

The Forgotten History of Christian Rock: Part Two

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. Sadly, it might prove difficult to find music that is challenging, convicting, original, or thought-provoking because those qualities might alienate some of their more easily offended listeners.

Why do Christian radio stations seem to avoid anything challenging? Why do they often 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. In [Part One](#) we covered music from the 1960s and 1970s. This article will focus on popular Christian rock of the 1980s and early 1990s. We are including a Spotify playlist that features songs from 1982-1993. This playlist is 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. We give you Part Two of *The Forgotten History of Christian Rock*.

Part Two:

***Youth Pastor Approved* by Phill Lytle**

The 1980s through the early 1990s

The hair was long and flowing. The clothes were bright and garish, with neon, pastels, and spandex making frequent appearances. The music was big and bold – loud drums, big vocals, epic guitars, and keyboard and synth liberally sprinkled in for good measure. The early days of trailblazing and rebellion were gone. The banner-bearers of creativity and boundary-pushing were operating under the radar. The music that captured and defined the zeitgeist of the Christian rock scene in the 80s was unapologetically religious and unambiguously mainstream. It was safe rock and roll yet with enough edge and bite that it retained an element of danger and

the allure of non-conformity. For the cool youth pastor, it was a dream come true.

As seen in [Part One](#), the 60s and 70s had the passionate trailblazers Larry Norman and Keith Green. In Part Three, we will talk about the underground Christian music scene with counter-cultural geniuses like The Call, The Choir, and the 77s. While those bands and many others like them were carving their paths by different means, the focal point of Christian Rock was happening out in the open for all the world to see. Bands like Petra and Stryper routinely sold out arenas that had previously been considered out of reach. Bands were selling hundreds of thousands and in some cases, even millions of records, getting serious radio airplay on traditional Christian radio stations and were no longer looked at as pariahs by the church as a whole.

And their music made clear that the union of rock and roll and Christian ministry was the formula that worked. Most of the popular bands of this generation were overtly religious, eschewing subtlety in favor of on-the-nose messaging. This is not a criticism per se, simply an observation about the fundamental truth of the bands that reached the highest popularity during this era. They proclaimed Jesus, the Bible, and the Christian faith with no fear, no hesitation, and no reservations. To some, it did not represent real life in all its ugliness and complications. But to many, this music was a lightning rod for their faith – a boisterous and encouraging reinforcement for their spiritual journey.

This era produced some of the longest-lived artists and bands in Christian music history. Degarmo and Key. Mylon and Broken Heart. White Heart. It was a time that saw Christian bands like Idle Cure and Allies continue down the path forged by the godfathers of the genre. These and many more were rock and roll enough for young people to flock to in droves, while still maintaining a sense of spiritual steadfastness that made them feel safer than anything the world had to offer.

To be clear, the bands that thrived in this era did not do so with complete acceptance by the church. There were still many that attacked and criticized the bands for their hair, their attire, and their music. They were lambasted from the pulpit by more than one nationally televised preacher.[1. Jimmy Swaggart even wrote a [book](#) about it. We are linking it for educational purposes only.] While their path was easier than the generation prior, they still did much to smooth the road for the following generations of Christian musicians. They took the slings and arrows of an unwieldy and unaccepting group of believers, and they kept on moving, creating, and performing. We do well to remember the contributions during this era. Our Church and musical heritage demand as much.

Enjoy this playlist that will serve as a quick snapshot of the sounds and the styles of the most popular Christian bands of this era. In particular, pay special attention to the musicianship and artistry at play in many of these songs – something that seems to be missing from much of the current Christian music scene. Finally, we hope you will allow one minor indulgence. We have included a couple of songs by Rich Mullins on this playlist even though we realize he does not exactly fit the profile of the bands and artists we covered in the article. We just strongly believe that his music deserves to be remembered and this playlist was the best fit.

Editor's Note: Part Three will be published on February 5th.