

CHRISTIAN HEAVY METAL ROCK AND ROLL

"Some of them find it bizarre — they're not used to alternative music, and I'm alternative alternative..."

BY KEN BURKE

Feedback screeches from electric guitars cuts through the air, as a plodding bass and drum beat begins bashing out the familiar shape of a heavy metal dronetune. But as the vocalist starts to wail, something sounds different — radically different — about this record. When the band reaches the anthem-like chorus, it's clear what's going on. "When will you begin to see the love of god?" shrieks the lead singer-cum-evangelist in leather and jeans.

Welcome to the incredible — not to mention bizarre — world of Christian Rock Music.

Traditionally a safe home for genteel white-clad singers like Pat Boone or church choirs and quartets, gospel music has been diversifying, much like the entire "Christian industry" in North America. That means using any and all means to spread THE WORD in the lean, mean '80s. Missionary work; travelling uncharted airwaves just as others had journeyed abroad hundreds of years before to convert the heathen.

"It's realising we have to go to every tribe and nation," says Christine Boychuck, host of a Sunday morning Christian rock show on Carleton University's CKCU-FM radio in Ottawa. "You have the punk tribe, the funk tribe, and other musical tribes," she says.

Boychuck is part of a growing trend of Christian rock and heavy metal shows on campus and mainstream radio stations across Canada. Aside from her *Song for You* show, the University of Western Ontario boasts two shows, one mild and one strictly hard rock. Dalhousie's CKDU had a Christian rock slot last year, and there are numerous shows in Western Canada. Off-campus, Q-104-FM in Dartmouth, has a show and at CFNY Toronto, ex-Lighthouse band leader Skip Prokop's *Rock in a Hard Place* show broadcasts the most metallic of modern hymns.

Almost anything can be found, if you care to look. Over here, Undercover are doing a new wave rave-up of the hymn *Holy Holy Holy* on an album *Boys and Girls, Renounce the World. Over there, a tune sung by Petra, most of whose record covers bear an uncanny resemblance to those of the 70s band Boston; God gave rock and roll to you gave rock and roll to you put it in the soul of every one you can let the music take you but where will you be when the music's gone?*

And way over in the corner, a lengthy metal rant about the evils of modern society by Stronghold in the name of "sodom in the world today."

If you're not ready for that, you may not be ready for bands which consider their "ministry co-ordinator" a band member, or list two dates of birth on their songbook biographies — physical date of birth and date they were born again.

The "Christian big beat," as one dee-jay describes it, is riding the crest of the Born Again religious movement which has swept North America since the mid-seventies. The movement is centered around a revelatory conversion experience and strong emphasis on Bible study. Born-again adherents exist mainly outside organized religions, simply calling themselves "Christians." One fundamental belief seems to be that all people who haven't been "born-again" are hell-bound, regardless of their actions in life. That kind of raises the stakes in the evangelical sweepstakes.

When existing rockers discovered this charismatic movement, many decided to use rock and roll as a means for spreading their new-found faith, rather than giving up their beat for Bibles. As Joey Taylor, keyboardist in the group Undercover, told *WORD* magazine, "Punk and New Wave were just getting started at the time (of our conversion) and we saw right away that this was the tool that God had given us. We got a clear calling to minister to people in that subculture."

"The Lord just said 'Go get 'em,'" said Taylor.

These bands know what traditional evangelists had ignored for years - there is a genuine generation gap in the selling of kids on Christ. The evangelists demanded that the kids change. They didn't. It doesn't take a born-again marketing genius to see why young people weren't excited about the music their religious friends or parents pushed on them. Without even considering the lyrical content, it was dull. B-O-R-I-N-G. And they weren't about to change their musical tastes for something as trivial as being saved from the fires of eternal damnation. So something had to give.

As a result, Christian Rock Bands with names like Stronghold, Bond Servant, Petra, and the Rez Band (Resurrection Band) are filling the airwaves and

Christian bookstore record stands across the country — and emptying the stands in a hurry. Their records are by far the hottest selling items in Christian stores in Halifax and other cities and regularly achieve "gold" record sales in the U.S.

"It's the modern gospel music people are looking for," says Molly Austen, the grandmotherly manager of the Canadian Bible Society's Halifax bookstore.

The resulting merger of rock culture and evangelical religion has taken on the full force of a marketing blitz, selling Christ to the masses as he's never been sold before. There are T-shirts, fanzines, videos, sampler cassettes, and posters galore. Ads tell kids the albums they're looking for are *The Permanent Wave*. Another ad for the Rez Band promises "music to raise the dead." They ain't talkin' about *Thriller*, you can bet that.

These sales efforts are centered around the real thing — musicians on independent Christian music labels like Exit, Light, Sparrow, and Myrrh. On mainstream labels, born-again rockers have been playing for years, though usually spreading a less dogmatic message. U2, The Alarm, Cliff Richard and Donna Summer are all Christian musicians working with major labels, although people buying their records may not recognize their messages of peace, love and harmony as Bible-inspired. So where's the line between Christian and secular rock?

"Right now I'm drawing the line at Simple Minds," says Boychuck. "They're Catholics, but I don't think any of them have said they're active Christians. I ask 'is the dominant force in the group Christian?' They just use religious imagery in their songs," she says.

Anyone doubting how much Christian rock means to its fans could ask Christine Boychuck for a testimonial. Before hosting the two and a half hour CKCU show, which *Chicago's Cornerstone Magazine* listed as one of the best in North America, the Carleton journalism graduate was the "NUMBER one fan" of the show's first host, Lorne Anderson. She took over as host in 1982, five years after she first experienced Christian rock and roll.

Before her conversion, Boychuck loved bands like Led Zeppelin. Then religion changed all that. "I was taught that I should break my records and burn my music," she says. Minus the offending music, something still wasn't right with her life. "I felt a void," she recalls.

"Part of my soul still wanted to rock." When she finally heard the Word made metal in 1977, the music was a godsend...literally. "I said it can't be Christian because it's too good," says Boychuck.

Reactions such as her own to Christian

rock come few and far between from students at Carleton, says Boychuck. "I haven't had much student reaction," she shrugged. "They're not my listeners." CKCU has a mandate from the CRTC to provide community service outside the Carleton campus.

"Some of them find it bizarre — they're not used to alternative music, and I'm alternative alternative," she says, pausing to underline the words, "so they find it really hard to take."

Hosting *Song for You* for the past two years has led Boychuck to define her goals — and limitations.

"The four objectives of the show are: entertainment, information, edification, and evangelism," she says. "Evangelism is deliberately fourth. This is a rock show. I don't want to preach."

The same doesn't apply for a colleague of hers here on the east coast.

High above Dartmouth, in the penthouse studios of Q104-FM, Penthouse magazine "pets" stare from bulletin boards in snapshot embraces with dee-jays and station staff. Keith Wells doesn't look at them though, or at the pictures of Billy Idol's iron-on sneer and endless legions of faceless bands that festoon the studio walls. Instead, he looks out the huge windows to see the station's listening audience spread out below, split by the shining waves of Halifax harbour on a Sunday afternoon. In his shades, jeans, India cotton shirt and sneakers, he looks just like any of the station's cooler-than-thou-dee-jays — until he opens his mouth to speak. Keith Wells is a concerned young man.

"There are a lot of young people out there going to hell and we've got to try and reach them," he says, leaning back in this swivel chair at the sound controls. "There's got to be a way other than *Amazing Grace* to reach young people."

Wells, a roadie and singer with Nova Scotia rock bands before his born-again experience at a 1981 Billy Graham rally, hosts a Sunday morning Christian rock show on Q104, or *The Rock of the Atlantic* as they like to be called. And he makes no bones about the role he sees the music as playing.

"It's a premiere effort by God to reach young people," he says.

"God has traditionally made material to reach the people. You have to relate to people from where they are at the time."

Where Keith Wells is places him in the unusual situation of being a dee-jay for a radio station he hopes nobody will be listening to when he's not on the air, that is. You see, not only does the *Rock of the Atlantic* play hard rock, but specialises in the loudest, fastest, and sometimes vilest.

Continued on page 5...