

Christian music expands beyond traditional audience

■ GROWTH: Sales have increased 290 percent since 1985, making the industry hard to ignore

By Ashley Bach

Student Activities Reporter

When Amy Grant sang "Baby, Baby" on MTV in 1991, it was one of the first glimpses of Christian music the general public ever had.

Five years later, the contemporary Christian music industry has boomed, appealing not only to its traditional audience, but to music listeners in general.

While the music business has lagged in the last decade, gospel music, which includes everything from worship songs to heavy metal, has seen dramatic sales improvements since the mid-1980s, according to a poll of 76 gospel labels.

Total sales have jumped 290 percent since 1985, mostly from Christian bookstores. However, sales in the general marketplace have jumped to 21 percent in 1994 from 8 percent three years earlier.

Thomas Hamann, sales manager of Tree of Life bookstore in Eugene, said the secular music industry is finding it hard to ignore these numbers.

"[Gospel] is the fastest growing music in America," he said. "The non-Christian world is taking notice of that."

Indeed, alternative groups like Jars of Clay, which recently hit the Billboard Top 20 Singles chart, are signing with major labels like Silvertone Records. In turn, they are being marketed to a mainstream audience.

"We have music that everyone will listen to because it's good music," Hamann said.

The quality of Christian music is rapidly catching up to its mainstream counterparts after years of dwelling in its own world, Hamann said.

"People would listen to Christian music just because it was Christian," he said. "Now, the skill level is improving."

But while Christian music expands in quality and audience, many in the industry say commercial success needs to be approached with caution.

Motivations for "crossing-over" to the mainstream industry can



Black Eyed Scea, with a similar sound to the Gin Blossoms and Toad the Wet Sprocket, will be in the EMU Ballroom tonight at 7 p.m. They are just one of many Christian groups who have moved away from the traditional sound of their industry.

vary from edifying an audience with wholesome entertainment to a money-making venture. It is the latter that has some people concerned.

"It's easy to condemn someone who is primarily looking for more money," said one group's publicist.

Desiring a larger audience is not wrong for Christian artists, however, said Bruce Brown, online editor for CCM magazine, the primary industry publication.

"Any entertainer, Christian or not, by definition of their job, wants as many people as possible to hear [his or her] music," Brown said.

"But generally speaking, most Christian entertainers will not resort to the outlandish behavior of their secular counterparts to sell more albums."

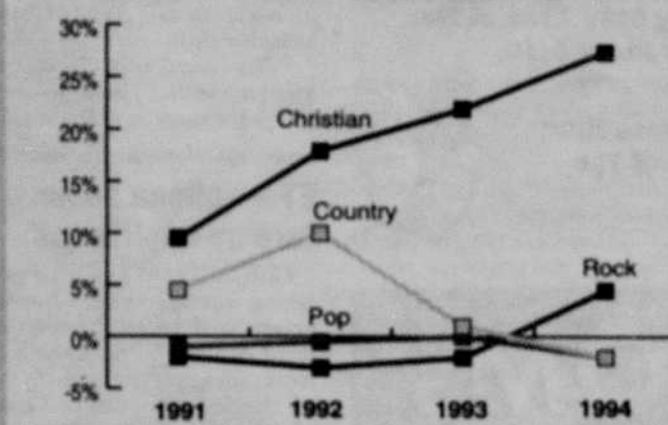
Even if most Christian performers won't smash their guitars into speakers or strut around stage half-naked, they do have goals. And proclaiming their faith is often a major issue.

"Outreach is a part of the life of anyone who considers himself to be a believer, not just Christian musicians," Brown said. "Some musicians feel more compelled to make the gospel message a part of their performances than others, but that does not make one band's presentation any less valid than another's."

Regardless of whether it is a

CHRISTIAN MUSIC ON THE RISE

Yearly growth of various types of music:



SOURCE: GMA RECORD INDUSTRY SURVEY & RIAA

DENNIS BOLT/Emerald

band's mission to preach, they do want to reach an audience. And by using their own type of music, specific groups can be targeted.

Jars of Clay and the grunge/rap group DC Talk have recently been able to target young people with a modern rock sound.

And smaller groups like Black Eyed Scea, Seven Day Jesus and Sometime Sunday, who are all coming to the EMU Ballroom tonight at 7 p.m., have adopted an alternative rock sound while maintaining the same message.

While many argue the alternative sound has no place in Christian music, most industry leaders say it's just an indicator of the

times, where Christian music is adapting to all genres.

"I believe there is a place for Christian alternative as long as their focus is on Jesus, and they're putting him first," said Dave Kelly, programming director for KLOV, a Portland-based radio network.

But regardless of its motivations, the Christian music industry is finally being recognized for musical integrity, not just its beliefs.

"There's nothing being done in the secular market that can't be done by the Christian market," Hamann said. "There are no limits."

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