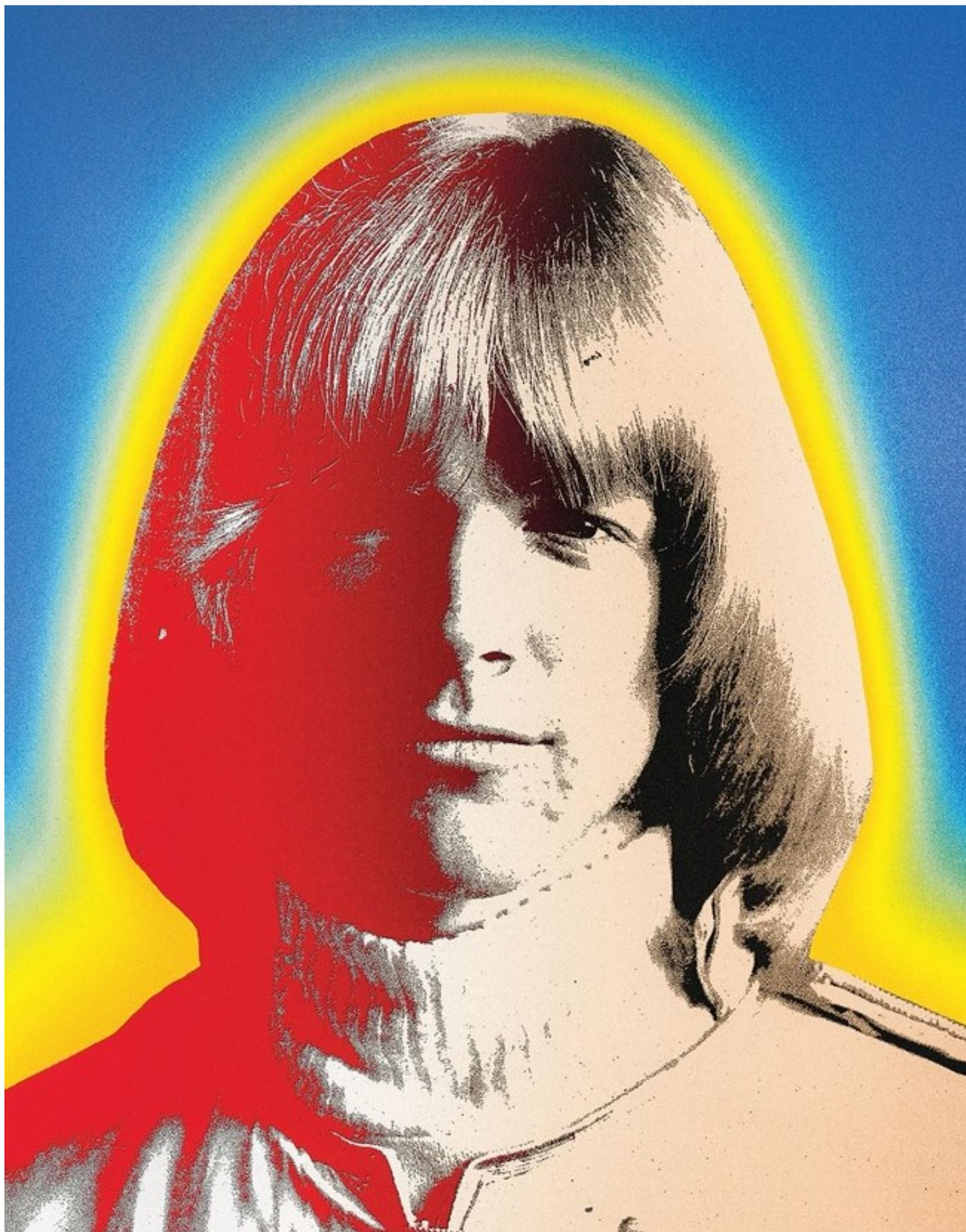


THE UNLIKELY ENDURANCE OF CHRISTIAN ROCK

The genre has been disdained by the church and mocked by secular culture. That just reassured practitioners that they were rebels on a righteous path.

By Kelefa Sanneh



Larry Norman, the founder of Christian rock, never entirely endorsed the genre.

Illustration by Bráulio Amado; photograph by Michael Ochs Archives / Getty

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In 1957, less than a year after the end of the Montgomery bus boycott, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., took a part-time job as an advice columnist. His employer was *Ebony*, and his ambit was broad: race relations, marital problems, professional concerns. In the April, 1958, issue, King was asked to address one of the most polarizing issues of the day: rock music. His correspondent was a churchgoing seventeen-year-old with a musical split personality. “I play gospel music and I play rock ‘n’ roll,” the letter read. Its author wanted to know whether this habit was objectionable.

King’s advice was characteristically firm. Rock and gospel were “totally incompatible,” he explained: “The profound sacred and spiritual meaning of the great music of the church must never be mixed with the transitory quality of rock and roll music.” And he made it clear which he preferred. “The former serves to lift men’s souls to higher levels of reality, and therefore to God,” he wrote. “The latter so often plunges men’s minds into degrading and immoral depths.”

Randall J. Stephens, a religious historian, views the relationship between Christianity and rock and roll as a decades-long argument over American culture, sacred and profane. In “The Devil’s Music,” released last March, Stephens reconsiders the judgments of King and other Christian leaders who viewed rock and roll with alarm. He points out that many pioneering rockers, from Sister Rosetta Tharpe to Jerry Lee Lewis, came out of the Pentecostal Church; for some preachers, he argues, rock and roll was worrisome precisely because its frenetic performances evoked the excesses of Pentecostal worship. In a sermon given in 1957, King, a Baptist, urged his fellow-preachers to move beyond unseemly displays: “We can’t spend all of our time trying to learn how to whoop and holler,” he said. Stephens wants us to think of rock and Christianity not as enemies but as siblings engaged in a family dispute.

Rock’s reputation quickly improved: less than a decade later, King’s protégé Andrew Young declared that rock and roll had done “more for integration than the church.” And by the end of the sixties a small but growing number of believers were helping to invent a style that King might have viewed as a contradiction in terms: Christian rock,

which became a recognizable genre and, in the decades that followed, a thriving industry. Even so, plenty of religious leaders held fast to King's belief in the separation of church and rock. In the eighties, as Christian rock bands like Stryper were filling up arenas, Jimmy Swaggart, the televangelist, published a book called "Religious Rock 'n' Roll: A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing." And, for secular audiences, Christian rock became an easy punch line. In a 1998 episode of "Seinfeld," Elaine borrowed her boyfriend's car and made a horrifying discovery: "All the presets on his radio were Christian rock stations!" The studio audience laughed, and Jerry squinted his disapproval, but George didn't see what the problem was. "I like Christian rock," he said. "It's very positive. It's not like those *real* musicians, who think they're so *cool* and *hip*." A few years later, on "King of the Hill," Hank Hill, the crusty Texan paterfamilias, confronted a guitar-wielding pastor and delivered an unsparing judgment. "You're not making Christianity better," he said. "You're just making rock and roll worse."

For the Christian rockers themselves, this double helping of disdain—from inside and outside the church—only bolstered the sense that they were righteous rebels, following Jesus by challenging both the priestly elite and the dominant culture. Despite decades of mockery, Christian rock has proven remarkably durable, creating a lucrative and sometimes lively cultural ecosystem, which generations of musicians have been happy—or happy enough—to call home. Earlier this year, Dennis Quaid co-starred in a feature film called "I Can Only Imagine," which tells the story of how Bart Millard came to write the ballad of the same name, one of the most beloved Christian rock songs of all time. Most non-churchgoing Americans have likely never heard of the film, the song, or the singer. And yet "I Can Only Imagine," which came out in March, has grossed eighty-three million dollars.

Many historians trace the birth of Christian rock to the release, in 1969, of "Upon This Rock." It was an inventive concept album, by turns fierce and sweet, that was the work of a stubborn visionary named Larry Norman—the founding father of Christian rock. Norman, who died in relative obscurity, in 2008, has often been viewed as a tragic figure: a gifted and quirky musician who inspired a generation while alienating his peers and, at times, his fans. In "Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?," the first biography of Norman, Gregory Alan Thornbury tells a more triumphant story, portraying Norman as a genius and a prophet, clear-eyed in his criticism of what he sometimes called "the apostate church."

By the late sixties, when Norman emerged, the rise of rock had already inspired what Tom Wolfe once called “one of the most extraordinary religious fevers of all time”—the hippie movement, with its eagerness to remake society. Wolfe saw this as a faith-based enterprise, and many of its participants would have agreed; their dominant theology was not atheism but mysticism, in its many forms. (In 1967, one popular evangelist warned young Christians to shun “the gospel of LSD.”) A small band of enterprising pastors, many in California, sought to convince the hippies that Christianity could be every bit as transformative as its more exotic counterparts. Arthur Blessitt, the self-proclaimed Minister of Sunset Strip, mimicked the conspiratorial patter of an eager drug buddy: “If you really want to get turned on, I mean, man, where the trip’s heavy, just pray to Jesus. He’ll turn you on to the ultimate trip.” Blessitt and others found surprising success, setting up storefront ministries that inspired a nationwide wave of Jesus-fuelled coffee shops and Christian group houses, which tended to be communal but not, for obvious reasons, coed. This decentralized revival became known as the Jesus Movement, and its participants as Jesus People—or, less delicately, as Jesus Freaks.

Norman grew up in the Bay Area, and dedicated his life to Jesus when he was five—purely on his own initiative, he later remembered. He discovered a talent for singing and songwriting when he was in high school, and soon joined a local band called People!, although he quit after one marginally successful album. (There were religious differences: most of the other band members were Scientologists.) Norman moved to Los Angeles and made his solo debut with “Upon This Rock,” which attracted a small number of buyers and, in time, a large number of acolytes. Over the next few years, Norman came to seem like less of an outlier, as the Jesus Movement went from a fringe pursuit to a national obsession. Time put a Pop-art picture of Jesus on its cover in 1971 (“THE JESUS REVOLUTION,” it said), and the next year hundreds of thousands of young people gathered in Dallas for Explo ’72, a weeklong revival that was widely described as the Christian Woodstock. In retrospect, the event marked the moment when the Jesus Freaks began to shed their freakiness: Norman was one of the headliners, but so was Billy Graham, the embodiment of mainstream Christianity; President Nixon was eager to attend, but organizers, after some discussion, declined to invite him.

Larry David on Writing “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and Why He Doesn’t Understand “Squirmish”
People

Norman didn’t care for the Jesus People (he disdained the movement’s “commercial tinge”), although, in fairness, he didn’t much care for people in general. “I don’t feel like belonging to anything or anyone,” he once said. Norman’s biographer, Thornbury, is both a religious scholar (he is the former president of the King’s College, a Christian institution in lower Manhattan) and an unabashed fan. In the book, Norman comes across as a charismatic performer and, despite Thornbury’s best efforts, a rather exasperating person—hardly an unusual combination among rock stars. His greatest asset was his voice, which Thornbury describes as “queer”: it was high and imperfect, conveying a tentative spirit that helped soften the certainty of the lyrics. The best-known Larry Norman song is probably “I Wish We’d All Been Ready”:

Two men walking up a hill

One disappears and one’s left
standing still

I wish we’d all been ready

There's no time to change your
mind

The Son has come and you've been
left behind.

In print, the song looks like a stern warning about the Rapture. Norman sang it, though, in a small, spookily calm voice, like a child repeating a terrible nursery rhyme that he couldn't yet comprehend. Norman loved easy, bittersweet melodies, even when his lyrics grew aggrieved or inscrutable. In 1973, he released "So Long Ago the Garden," scandalizing some of his fans by posing shirtless on the cover (some thought they spied pubic hair), and by declaring, in a press release, "I'm not out to convert anyone." The album opened with a lovely and carefree song wrapped around a refrain that invited misinterpretation: "Fly Fly Fly / My baby gets me high." If this was an attempt to charm non-Christian listeners, it failed. But one verse contained a secret message to believers. "Hitch-hike up through Switzerland and drop in at L'Abri," Norman sang, referring to a Christian community founded by the theologian Francis Schaeffer, who was one of his heroes.

Like many rock stars of his generation, Norman was proudly antiestablishment, which meant that the increasing popularity of his chosen field presented something of an existential crisis. By the nineteen-eighties, Norman had grown contemptuous of the Christian music business that had sprung up in his wake. According to industry conventions, Christian bands were expected to eschew profanity and any drug stronger than caffeine. They were also expected to proclaim their faith in Jesus—although the necessary frequency and clarity of these proclamations were the subject of much debate. Norman hated the idea that his faith should dictate or limit his subject matter. (He once said that, because he was a Christian, all of his songs were necessarily Christian songs, no matter what they were about.) In some cases, the contempt was mutual. Thornbury reports that, in the nineties, when a Norman tribute album was arranged, he was so controversial within the industry that some Christian-music stars "had to get permission from their pastors" before they would agree to participate.

Most of the Christian rock stars who emerged in the nineteen-seventies were less contentious. At Explo '72, Norman shared the bill with Love Song, a breezy band that helped codify the soft sound of early Christian rock. Phil Keaggy, the genre's

first and greatest guitar hero, was equally adept at corkscrewing electric solos and careful acoustic fingerpicking. And, in 1974, an independent Christian label called Maranatha! Music released an unassuming but astonishingly influential record called simply “The Praise Album.” It contained twelve gentle, strummy songs, with lyrics mostly taken straight from the Bible. This wasn’t really a Christian rock album at all; it was a modern hymnal, and, in many churches, songs like these helped make traditional hymnals obsolete.

Maranatha! Music was an enterprise of Calvary Chapel, in Orange County, which was led by Chuck Smith, who did as much as anyone to get the Jesus People off the street, literally and figuratively. Smith ministered to bedraggled hippies, whose appearance sometimes shocked his older congregants. (When some worried that the newcomers would ruin the church’s fancy carpet, he said he would rather tear out the carpet than turn away the hippies.) Calvary helped nurture a number of Christian singers, including Marsha Stevens, who wrote “For Those Tears I Died,” a folk song that became a contemporary-Christian favorite. In a recent memoir, Stevens recalls the Jesus Movement with mixed feelings. She writes that women were expected to be “submissive,” both in the church and in her band—Smith appointed one of her male bandmates the leader. Stevens says that her relationship with Calvary disintegrated after she told Smith that she was gay. She writes that he responded coldly, “with conviction and a tinge of condemnation,” and suggested that she simply hadn’t married the right man.

The streetwise aesthetic of the Jesus Movement had always been joined to a firm belief in Biblical inerrancy. As the movement grew more organized, and more church-oriented, pastors figured out that they could attract young people with services that were theologically strict but culturally contemporary: anti sexual revolution, pro denim. (This, more or less, is the ethos of the modern megachurch.) Calvary Chapel grew into an international network of thousands of churches, and so did the Vineyard movement, which is descended from Bible-study groups in California, one of which used to meet in Larry Norman’s living room.

As the Jesus Movement became part of the evangelical mainstream, its soundtrack mellowed further. Christian radio stations, which were proliferating, favored gentle crooners like B. J. Thomas, a pop-country singer, and Evie, a balladeer whose voice and

lyrics hinted at romantic love: “Anybody here want to live forever? / Say, ‘I do.’ ” In 1979, stations began playing “My Father’s Eyes,” a pious ode to good behavior by a precocious teen-ager named Amy Grant. Grant evolved into the first purposively Christian pop star, as well as a stylish, subtle singer-songwriter. (One of her best songs, “1974,” evoked the shivery excitement of her high-school conversion: “We were young, and none of us knew quite what to say / But the feeling moved among us in silence, anyway.”) In 1991, Grant released “Heart in Motion,” which sold millions, making it the most popular Christian pop album of all time—if, that is, you consider it a Christian album at all. It gave the world “Baby, Baby,” a lighthearted and wholly secular love song, which took Grant to the top of the pop chart, forcing some listeners to ask a complicated question: what counts as Christian music?

In gospel music, form and content are joined: the term denotes both a style and a message, leaving no room for theological ambiguity. Likewise, the sound of seventies Christian pop was warm and sweet, designed to reinforce the hopeful spirit of the words. But, in the eighties, many Christian rock bands embraced snarling guitars, which were harder to interpret. Tim LaHaye, who turned prophecies of the Rapture into a series of “Left Behind” movies and books, warned, in 1982, that “the sound and beat of rock” could arouse “fleshly lusts.”

Christian rockers sometimes defended themselves by asking critics to focus on the lyrics, not the music. Eddie DeGarmo was one half of a popular Christian rock duo called DeGarmo & Key, which drew huge crowds in the eighties and early nineties; he also became a powerful Christian music executive. In a new memoir, “Rebel for God,” he gives some advice to aspiring stars. “Christian music is a lyric-based genre,” he writes. “If you’re not passionate about delivering a message, this isn’t the scene for you.” DeGarmo & Key were sometimes accused of being overzealous in this regard: they specialized in songs so lumbering and artless that they resembled parodies (one was called “God Good/Devil Bad”). DeGarmo makes no apologies. “We always tried hard to come up with a title and a song that could end up being the theme to a summer youth camp and plastered on t-shirts everywhere,” he writes. “That was a badge of honor for us.” Stryper was a hair-metal band not known for its light touch: members tossed pocket-size Bibles into the crowd during concerts. In 1986, Stryper released an album called “To Hell with the Devil,” which became the first Christian rock album to go platinum.

The focus on lyrics exacted a cost, because it encouraged listeners and musicians alike to view music as a meaningless delivery system for meaningful words. (“It is the words that make a song sacred,” declared the megachurch pastor Rick Warren. “There are no spiritual tunes.”) One result was the rise of Christian soundalike songs, which sanctified the latest secular styles by adding righteous lyrics. “Jesus Freak,” for example, was a big hit in 1995 for a singing-and-rapping trio called DC Talk, whom DeGarmo discovered. It bore a striking resemblance to Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” except for the lyrics. (“People say I’m strange, does it make me a stranger / That my best friend was born in a manger?”) In an interview from that time, one of the members, TobyMac, explained the group’s strategy. “Nirvana had a big influence on this generation musically, but lyrically it definitely rubs me the wrong way,” he said. “I think people are ready for something that’s a little more hopeful.”

In the margins, some Christian bands found that the obsession with lyrics gave them freedom: they could make pretty much whatever noise they wanted, as long as the words were sufficiently joyful. A Christian punk scene arose in California, where a group called the Altar Boys released an anguished, revved-up album called “Gut Level Music.” Another band, Vengeance Rising, recorded a first-rate thrash-metal album called “Human Sacrifice,” which had a cover that was shocking but, from a Christian point of view, irreproachable: a photograph of a hand on a wooden plank, with a stake driven through the palm. And, starting in the nineties, an innovative Pennsylvania metalcore band called Zao released a series of brutal and mysterious albums that evoked the torment of Hell on earth.

By the aughts, these mutant forms of Christian rock were no longer so obscure. An independent label called Tooth & Nail helped push punk and alternative bands into the Christian mainstream—and sometimes into the non-Christian mainstream, too. The most popular was Underøath, a screaming emo band, which found a place on MTV and helped lead a growing Christian contingent at Warped Tour, a travelling punk festival. Christian rock was growing more popular and less isolated, buoyed by the increasing visibility of the evangelical church. In 2001, *Newsweek* celebrated the genre on its cover, with a headline that resembled an endorsement: “Jesus Rocks!”

Separately, Christianity and rock and roll were at the center of twentieth-century American culture. Why was their combination so often viewed with disdain? One

tempting explanation is a variant of King's old claim: that it is a bad idea to mix rock and roll with Christianity. Greil Marcus, the rock critic, once wrote a brutal review of "Slow Train Coming," one of the albums Bob Dylan released during his Christian period. (In those years, Dylan attended Vineyard Christian Fellowship, the church with roots in Larry Norman's living room.) Marcus accused Dylan of trying to pass along "a prepackaged doctrine he's received from someone else," which he translated as "Jesus is the answer, and if you don't believe it, you're fucked."

Do Christian bands have a propaganda problem? It is certainly true that most Christian rock bands were obliged to follow doctrinal rules. But, in their determination to deliver clear messages, these bands weren't necessarily much different from the many secular bands that wrote protest songs: in the history of rock, furious conviction has been neither rare nor necessarily unhelpful. There is no easy way to distinguish between a musician who spouts "prepackaged doctrine" and one who boldly stands up for what is right.

A greater problem has been what Thornbury, in his Norman biography, mischievously calls "religious economic socialism." Over the years, Christian rock has been generously subsidized, not just by church organizations but also by parents, willing to buy whatever albums and concert tickets might inspire their children to keep the faith. "When it came to art, evangelicals weren't very discriminating," Thornbury writes, and indeed it often seemed as if any halfway competent group of Christian rockers would be awarded a modest record contract and sent out to play concerts for youth groups for as long as they could stand it. Reviews in Christian publications tended to be kind—although not kind enough for some Christian musicians, who, in 1986, published an open letter arguing that "the whole area of reviewing albums and ripping apart one another's offerings unto the Lord is disgraceful." Compared with the greedy, ruthless secular music industry, the Christian music industry has often seemed rather soft, and consequently less effective at turning out good records.

The lousy reputation of Christian rock has also been self-perpetuating, encouraging the best bands to abandon the category—or to avoid ever associating with it in the first place. Few bands are more admired, in the world of Christian rock, than U2, precisely because Bono has spent four decades singing about his Christian faith, and his Christian doubts, without ever being boxed in. And many of the best albums to emerge

from the Christian rock world have been the product of musicians who eventually distanced themselves from it, like Leslie Phillips, a singer-songwriter who renamed herself Sam Phillips and went secular, or *mewithoutYou*, a Philadelphia post-hardcore band that combined Christian teachings with Sufi poetry; each was as restless, in different ways, as Larry Norman.

In a new book called “Rock Gets Religion,” the journalist and producer Mark Joseph writes that, by the time *Newsweek* published that cover story, “Christian rock was giving way to Christians in rock.” In the aughts, the airwaves were full of bands led by Christians: Creed, P.O.D., Evanescence, Daughtry, the Fray, Lifehouse, Skillet, Chevelle, and plenty more. But many of them declined to be labelled “Christian rock.” One of the best examples was Switchfoot, from San Diego, which found success with a song whose refrain had as much, or as little, theological content as listeners wished to hear: “We were meant to live for so much more.” Joseph sees this as a heartening development. For years, he writes, “short-sighted religious businessmen” had been “sentencing artists of faith to cultural obscurity” by marketing them solely to other Christians, creating an insular market that left nonbelievers untouched. In his book, Joseph quotes from an interview with Hayley Williams, from the band Paramore, who has been eager to keep her faith from defining her band. “Fortunately, we’ve never really been associated with the Christian rock scene,” Williams said. “I wouldn’t want to be a part of something so easily pigeonholed.”

Christian rock bands who seek broader audiences are invariably accused of greed. After “I Can Only Imagine” started getting played on secular radio stations, Bart Millard and his band, MercyMe, made a conscious decision not to cross over. “I don’t know how we got into this whole situation in the mainstream industry,” he said, at the time. “But we’re called to be worship leaders.” Joseph thinks that there is also a different kind of professional ambition at work—there are, he says, “market pressures” that induce Christian musicians to make “lyrically obvious ‘worship records.’ ” Within the industry, “worship” is shorthand for music that can be played during services, with the whole congregation singing along. Worship music is descended from songs like the ones that appeared on “The Praise Album,” in 1974, and in the past decade it has become the most important segment of the Christian music industry. Many churchgoers now expect to sing some of the same refrains on Sunday that they hear on Christian radio during the week, and bands know that writing a popular worship song means having an

evergreen hit. Worship music is generally thought to be too theologically specific for the mainstream market, but perhaps those rules are changing. Earlier this year, the pop star Justin Bieber posted a video on Instagram of himself singing “Reckless Love,” by Cory Asbury, which is one of the biggest and most memorable worship songs of the past few years.

In 1972, when Larry Norman was still feeling optimistic about his musical career, he set out on a tour of Great Britain. Thornbury writes that he was met with curiosity and, in some cases, grudging respect. He quotes a British reviewer who wrote, “If, like me, you see Christianity as a reluctantly but irrevocably dying mythology, Larry Norman is still worth hearing for his music and himself.” What seemed irrevocable in 1972 may seem less so now—in fact, if Christian rock now seems less vibrant than it once did, that may say more about rock and roll than about Christianity. Mainstream rock is today a rather moribund genre. An ambitious pastor looking to minister to the nation’s youth would surely turn, instead, to hip-hop. Indeed, there are plenty of Christian rappers, including Lecrae, whose lyrics and professional choices attract the kind of controversy that Norman’s once did. His most recent album conjures up the image of a sanctified dope house; it is called “Let the Trap Say Amen.”

And yet, even now, Christian rock is all around us. On *Billboard’s* list of the twenty most popular rock songs of 2017, fully half of them were by bands whose members have espoused the Christian faith. This has something to do with a phenomenon that would have been hard to imagine in 1969: two of the country’s top rock acts, the Killers and Imagine Dragons, are led by Mormons. It also has something to do with the fact that faith no longer seems so alien to popular music—ours is an era when plenty of artists, not just religious ones, aim to send inspirational messages. (Think of “Praying,” the gospel-powered Kesha song about resilience and recovery.) This has made Christian bands harder to ignore, and at times harder to identify. Depending on your perspective, this could mean that Christian rock has triumphed or that it has gone soft. Either way, the genre endures, no longer preaching to the converted—and, sometimes, no longer preaching at all. ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the September 24, 2018, issue, with the headline “True Believers.”



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