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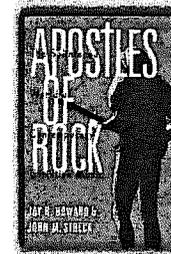
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Ministry Resources

*REVIEW ARTICLE*



*APOSTLES OF ROCK: THE SPLINTERED  
WORLD OF CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN  
MUSIC*

Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck  
Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Ken-  
tucky Press (1999)  
312 pages, cloth, \$29.95

For those readers who find themselves perplexed or even dismayed by the contemporary Christian music (CCM) industry but also repelled by perhaps well-intentioned yet specious or sometimes hysterical denunciations, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music* represents a reasoned consideration of a reality in modern Christianity which, for better or worse, cannot be ignored.

The book has two authors, Jay R. Howard, associate professor of sociology at Indiana University/Purdue University-Columbus and a former Christian radio disc jockey, and John M. Streck, a doctoral candidate in communications at the University of Iowa. The cover notes that despite annual revenues in excess of \$750 million, "Little has been written about CCM." Through *Apostles of Rock*, the authors seek to provide "the first objective, comprehensive examination of the contemporary Christian music phenomenon" and "how this musical genre relates to a larger popular culture."

The authors begin by attempting to define CCM, noting that CCM "offers evangelical Christians who cannot identify with what they see on MTV their own alter set of egos" (5) and that CCM "is only one element in the cultural identity of

America's evangelical Christian community" (6). Lacking a "sonic code," i.e., a "particular set of [distinctive] fundamental sounds" because of its wide variety of styles (e.g., "Christian heavy metal," "Christian blues," "Christian new age," and "Christian alternative rock"), CCM defies definition by its *sound*. Definition by the *people* who write, perform, or produce the music is also difficult, according to Howard and Streck, because of the ambiguity of terms like "artists who are Christians" or "Christian artists" due to widely disparate approaches to Christian doctrine and Christian living. To the suggestion that CCM should be defined by its "message," which is to say its *lyrics*, the often conflicting "factions, viewpoints, and variants on theology that characterize contemporary evangelicalism" (10) necessarily reflect themselves in CCM. After enumerating the difficulties of these and other possible ways to delineate CCM, the authors settle on a definition of CCM that proves quite workable.

Contemporary Christian music is an artistic product that emerges from a nexus of continually negotiated relationships binding certain artists, certain corporations, certain audiences, and certain ideas to one another. It is the art produced by an art world that surrounds a heterogeneous grouping of sometimes competing, sometimes complementary, and sometimes unrelated discourses concerning moral values, artistic values, commercial values, social values, and religious values. [It is] produced through the interaction of label executives, record producers, artists, critics, audiences, and others. . . . (14).

The crux of the book, in this writer's opinion, is in the authors' assertion that the "conflicts [surrounding CCM] can best be understood as manifestations of the age-old attempt to resolve the Christian dilemma of being called to live in the world while not becoming a part of that world" (16). Proceeding from that thesis, they draw on one of the landmark treatises on the subject, H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. In *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr suggests several responses to the "in the world yet not of the world" dilemma. Howard

and Streck offer three classifications of CCM based on the options Niebuhr proposes.

To Niebuhr's "Christ against culture" model, Howard and Streck correlate their category of "Separational CCM." Separational CCM has as its basis the "rationales of evangelism, exhortation, and worship" and "attempts to maintain a stark distinction between Christian and secular culture while at the same time remaining committed to reaching non-Christians and making converts." The emphasis on evangelism and, along with that, a requisite "cultural relevance" has "routinely demanded that concessions be made to secular culture" (16) by this type of CCM. Yet, paradoxically, separational artists (and their audiences) require that *something* distinguish their product from secular artists. Since the music itself is noticeably (and, presumably, purposefully) not different from its secular counterparts, those associated with Separational CCM must rely on such an overt gospel message that their music ends up having its biggest audience by far among the already converted. Or, as Howard and Streck declare, "Separational CCM emerges as music created by and almost exclusively for evangelicals" (16).

"Integrational CCM" is their second category and, to Howard and Streck, articulates Niebuhr's "Christ of culture" paradigm. This type of CCM would endeavor to avoid being solely for the Christian subculture (as in the case of Separational CCM), and its proponents would set about to provide "a wholesome alternative to mainstream rock" (16). For this to occur, the music (including the lyrics) would not be explicitly Christian, yet these "crossover" artists would give witness through their "participation in the production of mainstream culture." Integrational CCM, in other words, would be characterized as "positive pop."

If, as the authors submit, "Christ against culture" (as Separational CCM would express) and "Christ of culture" (the underpinning for Integrational CCM) represent opposite extremes in Niebuhr's continuum, "Transformational CCM," Howard's and Streck's third and final classification, reflects three median perspectives from *Christ and Culture*: "Christ

above culture," "Christ and culture in paradox," and "Christ the transformer of culture." This view "has as its goal not to enter or to withdraw from mainstream culture but to enable its transformation" resulting, among other things, in music which is "stripped of its utilitarian purposes and rendered valuable only through its ability to manifest both truth and quality" (17).

Much of the book is about the outworking of the authors' integrated approach to CCM based in large part on the three categories of CCM they have proposed. This reviewer's point of view is that they provide a very helpful perspective which gives the reader a much better understanding of the CCM anomaly. Beside the treatment of the three categories, there is a chapter entitled "Origins and Oppositions" which provides an informative historical perspective on CCM. Interwoven with the introduction, the five chapters, and the conclusion, are a prelude and six interludes which offer fascinating descriptions of representative CCM events. This is a kind of eyewitness account. The book also includes thorough documentation, viz., an extensive discography, helpful endnotes, and a comprehensive bibliography.

Following are some quotations from *Apostles of Rock* which, it is hoped, will whet the reader's appetite to read the entire book and, more importantly, reflect on its implications:

One can use popular music as an identity marker to create a real or imagined sense of community, but it is very difficult to use popular music to transform society, and more strongly, rather than being a force to change society for the better, music may merely displace the energies necessary to do so (126).

If . . . rock music is merely an accessory that identifies rather than an agent of substantive change, then it would follow that Christianity, through vehicles like CCM, may be reduced to such a construct. Christianity, in other words, is transformed from faith into fashion, and what sets Christians apart from non-Christians is not their belief system but their purchasing patterns (126).

While scholars . . . have long been exploring the profound influence that particular media forms have on the messages they carry, the cultures that contain them, the social organizations that produce them, and the thought patterns that emerge from their use, evangelicals have largely ignored such thinking (127).

Absent any theoretical understanding of culture and/or the media, evangelicals thus blindly assume the neutrality of media and use them uncritically. This conclusion is echoed by Quentin Schultze [in *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media*], who argues that American evangelicalism's disinterest in tradition coupled with its faith in technology has left the evangelical church without a foundation from which to work and believing in what Schultze calls the "mythos of the electronic church: a technological optimism that uncritically links the electronic media with the providential mission of God to preach the gospel around the world before the second coming of Christ. Research clearly documents the ineffectiveness of electronic media as agents of religious conversion, yet the popular mythology holds that spiritual battles can be won technologically" (128-29).

The problem, as one musician describes it, is that Transformational CCM, as much as Separational CCM and Integrational CCM, faces the problem of selling "the most precious thing in the world . . . through this vending machine format that is pop culture" (145).

The assumption of the Christian music industry as a whole is that the majority of evangelicals want simple, even trite, affirmations of their beliefs (159).

Theology is now less a matter of logical argument founded on biblical exegesis than an impressionist collage emerging from the raw materials of what's available in the surrounding culture (219).

As CCM comes to be incorporated both into the daily life of evangelical Christians and into the liturgies of the evangelical

church, the equation of the lyric [*sic*] with the holy writ, the musician with the minister, becomes all but unavoidable. Whatever else this may mean in terms of the theologies it enables, this elevation of Christian music [the reviewer would add, *whatever the style*] to the level of scripture ultimately renders doctrine a matter of musical taste (219-20).

*Apostles of Rock* offers much to consider regarding an influential, lucrative industry which should be approached with greater scrutiny than it heretofore has been given.

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