

The Forgotten History of Christian Rock: Part Five

Welcome to *The Forgotten History of Christian Rock*.

This is Part Five of a five part series exploring the history of Christian Rock and Roll Music.

To read Part One of the series focusing on the pioneers of the movement in the 1960s and 1970s click [here](#).

To read Part Two where we looked at the popular rock bands of the 1980s and early 1990s click [here](#).

To read Part Three covering the visionary bands of the 1980s and early 1990s click [here](#).

To read Part Four covering the music of the late 1990s through the early 2000s, click [here](#).

To read our intro where we explain some of the reasons we wanted to do this series click [here](#).

Thank you so much for reading. Please feel free to comment below.

Part Five:

Where Do We Go From Here? by Phill Lytle

The mid/late 2000s through present

What has been the point of this series? Why have we spent the past month writing over 4,000 words and creating playlists with hundreds of songs?

To remember.

It really is that simple. As our scope has been laser-focused on the rock music genre, we realize that this leaves many artists unexplored. Many great artists that risk being forgotten just as much as the bands we have covered. There is a whole other series that needs to be written about those wonderful bands, singers, and performers in Christian music history that didn't quite fit into what we were doing. Perhaps one day, we will tackle that topic. For now, we appreciate all the comments, questions, and suggestions we have received as we have released each new installment in this series. Our hope is that we, at the bare minimum, started a conversation. For reasons we will never understand, the Christian music world is seemingly the only one that actively forgets its history. That needs to stop. Based on the massive reaction we received from this series, it is clear there are many others who feel the same way.

That leads us to our next steps. Where do we go from here? Instead of writing another 1,000 words about the Christian bands and artists that are currently making what we consider to be the best music, we would rather let their music speak for itself. We would also like to invite you to join us by telling us about your favorite artists that don't quite fit the CCM mold. We all know the *Hillsongs*, the *Casting Crowns*, the *Toby Macs* of the world. We want to move right outside of that space and show you a world of music created by artists, poets, and visionaries that will challenge and inspire. Artists like *Andrew Peterson*, *John Mark McMillan*, *Josh Garrels*, and many more. These artists carry the banner first picked up by *Keith Green*, *Petra*, *The 77's*, and *The Call*. They carry on the legacy of excellence, artistry, and creativity. Let us do our best to not overlook this amazing music simply because it does not get played on the local FM station.

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Part Four:

The Road Less Traveled by Michael Lytle

The late 90's to the early 2000's

The late 1990s and early 2000s were a pivotal time in Christian rock and roll music. While it may not have been

obvious or even a conscious choice there was a battle going on for where Christian music would go in the future. On one hand, some of the more creative and critically acclaimed artists like *Jars of Clay*, *Sixpence None the Richer*, and *Switchfoot* were also the artists that were selling the most records. This was not necessarily true in the 1980s where critical acclaim and commercial success did not always seem to go hand in hand. The rise of independent record labels like Tooth and Nail/BEC and Five Minute Walk/Sarabellum propelled forward artists like *Dimestore Prophets*, *Dryve*, *Starflyer 59*, and *Plankeye* who were blazing their own trails and not simply following what was popular in secular music. These labels also were reaching a younger audience which the big names of the 80s were starting to struggle with.

At the same time, the rise of modern pop/worship music was starting to gain momentum. If *Petra* and their 1989 album *Petra Praise: The Rock Cries Out* was the John Wycliffe of this new praise and worship music then *Delirious?* was its Martin Luther. (Under this analogy *Hillsong* would be Zwingli.) The boys from across the pond created the blueprint that is still being followed, for better or worse, to this day.

While we here at REO are certainly very much in favor of singing praises to and worshiping our creator, the focus from record labels and radio stations on "worship" music was not all positive. Lyrics that dealt with personal struggles, social issues, family dynamics, and life, in general, were quickly jettisoned in favor of songs that addressed God directly. Again, singing songs to God is not a bad thing, but we lost something along the way when other types of songs were discarded. Today we rarely, if ever, hear songs like *All Star United's* satirical *La La Land*, which took aim at the health, wealth, prosperity gospel movement. It is more difficult to find voices like Steve Hindalong of *The Choir* acknowledging the strain a cross-country move from Los Angeles to Nashville had put in his marriage in *Never More True*. We moved away from

bands like *Plankeye* writing about their band breaking up and the uncertainty it created in *Goodbye*. Radio forgot artists like *The Waiting*, who drew inspiration from the opening paragraph of Melville's *Moby-Dick* to write about the Old Testament wanderings of God's chosen people in the song *Israel*.

If you go to a Christian bookstore or listen to Christian radio today it is easy to see who won the battle. Modern worship music dominates the landscape while the more creative artists are once again going underground and using alternative methods to get their message to the public. We will continue this discussion in part five of our series.

The goal of the following playlist is to highlight some of the artists that we feel raised the bar of creativity and originality for Christian rock and roll music during the late 1990s and early 2000s. We realize that many of these artists would have cringed at being labeled a "Christian band". They would have preferred to be called a rock band that happened to be made up of people who were Christians. It may be hard to believe now, but this distinction really was a big deal to some during the time period covered in this article and playlist. While it might make for an interesting article at some point in time this is not that article. We tried to primarily highlight artists who either never got their due even at that time or who may have been popular then, but have fallen off the radar since. All songs on this playlist were released between 1994 and 2005. As always, there are other songs we would have included if they were available on Spotify. We have now put together four playlists for this series of articles. We expected the playlists that featured more recent music would be easier to put together than those featuring music from several decades ago. This was not really the case. Many great artists from the 1990s and early 2000s are not on Spotify. Some of our favorites that are missing include *Dimestore Prophets*, *The Listening*, *Reflescent Tide*,

and *Room Full of Walters*.

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Part Three:

The Underground Groundbreakers by Phill Lytle

The early 80's through the early 90's

There were no platinum records. There were no arenas filled to capacity. And unless your local Christian station was unusually "out of the box", you rarely heard this music played on the radio. Yet to many, if you were to pinpoint an era of music that justifies the existence of Christian rock, this would be it. Throughout the 80's and into the early 90's, a group of singers, poets, storytellers, and artists reshaped how we experienced "Christian" music. They turned it on its head and opened up a new world to believers, music lovers, and spiritual seekers. It was the time of the underground groundbreakers.

In part two we examined the bands that had major success and popularity during the 80's and early 90's. Bands like *Petra*, *Whiteheart*, and *DeGarmo and Key*. While those bands were playing in front of arenas full of youth groups, churches, and believers, there was another movement happening just outside of the Christian mainstream. Out there, bands like *The Call*, *Daniel Amos*, *The Prayer Chain*, and many others were singing about broken relationships, marriage problems, politics, and doubts. Out there, their songs were in turn angry and frustrated, joyous and hopeful, pointed and prophetic. The music was enigmatic – less definable. It was passionate, messy, and full-to-bursting with life. They avoided the pop rock sounds of their more accepted contemporaries, choosing instead to blaze their trails with styles and sounds all their own.

This era of music produced some of the most critically acclaimed music in the history of Christian rock. Many of the albums that released during this time frame are still considered some of the best Christian releases of all time. *Circle Slide* by *The Choir*. *Sticks and Stones* by *the 77's*. *Reconciled* by *The Call*. These and more pushed boundaries and expanded what was believed possible for "Christian" music

at that time.

Their music was never easy. Whether it was Steve Taylor singing satirically about a deranged ice-cream delivery man blowing up an abortion clinic to preserve his livelihood, or *The Choir* wrestling with the grief of a miscarriage, these bands made their fans grapple with big ideas and complicated emotional reactions. In some ways, they courted controversy, not to get the spotlight as much as to shock their listeners out of their comfort and stagnation.

At every turn, it seemed like these bands could not catch their big break. In a perfect world, many of them would be household names – their music was that good. That is not to suggest that these bands did not have any influence on future generations of musicians and creators. Members of these bands went on to form successful record companies that gave Christian music one of its biggest bands in *Jars of Clay*. They went on to produce albums for much more successful bands like *Sixpence None the Richer* and *The Newsboys*. They eventually wrote and created songs that are sung in worship services all over the world like *God of Wonders*. No doubt, their musical legacy inspired many bands that are being played on the radio today. While few of them ever achieved the kind of success and recognition they deserved at the time, our musical heritage would be much poorer without their contributions.

As stated before, the playlist below is merely a selection of some of the best music in this era. It is meant to capture the sound and the spirit of this pivotal time in Christian music. Please, take some time to listen and appreciate the music that laid the groundwork and played such a monumental role in our history.

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.

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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.

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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.

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.

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