

Jesus climbs the charts: The business of contemporary Christian music

by [Mark Allan Powell](#) in the [December 18, 2002](#) issue

"We weren't really sure what to do," Daniel Davison said, after his entire rap-metal band Luti-Kriss got "saved" at an Assemblies of God revival service. "But we figured we should stop cussing so much in our songs. And . . . maybe we can write songs about God!" Inexplicably, the group changed its name to Norma Jean and by this August they were on the cover of *HM* magazine, the Christian music industry's premiere publication covering hard rock artists.

Such bands are a dime a dozen these days, though they cost a bit more than that to book. At one time, the Christian rock scene was a cultural ghetto, frequently ridiculed and easily avoided. But now Christian rock is big and loud; it'll shake your windows and rattle your walls.

It comes in all varieties. John Michael Talbot, a Roman Catholic, and Michael Card, a Baptist, write soft, reflective pieces informed by years of theological and liturgical study. Kirk Franklin revitalizes black gospel music with choir anthems spiked with rap, hip-hop and R&B.

A genre distinction is usually drawn between "contemporary Christian music" (ccm for short) and "modern worship music." The great majority of ccm artists do not envision their music being used in church (as is Talbot's, Card's and sometimes Franklin's); they expect it to be played in homes and automobiles just like regular pop music.

One Christian rock star told me, "I'm not trying to change what goes on in church. I think it would be a bad idea to make worship more entertaining. I just want to make entertainment more worshipful."

Typical of that trajectory is the aptly named Memphis blues band Big Tent Revival, which states in one of its songs: "The Bible talks about a book of names / Souls rescued from the flames / Tell me, brother, when it's all through / Will you know

Jesus, and will He know you?"

Christian rock traces its roots to the Jesus movement of the early 1970s. Now that it's over 30, some of its aging hippie progenitors are beginning to wonder if it can still be trusted. The scene was once the haunt of radicals—antiestablishment Jesus freaks whose passionate piety sometimes covered a multitude of theological and musical sins. In the 1980s, it became an industry, and in the 1990s, an empire. In 2001, music categorized as ccm accounted for more than \$1 billion in sales—up 12 percent in a year when the recording industry as a whole took a downturn. *Newsweek* ran a cover story on "Jesus Rock" and HBO's *The Sopranos* featured a humorous subplot about the mob family trying to get in on the action.

But is the music any good? More specifically, how does ccm hold up artistically (as music) and theologically (as a reflection of the Christian faith)?

Artists in the Christian rock scene have a tendency to copy the styles of successful mainstream performers in order to provide godly alternatives to whatever is popular at the time. Artists like Third Day ("the Christian Hootie and the Blowfish") and Rebecca St. James ("the Christian Alanis Morissette") have been marketed as though they were low-fat cheese: "almost as tasty as the real thing—and better for you!" Still, there are numerous artists who don't fit this stereotype, and even those who do often transcend it. Most of the major players in ccm perform at an artistic level consistent with that of the general market, with enough creativity to avoid being imitative.

It is hard to imagine anyone who likes Billy Joel or Paul Simon not enjoying Steven Curtis Chapman's musical style. Chapman is to pop music what *The Waltons* was to television: he has a sweet, homey and nostalgic sound. His songs have strong melodies and catchy hooks, like songs from the 1960s, and they are sung with warmth and tenderness.

BeBe and CeCe Winans are an African-American duo (brother and sister) who draw on both gospel and R&B roots to craft polished recordings that showcase their impressive vocal abilities. CeCe is Christian music's Whitney Houston, and Houston has cited CeCe as "my personal favorite singer." BeBe recently shook up the Christian music world with allegations of racism in the industry, accompanied by hints that he might abandon ship for a career in the general market. He told *CCM* magazine, "It's more difficult to be raped by people who are supposed to be kindred

spirits than by people who don't know who Jesus is."

Jars of Clay has a less commercial sound that appeals to "alternative rock" fans drawn to groups like R.E.M. or Matchbox Twenty. The band has enjoyed some crossover success in the secular market. Its first album went double platinum with astonishing sales of over 2 million copies (making it one of the best-selling albums of 1996). The band's third disc was chosen by *Playboy* as Album of the Month. (Its fourth album, *Eleventh Hour*, was reviewed in the April 24-May 1 Century.)

D.C. Talk is a vibrant, racially integrated group that has been on the cutting edge of the rock industry. Its best song, "Jesus Freak," is now a standard of modern rock. The first-ever wedding of rap and grunge, it succeeded in winning over many general market broadcasters—even *Rolling Stone* magazine loved it, though it ridiculed the lyrics. Often loud and brash, D.C. Talk can also be soulful and sensitive. In "What If I Stumble?" singer Toby McKeehan reflects upon his celebrity status: "What if I stumble? What if I fall? What if I go and make fools of us all?"

One of the biggest success stories in recent Christian music is the rapcore trio P.O.D. (short for Payable On Death). "Rapcore" is a relatively new style of music that sets rapped lyrics (usually screamed) to the sounds of heavy metal; it is not for the faint of heart. P.O.D. is good at it, though the group has received little support from the Christian music industry and quite a bit of criticism when it toured each year as part of the "Ozzfest," a raucous rock festival headlined by one of conservative Christianity's worst nightmares, Ozzy Osbourne. Over the years, the blatantly Christian band screamed its way into the hearts of rowdy crowds, and by 2002 it had sold millions of albums and become one of the hottest acts in the land. Suddenly P.O.D. was on the cover of *HM* magazine and was featured in the more cautious *CCM*, where the trio copped a bit of an attitude: "Oh yeah! Now you down with P.O.D.! Where was you before?"

In 1997, *Rolling Stone* reviewed a sampling of 30 Christian rock songs and rendered this verdict: the Christian songs were no more insipid or derivative than 30 songs "randomly selected from the *Billboard* Hot 100 in a given week." Such a backhanded compliment pays homage to the newfound professionalism of ccm, as compared to the atrocious production standards that marked the music for its first two decades. Today, the artists have talent, the producers have money and the companies have experience.

Still, talent, money and experience do not necessarily yield good art. The songs may be catchy and they may be performed well, and the music can still have the artistic appeal of advertising jingles. Frank Hart of Houston's hard-rock band Atomic Opera says that he hates most Christian music because it is "not art but propaganda."

Christian music fans often complain that bands like Sixpence None the Richer (named for a C. S. Lewis quote) or The Choir (an especially artistic combo of Episcopalians) don't mention Jesus enough in their songs. A band named All Star United recorded a song called "Smash Hit" in 1997 mocking this Christian music industry obsession ("Join his name to any cause, say his name to get applause"). Ironically, the song became a smash hit on Christian radio on the strength of its chorus ("This Jesus thing—it's a smash hit!").

The good news (artistically) for the Christian music scene is that these sorts of rebels continue to appear. Rock stars are hard to tame, and the ccm industry has seen a steady stream of artists like Larry Norman, The Seventy Sevens and Michael Knott who refuse to toe the line and do what is expected of them. They also tend to bite the hands that feed them, taking on the culture, the church and even the music business itself. I enjoy the irreverent humor (though not the music) of Christian goth band Dead Artist Syndrome: "Jesus I love you, but I don't understand your wife / She wears too much make-up and she always wants to fight / In my world of black and gray, she argues shades of white."

The two biggest rock bands in America right now are groups fronted by Christians who have nothing to do with the Christian music industry. Creed and U2 regularly pack stadiums, win Grammy Awards and fill the airwaves with spiritual songs. Scott Stapp of Creed and Bono of U2 view themselves simply as artists and entertainers. When their art reflects their faith, it does so naturally, in an honest, uncontrived and vulnerable way. Their songs sometimes also express their doubts, their lusts and even their blasphemies. In 2001, U2 had one of the top albums of the year (*All That You Can't Leave Behind*) with an allegorical, 11-song tribute to a lover (or, more likely, mother figure) identified as "Grace": "She takes the blame, she covers the shame, she travels outside of karma."

What about the theology? Naturally, there are degrees of theological sophistication in this music, which reflects a wide swath of American religious traditions. Jars of Clay is often cited as an example of a group that manages to be both subtle and profound. *Christianity Today* once dubbed it "the band that Luther and Calvin would

have liked,” perhaps because of its U2-like obsession with grace. A primary focus of its songs is the fragility of the human condition, rendered only more ambiguous when viewed from a perspective of faith. The group’s very name is taken from 2 Corinthians 4:7 (“We have this treasure in clay jars”), and one of its best songs is “Frail.”

Still, many ccm artists perform songs that are neither profound nor subtle, some of which are dismissed by critics as “happy-in-Jesus songs.” Defenders say such music stands in the grand tradition of summer camp songs like “Do Lord” and “Give Me Oil in My Lamp”—pleasurable ditties that are simply expressive of Christian joy without any pretense of addressing life’s complexities.

The problem with that argument is that Christian music often occupies a major, even defining role in the lives of its more ardent listeners. The music is not just material for a campfire sing-along; it becomes a soundtrack for people’s lives. Individualistic piety and crass sentimentalism can be innocent enough in small doses, but some fans and performers seem to think that faith consists of little else.

In the 1980s, militant triumphalism reigned in the lyrics. Three of Christian music’s biggest stars (Petra, DeGarmo & Key and Matthew Ward) recorded three different songs titled “Armed and Dangerous” (based on Ephesians 6). These songs, and many like them, presented Christians as a force that (in the words of Ward’s song) “will not stop until all Christ’s enemies lay dead at our feet”; one hopes they meant only to slay spiritual enemies, not bodily ones.

The 1990s showed little improvement in the area of social commentary. The topics of choice were harlots in the White House, baby-killers and anyone opposed to prayer in public schools. At least five songs were sung from the perspective of a fetus who, endowed with adult intelligence, knows that he or she is about to be aborted; in one case, the fetus asks Jesus to come into his (already beating) heart so he or she becomes a Christian before being killed.

I’d put about 10 percent of current ccm into the “theologically mature” category exemplified by Jars of Clay, Sixpence None the Richer, The Choir and some lesser-known artists (see sidebars). Another 10 percent can be written off as sensationalist trash marred by the kind of ignorant extremism noted above. As for the rest, it’s not too profound or thought-provoking, but it can generally pass as harmless, sometimes even inspiring entertainment.

A positive assessment of this music's theology depends on recognizing a legitimate role for emotion in faith. Many composers of rock music maintain that the primary intent of their songs is not to convey a message but to engage emotions.

Likewise, Christian music usually succeeds (if at all) by being empathetic. D.C. Talk's "Jesus Freak" seeks to express the fear that an adolescent believer harbors about being labeled or ostracized on account of his or her faith: "What will people do if they hear that I'm a 'Jesus freak'?" Apparently a lot of adolescents identified with that song, though the lyrics would win no prizes for poetic art.

With rapcore, subtlety is pretty much ruled out from the start. P.O.D. screams anguished laments about urban blight and broken homes with enough streetwise agitation to appall many listeners. Band members also relate sordid testimonies of growing up in a drug-ridden ghetto in southern California. Printed on a page, their lyrics might seem a tad predictable or simplistic. It is the band's defiant delivery of those lyrics that renders them prophetic, transforming them into postmodern, melodramatic oracles of doom.

On a different note, Christian folksinger Bob Bennett scored a hit with a song he wrote for his children while going through a divorce: "There is no such thing as divorce between a father and his son / No matter what has happened, no matter what will be / There's no such thing as divorce between you and me . . . Sometimes I cry over the things I can't undo / And the words I never should have said in front of you / But I pray the good will somehow overcome the bad / And where I failed as a husband, I'll succeed as your dad." That's about as sentimental as a song can get, but there is emotional power in such heartfelt words.

A critique of ccm must examine not merely the songs but the industry itself. Christian music is now big business, and few critics think its success is entirely a good thing. Even Stan Moser, an industry insider who was once the head of Word Records, has said that the acronym ccm might better stand for "commercial Christian music." The problem, Moser continues, is that the Christian music business arose to serve the needs of a revival, but once the revival was over and "the wave of the Spirit went flat," the business was in place and had to keep churning out products. "In many ways," says Moser, "I think we created a monster."

The business interests of the ccm industry are often sustained through appeals to a "Christ against culture" paradigm. The industry encourages reports about how

Christian artists are persecuted in the general market, and fans are sometimes exhorted to listen exclusively to Christian music. *Campus Life* magazine features a regular column that suggests Christian music alternatives to fairly innocent secular artists (Christians should listen to Third Day instead of Hootie and the Blowfish). On Reformation Day 1998 Steve Camp (musician-turned-senior-statesman) published “107 Theses,” including the claim that believers who sign contracts with secular record companies are “unequally yoked” and guilty of “spiritual adultery,” and the contention that “a song written by an unsaved person cannot embody sanctified truth.”

It is ironic (but surely no coincidence) that the ccm industry’s insistence on segregation from “the world” comes at the very time that Christian artists like D.C. Talk, Jars of Clay and P.O.D. are enjoying unprecedented success in the general market. Not surprisingly, a number of Christian artists are now bothered by what they regard as the “mammon-inspired isolationism” of the Christian music scene, which *Rolling Stone* recently described as “a parallel universe—a world unto itself.” A major act named Caedmon’s Call (named after the seventh-century monk) scored a 1998 hit with a song that proclaimed, “This world has nothing for me”; later the composer confessed a secret irony: by “this world” he meant “the world of ccm.”

As that double entendre suggests, many Christian artists (not to mention fans and critics) have noticed that the more separate from the world the ccm industry seeks to be, the more worldly it seems to become. Several young Christian stars have struggled to reconcile Christ’s call to self-denial with their record company’s desire to put their names and faces on T-shirts and magazine covers. Strangely, Reunion Records promoted Joy Williams by distributing 2002 calendars that display the 17-year-old singer in a variety of attractive poses. Daniel Smith of the eclectic pop band Danielson dismisses the whole notion of a Christian music market by saying, “I just find it hard to believe that Christ wants to be in a market. Didn’t he turn over those tables?”

The Christian music subculture is a microcosm of popular religion in America. It’s also a laboratory within which various theological questions are engaged. A couple of decades ago—in the wake of the first scandals in the ccm field—the industry revisited the Donatist controversy: Can the Holy Spirit minister through songs performed by unholy vessels?

Recently, the favorite topic has been vocation: Is there a distinction between the “call to ministry” incumbent on all Christians and the call to professional ministry as a vocation? Might some Christian musicians (like Stapp and Bono) receive only the first but not the latter? And what exactly does ministry mean? Can entertainment count as ministry, or does ministry mean (as one voice in the discussion claims) “winning people to Jesus and discipling them in their walk”? As near as I can tell, no one involved in this argument has read Luther on the subject but quite a few have arrived independently at positions similar to his.

The industry’s grappling with theology is fascinating to observe, quite apart from the question of whether the music is any good or not. In 1999, Sixpence None the Richer scored a crossover number-one hit on general market radio with their romantic ballad “Kiss Me.” The Gospel Music Association immediately ruled the song ineligible to receive any of its Dove Awards because, though it’s a nice song, there is nothing especially Christian about a woman wanting her husband to kiss her. Singer Leigh Nash and her newlywed husband (the composer) attempted to explain that they don’t experience faith as some compartmentalized religious aspect of life, but to no avail.

Two years earlier, an album by a Christian country-rock band called Vigilantes of Love included a song that rivaled the Song of Solomon in its celebration of marital sex. Aghast, Family Christian Bookstores (the single largest distributor of Christian music) pulled the product from its shelves, leaving more than one pundit to wonder whether the chain fully appreciates just where children come from.

Joe Bob Briggs once defined contemporary Christian music as “bad songs written about God by white people.” There was enough truth in that description to get laughs, but it’s not really accurate. The field is diverse—ethnically, stylistically and theologically. One can list problems—triumphalism, commercialism, individualism, and a few we have not touched on here (a virtual dearth of inclusive language and an uncritical approach to scripture)—but such dysfunctions are also endemic to American popular religion.

And there remain the Christian music rebels who acknowledge no parentage in this world save an adoption by grace, who give voice to those who feel estranged from church and society alike. The late Mark Heard wrote their anthem: “We are soot-covered urchins running wild and unshod / We will always be remembered as the orphans of God.”