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Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?
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Newsweek's recent feature story on Christian music, "Jesus Rocks!" (July 16 issue) was informative, but surprisingly lacking in perspective. While it gushed about rap, roots-rock and metal music being played by bands with overtly Christian messages, the tone was breathless, as if the writer couldn't really believe it. The prose read as if the Christian rock scene was somehow new, only recently-created so that record companies could cash in. After all, we are informed, the annual market here is nearly three-quarters of a billion dollars and for every 10 country albums sold, "seven Christian CDS fly off the shelf."

But Christians have been playing rock and roll for as long as rock has been in existence. One branch of early rock even grew out of the gospel tradition of southern singers -- Elvis was known to relax by singing hymns. When rock music was feeding the youth rebellion of the 1960s, young Christians rebelled right along with them with more uplifting lyrics. The Christian rocker Larry Norman was known for the song where he screams out the title line, "Why should the devil have all the good music?" in response to those who said rock and roll was from the devil.

And it was not just Christian music that was being consumed by Christian youth. Non-Christians were singing such songs, too. High school and college-age Christian youth groups in the 1970s were singing Bob Dylan's "Blowing in the Wind," the Doobie Brothers' "Jesus is Just All Right with Me," and other songs like Barry McGuire's "Eve of Destruction," and Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky." And who can forget George Harrison's "My Sweet Lord," often lustily sung by Christian youth, despite its Hindu focus on Krishna. One session of a youth Bible study even focused on the Christian meaning of Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven."

But surely Newsweek's suggestion that selling to the Christian-oriented populace is suddenly big business is an important insight. Citing the 28.8 million copies of novels sold in the Left Behind

series (now consisting of more than six volumes), Newsweek hypes the "gigantic cathedral of Christian entertainment." But this too ignores the past. A 1975 copy of Hal Lindsey's 1970 book "The Late Great Planet Earth" announces that it has sold 11 million copies, and that's just one book, listed under non-fiction at that! Publishers have long known there was money in Christian books. Why else would the prestigious Oxford University Press have purchased the leading seller of Christian books, Zondervan Press, a no-holds-barred evangelical publishing house?

What is new in these concerts is the organization. Kids (and their parents) come together in buses chartered by churches. The concerts themselves are organized as part of a mass-marketing campaign, replicating the same concert by the same collection of artists in 10-20 venues.

The point is, Christians like to be entertained. They follow the trends, in music and elsewhere, and feel snubbed when they cannot access them. The main difference between Christian entertainment and mainstream entertainment is the reliability of its moral values and ethical messages. As mainstream TV, movies and music have increased the amount of sexual innuendo and activities, bad language, questionable morals, and violence, Christians have turned to other sources of entertainment. It is good to realize that those sources have always been there; it's just that the media did not know where to look.