

Clueless No More

Amateur filmmakers Heather Whinna and Vickie Hunter were fairly clueless about Christian rock music, but that didn't keep them from making a stirring documentary about the scene.

by Mark Moring | posted 02/21/06

Five years ago, Heather Whinna and Vickie Hunter, by their own admission, were both fairly clueless about Christian rock music. Hunter's only exposure to the genre was music videos on late-night TV. And Whinna's only exposure had been through her boyfriend, recording engineer Steve Albini, who had worked with a few Christian bands at his studio. But what little they knew about Christian music prodded Whinna and Hunter to want to know more—to the point that they decided to make a documentary. So the amateur filmmakers—"We know how to hit the go button," jokes Hunter—put together a makeshift crew and headed off to the 2001 Cornerstone Festival to start rolling the videotape.

Four years and a couple more visits to Cornerstone later—and after working with editor Michael Dahlquist to whittle 170 hours of tape down to 90 minutes—they had their movie, *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?*, which went on to win the Audience Choice award at the Chicago Underground Film Festival. But perhaps more noteworthy is that the film has been praised for its objectivity, which makes Whinna and Hunter additionally proud. Why? Because neither is a Christian, and they both came into the project with preconceived notions—including some stereotypes—about Christians and the evangelical subculture.



Whinna and Hunter

Whinna, 34, and Hunter, 37, recently stopped by our offices to screen the film—now [available on DVD](#)—and hang around for a Q&A.

When did this idea come about?

Heather Whinna: About nine years ago. I love documentaries and I thought, oh, I could do that. I met some bands from [Jesus People USA](#), and they started telling me about [Cornerstone](#). That would be the setting. I didn't want to make the movie alone, so I asked Vickie, "You want to make a movie?" Then I put together a crew. We had everything ready but the actual interviewing. That part was a bit of a test, unexpectedly difficult for Vickie and me. When we showed up at Cornerstone the first day, it hit us that we were going to have to talk to people.

Hunter: It's a very vivid scene in my mind, that fifteen minutes where we're standing there looking at each other like a couple of eighth grade girls at the dance going, *No, you go ask him.*

Whinna: And the film crew was waiting for directions, and then I'm like, *Oh, I don't actually know how to do this.* I just knew how to MapQuest this out and end up at Cornerstone and get the tickets.

Just get there and wing it.

Whinna: Exactly. The whole thing was winged. We didn't go to film school. We didn't have an aesthetic goal. We wanted it to look nice, but we're not looking for a career. We're not looking to be hired by Steven Spielberg. I watch documentaries that look or sound really bad all the time, and it doesn't bother me.

Neither of you are Christians, so what made you want to do a film on Christian music?

Whinna: I had a lot of preconceived notions about what these guys would be like. My boyfriend has recorded a lot of bands. I'll just say he has a reputation. And I was surprised that these Christian bands would want to record with him. I just thought they would be very straight-laced and easily offended, and I thought we were very offensive.

How so?

Whinna: I swear like a trucker. My sense of humor is pretty crass. And a lot of people hate Steve anyway, and they're reasonable for thinking those things. We're both capable of offending people. And not only am I not a Christian, I'm an atheist. And then I met these Christian musicians and got along very well with them. I was really surprised that they didn't hate us. Steve Taylor came to our house to record with Chevelle. Steve was hysterically funny, and I immediately liked him. We had another friend at the house at the time who came up to me and he said, "Are those guys Christian?" I was like, "Yes. How did you know?" He said, "None of them smoke or swear." That's what it came down to for him.

Vickie, what was your exposure to Christian music before making this film?

Hunter: Watching Christian punk rock videos on late night Christian TV, and thinking, *I don't understand.* If you're not from that background, you start to be suspicious of the motives. The style was the most confusing to me. It seemed to mirror whatever was going on in mainstream.

OK, back to Cornerstone. You had pretty much free reign of the place?

Whinna: Yeah. The people we knew from JPUSA [who run the festival] ran the stages. So it worked out very well; we had complete access.

You had 170 hours of footage. You could've done anything with it. You could have lampooned the Christian music industry. But you didn't. You were fair and treated the subject matter with respect.

Whinna: Right. You can make a fool out of anybody, that's certain. And lots of things happen at festivals. But it was very easy to make a decision to do it the way we did it.



A fan gets into the music

Hunter: Some people would argue that artistically the movie would suffer from that. But we made some editing choices purely because we knew if we didn't include something, or if you didn't let somebody finish their thought, it wouldn't convey what they really thought or meant to say.

So you weren't going in with an agenda.

Hunter: No.

Whinna: I anticipated people would question our motives, and in four years, only one person did. One woman asked, "What's your agenda?" And Vickie said ...

Hunter: "We don't have one." And she didn't buy that answer. But in all fairness, if the tables were turned, the first thing I would say is, "What's your agenda?"

Whinna: "You're not Christian. Why are you here?"

Your editor, Michael Dahlquist, died in a [freak and tragic accident](#) just a few weeks after you finished the project. Talk about his role in the film.

Hunter: There's no way we could have learned to edit this movie on our own.

Whinna: Oh no, we wouldn't have even tried.

Hunter: I think we would have driven an experienced editor crazy, because at times we were so unfocused. But Michael, who was a friend, also didn't have any experience. He was learning as he went, so he couldn't argue with us about like, "Well, we can't do it that way."

Whinna: It didn't matter that Michael didn't have any experience, because I knew that Michael was such a sweet person that he would never do something in the process to make me angry, truthfully. Because I feel like all I have is my honor. All I have is my word. And so I have to trust that every single person that I'm working with is an extension of how I feel that things needed to happen. Which I think worked out really well for us.

How many hours do you think you put into the editing process? A lot of late nights?

Whinna: Yeah. Usually once or twice a week. Probably 20 hours a week for four years.

Do you see this film as kind of his legacy?

Hunter: In a small way, I do. I think he really enjoyed working on this movie, and he put an amazing amount of work and devotion into it. I'm so happy that we finished it, because the thought of trying to finish it with someone else, I just can't even imagine.

There are a few scenes in the film that feel kind of tangential, where all of a sudden the conversation turns to abortion and gays and Christians' feelings about those things. Why include those things in a documentary about Christian rock?

Whinna: For a non-Christian, if I went and saw this movie and that wasn't in there, I'd be like, *Hmm, how come they didn't mention this?* Because to people who aren't Christian, what's important is the politics. That's the reason non-Christians have a problem with Christianity most of the time—there are politics involved. I felt if I had seen this film and nobody brought it up, that it would have been skirting the issue. Christianity is a political movement as well as a religious movement, at least to those of us who are not Christians.

I wonder if that perception comes from the way media often cover Christianity, showing only outspoken televangelists or hateful protesters and their "God hates fags" signs. Viewers think, "Oh, that's how Christians feel about gays," when it's a terrible misrepresentation from a tiny minority.

Whinna: Vickie and I could have very easily put that kind of stuff in the film. It's not like that wasn't there. And you're right: TV media think you're only attracted to that. But the irony for us is all I could think about was, *Okay, if we put this one thing in, that's all you'll be thinking about.* I feel like if we had stuck that in our film, nothing else would have gotten across.

So, what are you most proud of when it comes to this movie?

Whinna: That when push came to shove, it would have been very easy to put some very incendiary, really crazy stuff in this movie. Lots of stuff happened that was caught on tape, but in a million years we would never put it in that movie. That doesn't mean that we're awesome people. We just rose to the occasion when it happened. We screened this in LA for people in the entertainment industry, and it was the biggest compliment to be told that I don't necessarily do things the way they do things. A friend of mine who has made several big movies said, "Heather, I've never seen a movie that objective in my life." One of my favorite reviews of the film came from the [San Francisco film festival](#). Non-Christians went in to see the movie and said, "We went in there to laugh. These Christians are so funny. And then all of a sudden we were forced to take people really seriously." At the end of the review, they said maybe we don't agree with Christianity, but that does not mean we are incapable of loving some Christians.

Who's your intended audience? Christians and non-Christians?

Whinna: Yes, both. It's not my first instinct to say Christians, because there's still this little part of me that feels like that's not my scene. But I hope they like it.

For more information on the film, [click here](#). To order a copy, [click here](#).

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