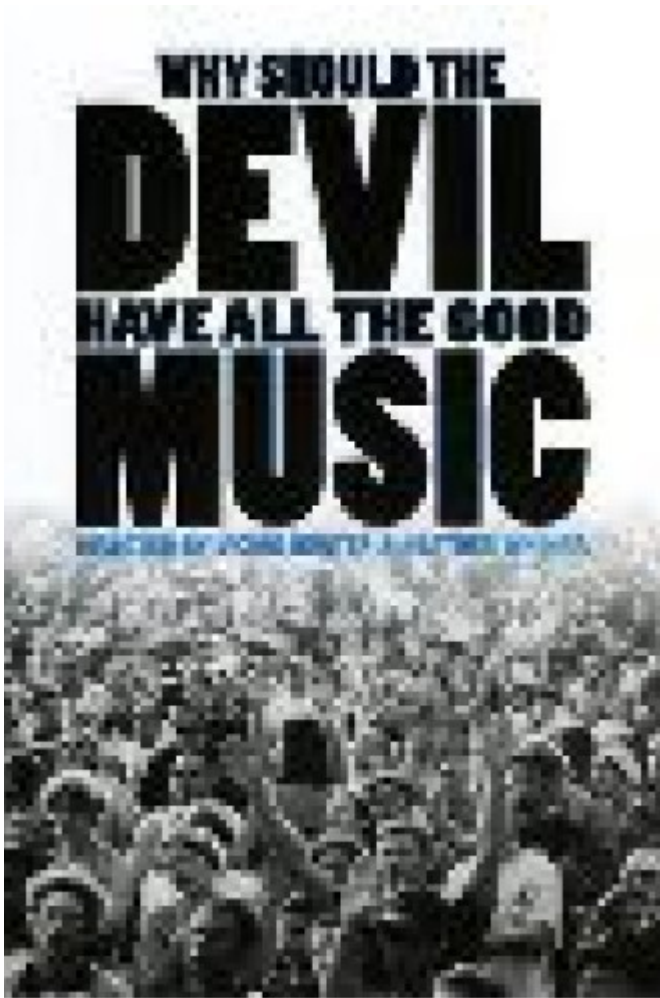


Sound alternatives

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

In Review



Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?

Vickie Hunter, Heather Whinna

Blank Stare/RightRightRight



Grown

Kendall Payne

BHT



Nothing Is Sound

Switchfoot

EMI/Sparrow



Purified

CeCe Winans

Pure Springs Gospel/INO



Jukebox of the Dead

Detholz!
self-released



This Is What We Do

The New Mastersounds

3 on the B



The Mission Bell

Delirious
Sparrow

Imagine you're part of a tandem making your first documentary film. Your experience: zero. In fact, you've never even worked a hand-held videocamera. Your subject matter: the fringes of Christian music. Your own religious identity: atheist.

On the surface, this might sound like a recipe for a cinematic disaster, a mockumentary or some fictitious indie comedy. But it's none of those things. Vickie Hunter and Heather Whinna's *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* (Blank Stare/RightRightRight films, available at www.blankstarefilms.com) is a ragged but earnest documentary that captures the convictions and contradictions behind independent Christian music.

The first-time directors seek neither to proselytize nor to criticize. *Devil* casts a level-headed look at artists who by and large are outsiders—too Christian for mainstream music and too off-the-wall for Christian music executives and fans. The quirky subjects of *Devil* run the gamut from Pedro the Lion (whose latest online demo is titled “The Devil Is Beating His Wife”) to Steve Taylor (who penned the controversial abortion-protest satire “I Blew Up the Clinic Real Good”).

Many of the musicians in the film sport tattoos and play genres that would’ve been unimaginable in Christian music a generation ago—speed metal, death metal, ska, Celtic punk and shoegazer rock among them. And their refusal to toe the conservative line is reflected in the comments of Jim Cooper, guitarist and lead vocalist of the Detholz! (see review below): “If Jesus were alive today and saw what the church is doing, He’d puke. I think He’d be out in gay bars, getting to know gay people.”

The Detholz! attracted the attention of the filmmakers after causing a stir at the Cornerstone Christian music festival in Bushnell, Illinois, where much of *Devil* was shot. With Cooper sporting a pea-green Statue of Liberty costume and his bandmates dressed as communist proletarians in red and olive drab, the group opened its set by singing the North Korean national anthem in Korean—this just hours after Independence Day 2003. The film shows them in a jittery excerpt that would do David Byrne and Talking Heads proud.

An Audience Choice Award winner at the Chicago Underground Film Festival, *Devil* also features Josh Caterer, who made it big in the 1990s as front man for the Capitol Records band Smoking Popes. The Popes were one of modern rock’s biggest names until Caterer found God and broke up his band. The Popes have since reunited (Caterer still maintains his faith); here, he’s seen with his Christian band Duvall. Caterer’s perspective gives the film crucial depth, as he thoughtfully wrestles with what it means to cross from one world to another. He admits sheepishly to throwing out some of his more brash rock CDs after becoming a believer.

But some secular music proved crucial in Caterer’s conversion experience. “Something that was a stepping stone for me was . . . this Willie Nelson disc,” he recalls. “I didn’t even know Willie Nelson was a Christian—and he may not really be one!—but he was singing these songs in all seriousness. And I was a really big Willie Nelson fan. And I found myself having to take Jesus seriously, because Willie Nelson took Jesus very seriously. And so I became open to it.”

Devil also confronts the problems with Christian music—in particular its penchant for placing theological agenda above art, and its focus on mass marketing. Outside voices include producer-engineer Steve Albini (Nirvana, Robert Plant), who argues that Christian musicians hawk the ultimate snake oil: a salve for “the torment of eternal damnation.” Even the musicians admit that much of Christian music exists as third-rate imitations of more established mainstream artists. The members of the speed metal band Living Sacrifice lament that because of their faith, few in the hard-rock world take their musicianship seriously.

For those not familiar with Christian music—particularly its more offbeat varieties—*Devil* might come off as the equivalent of inside baseball. It helps to remember that Hunter and Whinna encountered this world as newcomers, too; they don’t judge or explain so much as document. The glimpse they offer is fascinating and thought-provoking, striking the proper balance between telling and showing. And the live band footage speaks, sings, screams and whispers volumes—especially in the closing moments, when the normally hyper, hilarious ska band Five Iron Frenzy melts into a subdued, selfless moment of worship.

Some new CDs:

Despite earning critical accolades, securing a Lilith Fair tour spot, landing songs in major movies and selling more than 100,000 copies of her 1999 debut album, *Jordan’s Sister*, Kendall Payne was inexplicably dropped by Capitol Records. But with help from actor friend Zachary Levi (who financed this release), Payne is back with a strong, stirring album. Thoughtful lyrically and unafraid to wrestle with doubts and mysteries, she shuttles cleanly between cello-adorned folk and confident, sinewy guitar-rock rhythms. The one constant: Payne’s voice, warm and assertive as a summer wind.

Many Christian music artists proclaim right-leaning views. How refreshing to hear Switchfoot’s Jon Foreman sing on “Politicians”: “I pledge allegiance to a country without borders, without politicians.” The San Diego-based outfit picks up where its double-platinum album, *The Beautiful Letdown*, left off, with a bracing mix of turbo-charged rhythms and Foreman’s world-weary vocals. But *Sound* sometimes tilts a bit too much toward the sheen, with its modern-rock mix of loud guitars and hammering drums creating a play-it-safe vibe.

At many junctures this album employs R&B clichés. It succeeds mainly on the strength of Winans's singing and some fine songs. "Colorful World," with its creamy-dreamy refrain and lyrics, describes everyday outcasts in vivid detail, including the girl who "wears nose rings with weird things floating through her hair." The song joyously preaches tolerance: "Celebrate all our differences/ Instead of building these plastic fences."

Detholz! members met at evangelical Wheaton College, but the Chicago band is nothing like what you might expect. (Think an atomic meltdown of Devo, David Bowie and *Rocky Horror Picture Show* theatrics). Here the band takes eight overplayed pop radio hits and yanks them through the funhouse mirror. How about Lionel Richie's "Dancing on the Ceiling" morphed into a menacing, minor-key boogie worthy of C-3PO? Easily the funniest, most clever rock CD to come from the Windy City in years (available at www.detholz.com).

This outfit from Leeds, England, is a glorious throwback to the days of James Brown and Jimi Hendrix. Speaking of Hendrix, there's a compelling cover of "Ain't No Telling" in which organ and overdriven guitar trade stabs as if engaged in a high-speed freeway race. Elsewhere the full-on boogie blossoms with plucky wah-wah guitar, and shuffling grooves recall the syncopated strut of the Funky Meters. Occasionally the polyrhythmic funk formula wears thin, but mostly the spirited workouts here crackle and cascade with energy aplenty.

This British band has always been smart, drawing comparisons to U2, Radiohead and Blur. With this album the band shoots for added lyrical depth and force. "Our God Reigns," a key-of-D dirge built around spare acoustic guitar, keyboards and thunderous percussion, may be the hardest-hitting piece, tacking issues like abortion and the AIDS pandemic. ("My Chinese take away/ Could pay for someone's drugs.") "Love Is a Miracle" alternates between smoldering, soulful verses and wide-open, gospel-flavored choruses, while "Paint the Town Red" rocks as hard as anything Delirious has ever cut.