

God Rock, Inc.: The Business of Niche Music

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God Rock, Inc. is an exploration of how ethics and aesthetics are negotiated in forming boundaries between Christian rock and pop music markets. Situating himself within discourses of popular music studies, ethnomusicology, and Christian congregational musics, Andrew Mall explores how the construction of discrete markets in the popular music industry can serve as a theoretical lens for describing the ethical and aesthetic boundaries of contemporary Christian music (CCM). Throughout, Mall provides a historical account of the development of the CCM recording industry in the United States since the 1960s. Mall is a fitting guide to the topic. His autoethnographic reflections in the introduction identify him as someone who grew up in mainstream evangelical culture and attended concerts by popular CCM artists, but ultimately moved into other niche musical spaces as an adult. In that way, his own musical identity parallels some of the ins and outs of the story of CCM as a whole.

Mall's work builds on the historiography of Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck's landmark description in *Apostles of Rock*.¹ His account includes the oft-told stories of the artists themselves and their sales records, as well as the decisions made by "cultural intermediaries" who have shaped the industry's history. Mall writes that his main intervention into the field is to "address the roles of markets in the production, distribution, intermediation, and consumption of niche popular music in the United States" (3). Centering the role of the market is an attempt to provide a frame large enough to encompass "other taxonomies [of popular music study that] remain valid and useful" (5). Mall asks what we "might learn about *markets* from studying genres, audiences, subcultures, technologies, and record labels..." to enable broader discourse in an otherwise diffuse body of literature (5).

In the introduction, Mall suggests that ethical and aesthetic mappings are intertwined realities; values and the musical sounds exist hand in hand (9). In Christian music in particular, these realities come with an important, underlying debate over answers to the question, "what is Christian music *for*?" (9). Is its purpose to evangelize to new believers or serve existing ones? Mall suggests that this question is unique and central to the Christian music market since it navigates the tension between its success in ministry (however this is defined) and its commercial success. This fundamental tension is a key refrain throughout the book.

Part 1 addresses the history of the Christian pop and rock music industries. In Chapter 1, Mall focuses squarely on the rock music market and recounts the origins of the CCM market with the Jesus People Movement of the early 1970s. Mall's historical review is a succinct and helpful summary for researchers who are new to this particular musical culture and its industrial development. Chapter 2 rehearses the development of three major labels in Christian popular music and examines how their ethics are imprinted upon the musical sounds of those labels over time. The author's discussion relies primarily on industry executives as intermediaries and points to popular recordings to punctuate his examples. Mall addresses how major labels acquired Christian subsidiaries and thus increased the pressures for commercial success, impacted marketing models, and ultimately shaped and concretized the musical sounds of CCM.

In Chapter 3, Mall focuses on the ethical component of market boundaries, which he defines as constituted by social relationships, networks, and behaviors, rather than the music's aesthetics. Mall points to how CCM artists such as Sandi Patty and Jennifer Knapp suffered a grim commercial fate

¹Jay R. Howard and John M. Streck, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1999).

in the Christian market due to events in their personal lives that were perceived as transgressions of its ethical boundaries. Mall also discusses the related negotiation of market boundaries through the ethics of musical style and the way rock and roll music—and Christian rock, by extension—was condemned by evangelical Christian pundits for the music’s potential to convey immoral politics (like communism) or unethical behavior (such as racist critiques of dancing).

Chapter 4 concludes Part 1 with Mall’s discussion of the negotiations between ministry and profit with the rise of CCM’s first superstar in the 1980s: Amy Grant. Mall uses three lenses to explore what the CCM market had come to mean by the 1990s (in contrast to its roots in the early 1970s): Amy Grant’s career, the consolidation of multiple smaller Christian labels, and cross-over success. Although the CCM market began as subcultural and niche, it had rightfully become its own kind of mainstream.

Part 2 argues that as the Christian market went mainstream, its musical fringes and niche markets became more active. This second half comments on and rehearses the primary themes of the first: The ethics of style, negotiating commercial success, and the way artists navigate market inclusion. However, although the first part of the book references the historical boundaries of Christian markets and relies on interviews with important industry executives, the latter part is primarily ethnographic and emphasizes other cultural intermediaries, such as the organizers of niche Christian music events. Chapters 5 and 6 provide ethnographic descriptions of two CCM music festivals: Cornerstone (now defunct) and AudioFeed (a successor to Cornerstone). Mall highlights how attendees were attracted to Cornerstone and AudioFeed precisely because they featured niche genres within CCM, especially the edgier rock music sounds of metal, hardcore, and punk, and aligned with the ethics embodied in them. At Cornerstone, artists aimed to be included in the musically diverse CCM markets by public performances of faith, whereas at AudioFeed artists foregrounded resistance and divergence from the mainstream Christian market.

In Chapter 7, Mall revisits his previous exploration of how crossover success from fringe to mainstream defines and changes the aesthetic boundaries of market audiences and the artists’ relationships to them. The author argues here that analyzing this crossover privileges the commercial concerns for profits and increased market shares. Doing so emphasizes stories of crossover success and subsequent audience accusations that artists have compromised their work by “selling out.” Mall highlights other reasons, showing that crossover, at a basic level, reveals a convergence or reconstruction of previously discrete ethical or aesthetic boundaries between markets.

Mall’s work is characterized by the dynamism of the artists, markets, and industry interests he studies. His conclusion thus considers the role of stability or predictability as a key value for cultural intermediaries. Perhaps the most poignant evaluation here is Mall’s assertion that, “artists who choose to phone it in musically or lie about their identities or beliefs to avoid commercial repercussions are certainly selling out” (222).

Although the book’s conclusion touches on the present-day situation of the Christian music industry, it lacks consideration about the role of persons and institutions that act as cultural intermediaries in the recent worship music market, such as *Christian Copyright Licensing International* or Christian radio and streaming services. Given that Mall acknowledges how the industrial and profit landscape of CCM had shifted by the early 2000s toward songs for individual and group worship, addressing worship music from the last 20 years could have brought elements of his argument into the immediate present. Nevertheless, Mall’s work comes at an interesting time for Christian popular music since the industry has shifted drastically over the past two decades. The book is also relevant to some key insider discussions, complementing recent popular media on the CCM industry such as *The Jesus Music Movie* (Lionsgate, 2021), and offering a historical and theoretical texture for examining how some present-day Christian musicians are accessing larger market successes by capitalizing on white U.S. evangelical politics in attempts to kindle a nationwide revival of Christianity through worship music concerts.²

²See, for example, Adam A. Perez, “‘It’s Your Breath in Our Lungs’: Sean Feucht’s Praise and Worship Music Protests and the Theological Problem of Pandemic Response,” *Religions* 13.1, no. 47 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010047>.

Overall, the book provides a very accessible and insightful introduction to the key tensions relevant to understanding Christian popular music in a form that is accessible to readers familiar with this history and to new audiences. An unexpected strength of the work is provided in the additional reference materials, which include listening examples and appendices related to the current market. Although not critical to understanding the book's arguments, they help make *God Rock, Inc.* an even more useful guide for studying Christian popular music.

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The Lady Swings: Memoirs of a Jazz Drummer

By Dottie Dodgion and Wayne Enstice. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021.

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Purposely or not, pioneering women have long been written out of music history; the fields of jazz and popular music are no exception. It is exciting to see that these historical mistakes are being corrected in our media, scholarship, and classrooms. In recent years, we have amended these biases by affirming trailblazers such as the Go-Go's in their recent documentary and their induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.¹ Other women have been "rediscovered" through mini-documentaries, books, and historical footage gone viral—like Sister Rosetta Tharpe, whose guitar prowess and charismatic performance style influenced many of the men considered to be rock's founders, including every member of the Million Dollar Quartet, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry.² The act of "rediscovery" allows scholars and journalists to revise old narratives about music history that foregrounded the contributions of men. The new narratives being forged creates spaces for other voices that have shaped and reshaped popular music.

Dottie Dodgion and Wayne Enstice's *The Lady Swings: Memoirs of a Jazz Drummer* is the latest autobiographical addition to unearth the contributions of a central figure. Dodgion and Enstice take the reader on a journey through a life that is well-lived and chock-full of intrigue, making Dodgion's story ripe for a Hollywood adaptation: Its tales of kidnapping, rape, illness, abortion, romance, divorce, strip clubs, prostitution, an open marriage, and more makes the reader's jaw drop nearly every chapter. However, Dodgion's music career remains front and center throughout the text; in the words of Enstice in the prefatory notes, the book focuses on "her long-overlooked legacy as a player: How hard she swings, her artistry on the drums, and her rock-solid, in-the-pocket accompaniment" (ix). There are thirty-four short chapters (called "Scenes" in the book) divided into three parts according to their geographical locations. Parts 1 and 3 bookend her years in California, where she has spent most of her life, and part 2 details her East Coast, New York years, 1961–85.

¹*The Go-Go's*, directed by Alison Ellwood (Baarn, NL: PolyGram Entertainment, 2020).

²Gayle F. Wald, *Shout, Sister, Shout! The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2008); *The Godmother of Rock & Roll: Sister Rosetta Tharpe*, directed by Mick Csaky (London, UK: British Broadcasting Corporation, 2011).