

# The Forgotten History of Christian Rock: Part One

## Introduction by Michael Lytle

When scanning the FM radio dial in any U.S. city you come across a wide variety of stations. In my city, if I want to hear oldies from the 50s and 60s I have a couple options. I can also listen to classic rock from the 70s, modern rock, alternative/indie rock, top 40 pop and hip-hop, and of course a variety of country options. If I am feeling particularly adventurous, I can check out mix stations that play popular songs from the last four or five decades.

If I want to listen to Christian music I have several stations to choose from as well. Unfortunately, they all basically play the same songs over again and their entire catalog seems to be chosen from music released in the last six to twelve months. It's as if there is a deliberate attempt to pretend that Christian music did not exist before last year. There also seems to be a mandate to play a very limited number of artists who for the most part play the same generic style of pop worship music. These stations are very proud of the fact that their music is uplifting, upbeat, positive, encouraging, and safe for the whole family. Just don't look for anything challenging, convicting, original, or thought-provoking because those qualities might alienate some of their more easily offended listeners.

Why do Christian radio stations avoid anything challenging? Why do they gravitate to easy and safe music? And more importantly, why do Christian radio stations and even Christian music listeners want to ignore their history? Regardless of whether you are a fan of the music that continues to be released in the Christian Rock or CCM genres, it is critical to recognize that there is plenty of great

Christian music that has been made over the last several decades. Unfortunately, nearly all this music has been forgotten or ignored.

We want to do our part to shed some light on this overlooked music. We decided the best way to do that is a series of short articles spotlighting different time periods and styles of Christian rock music. We are including a Spotify playlist with each article featuring some of the music from each era. These playlists are by no means exhaustive. While Spotify has a vast library of albums and songs they don't have everything we would have wanted to include. We hope you enjoy reading these as much as we enjoyed writing them. Without further ado, we present part one of The Forgotten History of Christian Rock.

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## **Part One:**

***Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* by David Lytle**

### **The 1960s through late 1970s**

Rock 'n' Roll was rebellion—rebellion from social conformity, rebellion from moral standards, rebellion from the church. Sure artists like Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Chuck Berry infused blues with the sounds of both black and southern gospel, but the outcome was far from the music of the sanctuary. It was the music of the night and the nightclub. As the rebels of the 1950s gave way to the hippies of the 1960s, this rebellion became increasingly clear.

Rock 'n' Roll was sinful. Both the church and the artist agreed. It was rhythmic, sexual, and broke every tradition. Teens gyrated and shouted, while fundamentalist preachers fumed. When John Lennon contrasted the popularity of the Beatles with that of Jesus he did more than make an observation—he drew battle lines. It's no surprise that this same man later found it so easy to imagine a world where there

is no heaven. It was a world Christians found unimaginable.

More importantly, Rock 'n' Roll was the soul of a generation. What a generation it was! Their parents had grown up during the Great Depression and sacrificed mental and physical health to defeat the war machines of Germany and Japan. They were coming of age in the suburbs that sprouted in the soil of this post-war economic boom. The older the baby boomers got the more it became clear that they were not their parents. Their music, more than anything, was what made them different.

In this context, a handful of young people experimented with the idea of Rock 'n' Roll that was about Jesus. This first generation of Christian rockers faced a serious dilemma—the dilemma of existence. How could rock music even be Christian? How could a Christian play rock? For most churches, it was easy to dismiss rock as sinful, but there was a minority who understood that Rock n' Roll was the heart language of the new generation. They understood that rebellion from some of their parents' values (namely materialism and racial segregation) could be virtuous. They understood that Jesus transcended cultural expression. They were the Jesus Movement.

Some have tried to locate the origin of the movement to one church, like Chuck Smith's Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, CA, or one artist, like Larry Norman. Yet, the origins of Jesus Rock, like the origins of Rock 'n' Roll, are much more difficult to pin down. All over the Country musicians were melding the message of Jesus with the music of the times. Although a minority, churches in various parts of the country encouraged Christians to redeem Rock 'n' Roll. Likewise, many artists would forsake a lifestyle of sexual promiscuity and drugs for a radical relationship with Jesus Christ. They were known as Jesus Freaks. Their movement: the Jesus Movement. Their music: Jesus Music. Elton John even sang about them. They were Christian Hippies. Their message was about salvation, but their music would still rock.

Well, it would sort of rock. The fact remains that much of the Christian Rock music of the 1960s was never recorded. Recording costs were prohibitive and quality was low. Low quality was especially a problem for the heavier music of the late 60s. No matter, folk music was where it was at anyway. This was the era of Bob Dylan, Neil Young, and David Crosby. Much of the memorable Christian Rock from this era reflects these influences. Love Song, Sweet Comfort Band, 2nd Chapter of Acts, Randy Stonehill, and Larry Norman are just a few examples.

Speaking of Larry Norman. Norman is to Christian Rock what Elvis Presley is to Rock n' Roll. He wasn't the first but it is impossible to tell the story without him. He, more than anyone, is associated with the origins of Christian rock. His "Why should the Devil Have All the Good Music?" attempted to reconcile the dilemma of Christianity and Rock. His "Sweet Song of Salvation" became the anthem of the Jesus Movement and his "Great American Novel" is a scathing challenge to American values in the age of the space race in the tradition of Bob Dylan.

By the mid-1970s folk-based Christian music was well established and even accepted in some circles. Rock n' Roll, however, had gotten edgier. It was time for Christian Rock to really rock. It was time for Petra and the Resurrection Band. These bands attempted to preach the gospel with the blues-rock of the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin. Both had remarkably long careers and while their styles changed with the times, they consistently made their music about the gospel of Jesus. Petra would go on to make their name synonymous with Christian Rock throughout the 80s and 90s. They would also continue to rock.

The first generation of Christian Rockers faced opposition from all angles. They were scorned by the mainstream because of their commitment to Jesus and their denunciation of drugs and illicit sex. They were rebuked by much of the Church for

even trying to redeem the music of the world. Still, they kept on message. They focused mostly on salvation and the change brought by Jesus. As can be seen in the playlist, there also seems to be a significant interest in eschatology, which was apparently brought about by the fear of the atomic bomb.

The desire to redeem Rock n' Roll made it necessary to create a musical subgenre in which the lyrics set Christian Rock apart from "secular." While this created a false dichotomy between the sacred and the secular that Christian artists still face today, their singular focus on Jesus made their movement a success. Thousands came to a saving faith through the Jesus Movement. Today the instruments and rhythms of Rock can be heard in the majority of churches across the country.

This is most certainly an epoch on the history of the Christian church worth noting. For those Christians who enjoy rock music, this is your story. We hope you enjoy this less-than-exhaustive playlist. Sadly, due to the age of these recordings, and other issues, many great songs and artists are not available on Spotify. We did the best we could with what we had available. Please, seek out these trailblazing artists and bands we highlighted above. We also hope you leave your comments and share this series of articles. Let's not forget our past.