

Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?  
Review by Josh Hurst | posted 02/21/06

It's a well-known piece of advice: If you don't want to argue, then don't bring up the topics of politics and religion. Steer the conversation into more neutral ground by sticking to less inflammatory subjects. Like family. Or pets. Or movies. Or music.

Unless, of course, the music you listen to is already tightly entwined with politics and religion, as is the case within much of contemporary Christian music—an industry rife with an uncomfortable tension that comes from blending art, faith, and commerce. It's a tension forged from fiery opinions and impassioned worldviews, and it's made church music something that divides just as much as it unifies.



Brian Gray of The Blamed makes a joyful noise

It is this tension that lies at the heart of *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?*, a compelling new documentary from filmmakers Heather Whinna and Vickie Hunter. Filmed mostly at

the 2003 [Cornerstone Christian music festival](#), this film—made by a couple of "unsaved outsiders"—is little more than a mishmash of interviews with Christian musicians, concertgoers, and rock critics, with some brief moments of live footage thrown in for flavor, but, by taking many differing viewpoints and tossing them into the blender of objectivity, Whinna and Hunter have created a fascinating, profound exploration of the purpose of art and the nature of the Christian subculture.

In an age in which documentary films are frequently criticized for their lack of impartiality, it's refreshing to see a movie that succeeds so well in not picking sides. This isn't a 90-minute commercial for the Christian music industry, nor is it a hateful attempt to tear the industry to shreds. The directors simply keep the tape rolling as their various interview subjects discuss what's wrong and what's right with Christian music. The film feels like one long, insightful discussion, and, as such, it makes excellent fodder for post-viewing conversation.

Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?

★★★★

Not rated

**Genre:** Documentary

by RightRightRight Films

**Directed by:** Heather Whinna and Vickie Hunter

**Runtime:** 94 minutes

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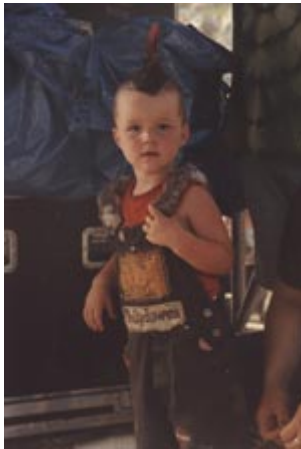
The very nature of art itself becomes one of the film's central questions as many of the contributors wonder aloud about the purpose of Christian music. For some, music exists solely as an evangelistic tool, used to spread the Good News by speaking in a language that youth can understand. For others, music is a vessel for worship, for ascribing glory to the Father. Still others view music, first and foremost, as art, and uphold creative integrity above the demands of commerce and people-pleasing.

Regardless of where they fall within this spectrum, viewers should be prepared to encounter some beliefs far different from their own, which at times can be infuriating. But thoughtful, attentive viewings should prove that this film contributes much to meaningful, critical dialogue.



Cornerstone's faithful getting into the music

Also called into question is the relationship between art and commerce. To some musicians, the need to make money and create a product that sells is a creative frustration, while others seem to view it as a necessary evil. Some take the question one step further by asking about the moral implications of buying and selling religious art; one interviewee goes as far as to say that, if Jesus came back today and saw the state of religious art, he'd vomit.



A young fan of Ballydowse

Exactly what *does* one make of an industry in which religion is bottled and sold, and artistry is seen as valuable only if it serves the needs of evangelism? Where does one find the place where the desire to reach people for Jesus ends and the need to make money begins? Furthermore, is there any room in the Christian music industry for originality? This last question comes to the forefront time and time again by musicians and critics who contend that the majority of Christian bands are really just knockoffs of similar sounding mainstream acts.

Just as difficult are the questions raised about Christian music as a political force. In the film's latter half, the focus shifts from the discussion of art to a discussion about the Christian subculture and its response to the homosexual community. Most contributors admit that reaching out to gays and lesbians with love and compassion is exactly what Christian musicians should do, but they also admit that doing so is a major taboo within the industry. It's an uncomfortable subject, and kudos are in order for the way in which the filmmakers and the participants approach it with candor.

The behavior of the musicians themselves might catch the attention of some viewers. Many of the performers casually mention the fact that they frequently perform in bars and clubs, while [Pedro the Lion's](#) David Bazan is seen sitting with open bottles of beer and cigarette smoke blowing around him—not to mention his colorful vocabulary. Are these

professional choices and lifestyle decisions appropriate, even valuable, in the Kingdom, or are these musicians behaving just as badly as their unsaved counterparts?

The film certainly doesn't have a shortage of engaging intellectual ideas, but, if it does have a flaw, it's that many viewers might have a hard time understanding the dynamics of the industry portrayed. Though the filmmakers call themselves outsiders, they clearly intended the film to be watched by those who already have a fundamental understanding of what Christian music is. Indeed, even some CCM fans might find themselves wondering what the blazes Cornerstone is, something that's never directly explained.



Larry Norman at the Cornerstone mainstage

Also disappointing is the film's narrow scope in terms of portraying the eclectic styles that make up today's gospel music industry. The musicians portrayed are almost all hardcore, punk, or indie rock groups, including such acts as MxPx, Zao, the Supertones, and Steve Taylor. But where are the Christian folk groups? What of jazz and blues musicians? And how about Southern and black gospel? These genres are all conspicuously absent, meaning that, if nothing else, many folks will find that the brief musical performances captured on tape won't be to their liking.

Still, these minor flaws in the movie's craftsmanship don't change the fact that this is a highly insightful movie, one that should be watched and discussed by anyone who's interested in the intersection of faith and art. At one point, *Punk Planet* journalist Dan Slinker says, "As amazing as I'm sure some of these Christian rock bands are, there's a lot *more* amazing *real* bands." If this quote provokes any kind of reaction in you—be it heartfelt agreement or furious indignation—then *Why Should the Devil Have All the Good Music?* is a documentary film that you shouldn't miss.

This film is not showing in theaters, but is available on DVD [here](#). You can also learn more about the film at the [official website](#).