the music depended largely on how observers understood these interpretive categories.

Aside from issues of lyrical interpretation, music contained additional elements that contributed to its religious significance. Evangelists and ministers in particular believed that instrumental music itself was spiritually charged. Certain rhythms, keys or chord progressions could facilitate worship and spiritual uplift, while others could contribute to spiritual deterioration.<sup>27</sup> Evangelicals also differentiated between contemporary styles that were

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 195.

<sup>25</sup> A claim like this presumes that increased freedom from structures of authority does indeed increase the vitality and authenticity of religion. Ostwalt is careful not to make such claims decisively, probably because concepts like “vitality” and “authenticity” of religion (not to mention “declension” ) would be difficult to define, measure and defend sociologically.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 194.

<sup>27</sup> The many proponents of this view include Bob Larson, *Rock & the Church* (Carol Stream, IL, Creation House: 1971); Jimmy Swaggart, *Religious Rock ‘n’ Roll: A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing* (Baton Rouge: Jimmy Swaggart



appropriate for Christians only outside the context of worship, while other contemporary styles were ideal for worship. The artist's personal integrity was also a concern, and some argued that a musician's performance style and personal life were at least as relevant to the music's religious validity as the lyrics were.<sup>28</sup> Not only is the boundary between religion and secularity disputed, the criteria for locating it remain to be settled. Setting the boundary oneself for the purposes of analysis entails entering the debate, privileging certain voices over others, and potentially excluding data relevant to the historical development of the discourse. Ostwalt's analysis leaves out the connection between categorization and the sociohistorical contingency of the subject who categorizes. When categorization itself becomes a religious practice (as it does in CCM), attention to the sociality and historicity of that practice becomes important.

In *Material Christianity* (1995), Colleen McDannell argues that the dichotomy between sacred and profane that dominated religious studies for much of its history has privileged written, intellectually formulated expressions of religion over material culture. It also has reinforced conceptions of the sacred as spatially or temporally bound, and essentially separate from mundane (profane) life. The study of Christianity and popular culture undermines these scholarly biases by "scrambling" the sacred and profane, accepting as legitimate the religious objects that confound the dichotomy.<sup>29</sup> In the case of evangelical Christians who strive to make their religion salient in all aspects of secular life, the sacred by definition (as a thing "set apart") describes religion inadequately.

Even the more flexible dichotomy between religion and secularity can be problematic when the primacy of the individual over the institution becomes significant. Christian communities are important and authorities are helpful, but "true" Christianity remains as salient and as visible outside the church as it is within. Difference is important to evangelicals, but the most important difference occurs on the level of the individual: has an individual been "saved" or not? Postwar evangelicalism has been more inclusive than exclusive, open to members of

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Ministries, 1987); Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement: Confessions of a Former Worship Leader* (Auburn, MA: Evangelical Press, 2002); and Mike Paulson, *Absolute Music for an Absolute God: The Rise, Peak, Fall & Crash of Japheth's Music*, Lecture Series (August-November 2005) PowerPoint and audio available online at <http://www.paulsonmusic.com/MusicsermonNEWpage.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Radio evangelist Bob Larson and Christian pop singer Steve Camp were particularly outspoken proponents of this view.

<sup>29</sup> Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University, 1995), 7-14.

nearly every Protestant denomination, class and political persuasion. The essential determiner of membership has remained the event of spiritual transformation through repentance of sin and submission to Christ. Citing the adaptability of this radical individualism to a modern pluralistic society, Christian Smith suggests replacing Berger's "sacred canopy" of ultimate meaning with "'*sacred umbrellas.*' Canopies are expensive, immobile, and held up by props beyond the reach of those covered. Umbrellas, on the other hand, are small, handheld, and portable – like the faith-sustaining religious worlds that modern people construct for themselves."<sup>30</sup> In a movement as diverse and diffuse as evangelicalism, attributing the construction of religious world views to the individual subject may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how controversial phenomena like CCM have been able to thrive in popular culture.

At the same time, concepts of religion and secularity informed much of the popular discourse that formed around Christian pop music throughout its history. As concepts, they were significant indicators and instigators of change within the subculture itself. For this reason the metaphor of a boundary between religion and secularity cannot be discarded, nor can it be fixed arbitrarily by an outside observer. Instead the plurality of world views that applied this metaphor must be acknowledged. Participants in the Christian pop music industry naturally did not share Smith's portrait of their religion as a conglomerate of individually constructed faith-sustaining world views. Even those who acknowledged the cultural embeddedness of religious practice believed that their religion gave them access to universal truths that transcended human subjectivity. One such truth was the dichotomous relationship between the Christian ideal and the fallen material world. From an insider perspective the line between the secular and the authentically religious exists on its own, even though it may be difficult to discern at times. From the perspective of an outsider, however, it is entirely a matter of individual discernment and group consensus. The CCM industry did not develop and change in the context of interaction between religion and secularity. Rather, the relationship between religion and secularity developed and changed within the context of CCM culture.

The internal conflict between separation and engagement strongly resembles Christian Smith's paradox of "engaged orthodoxy."<sup>31</sup> Smith's "subcultural identity theory" attributes the

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<sup>30</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 106.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *American Evangelicalism*, 10-11.

success of the evangelical movement in postwar America to its unique internal dynamic of conflict and tension. The movement's ability to oscillate between separatism and engagement contributes to a subcultural cohesion that has allowed evangelicalism to thrive within a pluralistic society despite its rhetoric of opposition. Smith argues that the perception of external opposition heightens this sense of cohesion within a group. For this reason, modern pluralism actually promotes the formation of strong, lasting religious subcultures. The processes involved in identity formation hinge on the group's attention to "relevant outgroups," other subcultural groups that serve as points of reference for the group's own self-image.

Thus, people know how to appraise themselves, their own identities, decisions and actions, in large measure by seeing how other reference groups appraise them. And, importantly, what people outside of a reference group think or feel about someone is largely inconsequential for that person's self-evaluation.<sup>32</sup>

While early CCM participants felt the need to argue against Christians who believed rock music was inherently anti-Christian, later participants dismissed them. At the same time, many participants became more responsive to criticism from the mainstream music industry. When insiders voiced concern about new developments, like the appearance of Christian heavy metal, their criticisms were often taken more seriously than similar criticisms from fundamentalists who condemned all CCM categorically. Relevance determined legitimacy, and identity to a large extent determined relevance. The language of religion versus secularity, metaphors of boundary, and other discursive tropes can be interpreted as means by which evangelicals articulated these relationships between and within relevant subcultures, including their own. For the purposes of this study I will approach them as cultural constructs that have facilitated the religious practice of articulating Christian norms and ideals. For the CCM industry this practice quickly became critical to establishing and maintaining religious and artistic legitimacy.

### **Method**

The following chapters examine chronologically the history of Christian pop music from the 1960s to the turn of the century with attention to how its popular discourse negotiated

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 105.

competing concerns of evangelism, commercial success, cultural relevance, religious authenticity, artistic integrity, and other challenges that have arisen since the commercialization of definitively “Christian” music. Primary source materials include popular books and magazines targeting Christian audiences, noteworthy songs and performances that contributed to the internal discourse, and reactions to popular “secular” literature that demonstrates relevant outsider perspectives on CCM. I examine these sources in their historical context in order to track changing conceptions of Christian identity and purpose in the world as they relate to developments in the music industry, evolving social norms, and events that take place within the discourse itself.

My narrative also relies on secondary sources for chronological and other insider data that would otherwise be inaccessible, but does not accept all of this data uncritically. Most of the authors who write about CCM in books also write about it in the popular periodicals that serve as primary source material for this study. Participants in CCM culture who write about CCM display deep commitments to particular historical interpretations of the culture’s history. Historical narrative and cultural commentary often inform each other as participants use historical interpretations to explain how particular problems arose and how they may be solved. To an extent, many of these secondary sources inform the CCM discourse even as they inform the narrative of this thesis. For the purposes of this analysis, sources that emphasize historical narrative over advocacy have been treated as secondary sources. Sources whose interpretations of history are secondary to some other goal remain primary sources.

### **Narrative Overview**

The historical beginnings of Christian pop are rooted in the encounter between evangelical preachers and the 1960s hippie culture in southern California. This encounter resulted in a network of local ministries, communes and churches that emphasized the accessibility of salvation through the immediate experience of Jesus. The religious music that grew out of the Jesus movement was sufficiently distinct to represent a break in the history of popular music and of Protestant evangelicalism. Limited in subject matter, musical diversity, material resources and regional impact, Jesus music was a marginal phenomenon during the 1960s and early 1970s. Its performers’ deviance from mainstream sociocultural norms was equally clear. Combining 1960s youth counterculture with the separatism and salvation theology of fundamentalist Christianity, Jesus People sought to locate themselves outside of American

society and to proclaim prophetically the message of salvation through Christ to the “lost” within. This outsider status manifested through a variety of visible signs. The embrace of folk and rock styles along with a uniform “hippie” appearance and vocabulary distinguished Jesus rock performers from other evangelicals. At the same time their outspoken condemnation of sin and their emphasis on salvation through Jesus distinguished them from the non-evangelical youth they otherwise resembled. The clarity of difference between the Jesus People and other subcultural groups left little room for ambiguity regarding their religious identity.

These distinctions were not immediately clear to outsiders, Christian and otherwise, who were unfamiliar with the movement. The apparent rise in religious references in mainstream pop music drew attention from prominent voices within American evangelicalism who were struggling to make sense of youth counterculture and its passion for rock music. Many popular evangelists categorically condemned the music, including religious music for its corruptive influences on America’s youth. Others saw in it the potential to bridge the “generation gap” that had inhibited evangelism to young people. Jesus rock musicians, many of whom were frustrated by apathy and opposition toward their mission, eagerly embraced opportunities to acquire legitimacy and welcomed endeavors by Christian outsiders to take them seriously. Prominent evangelists like Billy Graham, Bill Bright and Pat Robertson lent their support to the movement as it gained national prominence in the mainstream media. Commercialization rapidly followed as retailers capitalized on the novelty of the Jesus movement. Christian book stores diversified their merchandise to include T-shirts, bumper stickers, key chains and other novelties. Record labels for “contemporary” styles of gospel proliferated in Christian publishing companies. When enthusiasm for the Jesus movement faded during the 1970s, but a niche for Christian pop music remained in youth ministries, some church communities, and the gospel music industry.

Throughout the late 1970s and the 1980s, the increasing visibility of commercial business in the industry undermined its legitimacy as a spiritual enterprise. Trends in American popular music – including the heightened saliency of sexuality, materialism, rebellion and irreverence – exacerbated worries that Christians involved in such music were treading on dangerous ground. The music itself diversified to become more heterogeneous. CCM artists embraced new styles and trends in American pop. The subject matter of their lyrics broadened to include topics other than Jesus. They admitted the importance of temporal concerns like abortion, social justice, and the challenges of temptation. Over time the Jesus movement became romanticized as a

countercultural ideal from which commercialized Christian entertainment had fallen. The term “Jesus rock” soon gave way to the term “contemporary Christian music,” a shift that coincided with increasing dissimilarity between the CCM industry and the Jesus movement while paralleling the decreasing prominence of salvation through Jesus in the music’s lyrics. These developments eroded the distinction between sacred and secular in CCM, fueling accusations that the movement had succumbed to secularization.

Christians committed to CCM’s continuing validity felt the need to respond to these concerns. Artists defended the effectiveness of their music for evangelism and ministry, often downplaying its artistic qualities and entertainment value. They also sought to distance themselves from secular pop music even as they attempted to emulate its forms and reach out to its non-Christian consumers. They signed only with Christian record labels, addressed only Christian themes, and marketed primarily to Christian audiences. A strategy known as the “crossover model” came into effect: Christian bands first had to build an evangelical Christian fan base before they could attempt to broaden their target audience to include secular consumers. But while the technology of mass media production facilitated evangelism, the mechanics of the consumer market worked against it. With CCM’s limited and often alienating subject matter, as well as its frequent inferiority to mainstream music, the music rarely appealed to those whom its Christian adherents wanted to save. After establishing themselves in the CCM market, artists who attempted to “cross over” into the secular mainstream failed more often than they succeeded. Those who did succeed were often criticized by Christian fans for compromising their integrity as Christians. For many Christian and non-Christian critics of CCM, this ambivalence toward secular culture betrayed a lack of authenticity, if not an outright insincerity of its evangelistic purpose.

These controversies did not prevent CCM record companies from establishing a sufficient fan base to sustain business growth and attract increasing numbers of talented artists and professionals. Christian producers, marketers, executives and accountants integrated the goals of material success and religious vocation with less difficulty.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the 1980s and early nineties, amid constant criticism focused on CCM’s musical products, Christian business

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<sup>33</sup> The harmonizing of corporate success and religious vocation among American evangelicals in media industries has received treatment in several studies. See Erling Jorstad, *Popular Religion in America: The Evangelical Voice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) and Quentin Schultze (ed.), *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academe Books, 1990).

professionals worked to strengthen the industry's infrastructure, streamline production, capitalize on new technologies, and cultivate alliances with mainstream businesses. The separatism of earlier Christian pop, motivated by a theology of opposition, was sustained in part by the lack of resources to achieve prominent success in the competitive mainstream market. Tensions quickly mounted between musicians who attributed religious significance to their music and the labels who demanded their conformity with the expectations of the narrow target market. Following a period of declining sales in the late 1980s, dissatisfaction with the "Christian ghetto" associated with the crossover model culminated in an integrationist reaction within the movement. By this time sufficient resources were available to enable the latest generation of Christian performers to compete among their secular counterparts for the patronage of fans who consumed secular music (a market that included Christians and non-Christians). This latest trend expressed in a new way the inherent tensions within CCM that fueled its ambivalence toward secular culture, but did not resolve them. Christian artists still had to define themselves as Christians exerting a redemptive influence on secular culture even as they marketed their music to non-Christians and distanced themselves from Christian separatism.

By the turn of the century, the CCM industry had fully embraced the secular models of business and production employed by the mainstream industry, including methods of talent discovery, recording, marketing, research, distribution, investment, and finance. Many Christian record companies were owned by secular corporations. CCM albums, books, clothing, paraphernalia and digital media were available at "secular" outlets alongside non-Christian products. The music itself encompassed a diversity comparable to "secular" pop music, including rock/pop, punk, heavy metal, hip-hop, new age, reggae, R&B and Latin styles. Lyrical content often addressed topics relevant to both Christians and non-Christians, like interpersonal relationships or social problems. The emphasis on conversion through evangelism diminished, coinciding with increasing religious diversity among CCM artists. Though evangelical Protestantism predominated, a significant minority of artists were Catholic or acknowledged Catholic influences. A few acknowledged influences from non-Christian religions like Judaism, Zen Buddhism and Rastafari.

Over time the boundary between Christianity and secular culture, in as much as it is expressed in popular music, has become indistinct, while the normative conceptions of authentic Christianity within the CCM movement have become diverse. As a result there is a greater

degree of conflict over the nature of religious identity, a more pronounced ambivalence toward the broader secular culture, and a more visible anxiety over the proper relationship between the Christian community and the outside world. Though the development of CCM is ongoing, it has become a viable subject for historical inquiry. The following narrative attempts to take a limited but productive step toward incorporating Christian popular music more fully into the academic study of American religion.



## CHAPTER 2

### FROM PURITY TO DANGER: MARGINALITY AND LEGITIMACY

The Jesus People of the 1960s saw themselves as prophetic bearers of Christ's gospel to a culture so corrupted by sin that they could only engage it from outside the boundaries of its conventions. To other Christians and American youth, they were an exotic incongruity – fundamentalist hippies who preached and sang about Jesus. While many early performers of “Jesus music” (also called “Jesus rock” or “religious rock”) perceived a clear distinction between their music and secular music, this distinction was less apparent to evangelicals who were suspicious of rock music. The normative consensus of what constituted Christian music was shaped by the desire of born-again Christian performers to be recognized as legitimate members of the church's mission redeem sinners through salvation in Christ. It was also shaped by the desires of evangelicals in the church to channel the energy and enthusiasm of youth culture into a transformative Christian revival. In the effort to maintain their opposition to secular culture while engaging it through music production, Jesus musicians resorted to church resources and Christian publishing companies to perform the same functions that secular companies did for mainstream commercial music. For these individuals, the task at hand became the preservation of the Jesus movement's ideals in the form of a religiously-oriented commercial institution, a Christian pop music industry.

#### **“Christ is the Ultimate, Eternal Trip”<sup>1</sup>**

Jesus music emerged in the wake of a folk revival in early 1960s pop music. The folk aesthetic, with its connotations of sincerity and authenticity, grew more prominent in pop music for young middle-class, college-aged audiences. Popular folk music was best accessed through live performances at small venues like coffee houses. These venues allowed little-known musicians to gain exposure among local audiences, with the potential to establish a fan base and gain recognition as performers.<sup>2</sup> Pastors seeking to evangelize the American youth during the 1960s found the establishment of church-associated venues an effective strategy, especially in southern California. Baptist ministers founded the Living Room in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco to reach drug abusers and other youth involved in unhealthy lifestyles. A

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Blessitt, quoted in “Street Christians: Jesus as the Ultimate Trip” in *Time* (August 3, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> David Szatzmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock and Roll* (New York: Shimmer Books, 1996), 94-97.

Presbyterian youth pastor founded a Christian coffeehouse in Hollywood and published a newsletter that presented Christianity in a countercultural idiom. Arthur Blessit opened a 24-hour nightclub on the Sunset Strip. “His Place” provided free concerts and doubled as a youth hostel. Similar establishments and outreach programs subsequently appeared in areas outside of California, including Atlanta, New York, Milwaukee and Chicago. As born-again youth grew more actively involved in these ministries, they became centers of activity associated with the Jesus movement during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>3</sup>

In southern California the nondenominational Calvary Chapel became one of the most successful venues for Jesus Music. Founding Pastor Chuck Smith, convinced that denominationalism inhibited the vitality of churches, offered services that emphasized Christ’s relevance to contemporary youth. The informal atmosphere of the church and Smith’s accessible preaching style appealed to Jesus People who felt alienated from traditional church congregations. By 1968 the church had a regular congregation of over 1,600. As Calvary grew in popularity among Jesus People, it began recruiting musical groups for concerts and worship services. Two of these groups, Children of the Day and Love Song, became celebrated examples of Jesus music’s original folk/rock sound. While musically competent, were not on par with their contemporaries in mainstream rock. What endeared them to the Jesus People was their authentic expression of the experience that distinguished Christians from the rest of society.<sup>4</sup>

Jesus music was characterized by simple musical compositions, accessible lyrics and straightforward messages. Children of the Day, a teenage quartet, was one of the first known groups to combine simple, evangelistic lyrics about the personal experience of Jesus with contemporary folk music. Children of the Day’s most popular song was “Come to the Waters,” written by sixteen-year-old vocalist Marsha Stevens. Stevens later recalled having a difficult childhood, spending many nights hiding from her abusive father, who was an alcoholic. She

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<sup>3</sup> John Thompson, *Raised by Wolves: The Story of Christian Rock and Roll* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 32-3; Paul Baker, *Contemporary Christian Music: Where it Came From, What it Is, Where it’s Going* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1985), 6-7. Also see Lowell Streiker, *The Jesus Trip: Advent of the Jesus Freaks* (Nashville and New York: Abington Press, 1971) for more detail on youth pastors and Jesus movement newsletters.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Miller, *Reinventing Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 32-34.

drew from these experiences to describe the comforting presence of Jesus during moments of isolation and distress.<sup>5</sup>

And Jesus said, "Come to the waters, stand by my side  
I know you are thirsty, you won't be denied.  
I felt every teardrop, when in darkness you cried,  
And I strove to remind you that for those tears I died."<sup>6</sup>

Though the lyrics were straightforward, they were sufficiently abstract for listeners to interpret them in light of their own experiences with Jesus. "Come to the Waters" resonated enough with church audiences to become a staple of evangelical songbooks and translated into 12 languages.<sup>7</sup>

Besides expressing the intimacy of Jesus' personal involvement in Christian life, Jesus music also expressed the ideal of spiritual renewal within the individual or the Christian community itself. Love Song's "Little Country Church" articulated a widely assumed dichotomy between conventional religion and authentic worship, describing a "little country church" that experiences a spiritual revival after embracing the Jesus movement.

Preacher isn't talking 'bout religion no more  
He just wants to praise the Lord  
People aren't as stuffy as they were before  
They just want to praise the Lord  
And it's very plain to see  
It's not the way it used to be<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Allen Powell, "Marsha's tears: An orphan of the church - Marsha Steven's son 'For Those Tears I Died'" in *Christian Century*, March 17, 1999. Also see Powell's entry on Children of the Day in *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Children of the Day, "Come to the Waters," (Maranatha!, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> "Marsha's Tears."

<sup>8</sup> "Little Country Church," *Love Song* (Good News Records, 1972).

Many Jesus People, including the members of Love Song, perceived no inherent authenticity in institutional authority. However, they respected individuals with the credentials, expertise, and charisma to make Christianity meaningful for them. As a movement inspired by the catalyzing efforts of ministers and seminarians, the Jesus People absorbed their enthusiasm for revival among the wayward youth and extended it to the conventional churches. This enthusiasm motivated and validated their use of music in the Christian church.

Jesus music's more confrontational messages stemmed primarily from the music of Larry Norman. Norman considered his music a vehicle for Christian ministry but he performed entirely outside the context of worship, restricting his music to concerts and pop records. The songs themselves were more risqué and confrontational than typical Jesus music. Norman directed his lyrics at non-Christians audiences, and they reflected a pessimistic view of the world as an oppressive dystopia in which only Jesus could provide comfort. The most popular song among his fans was "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" (1969), a premillennialist depiction of global chaos after the Rapture. In contrast to the celebratory or devotional mood of church-affiliated pop songs, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready" expressed Norman's persistent frustration with the intransigence of non-Christians who refused to accept Jesus. "There's no time to change your mind/ How could you have been so blind?...The Son has come and you've been left behind." Later releases were more controversial, addressing topics many Christians considered taboo. Songs like "Why Don't You Look Into Jesus?" and "I am the Six O'Clock News" (1972)<sup>9</sup> made references to substance abuse, venereal disease and contentious political issues more explicitly than many evangelists would dare. Norman's music depicted non-Christian life as inherently irrational, chaotic and surreal. Jesus provided clarity and escape. As a native of the Haight-Ashbury district and an example of successful Christian music that did not rely on church support, Norman became an inspirational icon to Christian pop artists throughout the industry's history as the quintessential "Jesus Freak."<sup>10</sup>

Religious messages that resonated with young audiences (evangelical and otherwise) were also present in mainstream popular music. During the 1960s, Christian and non-Christian

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<sup>9</sup> "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," *Upon This Rock* (Capitol Records, 1969); "Why Don't You Look Into Jesus," *Only Visiting This Planet* (Capitol Records, 1972).

<sup>10</sup> Tim Stafford, "Stranger in a Strange Land" in *Campus Life* (March 1977, 45-48).

performers released several radio hits that were overtly religious or referenced religious symbols. Curtis Mayfield and the Impressions reached the top twenty in radio airplay charts for “Amen” (1964) and “People Get Ready” (1965). Elvis Presley’s “Crying in the Chapel” (1965) described an emotional moment of repentance. The Byrds’ “Turn, Turn, Turn” (1965) directly paraphrased Ecclesiastes 3. Inspirational music became especially popular in the early 1970s, with Judy Collins’ conventional rendition of “Amazing Grace” (1970) and Norman Greenbaum’s “Spirit in the Sky” (1970). Christians unfamiliar with the Hare Krishna could also relate to the ardent religiosity of George Harrison’s “My Sweet Lord” (1970). Christian references were discernable in the music of James Taylor, Simon & Garfunkel, The Jackson Five, Kenny Rogers, Bob Dylan, the Youngbloods and other “secular” artists. Many evangelical Christians enjoyed this music and found it meaningful. Young disc jockeys like Paul Baker and Scott Ross even played these songs on their Christian radio shows.<sup>11</sup> The developing consensus over what “Jesus music” was eventually excluded all of the above releases as the Jesus movement reacted to the praises and criticisms of evangelists who turned their attention to the religiosity of America’s youth.

### **Conflict with the Anti-Rock Movement**

The rise of “arena rock,” characterized by massive concert attendance and loud, ostentatious instrumentals, signified for some adults the degree to which traditional values were losing their influence over the younger generation. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Doors, and other successful groups began to represent an invasion of the community. Crowds which numbered in the thousands made local police and civil authorities uneasy, occasionally resulting in confrontations between authorities, concert-goers, and musicians themselves. The Rolling Stones developed a reputation for vandalizing furniture and using drugs in their hotel rooms. Jim Morrison of the Doors was arrested ten times between 1963 and 1969 for obscene performances, battery and drunk driving. Church groups and conservative leaders often acted to prevent rock bands from performing in their communities, citing the potential for civil disturbance as well as the obscenity of the performances. Anti-rock author Albert Goldman described one Rolling Stones performance as “sado-homosexual-junkie-diabolic-sarcastic-nigger-evil” that would have

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Baker, *Contemporary Christian Music: Where it Came From, What it is, Where it's Going* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Sources, 1985), 19-24; “Edwin Hawkins” in *Encyclopedia*, 404.

“warmed the cockles of a storm trooper’s heart.”<sup>12</sup> In one form or another, chaos was latent in the performance itself.

Evangelical arguments against rock music often portrayed it as antithetical to American culture. Reverend David Noebel, Dean of the Christian Crusade Anti-Communist League University, became notorious for his theories connecting rock music with the Communist conspiracy. In 1965 he published *Communism, Hypnotism, and the Beatles*, the first of several anti-rock tracts that described the music’s harmful effects on the minds and bodies of young people. Noebel asserted that rock music was a vehicle for mind control, which could be exploited by the Russians as a psychological weapon against the American population. Noebel’s evidence hinged on the similarity between the evident hysteria of Beatles fans at concerts and the symptoms of “artificial neurosis” (artificially induced mental breakdown) with Ivan Pavlov, the Russian physiologist). Such hysteria could not possibly come from sane, healthy people.

The Beatles or the Mindbenders or whatever they might be need only mass hypnotize 10 or 15 million American youth; condition their emotions through their music and then give the word or words for riot and revolt. The consequences are imponderable.

Noebel carefully avoided accusing the Beatles of knowing complicity with communists, but he did believe that the power of rock to dominate “the emotionally insecure person” made its eventual exploitation by the communists inevitable.<sup>13</sup>

Bob Larson, a former musician and radio evangelist, he dedicated his career to protecting American youth from evil influences like rock and roll. His first two anti-rock books, *Rock & Roll: The Devil’s Diversion* (1967) and *Hippies, Hindus, and Rock & Roll* (1969), attributed inherent supernatural properties to rock music. The rock beat not only incited hysteria, but also produced a trance-like state that was accompanied by undulations to the rhythm of the music. This state of mind prepared the individual for demon possession, increased the libido of

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<sup>12</sup> Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave, *Anti-Rock: The Opposition to Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1988), 122-3, 129-138; Albert Goldman, “On and On Mick’s Orgy Rolls” in *New York Times* (November 23, 1969), sec. 2, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Noebel, *Communism, Hypnotism, and the Beatles* (Tulsa: Christian Crusade Publications, 1965), 25, fn 129, quoted in Mark Sullivan, “More Popular Than Jesus: The Beatles and the Religious Far Right” in *Popular Music* 6:3 (1987), 315. Noebel’s choice to reference the Mindbenders, a lesser known British band, was probably motivated only by the name’s sinister connotations.

participants at rock concerts, and predisposed them to irrational and sometimes violent actions.<sup>14</sup> *Hippies, Hindus, and Rock & Roll*, a reaction to the Beatles' involvement in the Transcendental Meditation movement, Larson argued that the rock music subculture was actually a vehicle for proselytizing Hinduism in the United States. "If the Beatles are going to pray to Hindu gods, invite demon spirits to enter and control their bodies and encourage America's youth to do likewise,' I thought, 'where might it all lead?'"<sup>15</sup> Larson cited similarities in hair and clothing styles between hippies and Indian holy men, and compared the movements of spirit possessed Hindus with those of dancing rock fans. Most of the book described a trip that Larson took to India, which he portrayed as a dystopian inversion of American values and religion. Larson juxtaposed Hindu rituals and sacred sites with images of filth and poverty where ascetics worshipped cow dung and pilgrims drank "putrid water" from the Ganges river. "It is little wonder that thousands of people are killed by rampaging epidemics that systematically sweep through a community. Such situations bring into vivid contrast the difference between Christianity and Hinduism."<sup>16</sup> Like Noebel, Larson conceived the cultural threat posed by rock music as simultaneously religious and foreign. Rock music, in addition to facilitating demon possession, became the medium for cross-fertilization between East and West, insinuating idolatry into Christian America.<sup>17</sup>

To assert the legitimacy of their secular music styles, Jesus movement participants capitalized on the trope of Christian revival and wedded it to the trope of counterculture. Larry Norman's cult hit "The Outlaw" (1972) presented Jesus as a social revolutionary, condemned and misunderstood by the Pharisaic establishment. Norman's best-known song was a defense of Christian rock entitled "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?" (1972), echoing the reply attributed to Martin Luther when his arrangement of hymns to secular tunes was challenged. As with Love Song's "Little Country Church," this song correlated convention with

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<sup>14</sup> Bob Larson, *Rock & Roll: The Devil's Diversion* (1967) and *Hippies, Hindus, and Rock & Roll* (McCook, NE: 1969).

<sup>15</sup> *Hippies*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 48-54.

a lack of spiritual vitality. Norman pressed the correlation harder, chiding traditionalists for their adherence to outdated music.

I ain't knocking the hymns  
Just give me a song that has a beat  
I ain't knocking the hymns  
Just give me a song that moves my feet  
I don't like none of the funeral marches  
I ain't dead yet!

I know what's right, I know what's wrong  
I don't confuse it  
All I'm really trying to say is  
Why should the devil have all the good music?<sup>18</sup>

Advocates of Jesus music embraced the notion that they represented a pivotal generation in human history, a notion reinforced by sympathetic evangelists and writers. The appealing prospect of a Christian revival manifesting from within the baby boom counterculture quickly became instrumental in integrating the movement into the evangelical mainstream.

### **Revolution and Integration**

Billy Graham, a nationally prominent minister and the father of a rebellious teen-ager, began to adopt the language of 1960s youth culture in his efforts to communicate with the younger generation. Recognizing parallels between the experiences of psychedelic drugs and the transcendent experience of Christ, he borrowed heavily from drug-related idioms. At a Kansas City youth night he paraphrased Timothy Leary's notorious slogan: "Tune in to God, then turn on...drop out – of the materialistic world. The experience of Jesus Christ is the greatest trip you can take." Possibly evincing a sense of market competition with the gratification offered by drugs, he presented Christian rebirth as an alternative during a speech in Berkeley, California.

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<sup>18</sup> *Only Visiting This Planet.*



“Why not experiment with Christ? He’s an experience.”<sup>19</sup> Though he found the appearance, mannerisms and music of the younger generation distasteful, Graham invested an uncommon amount of effort in trying to understand its point of view. He bought and listened to rock and roll albums. He attended concerts, “love-ins” and political rallies (often in disguise) to observe them from within and interact personally with their participants. He even let his hair grow over his collar. As he continued to concentrate on the rising Baby Boomers, he became convinced that their perspective was unique in American history. They had grown up in a nation more affluent than any other in the world. They were “rebellious because they have no challenges. They are searching for meaning in life but they don’t know where to find it.” Graham saw in the counterculture’s radicalism an energy and vitality that presented an ideal resource for youth revival.<sup>20</sup>

Graham first discovered the Jesus movement during his appearance at the 1971 Tournament of Roses parade in Pasadena, California, when he saw “hundreds of young people” waving signs with evangelical slogans or raising a fist with one index finger into the air. Spontaneously he returned the gesture and shouted back “One way – the Jesus Way!” He spent the following years endorsing the Jesus movement as a spiritual revival that carried the Gospel across the generation gap. Coming from a respected member of the evangelical mainstream and the broader national culture, Graham’s endorsements also articulated a place and purpose for the Jesus movement in America and the Christian church. In *The Jesus Generation* (1971) Graham laid out a comprehensive theology for the Jesus movement that informed his numerous speeches and outreach programs to the younger generation. The first chapter argued for the movement’s sincerity while admitting some of its “pitfalls.”

Some say it is too superficial – and in some cases it is. Some say it is too emotional – and in some cases it is. Some say it is outside the established church – and in some cases it is. But even in the early church such problems were encountered.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Larry Eskridge, “One Way: Billy Graham, the Jesus Generation, and the Idea of an Evangelical Youth Culture” in *Church History* 67 (1), 86.

<sup>20</sup> Eskridge, “One Way,” 84-86. Eskridge’s article also describes Graham’s personal conflicts with his son Franklin and their possible influences on his approach to young audiences.

<sup>21</sup> Billy Graham, *The Jesus Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 17.

Graham followed this admission with a list of the movement's "commendable features." The Jesus movement centered on Jesus and the Bible. It demanded a personal experience of Christ, which helped cure drug addiction and other dangerous habits. It emphasized the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship, social equality, and evangelism. Finally, it "brought a renewed emphasis on the Second Coming of Christ," which had been lacking in some of the mainline churches. Graham also criticized elements of counterculture that he considered obstructive or inadequate to an authentic evangelical youth culture. Preoccupation with political causes, exacerbated by Christian and secular liberalism, distracted young people from the necessity of a personal relationship with Christ. Attempts to "drop out" of society failed to escape the depravity inherent in the individual. No mention was made of Christian groups whose theology departed radically from conventional evangelicalism, like the Children of God. For Graham, revolution was only meaningful and constructive when it centered on spiritual rebirth within the framework of moderate evangelicalism.<sup>22</sup>

Billy Graham's focus on the Jesus movement accompanied a burst in media coverage on the "Jesus revolution." The June 21, 1971 issue of *Time* featured a rainbow-colored print of Jesus on its cover. The accompanying story emphasized the movement's spontaneity, exoticism, and renewed spiritual sincerity. "In a world filled with real and fancied demons for the young, the form their faith takes may be less important than the fact that they have it."<sup>23</sup> *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Look* magazine followed the movement for about a year as the idea of a Christian youth revolution gained widespread appeal. Youth ministry organizations and Christian publishing companies adapted readily to the hip language and culture of American youth. Hal Lindsay's contemporary rendition of pre-millennialism in *The Late, Great Planet Earth* (1970)<sup>24</sup> provided youth an accessible interpretation of end-times prophecy and reinforced the sense of relevance and immediacy that characterized the youth revival. *The New Living Bible* (1971), a paraphrase of the King James Bible into informal contemporary language, became a number one bestseller in 1972. Christian bookstores diversified their merchandise to cater to their new clientele.

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<sup>22</sup> Graham, 1-25. The quote is from 23-24.

<sup>23</sup> "The New Rebel Cry: Jesus is Coming!" in *Time* 97 (25).

<sup>24</sup> Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

Colorful prints and logos advertising Jesus proliferated on T-shirts, bumper stickers, buttons and school supplies, some of them manufactured by the youth-oriented parachurch organizations that had grown out of the 1960s. Magazine ads targeted the new market for “contemporary signs of the Christian’s faith.” Small round “witness stickers” were 35 cents each (“stick up for Jesus!”). Christian posters displayed countless variations on the “one way” sign (a clenched fist with one index finger extended), including an enlarged print of the front cover on *The Jesus Generation*. Christian dog tags were available for \$1 per set, and “poverty patches” cost \$2.50 per 3 ½” cloth patch. These highly visible displays of religious identity served to draw attention to the prevalence of evangelical faith in a post-1960s society by distinguishing their apparently Christian owners from the rest of the baby boomer crowd.<sup>25</sup>

Amid the excitement over this infusion of Christianity and youth culture, Bob Larson published his latest anti-rock installment, *Rock and the Church* (1972). As a reaction to the intermingling of contemporary music and religious functions, Larson condemned the use of rock music for worship, entertainment or evangelism. He downplayed his earlier about rock’s supernatural and cultural dangers, instead focusing on the lifestyles of particular musicians and the theological shallowness of pop music. Larson’s targets for criticism demonstrated the lack of consensus on the distinction between “secular” and “Christian” rock music. Though Larson directed his attack specifically toward “Jesus rock,” every artist he mentioned was later considered “secular” by the CCM community in general. Larson later admitted that he was simply unaware of those particular bands. His examples of religiosity in rock music included Eric Clapton, Norman Greenbaum, George Harrison, Bob Dylan and the Byrds. Larson argued (correctly) that none of these artists were born-again Christians. Because of their inexperience with Christ, these artists could not produce music that communicated his message to others even if rock music was an acceptable means of religious expression.<sup>26</sup>

As an evangelist dedicated to youth ministry, Larson evaluated these “Jesus rock” musicians in terms of their competence as evangelists and missionaries of the Christian church. Even the comparatively safe folk style of “contemporary gospel signified” could not be trusted

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<sup>25</sup> Advertisements in *Campus Life*, June 1972; *Bookstore Journal*, February 1972; and *Bookstore Journal*, October 1973. *Bookstore Journal* advertisements reproduced in McDannell, 249-255.

<sup>26</sup> Larson, *Rock and the Church* (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1972), 1, 17-25. Bob Dylan did convert to evangelical Christianity, but not until 1979.

implicitly “No two contemporary gospel songs are alike. Each must be individually considered for its own merit.”<sup>27</sup> The presence of the rock beat was suspect because it inspired moods and actions not conducive to Christian worship. Most importantly, the majority of popular lyrics were theologically shallow or inaccurate. Larson’s portrayal of Jesus music as dangerously ambiguous contrasted with later portrayals that characterized it as distinct from secular music. Of course, his Jesus musicians were not the same individuals as the Jesus musicians who became regarded as the first CCM artists. His categorization of “religious rock” probably came from the inclusion of these secular songs on a Christian radio and in churches experimenting popular music hits at rallies and worship services.<sup>28</sup>

### **Explo ‘72**

In June 1972, an international youth convention in Dallas, Texas drew national attention to the compatibility of evangelicalism and contemporary music. The event was the International Campus Crusade for Christ’s (ICCC) International Student Congress on Evangelism, popularly known as Explo ’72. The congress drew over 75,000 members of the Campus Crusade from all over the US and several foreign countries. Its mission was to train a new generation of youth pastors for mass evangelism – part of ICCC’s ambitious campaign to evangelize everyone in the United States by 1976 and to reach the entire world by 1980. The turnout suggested that the goal was achievable. For a week participants attended daily classes and seminars in 65 locations throughout the city. Two hundred and six evangelical groups set up booths near the Cotton Bowl, which filled with spectators for nightly rallies. Billy Graham spoke at each rally, declaring on the first evening, "We are here to say to the world that Christian youth are now on the march, and we're going to keep marching until millions of people are brought into the kingdom of God!" The final night featured an eight-hour concert that became known as the “Christian Woodstock,” including performances by Johnny Cash, Larry Norman, Children of the Day, Love Song, and other contemporary music acts. The publicity boosted the popularity of the lesser-known bands among Christian consumers. Love Song and Larry Norman both released albums in 1972 that eventually became Jesus music classics among CCM fans. Love Song’s self-titled debut was the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 85.

<sup>28</sup> See Baker, 19-23, 43-48.

best-selling religious album of the year. Subsequent musicians who aspired to minister through contemporary music patterned themselves after the Christian performers at Explo '72.<sup>29</sup>

After Explo '72 the Jesus movement largely disappeared from the news media and Graham turned his attention to other projects, but a viable market for Jesus music remained. The music gained a tentative foothold in Christian bookstores and gospel music companies formed record labels specifically for the new genre. The idea of a distinct genre of contemporary music for worship and ministry appeared to gain credibility in the evangelical community. Even Bob Larson, who still maintained that certain rhythms were potentially dangerous, qualified his earlier claims in about Jesus music.

[*Rock and the Church*] was written before I knew of Love Song, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Acts, and other more solid musicians like that. I did not perceive that a truly authentic and spiritually mature statement of faith would come out of the contemporary field. All I saw was a copy of what the world was doing.<sup>30</sup>

Larson, who now focused his ministry on spiritual warfare, had even used Jesus music recordings to minister to people involved in witchcraft. Jesus musicians could gain acceptance from skeptical evangelicals identifying their music with evangelical ministry, adhering to conservative moral lifestyles, maintaining a narrow emphasis on theologically correct religious lyrics.

Central to the emerging consensus on the purpose of Christian music was the need to remain distinct from the secular world. The legitimacy of the Jesus movement was invested in its revolutionary stance against the spiritual apathy of society. At the same time, the evangelical establishment had inculcated in the movement a drive to pragmatic cultural engagement. This drive remained essential to the movement's justification. As a result, Jesus musicians demonstrated a striking ambivalence toward material success. Mass media possessed the greatest potential for widespread propagation of the Gospel through music. Propagating the Gospel entailed participation in the consumer market, a secular profit-driven system where consumer

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<sup>29</sup> "The Jesus Woodstock" in *Time* 99 (26), June 26, 1972; "Larry Norman" in *Encyclopedia*, 614; Baker, 38; Eskridge, 104-106.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Baker, 106.

preference dictated the success of the artist's message. In a 1972 interview, Noel Paul Stookey predicted Jesus rock's demise based on the incompatibility between Christ and secular culture.

I think that the chance to make a buck talking about Jesus is not going to happen. It's antithetical to the market, our world. Your life might belong to God, but the market's life belongs to itself and it's not going to pay homage to God.

When asked why he thought music about Jesus was finally attaining market success, Stookey responded that commercial co-optation was how "the establishment" defeated cultural revolutions. "You take what is fighting you and you sell it. Then, if you sell it hard enough, the only way people can purchase your enemy is through you and so you win." In order to preserve the vitality of the Jesus movement in a free-market environment, evangelicals who wanted to continue the redemptive mission of Jesus rock had to avoid co-optation while somehow using the consumer market to spread their message.<sup>31</sup>

Concerns over the direction of the new industry prompted Christian radio jockey Paul Baker to publish the first history of CCM. *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* (1979) emphasized the religiosity and evangelistic spirit of the Jesus movement, described the difficulties of gaining legitimacy as Christians and performers, and celebrated the movement's achievements. The final chapter was called "Time We Returned." In it he advocated strong leadership among "the older Jesus musicians, having been in the business for anywhere from four to ten years." Establishing a "Paul/Timothy relationship with younger musicians" would reinvigorate the genre with the enthusiasm that the older musicians were losing. "But we must make sure that 'contemporary gospel,' as the industry itself has tagged it, doesn't become a sparkling new show car with a jalopy engine...Once we get those inner parts renewed, we'll be truly roadworthy again!"<sup>32</sup> This desire for renewal, complimented by the idealization of the original Jesus People, fueled subsequent struggles to manage the evolution of CCM as the ministry grew into a competitive, fully profit-driven enterprise.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with Bob Combs in *Campus Life*, June 1972, 114. The interview was a response to the success of Stookey's hit single "Wedding Song," released through Warner Brothers, 1971.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, 118, 120.

### CHAPTER 3

#### CONSTRUCTING AND DECONSTRUCTING A GENRE

The dual participation of CCM insiders in the cultures of evangelical Christianity and of popular music entailed sharing certain values in each sphere and interpreting each in terms of the other. It also entailed negotiating points of contention and opposition between evangelicals and the art world of popular music. Throughout the challenges and developments of its history, the memory of the Jesus movement persisted as a symbol of Christian music in its most authentic form. Accordingly, the majority of CCM professionals<sup>1</sup> justified their vocations in terms of worship, evangelism or ministry. As CCM grew and diversified, the changing landscape of commercial music culture forced participants to continually reevaluate their relationships with relevant groups in the industry, the church and the secular culture. The conflicts inherent within the enterprise of CCM contributed to the drive for creative innovation as professionals continually challenged the conventional boundaries between sacred and secular in order to meet the shifting requirements of professional and vocational success. By the turn of the century, the categorical distinction between Christian and secular pop music had become so ambiguous that many Christians refused to acknowledge it. For this growing minority, the categorical distinction itself had become antithetical to the spirit of the Jesus movement.

The CCM industry grew rapidly during the 1970s. In the United States, the number of Christian bookstores, the only retail outlets that sold CCM records, more than doubled (from 725 to over 1,850) between 1965 and 1975.<sup>2</sup> In the early 1970s, production budgets for CCM records ranged from \$10 to \$15,000 per album. By 1979 they averaged about \$25,000. A trade magazine entitled *Contemporary Christian Music* began publication in 1978, just as the industry's growth reached its first plateau. The magazine was originally targeted at professionals in the gospel music business, connecting industry participants in publishing companies, record labels, retailers, radio stations, and the music's fan base to a single source of news, commentary and discussion. Debuting at a time when the lack of coordination between businesses within the industry presented the greatest obstacle to continued growth, *Contemporary Christian Music* quickly

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<sup>1</sup> In keeping with the observation that art production is a cooperative effort among numerous specialties (including marketing strategists and corporate management), I use the term "professionals" to include many professions in addition to the artists themselves who are involved in that production.

<sup>2</sup> McDannell, 246.

became a centralizing influence among the many perspectives within the industry.<sup>3</sup> The popular discourse that emerged demonstrated an early preoccupation with the problem of articulating the genre's definition and purpose, a preoccupation that resurfaced frequently as new developments continued to confound the genre's definition.

### **Professionalizing a Prophetic Message**

The immediate challenge to gospel labels was to make Jesus music a professional-grade product. Professionalization in the CCM industry entailed conforming to standards established by its non-Christian competitors. To compete with their secular counterparts, CCM participants had to become more like them. However, too much conformity with secular music would compromise the industry's integrity. This was a necessary but dangerous enterprise. The CCM subculture embraced it with ambivalence and considerable self-criticism. CCM's classification as a division of the gospel music business despite its resemblance to secular music established a precedent for cultural separatism that associated company affiliation with religious community. Record executives like Billy Ray Hearn represented a perspective within CCM less concerned with the aesthetics or the experience of the music than with the company's ability to compete against secular companies. Hearn's involvement in contemporary Christian music began with his church. As the music minister for a Baptist church during the 1960s, Hearn collaborated on several successful religious folk musicals that eventually led to a position at Word, Inc, one of the largest Christian publishing companies in the United States. He was the first to act when the Jesus movement gained national visibility, forming a contemporary gospel label specifically for Jesus music (Myrrh Records) and contracting several promising Jesus musicians. After Explo' 72, Billy Ray Hearn became the most successful record executive in the CCM industry.

For Hearn, the company's religious orientation provided the delineation between religious and secular music. "Ministry-oriented companies" needed to produce professional-caliber music "because the competition is the enemy – the devil. Satan has his music and we have our music, and we have to be on a par in the artistic sense as much as possible." From the perspective of executive management, ministry took place in the free market with the conversion of consumer loyalty from secular product to CCM's spiritually beneficial product. This separation between ministry-oriented companies and non-religious companies represented a logical and pragmatic adaptation of the Jesus movement's prophetic stance and redemptive

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Joseph, *The Rock & Roll Rebellion* (Nashville: Broadman & Holdman, 1999), 15-16.



mission. Unlike some Jesus musicians, Hearn saw no conflict between Christian morality and consumer capitalism. To be a good Christian, he had to be a good businessman. When another publishing company (the California based CHC Corporation) offered to make him the chief executive of its new contemporary gospel label, Hearn left Word and became a competitor against his former company. “Competition always breeds quality,” he later explained. “I wanted a label that would minister to the artist ... and be a *real* record company.”<sup>4</sup> Even when competing against his fellow evangelicals, an aspect of commercialism that bothered some CCM artists,<sup>5</sup> Hearn saw himself furthering the overall mission with effective business practices.

Other perspectives within the CCM industry initially held similar associations between business affiliation and religious community. However, the changes brought on by adopting professional methodologies brought alarming similarities between gospel music and the secular business. At a time when Christian radio shows and many Jesus bands were still funded by donations, the commodification of religious products injected an element of materialism into the enterprise that seemed incongruent with the movement’s religious goals. While musicians and radio professionals did not condemn success in principle, at least some of them found the impact of commercialism discouraging. The market’s “increasing demand for cute, repetitive lyrics” stifled creative freedom, wrote one musician. “I am running into an increasing number of artists who are handcuffed by this approach.” Though Jesus teachings often alienated the “‘lowest common denominator’ of the listening audience” with his teachings, Christian musicians encountered demands to do the opposite. A radio producer complained that he was being overwhelmed by “gospel ‘hype!’” after continual harassment by record promoters who wanted him to spend radio time playing their songs at the expense of his preaching.<sup>6</sup> *CCM Magazine’s* conformity with secular standards of promotion, packaging and aesthetics led one fan to drop his subscription after one year. “With flash pictures and cute little clichés, you seem to try and make Christian music a better-selling product...I realize that you are involved in an industry, but is that all Christian music is?...Isn’t there supposed to be more to it?”<sup>7</sup> To preserve the Jesus movement

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<sup>4</sup> Hearn, quoted in Devlin Donaldson, “Billy Ray Hearn” in *Contemporary Christian Music* (June 1988), 46; Hearn, personal interview with William Romanowski (1989), quoted in *Rock ‘n’ Religion*, 167; Joseph, 12-14.

<sup>5</sup> cf. Richard Nakamoto and Audrey Hingly, “Michael Card: Teaching the Word” in *Charisma* (February 1984), 68.

<sup>6</sup> “Feedback” in *The Best of CCM, 1978-1980*, 6. The precise date is not included in the reprint.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Nordberg, “Are We Losing our Direction?” (Letter to the editor) in *CCM Magazine*, February 1982.

in the emerging industry of CCM, participants had to reconcile the conflicts they perceived between business and Christian counterculture.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Music Ministry**

John Fischer, a former member of the Jesus movement and columnist for *CCM* magazine attempted to resolve these conflicts with “Biblical Foundations For A Music Ministry.” Citing frequently from I Corinthians, Fischer premised his argument on a radical opposition between Christ and the world. Christ’s message of sin and redemption ran directly counter to the “wisdom of the wise,” which for Fischer was analogous to the prevailing tastes in secular entertainment.

What we think of as life is actually a suspended state of death... this isn’t exactly ‘Top 40’ material. In trying to make our musical message appealing to the world we must not lose sight of the fact that by its very nature, our message will not be appealing to *all*. If we do try and smooth out the Gospel by avoiding such painful issues as sin, death, and the Cross, we end up rendering it powerless – for the power is in the Cross.<sup>9</sup>

Regardless of the music’s quality, a Christian message would inevitably draw the ridicule of listeners who rejected Christ. Fischer’s distinction between Christian and non-Christian pop lay in the presence or absence of the “truth” in its content. The truth was independent of any other attribute of the musician’s art. An effective music ministry had to proceed with a world view of absolute dichotomy between God and sin. Christians “in any way involved” with CCM needed to constantly question their own motives.<sup>10</sup>

While resistance to the materialism of market production itself could not remain unmitigated if the industry was to survive, the association of glamour with secularity persisted among the few artists who shared Fischer’s view of CCM as a ministry. Singer/songwriter Michael Card resisted even the minor trappings of commercialism that his producers encouraged, including putting his face on the cover of his own albums. When Card won the 1983 Dove Award for Songwriter of the Year he almost declined it, claiming that the lyrics in question had

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<sup>8</sup> Bob Carlson in “Feedback,” *The Best of CCM*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> John Fischer, “Biblical Foundations For A Music Ministry” reprinted in *The Best of CCM, 1978-1980*, 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

come from God. Competition and market promotion glorified the messenger over other Christians instead of glorifying Christ's message. "I mean, wouldn't there be something weird about the disciples patting each other on the back and giving out awards?" For Card, CCM was an extension of the Christian church. The competition and celebrity of secular entertainment had to be mitigated by a radical Christian humility in the face of success, resolutely placing Christ above all other concerns.<sup>11</sup>

Keith Green, who became known for his uncompromising view of the Christian church as holy and separate from the secular world, dealt with his material success by announcing that his new album (*So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt*)<sup>12</sup> would cost only as much or as little as the consumer cared to pay. He obtained release from his contract at Sparrow Records, mortgaged his home and financed the album himself. After his first tour performance, his announcement of the "whatever you can afford" policy prompted fans to rush the record tables, with some fans grabbing armfuls of albums and only a few offering money. *So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt* fared somewhat better in retail as some consumers paid more than the asking price would have been, while a relative minority obtained copies for free. Green's anti-consumerist experiments prompted some musicians to attempt free concerts (financed by donations from the audience), few besides Green were sufficiently popular to guarantee that the donations would cover their costs. Green himself eventually modified his policy to include an asking price with his albums, but allowed consumers to write to his ministry and request an album for a reduced price. Almost no one did this. CCM performers who were less popular than Green eventually began relying more on hats, T-shirts and other merchandise sales to cover the costs of their concerts.<sup>13</sup> Financial necessity eventually forced CCM participants to reframe their attitudes toward celebrity and commercial success. The rise of CCM's first pop star to gain celebrity status in the

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Nakamoto and Audrey Hingly, "Michael Card: Teaching the Word" in *Charisma* (February 1984), 68.

<sup>12</sup> Pretty Good Records, 1980. As the head of a non-profit Christian ministry at a time when Christian pop sold few albums, only Green had the clout and the resources to offer albums for free through Christian retailers. Retailers were donated one dollar for each album sold (or given away) in their stores. See William Romanowski, *Rock 'n' Religion: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Contemporary Christian Music Industry* (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 1990), 201-206.

<sup>13</sup> Baker, 133-136; Powell, "Keith Green" in *Encyclopedia*, 383-384. Keith Green released two more albums before dying in a plane crash in 1982.

secular industry provided the opportunity to reformulate the role of celebrity in the normative conception of successful CCM.

### **Amy Grant**

Amy Grant may have influenced the development of CCM more than any other artist in the genre. She was born in 1960 and grew up in Nashville, Tennessee. Though she was too young to have participated in the Jesus movement, she joined Nashville's Belmont church when she was 13, mingling with a congregation that included former Jesus People, ex-hippies and musicians. She began writing songs at 15, occasionally performing at Belmont's coffeehouse. She also had a part time job at a recording studio owned by Chris Christian, a CCM artist and producer. Christian heard a tape recording of her music, decided she had potential and got her a record deal with Myrrh. The album was released in 1977, selling 50,000 copies in its first year.<sup>14</sup> In 1978 three of its songs made the top ten in Christian radio airplay charts. Grant quickly became a reliable investment for success. Her fourth album, *Age to Age* (1982) became the first CCM record to achieve platinum certification, winning the Grammy Award for best gospel performance and the Gospel Music Association Award for best pop/contemporary album.<sup>15</sup>

Grant's unprecedented success undermined widespread assumptions about the secular world's hostility to Christian music. Mainstream record stores stocked her albums. Her performances sold out to audiences numbering in the thousands. She appeared on talk shows, discussed her faith in interviews with the mainstream press, received corporate sponsorships, and continued to perform overtly religious songs. *Charisma's* music reviewer Richard Nakamoto confessed to being mystified at the sudden secular attention. "What's going on? Christian artists don't ordinarily get this sort of attention without all sorts of compromises – toned down lyrics, hidden meanings and so forth." The "gawking secular world" had "continued to listen, regardless of the boldness of her lyrics which praise and glorify God." Instead, she had achieved what no other Christian artist had since the emergence of CCM: the opportunity to sing the Christian

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<sup>14</sup> *Amy Grant* (Myrrh Records).

<sup>15</sup> Barry Alfonso, "Amy Grant" in *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 2002), 168-170; Powell, "Amy Grant" in *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 373-375; Don Cusic, "Amy Grant: Reaching Out" in *Christian Life*, June 1981, 19; Gospel Music Association, "GMA Dove Awards History," available online at <http://www.doveawards.com/history/browse.cfm?year=1983>.

message to a receptive secular audience. Nakamoto offered no theories on why they listened, but conceded she must have been doing something right.<sup>16</sup>

Grant's success was due not only to her own talent, but to the talents of her managers and the resources available to her. She came from a wealthy family who could provide financial backing in the early stages of her career. Her managers oriented their strategies toward mainstream success, monitored pop music trends and limited her public performances to increase demand. They also kept her from performing professionally in churches, emphasizing her identity as a commercial gospel artist rather than a church singer. The musical production of Grant's early albums was designed to maximize the effect of her clear-toned, unornamented vocals, which favored simple and accessible lyrics with minimal orchestration and pop/rock accompaniment. Her songs addressed personal devotion to God and reflections on everyday religiosity rather than conversion from a life of sin or the evils of secular society. Her music lacked the countercultural and evangelizing elements of Jesus music, but it retained the devotional character of contemporary worship and the affirmation of God's immanence in Christian life. The result was music that could appeal to Christians outside the CCM market without alienating CCM insiders, designed and marketed effectively to succeed in both areas.<sup>17</sup>

Grant popularized a musical style that came to be known as "contemporary praise," during the 1980s. Contemporary praise blended Nashville-style country, pop and rock music into a sound that avoided the staidness of outdated styles and the controversial elements of more progressive music. The lyrical tropes associated with Jesus rock gave way to less radical depictions of God's role in the lives of ordinary Christians. The lyrics were typically devotional in nature, but they also tended to be uplifting, non-confrontational, and accessible. Record executives recognized the advantages of a greater conformity within CCM over the diversity that required them to invest in more bands to reach an already narrow market. A sudden growth in the popularity of contemporary praise and inspirational music during a period when music sales in the general market were stalling encouraged CCM labels to select for these qualities in their artists. The corruption of the world, the need for repentance, and even the personal experience of

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<sup>16</sup> Nakamoto, "What's Amy Grant Doing? Why the Secular Attention?" in *Charisma*, June 4 1984, 89-94.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Millard, *Amy Grant: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1986), cited in Powell, 373-374; "Dove Awards History."

salvation were no longer central emphases in songs targeting an audience that had already repented and been saved.

Amy Grant's career development after 1984 provided the CCM community with a template for an artist's successful "crossover" from the Christian market into the secular market as her managers gradually phased her into the mainstream market over the next several years. In 1985 Word forged a deal with a secular music label (A&M records) to promote and distribute her next album to the secular market while Word did the same for the CCM market. The release of *Unguarded* in 1985 drew criticism from some evangelicals who believed she was abandoning her Christian roots. The radio-friendly hit "Find a Way" on secular top 40 stations, but the lyrics used the word "love" in every place where the word "God" would have been appropriate for a Christian pop song. The cover featured Grant posing in a leopard print coat, a modest but deliberate attempt at sexual appeal. She appeared at the Grammy awards barefoot, wearing the same coat, and danced on stage with her husband. Grant later told *Rolling Stone* that she was "trying to look sexy to sell a record. But what is sexy? To me, it's never about taking my shirt off or sticking my tongue out. I feel that a Christian young woman in the eighties is very sexual."<sup>18</sup> Grant's attempt to present a positive Christian image of sexuality confused and scandalized many evangelicals, prompting angry letters from ministers, retailers and fans, but she retained her credibility in the CCM industry.<sup>19</sup>

CCM bands with more progressive styles were encouraged to follow the "crossover" strategy, modeled after Grant's success with *Unguarded*. After developing a loyal fan base among Christian bookstore costumers, the artist's label would partner with a secular label to launch parallel marketing and distribution campaigns in the CCM and mainstream markets. Most attempts failed. Rock and pop artists who signed with gospel labels during the 1980s were promoted in the gospel market as Christian alternatives to the objectionable content of secular music. Artists who achieved this objective could then "cross over" by producing an album that could be marketed as a CCM product or as a secular pop record. Such attempts risked alienating the original fan base and were frequently under-funded by mainstream companies. Jesus rock performers with close ties to the churches, like the Seventy-Sevens and JPUSA's Resurrection

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<sup>18</sup> "Amy Grant" in *Rolling Stone* (June 1985), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Romanowski, 257-258.

Band, were likely to be passed over for crossover opportunities because of their church associations or their unwillingness to mitigate their religious themes for the secular audience. At the same time, their appeal among the churches was limited because their style was often considered too aggressive for worship.<sup>20</sup>

### **Hard Rock and Christian Heavy Metal**

Amy Grant's success coincided with renewed attention to the immorality of rock and roll. Sexuality and violence had become more overt than the innuendos and allusions of 1960s rock music, which was now remembered with a degree of nostalgia. "In 1964, the Beatles sang 'I Want to Hold Your Hand,'" wrote one entertainment columnist, "Today, rock groups are harmonizing about activities that go much farther than that."<sup>21</sup> Kiss, with its heavy face paint, lewd gestures and sexually explicit lyrics, contributed to an image of rock and roll as inherently hedonistic and shocking to older generations. Van Halen, AC/DC, Prince and Sheena Easton were among the "filthy fifteen" performers singled out by the Parent's Music Resource Center (PMRC) for the references to violence, incest, masturbation, bondage and other taboos in their music. The growing availability of music on records, cassettes and television (MTV debuted in 1981) shifted the primary locus of its consumption from the public arena toward the private sphere. Because the music appealed to younger audiences (some as young as nine or ten years of age), some parents became aware of it only after it invaded their homes. Such an episode happened to Tipper Gore, co-founder of the PMRC, when she realized that a record she bought for her 11 year old daughter included a song about masturbation.<sup>22</sup> Faced with the need to remain relevant to contemporary audiences and to work against the immoral elements of secular entertainment, Christian rock artists renewed their emphasis on evangelism to justify their music and to reach beyond the CCM market.

The second most successful crossover group during the 1980s (after Amy Grant) was an unabashed evangelical derivative of Kiss named Stryper. Often compared to Kiss, Journey or

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<sup>20</sup> The crossover model and the logistical difficulties it involved are discussed in multiple sources, including Baker, 151-157; Romanowski, 249-262; and Joseph, *Rock & Roll Rebellion*, 169-185.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Jaeger, "Rating Rock: A Tempest on a Turntable?" in *Washington Post* (October 6, 1985), E1.

<sup>22</sup> David Szatmary, *A Time to Rock: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 235-241, 246-249. Seb Hunter, *Hell-Bent For Leather: Confessions of a Heavy Metal Addict* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 1-4; Jaeger, "Rating Rock." Also see Linda Martin and Kerry Seagrave's chapter on the Parent's Music Resource Center in *Antirock: The Opposition to Rock 'n' Roll* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1988), 291-314.

“Styx after a crash course in speed-metal,” Stryper’s appearance and musical style gave no obvious indication that it was an evangelical rock band. “If you had to guess their name, you might think of the Devil’s Disciples or the Beelzebubs. Or perhaps the Killer Bees, which is what the four young men on the stage look like.”<sup>23</sup> The members dressed in the late-1970s “glam” style, with tight leather and spandex, big hair, makeup, and high heels. They opened their stage acts with pro-Christian slogans like “we’re here to kick the devil’s big fat butt out of rock and roll forever!” The name “Stryper” carried a dual reference to Isaiah 53:5 (“by his stripes we are healed”) and to the rumor that “Kiss” was an acronym for “Knights In Satan’s Service.” (Stryper claimed its name was an acronym for “Salvation Through Redemption Yielding Peace, Encouragement and Righteousness.”) The costumes and logos sported a signature color scheme of yellow and black stripes. The members threw New Testament Bibles into the audience at every concert. Their performances incorporated multicolored lights, fog machines, and the stage antics associated with glam rock. The vocals and instrumentals were on par with most other professional rock bands. The conventions of heavy metal entailed a greater emphasis on instrumental music than the vocals, which could be difficult to discern even for heavy metal fans. “A casual listener could sit through the whole album at a party,” noted one reviewer, “and not even realize the record was the work of a Christian band.”<sup>24</sup> Stryper’s music was discernible from secular metal only by its lyrical content, which was a comparatively minor point of distinction.<sup>25</sup>

In keeping with heavy metal’s lyrical conventions, their songs made frequent references to hell and the devil, mostly rock anthems calling for the listener to reject the devil and celebrate being a Christian. As rock musicians who had grown up listening to heavy metal, the members of Stryper considered rock music an inherently celebratory medium. Stryper’s conception of evangelism entailed celebrating Jesus instead of celebrating the hedonism that was associated with secular metal. The band’s lyrics typically expressed militant opposition to the devil or the affirmation of Christianity. In a medium where a six line verse could last nearly a minute, songs like “To Hell with the Devil” could get by on minimal theological content.

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<sup>23</sup> John Pareles, “Christian Rock in Tight Leather Pants” in *New York Times* October 20, 1990, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Jimmy Magahern, “Rock Band Credits God for Its Success” in *St. Petersburg Times* March 21, 1987, 7E.

<sup>25</sup> Gerald Clarke, “New Lyrics for the Devil’s Music” in *Time* March 11, 1985.



When things are going wrong  
You know who to blame  
He will always live up to his name  
  
He's never been the answer  
There's a better way  
We are here to rock you and to say  
To Hell with the Devil!<sup>26</sup>

Stryper's religious ambiguity was crafted to attract heavy metal fans from outside the CCM market without compromising their legitimacy within the CCM industry. The group signed with Enigma, an independent label that carried Christian and non-Christian metal bands. It frequently performed with secular metal bands to gain exposure to the secular audiences that CCM had been struggling to reach. Stryper's Christian identity was a viable selling point in the CCM market as well, allowing promoters to emphasize or downplay the band's Christian theme depending on their target audience. The appeal to both markets contributed to the success of *To Hell with the Devil* (1986), which became the first Christian metal record to attain platinum certification in 1988. Stryper's success drew attention to the phenomenon of Christian metal. Non-evangelicals could enjoy Christian metal without feeling alienated by its lyrics. The music was not devotional, but sought to channel the aggressive connotations of heavy metal into condemnations of evil, abortion, suicide and racism, voicing opinions that non-evangelicals could endorse. Metal bands who identified themselves as Christian bands often signed on with labels outside of the gospel music industry that tended to be more accepting of the heavy metal style. Stryper did not face the same obstacles to crossing over that bands who began on CCM labels faced.<sup>27</sup>

Though hard rock and heavy metal came to epitomize for some Christians all that was wrong with the secular music industry, the essential separation between message and music provided the resources to justify its validity as Christian music. "Look around you at all the

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<sup>26</sup> *To Hell With the Devil* (Enigma, 1986).

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Allison, "This Band's an Enigma" in *CCM* (May 1989), 6; Powell, "Stryper" in *Encyclopedia*, 892-894; Doug Van Pelt, "Why are All the Children Headbanging?" in *CCM* (August 1989), 15.

objects we have in the world. Most of them can be used for good or bad purposes,” wrote Christian pop singer Dana Key. “Their ‘goodness’ or ‘badness’ isn’t part of their inherent nature; it depends on how they are used by humans.” Dismissing claims of demonic influences connected to rock music, Key asserted a complete separation between the morally neutral music and the morally relevant lyrics. “*Sound* is not the important issue. It’s meaning. It’s what the song is saying – and the *lyrics* of a song are what gives us meaning.” Sanctuary, a network of churches that followed up Christian metal concerts with tracts, taped sermons and a phone number for their hotline, claimed to receive approximately 4,000 calls a month from heavy metal fans on their 800 phone lines. These young people called with questions about Jesus, second thoughts about having an abortion, and similar requests for spiritual guidance that had been prompted by their contact with a Christian metal band. “I’ve yet to find in the Bible what a ‘real Christian’ looks like,” wrote founding pastor Bob Beeman in an article entitled “Why Heavy Metal is a Ministry.” Chastising his detractors for conflating personal taste with Biblical principal, he asserted that heavy metal had reached people that other styles could not. “When Jesus said that the Father desires us to bear much fruit, and that our fruit would remain, this is the fruit He was talking about! Is there any greater proof than truly changed lives?” If the musical form was neutral, then its value as a ministry had to be judged by the outcome. This perspective on the purpose of Christian pop recalled the mission of the original Jesus People, but with a renewed emphasis on their interaction with sinners over their withdrawal from the secular world.<sup>28</sup>

### **Secular Christian Music and CCM**

In 1987 CCM’s sales suddenly plummeted, reversing what had been a second period of rapid growth. Though mainstream industry growth had been slow, the Christian record industry had averaged 10 to 20 percent annual growth for several consecutive years. Then gospel music sales dropped 20 to 30 percent below industry projections. Publishing companies reacted with layoffs and massive production cutbacks in their music divisions, cutting their new releases by 60% or more.<sup>29</sup> Record executives attributed the industry’s reversal to religious as well as

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<sup>28</sup> Dana Key and Steve Rabey, “Tool of Satan or Tool of God?” in *CCM* May 1989, 24; Bob Beeman, “Why Heavy Metal is a Ministry” in *CCM* (August 1989), 19.

<sup>29</sup> *Rock ‘n’ Religion*, 274; “Christian Music: Poor Sales Lead to Industry Cutbacks” in *CCM* (June 1987), 11.

commercial forces. Billy Ray Hearn blamed an excess of product in the CCM market.<sup>30</sup> Out of the thousands of albums that were being released by 1986, only a few were reliable enough sellers to warrant the investment. For some executives, the reluctance to buy more records also signified dissatisfaction with the music's spiritual relevance. The industry's attempts to reach wider audiences had diluted the religious message. Chris Christian claimed that the "thin line between a Christian record and a non-Christian record, from a lyrical standpoint" had produced "secular records in a Christian package" and confused evangelical consumers. The logical solution was a narrower focus within Christian pop on lyrical themes of exhortation, theological edification, and the message of salvation through Jesus.<sup>31</sup>

This sudden decline also coincided with the release of U2's breakthrough album, *The Joshua Tree* (1987), a "secular" album by evangelical Christians whose theology and music bore little resemblance to conventional CCM. *The Joshua Tree* overshadowed the accomplishments of CCM artists, debuting in the Top Ten on the *Billboard* chart and selling 14 million copies worldwide. In addition to winning two Grammy awards, the lead singer was voted "sexiest male" by a *Rolling Stone* poll. CCM's industry cutbacks coincided with the release of Christian record companies found themselves competing not only with each other, but also against a new public image of Christianity in pop music culture.<sup>32</sup>

U2 made no effort to portray itself as part of a Christian community at odds with the world. Songs like "With or Without You" and "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" portrayed faith in God as a struggle or a continual striving, which ran counter to the portrayal of Jesus as an immanently accessible experience. Songs like "MLK" and "Pride (In the Name of Love)" celebrated the work of Martin Luther King, a figure revered by Christian and non-Christian Americans. U2's embrace of the ostentatious "rock star" image alienated evangelicals who believed Christian music should be less entertainment-oriented. The band's liberal political activism was particularly incongruous at a time when the most visible leaders in the American

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<sup>30</sup> Bill Hearn, quoted in "Poor Sales."

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Jay Cocks, "Band on the Run" in *Time* (August 27, 1987); Romanowski, *Rock 'n' Religion*, 281-2. Romanowski used U2's success as an example of what Christian pop music could accomplish when performers did not sacrifice their religious and artistic integrity to maintain standing within a defunct gospel industry. Other histories of CCM by industry insiders have offered similar interpretations of U2's significance. See John Thompson, *Raised by Wolves: The Story of Christian Rock & Roll* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2000), 96-100; and Powell, *Encyclopedia*, 978-983.

evangelical media endorsed conservative political causes. Most significantly, its members did not associate Christian identity with Christian authenticity in the same way that CCM participants had, placing more emphasis on social action than conversion or ministry. “Trying to explain my beliefs, our beliefs, takes away from it,” one member told *Time*. “I have more in common with somebody who doesn't believe at all than I do with most Christians. I don't mind saying that.”<sup>33</sup> Such a perspective challenged the preconceptions underlying CCM's relationship with secular culture. While CCM labels narrowed their standards of acceptable Christian content, evangelical critics and CCM participants began deploring the lack of creative innovation in CCM that was integral to U2's appeal. Public discussion of CCM in the early 1990s shifted from debating the normative form of authentic Christian music to reconsidering the nature and purpose of the Christian music business in the world.

### **“What Makes Music Christian?”**

In the wake of stalled commercial growth and numerous failed crossover attempts, the CCM industry underwent a period of critical self-examination going into the 1990s. Professional conflicts among producers, promoters and distributors left many artists frustrated with the restraints placed on their creativity. Record labels were known to change album titles, demand rewrites on lyrics, and alter songs, or refuse to publish them entirely, all to meet the expectations of a narrowly defined market segment. Performers who had bad experiences with CCM record labels contributed to an image of the CCM industry as a force that inhibited the music's mission with excessive commercialism and shallow religiosity. Mark Heard recalled extensive discussions with “the label people” over lyrical minutia. “I've had record companies tell me, ‘Oh this song has six negative words in it. We have to get rid of this word, this word, this word. Rewrite the song and get rid of those words.’”<sup>34</sup> CCM producer Reed Arvin wrote that Christian pop had become “largely ineffectual” in the post-Christian society of 1990. The reason was that the CCM industry was just another secular institution within the society it was trying to influence. “We are not sanctified; we're busy watching TV with everyone else. Thus the creative

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<sup>33</sup> Larry Mullins, quoted in “Band on the Run.” Of the three band members who identified themselves as Christians in the article, Mullins was the only one who did so without qualification. Bono said he felt “unworthy of the name. It is a pretty high compliment.” Lead guitarist David Evans considered himself a Christian, but “not a religious person.”

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Dan MacIntosh, “Mark Heard: Music to Make Dry Bones Dance” in *Harvest Rock Syndicate* 5 (3), 11.

response of the church in outreach is often to copy the hit records of secular entertainment.”<sup>35</sup> No longer satisfied with translating the gospel into the language of contemporary youth, a growing number of CCM musicians perceived this effort as a misguided attempt to imitate the secular industry.

To correct the course of the straying CCM industry, evangelicals once again looked to the Jesus People for inspiration. Recollections of the movement shifted in emphasis from its anti-secular stance to the movement’s spontaneous and countercultural qualities. The original Jesus rockers had revitalized Christian music by taking it out of the church and into the secular world. Jesus music’s institutionalization in the form of a record industry had created yet another man-made religious structure, saturated in superficial markers of identity and distracted from its original purpose. Fischer’s regular columns reflected increasing distrust of the “Christian culture” that had arisen since the 1970s.

This is a mandate for all contemporary Christians. You can no longer trust a Christian label on something (as if we ever should have). Nor can you presume upon the absence of one. God is up to something in our world and I’m not always sure it’s what we’re up to.<sup>36</sup>

Fischer was one of many commentators who advocated using the Jesus movement as a model for emulation. “Those who have the benefit of the Spirit of God within them should be able to learn something from the past. If prophecies were being proclaimed from outside the established religious structures twenty years ago, what’s to prevent the same thing from happening now?”<sup>37</sup> Though few CCM participants were as harsh in their assessments of CCM or the church as Fischer often was, industry veterans who remembered the Jesus movement now recalled it as a time when rock music was not divided into categories of sacred and secular. Its precursors had included Bob Dylan, Barry Maguire and Curtis Mayfield. They located the movement’s origin primarily in Larry Norman, who had written his music for secular venues and had begun his career on a secular label. The 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *CCM* (July 1993) included a history of the

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<sup>35</sup> Reed Arvin, “Christian Ministry in a Post-Christian Culture” in *CCM* (August 1990), 14.

<sup>36</sup> Fischer, “I Wish We’d All Start Listening” in *CCM* (August 1990), 62.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

music by Styll that emphasized the secular origins of 1960s. He summed up most of the subsequent two decades in two sentences.

During the '70s, a subtle shift in mission took place as artists realized that their primary consumers were Christians. Before long, contemporary Christian music had almost totally abandoned its original call to influence popular culture and had become a subculture in and of itself.

The rest of the article celebrated the successful crossover albums over the previous five years and the interest that secular entertainment companies had begun to show in CCM. Styll portrayed these developments as movements toward the recovery CCM's original prophetic mission. "It seems clear that God has orchestrated a shakeout of the contemporary Christian music industry. He is purifying it and preparing it for the next stage of life. Perhaps he is bringing it full circle, back to the people for whom it was originally intended."<sup>38</sup>

In 1991 Styll began a *CCM* Magazine editorial with the claim that "there is no such thing as Christian music." This was not so much a claim that CCM did not exist as it was a call to reexamine the criteria that distinguished it from secular music. He retained the assumption that lyrics distinguished Christian from non-Christian songs. In that sense no musical arrangement could be considered Christian; only the lyrics. In a more fundamental sense, Styll's intended his claim to mean that the variety of styles, contexts and motivations for making and experiencing "Christian music" had rendered the term inadequate. It was the variety within the genre that made its distinction so ambiguous and the debates over its purpose so difficult to resolve.

And the questions don't stop there. Is music supposed to be used for evangelism or "body ministry" or for both? ... How "Christian" does a song have to be to be truly Christian? What about "Christian" songs by artists who aren't believers? ... What about non-Christian songs by artists who are believers?<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> John Styll, "Sound and Vision: 15 Years of Music and Ministry" in *CCM* (July 1993), 43-44.

<sup>39</sup> Styll, "What Makes Music Christian" in *CCM* Magazine (June 1991), 22-23.

Styll's argument divorced the question of Christian authenticity from the parallel dichotomies of sacred versus secular and ministry versus entertainment. Instead, he correlated it with artistic quality and integrity. Christian music could be of any style and fulfill any purpose that artists or audiences intended, but in order to be truly Christian it also had to be good art.

Styll drew from arguments by evangelical authors who criticized the superficiality of sacred/secular dichotomies within Christian entertainment media. Calvin Johansson's *Music and Ministry* (1984) argued that sacred and secular were not qualities intrinsic to things, but qualities of relationship and perspective. "For the Christian, then, life in its entirety is sacred. He has no compartments; his work, his recreation, his relationships, his art, and his music are seen through life in Christ."<sup>40</sup> John Blanchard's *Pop Goes the Gospel* (1983) refuted the assumption that art was only legitimate as a tool for specifically religious functions. "A musician's first responsibility is to make good music, not gospel music – and the Lord will be glorified by the honesty, beauty and integrity of his work."<sup>41</sup> For a definition of good music, Styll quoted Christian music professor Dale Topp: "Good music is music that does what people want music to do."<sup>42</sup> For Styll, the variety of music that could be considered "Christian" was not only permissible, but beneficial. Amy Grant, U2, Petra and Sunday morning church music were all spiritual in their own ways, and each had a place in its proper context for Christian listeners. Citing Ecclesiastes 3, he argued that "there is a time for entertainment" as well as for ministry and worship. Music could therefore be "godly" without being "specifically Christian."

It is the presence of truth, beauty, and integrity – not religious jargon – that makes music godly. To make it specifically Christian, the song should offer praise to God or contain some aspect of the gospel of Christ. It is specifically Christian if the words were those only a believer could sing.

Styll acknowledged that most of the music coming from CCM labels did not fit these latter criteria, but he characterized their inclusion in the genre as semantic mislabeling rather than

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<sup>40</sup> Calvin Johansson, *Music and Ministry* (Hendrickson, 1984), quoted in *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> John Blanchard, *Pop Goes the Gospel* (Evangelical Press, 1983), quoted in "What Makes Music Christian?"

<sup>42</sup> Dale Topp, *Music in the Christian Community: Claiming Power for Music and Worship* (Eerdmans, 1976), quoted in *Ibid.*

secularization. “A more accurate descriptive phrase for the music – much of which is primarily entertainment-oriented – might be ‘contemporary music for Christians.’” Styll articulated a kind of pluralist position for *CCM* magazine, one which implicitly harmonized free-market consumerism, artistic integrity and innovation with Christian identity. Less policing of the creative process from *CCM* labels would result in more authentic music. More authentic music would accomplish whatever goal motivated its production, and in the process it would sell more records.<sup>43</sup>

### **Jars of Clay**

In 1995 “Flood” became an instant radio hit on alternative rock and top 40 stations nationwide before nearly anyone knew that it was supposed to be a Christian song. It was performed by Jars of Clay, a band formed by four students at a small Bible college. The band’s obscurity may have contributed to their initial success. One Los Angeles director admitted that he would probably not have given the song a chance if he had known it was supposed to be Christian.<sup>44</sup> “Flood” featured simple, catchy, well-executed guitar riffs that were typical of radio-friendly alternative hits. The lyrics employed imagery of continual rainfall, vaguely reminiscent of the Genesis flood, to describe abstract feelings of personal anxiety and the desire for spiritual uplift. “Calm the storms that drench my eyes\Dry the streams still flowing\Cast down all the waves of sin\And guilt that overflow me.” This reliance on metaphor, which had been rare in Jesus music and discouraged by many *CCM* producers, left the meaning of the lyrics to the discernment of the reader. The word “sin” represented the entirety of explicitly Christian language in the song, and it hardly represented an exclusively Christian concept. Though particularly open to interpretation as a Christian song, “Flood’s” religious meaning was highly subjective. It was neither specific nor exclusive regarding its identity or target audience.<sup>45</sup>

Because of “Flood’s” radio exposure, Jars of Clay’s first album became the best-selling debut in *CCM* history, remaining on the Billboard Top 200 for 52 consecutive weeks and eventually selling two million copies. Jars of Clay quickly came to represent a perspective among younger *CCM* artists in the 1990s who sought to exert an influence on secular

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<sup>43</sup> Styll, *Ibid.* “What Makes Music Christian?” was one of the few *CCM* Magazine articles to be printed with footnotes citing its sources.

<sup>44</sup> Mike Morrison, quoted in Gregory Rumburg, “The Other Side of the Tracks” in *CCM Magazine* (July 1996), 40.

<sup>45</sup> “Flood,” *Jars of Clay* (Essential, 1995); Joseph, 232-233.



entertainment by focusing their music on experiences that Christians and non-Christians had in common. Informed by criticisms of the CCM's cultural isolation, Christian rock bands immersed themselves in the culture of secular rock. For these artists, the idea of an exclusive Christian subculture was more detrimental to authentic Christian life than secular culture or market-driven consumerism. "We've tried really hard to break that separation of Christian band and mainstream band, because as far as we're concerned there really shouldn't be that separation."<sup>46</sup> Magnified Plaid (MxPx), a Christian punk band, wanted Christians to be "more accepted and less weird. And so we go out in these larger circles and throw in our ideas, and that's what'll influence and change people's minds. As a band, we want to contribute to everyone, not just Christians."<sup>47</sup> The fact that Christian alternative bands defended their religious integrity and artistic approach suggests that they still desired acceptance in the CCM community. However, their normative conceptions of Christian art also committed them to circumventing CCM's stigma of militancy and separatism in order to interact meaningfully with non-Christians.

Like the Christian metal bands of the 1980s, young alternative bands sought mainstream exposure by performing with secular bands in non-Christian venues, including clubs where alcohol, smoking and other vices could be readily accessible. Earlier CCM performers had been known to downplay their religious identities when targeting secular audiences, and then to present them with explicitly evangelistic lyrics. Considering this strategy disingenuous and confusing to their audiences, younger bands identified themselves more explicitly as Christians to counterbalance the ambiguous religiosity of their lyrics. Lead vocalist Dan Haseltine began every Jars of Clay performance with a brief explanation of the band's name, a reference to 2 Corinthians 4:7 – "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.' . . . Our music is not something we do; it's something God does through us." Haseltine claimed to do this for his own benefit as the audience's edification. "If I don't, I can easily lose focus. I can forget why we do what we do." Some bands actually pursued opportunities to work closely with anti-Christian acts like Bad Religion or Marilyn Manson,

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<sup>46</sup> Dan Haseltine, quoted in Debra Atkins, "Jars of Clay Faces the Critics in *CCM Magazine* (July 1996), 24.

<sup>47</sup> Mike Herrera, quoted in Dave Urbanski, "Where the Buffalo Roam" in *CCM Magazine* (August 1998), 37.

reasoning that their audiences were in greater need for good rock music with a Christian worldview.<sup>48</sup>

CCM began to immerse itself in secular culture on the corporate level as well. Mainstream music companies showed a renewed interest in Christian pop after a strong sales comeback in 1991 placed several Christian artists on mainstream pop and R&B charts, with the help of distribution deals between CCM and mainstream companies. Anticipating the potential benefit of a wider market exposure, EMI bought Sparrow records in 1993, placing Billy Ray Hearn and his son Bill on the executive board of the new EMI Christian Music Group. Soundscan, a company that provided the sales data for the music industry publications, expanded its coverage to Christian retail stores in 1995, where the majority of CCM releases were still purchased. The result was a dramatic increase in reported CCM sales on mainstream charts. After Jars of Clay's debut other secular entertainment companies followed EMI's lead. By 2001 every major CCM label was owned by major mainstream corporation.<sup>49</sup> Independent CCM labels proliferated in the general market, and successful ones were readily bought up by secular companies. CCM executives stressed that secular ownership was ultimately a positive development. Even Billy Ray Hearn, who in 1988 said that CCM should "not have gotten enamored with the secular market,"<sup>50</sup> accepted EMI's assurances that secular ownership would not interfere with the music's message. "That would be like EMI telling the artists on their Latin label to begin singing in English so they could sell more albums. It doesn't make sense,"<sup>51</sup> The younger Bill Hearn acknowledged the practical necessity of mainstream ownership in the contemporary market. "The bottom line was that we needed the resources in order to grow, in

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<sup>48</sup> "Faith Under Fire: Criticized for Taking Their Music Into the Mainstream, Jars of Clay Wants to Keep their Message Clear" in *Campus Life* (March/April 1997), 16-17.

<sup>49</sup> Steve Rabey, "Pop Goes the Gospel" in *Christianity Today* (May 15, 1995), 55; Joseph, *Rock & Roll Rebellion*, 193-194; Andrew Beaujon, *Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2006), 38-39. By "major corporations," I am referring to the "Big Five" entertainment conglomerates that produced 70-80% of all the music sold in the world. At the time they included AOL-Time Warner, Sony, Universal, EMI and Bertelsmann. (Tim Wall, *Studying Popular Music Culture*, London: Edwin Arnold Ltd, 2003, 69).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Devlin Donaldson, "Billy Ray Hearn" in *Contemporary Christian Music* (June 1988), 46.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in "Pop Goes the Gospel," 55.

order to fulfill our vision.”<sup>52</sup> This vision replaced crossover with integration into a secular market that was more accessible to CCM.

The migration of CCM product into mainstream distribution exacerbated the developing tensions between the CCM record industry and professionals in Christian radio and retail. However, high-profile record industry veterans received more attention when they protested that CCM lost the vitality of the Jesus movement. Stan Moser, CEO of Star Song records, left the industry in 1996 after 26 years in CCM. Since the revival he had experienced in the Jesus movement, he said, “the wave of the Spirit had gone flat, but our profile has continued to rise through secular ownership, secular venues, and crossover songs.” Now the industry’s success and its emancipation from the church had left it with no higher purpose than production for production’s sake.<sup>53</sup>

Steve Camp, who had been a CCM artist for 20 years, took a more confrontational approach. On October 31, 1997 (Reformation Day), he published “A Call For Reformation in the Contemporary Christian Music Industry,” a four foot long poster listing of 107 “theses” against CCM’s “spiritual adultery in joining itself with the wayward world.” Camp mailed nearly 6,000 copies of it to CCM participants. They proclaimed that “authentically Christian Music was never intended for casual use or purely for entertainment” and that For Camp, any music that was written by non-evangelicals or that relied on subject matter outside the Biblical message could not be “authentically Christian.”<sup>54</sup> Reactions from the Christian record industry were generally dismissive, but Camp’s fears that CCM was vanishing into the mainstream echoed the sentiments of CCM professionals in radio and retail. Lindy Warren, the managing editor for *CCM Update*, warned that Camp had “a ton of followers,” and that their perspective was inevitably going to come out.<sup>55</sup>

### **Defining Christian Music**

In 1998 concerns over the growing prevalence of secular sounding music at the annual Dove Awards prompted an attempt by the Gospel Music Association to provide an official

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<sup>52</sup> Bill Hearn, quoted in *Body Piercing*, 38.

<sup>53</sup> Stan Moser, “We Have Created a Monster” in *Christianity Today* (May 20, 1996), 27.

<sup>54</sup> Camp, thesis 41-42, available online at <http://www.worship.com/theseesthree.htm>.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher Ave, “Breaking Camp: Christian Singer Stirs up Industry with Campaign for Change” in *The Dallas Morning News* (February 21, 1998). Reprinted online at <http://www.watch.pair.com/ccm.html#camp>.

definition of gospel music.<sup>56</sup> As the gospel music industry's most prominent trade and networking organization, the GMA represented "the face and voice for the Christian/Gospel music community."<sup>57</sup> Membership in the GMA provided access to the networks of business relationships among professionals at every level of music production. The GMA's annual Dove Awards ceremonies were presented as celebrations of unity and achievement among evangelicals dedicated to the production of commercial music as a religious endeavor. The awards themselves represented powerful endorsements by the community as a whole, as well as public statements identifying the ideal expressions of Christian religiosity through music. Since the 1970s, CCM's visibility within the GMA had increased in tandem with its growing market share, displacing traditional and southern gospel as the most influential forms of music in the gospel market. CCM's concurrent integration into the secular mainstream during the 1990s evidently threatened the distinctiveness of gospel music as a whole. The attempt to define Christian music in 1998 was fundamentally an attempt to prevent religiously ambiguous songs from gaining recognition as exemplary Christian products at the expense of more overtly religious (but less popular) songs.<sup>58</sup>

The new criteria were released just in time to disqualify the controversial pop hit "Kiss Me" by Sixpence None the Richer, which had topped radio play charts in ten different countries and received enthusiastic praise from CCM reviewers. "Kiss Me," a song describing a healthy, joyful romantic relationship, contained no distinctly Christian language. Its mainstream success provoked a backlash from many Christian radio stations that refused to play a love song which did not reference God, Jesus or the Bible.<sup>59</sup> The resulting criteria demonstrated how complicated such a categorical distinction could be:

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<sup>56</sup> Originally, any musical product that was available in CBA-accredited retail stores was eligible for a Dove award, but the dissolution of CCM's distribution barriers between Christian and secular outlets rendered this "gatekeeping" criterion increasingly inconsequential.

<sup>57</sup> Tricia Whitehead, "Christian/Gospel Music Album Sales Rise in 2006" (Gospel Music Association, January 4, 2007), 3.

<sup>58</sup> See James Goff, "The Rise of Southern Gospel Music" in *Church History* 67 (4, 1998), 722-744 for more on the distrust of secular musical styles within the gospel music industry since the 1960s.

<sup>59</sup> Powell, "Sixpence None the Richer" in *Encyclopedia*, 830.

[Gospel music is] music in any style whose lyric is substantially based upon historically orthodox Christian truth contained in or derived from the Holy Bible; and/or an expression of worship of God or praise for his works; and/or testimony of relationship of God through Christ; and/or obviously prompted and informed by a Christian worldview.<sup>60</sup>

This initial attempt disqualified thirteen nominations from the 1998 awards, including the award show's opening act, and prompted complaints from CCM artists and fans. The centrality of lyrical content implied an extraneous role of instrumentation in the song's meaning. (If applied consistently, the definition would have disqualified every nomination for instrumental album of the year.) More importantly, phrases like "obviously prompted and informed by a Christian worldview" were arguably as open to interpretation as any ambiguous song lyric. The resulting exclusion of music and artists that many GMA members considered exemplars of Christian music ultimately demonstrated how difficult its categorical distinction from secular music had become.<sup>61</sup>

In response to complaints, the GMA altered its definition after the 1998 Dove Awards and specified that it would only be used by screening judges if a nomination's eligibility was challenged:

For purposes of GMA Music Award eligibility, the lyrics of all entries in the Album and Song categories will be: based upon the historically orthodox Christian faith contained in or derived from the Holy Bible; or apparently prompted and informed by a Christian worldview.<sup>62</sup>

The operative shift from "obviously" to "apparently" offered enough leeway to a screening judge to include or exclude nearly any entry that came into question. Several disqualified nominees from 1998 received awards in 1999. In the GMA guidelines for delineating gospel music from

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<sup>60</sup> Quoted in Beaujon, 177.

<sup>61</sup> Beaujon, 176-177; Randall Balmer, "Hymns on MTV" in *Christianity Today* (November 15, 1999).

<sup>62</sup> *GMA 35<sup>th</sup> Music Awards Policies and Procedures Manual* (2004), 2. Available online at [www.gmamusicawards.com/voting2004/pdfs/2004\\_Policy\\_Procedures\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.gmamusicawards.com/voting2004/pdfs/2004_Policy_Procedures_Manual.pdf).

secular music, the religious identity of any given song or album was now a matter of subjective appearance. As of 2007, the definition is still in place.<sup>63</sup>

In a curious reversal of the disqualifications of 1998, the 2005 Dove Awards were dominated by a young alternative rock band named Switchfoot. Their latest album *Nothing is Sound* (2005) was the highest selling CCM album of the year. The group received nominations for awards in eight categories and won four of them. Ironically, the amount of attention focused on Switchfoot's contribution to Christian music also highlighted an incongruity in the GMA's celebration of unity and success: Switchfoot never showed up. Despite its members' uniform self-identification as Christians, the explicitly spiritual content of its music, its dependence in large part on an evangelical Christian fan base and its reliance in the past on Christian producers to achieve national exposure, Switchfoot refused to identify itself as a Christian band. "For us, it's a faith, not a genre," said lead singer Jon Foreman in a 2004 interview. "'Christian rock' tends to be a box that closes some people out and excludes them. And that's not what we're trying to do."<sup>64</sup> When Switchfoot was awarded Artist of the Year, the presenter said "we have to acknowledge that they're out there in the world," and the band received a standing ovation in absentia.<sup>65</sup>

The prominence of Switchfoot in the 2005 GMA awards demonstrated how complicated Christian identity had become over the course of three decades in the context of CCM. By applauding the band that was trying to distance itself from them, the attendees of the GMA awards ceremony signaled their approval of its religious endeavors "in the world." By rejecting the term "Christian" as a genre, Foreman sought to authenticate his Christian identity by internalizing it as a faith, divorced from the religious nature of his band's music. The breakthrough success of *Nothing is Sound* brought it with the chance to reach more of the secular market and to contribute to the prevalence of Christian-inspired music in the art world of American popular music. At the same time, the gospel music industry continued to lay claim to Switchfoot by including the band in its ceremonies and acknowledging the compatibility of their goals. For the newest generation of CCM performers, integration with the secular music culture

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<sup>63</sup> cf. *GMA 36<sup>th</sup> Music Awards Policies and Procedures Manual* (2007), 2. Available online at [www.gmamusicawards.com/voting2007/pdfs/2007\\_Policy\\_Procedures\\_Manual.pdf](http://www.gmamusicawards.com/voting2007/pdfs/2007_Policy_Procedures_Manual.pdf).

<sup>64</sup> Jon Foreman, quoted in Steve Morse, "Switchfoot Steps Toward Stardom" in *The Boston Globe* (Jan 9, 2004).

<sup>65</sup> Beaujon, 178.

had become sufficiently pervasive to disavow any real distinction in the phrase “Christian music.” At the same time, the distinction between Christian and non-Christian was necessary for the Jesus movement’s redemptive mission to continue. What exactly that mission has become and how it is to be carried out continues to vary among individuals and communities in the CCM culture, but the need to continually question the movement’s own assumptions contributes to the continual redefinition and renewal that has characterized the history of CCM.

## CONCLUSION

In May 2007, *CCM Magazine* marked its 29<sup>th</sup> year of publication with a redefinition of the term “CCM.” Jay Swartzendruber, who had taken over as the chief editor in 2003, said the time had come to acknowledge the obsolescence of the phrase “contemporary Christian music” in the art world of Christian pop.

A lot of the long-time Christian music fans still read the magazine. But we have gotten so many letters repeatedly in the past years from readers asking, “What does *CCM* stand for?” since we hadn’t been featuring “contemporary Christian music” in the magazine.<sup>1</sup>

The magazine redefined *CCM* to stand for “Christ,” “Community” and “Music.” The change sought to articulate a shift in how *CCM* participants had come to understand the intersection of religion and popular music. The use of the term “Christian” as an adjective rather than a noun had acquired connotations of exclusion and shallow religiosity. Employed as nouns, “Christ” and “community” emphasized the centrality of Christ’s relationship to humanity and the importance of inclusivity within the Christian community. Swartzendruber’s emphasis on community referred to *CCM*’s recent launch of MyCCM.org, an online community emphasizing fan input through free blog space, customizable profiles and discussion forums. Swartzendruber also announced that *CCM* would cover artists who publicly resisted association with the Christian music industry.<sup>2</sup>

This attempt to overcome structural boundaries separating artists from consumers recalls Charles Lippy’s characterization of popular religion as inchoate and syncretic. The quest for artistic and religious integrity has led the community’s most prominent news outlet to diffuse its editorial voice among the fan base while providing lesser-known artists the opportunity to gain

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Jackson, “Interview: ‘CCM’ Editor Jay Swartzendruber on the Evolution of Christian Music” in *The Christian Post* (April 14, 2007). Available online at <http://nashville.christianpost.com/article/editorial/140/9/20/26/31/interview.ccm.editor.jay.swartzendruber.on.the.evolution.of.christian.music/2.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. One artist mentioned specifically was Sufjan Stevens, a folk/indie rock artist who has employed religious themes (Christian and otherwise) in some of his music. Stevens has identified himself publicly as a Christian who was raised in an interfaith community, attends a “kind of Anglo-Catholic” church, and prefers not to discuss the details of his beliefs. See Noel Murray, “Sufjan Stevens” in *The A.V. Club* (July 13, 2005) and Andrew Beaujon, *Body Piercing Saved My Life* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 2006), 116-117.



exposure as community participants. MyCCM.org's decentralized structure has allowed its 5,000 members to discuss the nature of Christian pop music, speculate about the suitability of particular artists and songs, and share their own musical interests with minimal interference from authorities within the church or the magazine itself.<sup>3</sup>

To the extent that the CCM industry grew less dependent on church authority for support and legitimacy over time, the history of its development can be understood as a secularization narrative. Though the Jesus movement consisted primarily of young religious seekers who emphasized personal experience over institutional organization, it relied on institutional authorities to articulate its purpose, its direction, and its role in God's plan for his people. The earliest Christian folk and rock bands were often affiliated with Christian churches, as were other influential professionals in the CCM movement including John Styll, Billy Ray Hearn and Ralph Carmichael. Churches and church-affiliated coffee houses served as the first venues for "contemporary gospel" performances. Ministers who opposed Christian rock music typically cited qualities that made the music unsuitable as a source of religious teaching, especially the theological shortcomings of its lyrics and its incompatibility with church decorum. The eventual transition into commercial business models was met with ambivalence and some resistance by CCM participants. However, the success of performers who deliberately avoided playing in churches (especially Amy Grant) demonstrated the potential for CCM to survive as a secular institution with a Christian mission. As the Christian pop industry solidified and expanded its niche in the entertainment market, professionals outside the churches gained the autonomy to articulate the purpose and direction of the music themselves. In the process of expansion and diversification, the personal themes of CCM eclipsed the eschatological and countercultural themes of the earlier Jesus music. The Jesus movement's rhetoric of distrust toward denominational authority eventually shifted into a similar rhetoric against executive interference in the creative process of music production. Associating artistic integrity with religious authenticity, outspoken artists and other professionals reacted against the separatism of gospel music production by focusing on themes of experience that Christians and non-Christians had in common rather than experiences that set Christians apart. The concomitant integration of CCM record labels into the infrastructure of secular music signaled an emancipation from church

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<sup>3</sup> See Charles Lippy, *Being Religious American Style: A History of Popular Religiosity in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985).

authority that had been in progress since the commercial production of Jesus music had first moved from the churches to the gospel music companies.

In some ways, Christian pop music participated in the bilateral process of secularization that Conrad Ostwalt has described in Christian books, films, megachurches. Though Christian performers continued to identify themselves as a subculture at odds with the world, their approach to cultural engagement entailed appropriating forms of institutional organization and artistic expression that allowed them to carry religious messages beyond the boundaries of formal religious practice. This infusion of secularity into the CCM movement arguably complimented a diffusion of religious messages and symbols into American pop culture, including popular music. Secularization may also have occurred within the CCM record industry as well in the sense that contemporary worship music has become only one of many “relativized spheres”<sup>4</sup> that make up the array of functions the genre has come to serve.

Originally justified in terms of evangelism or exhortation, CCM quickly adapted to fulfill other purposes like family entertainment. Though a significant portion of CCM performers continued to justify their careers in terms of ministry and to produce music primarily for worship, the genre diversified to include aspects of everyday experience outside the public sphere of formal religion. Working from the premise that personal salvation impacted all areas of life, prominent voices in the movement argued successfully for a conception of Christian music in which Sixpence None the Richer’s “Kiss Me,” or even Madonna’s “Papa Don’t Preach,” could be as legitimate an expression of Christian values as “Amazing Grace.”<sup>5</sup> The initial evangelistic goal of effecting or facilitating conversion among secular audiences gradually gave way to more modest goals like public recognition and the exertion of a “redemptive influence” on popular culture. From these perspectives, the launch of MyCCM.org signifies a culmination of trends toward the decentralization of religious authority and the dissolution of boundaries between sacred and secular manifestations of religiosity.

However, it is precisely the multiplicity of normative conceptions regarding the sacred-secular distinction that limits the feasibility of secularization as a historiographical trope for Christian pop music. The internality of salvation through the personal encounter with Jesus

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Mark Chaves, “Secularization as Declining Religious Authority” in *Social Forces* 72:3, 749-774.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Joseph, Patrick Cavanaugh and Kerry Livgren, “Can Christian Music Exist?” in *CCM Magazine* (August 1995), 55-57.

suggests a model more sensitive to the array of often conflicting sacred-secular distinctions that communities construct for themselves. Applying Christian Smith's subcultural identity theory to the CCM movement provides a narrative consistent with the concurrent development of the broader evangelical movement. Navigating the dual motivations of separation and engagement, CCM participants articulated their identities in response to various "reference groups"<sup>6</sup> as their relevance to the CCM industry increased or diminished. Jesus musicians who accepted commercialization had to define themselves against the "secular" industry, signing under religiously-oriented gospel companies. Suspicions toward contemporary styles on the part of retailers, churches and consumers motivated CCM labels to enact rigorous controls over their musical output to minimize the ambiguity of its Christian content. Amy Grant's popularity among a broad fan base allowed her to shrug off many of her detractors. Performers more invested in conservative approval, like Stryper, defended themselves more rigorously against internal criticism.

The declining credibility of anti-rock movements and the general acceptance of rock and roll gave Christians the latitude to produce Christian music in a variety of forms. Growing acceptance of CCM among retailers and consumers prompted a shift in attention to the secular market as CCM labels sought to expand their distribution and overcome criticisms of cultural irrelevance. Recollections of the Jesus movement – which had continued to symbolize the essential mission of Christian pop music – allowed advocates to justify the push for CCM's cultural integration while retaining the element of cultural opposition that set evangelicals apart from the world. Criticisms of secularization during the late 1990s, even from industry veterans like Stan Moser, Steve Camp and Michael Card, no longer presented a threat to the legitimacy of an industry that had become a significant force in American popular culture. The launch of MyCCM.org and the redefinition of *CCM Magazine's* title signify a shift in attention to the consumer base as a reference group from which to construct the Christian worldview that will inform the magazine's own discernment of sacred from secular.

More broadly, CCM's integrative shift may reflect the recognition of evangelicalism's indebtedness to modern pluralism and consumer capitalism for its prominence in American culture at the turn of the century. Both of these elements reinforce the presentation of religious affiliation as a matter of personal choice in the face of multiple overlapping and conflicting

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 104-107.

consensuses over matters of religious truth. Evangelicalism's emphasis on the transformative experience of Christ and its persistent rhetoric of cultural opposition have provided evangelical movements with the resources for continuous religious innovation in response to the challenges they perceive to their spiritual and social goals. A testament to this dynamic resiliency, the CCM industry emerged as an unlikely hybrid and evolved into a significant influence within mainstream religion and entertainment. In a process both reactive and creative, the movement has thrived by negotiating the internal tensions inherent in the relativism of modern American religion and the need for access to the absolute truth of Christian salvation, but has never resolved them. A harmonious resolution between the internal tensions inherent in the paradox of engagement and separation (if such a resolution were possible) would only dissolve the motivation for creative action that drives the movement forward.

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