

Goths for Jesus: An alternative witness

by [Jason E. McBride](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

His black-dyed hair, shaven at the base, was pulled up into a bun pierced by thin black sticks. All of his clothing was black: an ankle-length skirt accompanied by a zip-down leather vest with fishnet sleeves. Six silver rings of various shapes cluttered his fingers, and his nails were painted pale green to match both his eye shadow and the jewel set in the large Celtic cross hanging from his neck. With his hands folded and held just below his chest, this slight, pale young man seemed to float into view while a high school girl and a college-aged woman tried to explain the culture of Christian Goth to two adults.

One of the adults pointed to the elaborately dressed young man and commented that, no offense, but this guy looks, well, not like a guy, and well, that's a problem for me. The college-aged Goth offered: "I look at him and I think, 'He's beautiful.'"

This intra-Christian encounter was one of many fascinating scenes that took place at the Cornerstone Music Festival, probably the largest venue for Christian alternative music (and alternative culture) in the nation. The festival is sponsored by *Cornerstone* magazine, whose masthead challenges readers "to look out the window of biblical reality and break the 'normal Christian' mold with a stance that has cultural relevancy." The magazine is a publication of Jesus People USA (known as JPUSA, and pronounced "ja-poo-za"), based in Chicago. The first Cornerstone festival was held in 1984 with 5,000 participants. In early July, close to 22,000 campers, most of them evangelical Christians, converged on the 579-acre *Cornerstone*-owned campground in western Illinois.

Cornerstone is a strange melange of music, costume and consumerism. For five days a lightly wooded plot of land surrounded by farm fields is transformed into a tent city, complete with fast-food trailers, a grocery store and an art gallery. Musicians perform nearly around the clock at six music tents, and festival participants gather every night at the main stage for four-hour concerts. The festival also features seminars on a variety of hot topics, including pluralism, New Age philosophy, sexuality, "neo-theism" and women's roles in the church. Festivalgoers can even take drawing lessons at Art Rageous workshops.

The campground reminded me of the East Village in New York, where body parts are pierced with rings, bars and chains; skin is painted with tattoos; and hair is dyed all colors imaginable. Plenty of young people also brandished cigarettes—a new trend, I learned, among young evangelicals exercising their "freedom in Christ" to flout the old taboos. Not everyone donned chain and padlock necklaces or lit up, however. There were plenty of clean-cut youth-group types as well. And the families in the RV sites, with their yard torches and makeshift pavilions, brought a suburban feel to this temporary community.

Over a hundred bands were on hand, representing music ranging from folk to ska swing, punk to metal. In a tent featuring hip-hop I ran into Keith, whose braided hair competed with his bushy beard for length. On his right calf was a tattoo of big red Rolling Stones lips. He called himself "just an old hippie trying to spread the gospel," and said he was at the festival mainly for the hip-hop music. He said he and a pastor run a coffeehouse in inner-city St. Louis, and he wanted to make hip-hop contacts. Hip-hop, he hoped, would attract black urban youth, who evidently were not being drawn by other Christian musicians. I left the tent soon after the hip-hoppers started the chant, "Go, Jesus, go, Jesus, go!"

Later in the night I ventured into the "hard music" tent to observe some moshing. This was not watered-down moshing, with people merely bumping against each other in an overcrowded room. The space cleared in the center of the tent looked like a charged field. The moshers threw their bodies into the field and thrashed violently, gaining momentum before hurling themselves to the fringe. The crowd at the edges couldn't always hold them, and when I saw a blur of leather, ripped denim and silver spikes hurtling toward me, I raised my flashlight as a shield. Better bring my own spikes next time.

"Does the gargoyle belong on the cathedral?" This question about the place of the grotesque in the Christian worldview was the theme of Imaginarium, a tent dedicated to the discussion of film and literature. My first night I decided to watch both films that were playing: Todd Browning's *Freaks* (1932) and William Dieterle's *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1939). The discussion that followed touched on monstrosities, the human form and our general fascination with the freakish.

The next day the freaks came out in full force to attend a panel discussion on Goth. On my way to the tent I passed a fellow whose eyes were framed in black diamonds, painted over a white face. He wore a black T-shirt that declared "Jesus loves Marilyn

Manson too." OK. And the point? Is this Christian Goth?

The answer, apparently, is not exactly. I gathered from the panel discussion that for these young adults, being a Goth was simply a "cultural preference" for things sad, quiet and mournful. And of course it entails a liking for Goth music, which embodies that somber mood. Begun as a component of punk rock, Goth music shares similarities with industrial music, with its vocal distortions, and may be seen as a backlash to upbeat and colorful disco. One panelist said the Goth outlook is aligned with the Christian perspective in many ways—like Christianity, Goth culture acknowledges human fallenness and suffering.

One person said that she had been born a Goth, and that it was a comfort to come to a place where Christian Goth was recognized as a possible strategy for evangelism. In fact, the young man who was dressed in the elaborate black costume told me he serves as a missionary in London to its underground community.

Still, unsavory associations due to mainstream stereotyping have their cost. One girl tearfully related how, after the shootings at Columbine High School, where the murderers were identified with Goth-style clothing, her church had shunned her. (The original crosses that were built as memorials for the dead at Columbine had been reassembled at the festival, adding further to its eerie mix of cultural symbols.)

Attracted to its style, proponents of Christian Goth resisted admitting that there might be serious incompatibilities between the cultural props and meanings of Goth (like its bleak posturing and macabre fascination with death) and the ultimate message of Christianity. As with hard-metal moshers—whose violence makes them even more unpalatable—their tendency was to think that inserting the gospel into any musical form redeemed that form for Christian use.

There are precedents, of course, for the Christian use of secular sources. Renaissance composers used popular folk songs as *cantus firmi* for their masses, and Luther adapted familiar drinking songs as hymn tunes. Fin-de-siècle evangelicals employ all styles of popular music and its attendant culture to spread the gospel. But many seem surprisingly uninterested in the relation of form and content, and satisfied merely with reproducing forms of popular culture, however questionable. Like the cathedral gargoyles, whose phantasmagoric appearance still remains a curiosity, the Christian Goths are unsettling forms in the artifice of Christian pop.