

REBORN TO BE WILD

GOD ROCKS



Holy rock and rollers keep the faith and gain fans.

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ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW MINSEN, TEXAS TECH U.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PATTY MASTEN (AUDIO ADRENALINE AND DC TALKS), JASON PAUL ARMSTRONG, SPRING ARBOR COLLEGE, MICH. (REBECCA ST. JAMES) AND SILVERTONE RECORDS (JARS OF CLAY)

IT WAS A NORMAL DAY IN THE '80s when Chrissy*, then attending a junior high in Fresno, Calif., came home to find her shrine to Depeche Mode missing. When she went looking for an answer, she found her mother burning posters and magazine clippings and shredding her cassettes.

Chrissy's mother was tired of the gloom-and-doom vision of David Gahan and the other DM boys and how it was affecting her daughter's attitude. She gave Chrissy an ultimatum: Christian music or no music at all.

What was a mod-rock fan to do with a musical genre dominated by the bubbly pop of Amy Grant and the Bible-tossing, big-hair metal band Stryper?

Today the decision wouldn't be so tough. Contemporary Christian music (CCM) has grown into something of an empire, with bands in every category, from rap and pop to alternative and country, to please concerned adults and avid music fans alike.

And it was good

LIKE MAINSTREAM MUSIC, BUT IT DOESN'T compare to really good Christian bands," says Tanya Francis, a junior at Western Washington U. "Christian music is a spiritual strengthening as well as entertainment. The Lord is worshipped in many ways, and the music is reaching out to believers on their level."

By the looks of it, the God Squad is preaching to the converted and turning CCM into a multi-million-dollar industry. Hundreds of artists record thousands of CDs on dozens of religious labels for millions of passionate fans who attend a gazillion concerts a year. Bands are no longer cheap knock-offs of the secular industry's best offerings — they're groups that rise above sonically, using the same budgets, producers and video directors as the Gin Blossoms or Nine Inch Nails.

The self-sufficient world of God rock boasts its own cable network, Z Music Television, and record clubs like Word Direct. Fans can catch the latest happenings in glossy mags like *CCM* and *Release*. Some 700 stores carry the Truth clothing line — rave chic for the divinely inspired. Students at Greenville College, Ill., can take classes on the subject. Heck, CCM even has its own Jesuspaloozas, like Creation,

DC/LA, Jesus Northwest and Cornerstone.

"The mainstream world wasn't very accepting of early Christian artists," says Troy Vest, EMI Christian Music Group manager of field sales and marketing. "The logic was if they were Christian, they couldn't be real rock and roll artists. So it developed as a subculture, taking care of its own."

Most of the force behind the movement stems from the Bible Belt, whose epicenter is in Nashville. Mom-and-pop bookstores have transformed into the religious equivalent of Tower Records, shelving Michael W. Smith's latest LP next to icon candles and the Jonah-and-whale play sets. Churches and Christian colleges have become scouring grounds for talent scouts looking for the next big holy thing.

Dawn of a new era

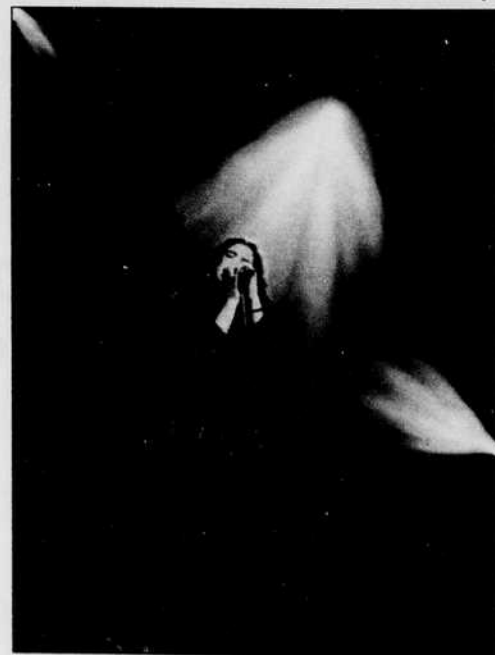
FOR YEARS, THE GENRE EXISTED IN ITS vertically integrated arena virtually ignored by general markets but happy to play in the fields of the Lord to dedicated believers. Then suddenly, a charismatic song about Noah and his ark called "Flood" made heavy rotation on the nation's top alternative radio stations, and Jars of Clay became overnight sensations.

"We never made a conscious decision to cross over," says Jars guitarist Matt Odmark. "We never expected anyone but the contemporary Christian market to be interested. But it was a pleasant surprise. What a gift to make music likable enough to challenge mindsets and build bridges between two groups who don't normally communicate."

Insiders understood the new attention paid to CCM was a long time coming. Perhaps the biggest break came when SoundScan — the market-research company that tallies weekly music sales — was installed in religious bookstores in 1995, giving Christian bands a prayer at charting. When dc Talk's *Jesus Freak* sold 86,000 copies its first week — beating recent chart debuts by De La Soul, Neil Young and Beck — money-hungry, major-label execs discovered a potent and relatively untapped audience.

"I don't think the general industry ever realized there was such a captive audience looking for a positive message in music," *CCM* managing editor April Heffner says. "Also, the bands aren't just trying to sell the Bible put to music anymore. They are more focused on the music and not caught in religious clichés."

The concern to be a valued musician as well as a minister has also had a major influence on how the genre is perceived.



Jagged little pilgrimage for Rebecca St. James.