

# Introduction

## Popular Music, Markets, Margins, and the Curious Case of Christian Music

I was first introduced to Christian music in the early 1990s. My parents are devout Christians, themselves the children of ministers, and met while students at a small Bible college in central Texas. My father later attended Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. After he was ordained, he worked for the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board) directing an office that ministered to the diplomatic community in New York City. During my childhood, we attended a white Southern Baptist church in suburban northern New Jersey, usually going three times a week. Our family's social life revolved around the church and my dad's work: Bible studies, hosting international diplomats for holidays, monthly potlucks, regular Saturday drives into New York to feed the homeless in the East Village's Tompkins Square Park, Vacation Bible School (a weeklong summer camp held at church), weekend retreats, worship services, and even a few Christian concerts.

It was during middle school that I discovered pop music through Top 40 radio (mostly New York's Z100). As the oldest of four children I had no big brother or sister to introduce me to cooler music, and neither of my parents listened to music very much. But they humored my interest in music, tuning into the Top 40 countdown radio shows hosted by Shadoe Stevens and Rick Dees on our drives to and from church every Sunday. Some of the music to which I was listening made them uneasy, and the youth ministers at church taught us that it was sinful to idolize

and listen to musicians who, judging by their lyrics and lifestyle choices (drug and alcohol abuse, extramarital sex, rebelling against authority), so clearly held God and Christianity in contempt. For several of my teen years, a highlight of the summer was our church youth group’s weeklong trip to Centrifuge, a Southern Baptist summer camp. One year I returned from Centrifuge so convicted about the wrongness of listening to secular music that the following Sunday I made a tearful public commitment in front of our entire church congregation to listen only to Christian music.

Where did a middle schooler find Christian music in North Jersey? The Sam Goody in our local mall carried some gospel CDs but nothing that sounded like the rock music I heard on the radio. Instead, my parents took me to the local Christian bookstore, a franchise of the Family Bookstores chain. Christian bookstores carry more than books and Bibles; they are essentially small department stores, also selling clothes, gifts, home décor, jewelry, music, and stationery. The music section had a “recommended if you like” sign that suggested Christian artists who purportedly sounded similar to specific contemporary Top 40 artists. Among others, I bought cassettes by DeGarmo & Key, Recon, White Heart, and Petra, whose 1990 album *Beyond Belief* quickly became a favorite, especially the song “I Am on the Rock” (🎧).<sup>\*</sup> I got my first CD player as a birthday present in July 1992 and bought several Christian CDs in the coming months: DC Talk’s *Nu Thang* and *Free at Last*, Amy Grant’s *Heart in Motion*, Michael W. Smith’s *Change Your World*, and Petra’s two-disc career retrospective *War & Remembrance*. Our church sometimes hosted concerts, such as Steven Curtis Chapman touring in support of his 1992 album *The Great Adventure*. And in 1993, my mom took me to my first major concert when we went with a group of other church members to see Michael W. Smith’s *Change Your World* tour, with Christian hip hop group DC Talk as the opening act. Smith’s single “Place in This World” (🎧) and his earlier song “Friends” (🎧), which has soundtracked countless high school graduation videos, were crowd favorites that prompted a theater-wide sing-along. It was heavenly.

<sup>\*</sup> I have compiled Spotify playlists for every chapter; you will find these in the Playlists section at the front of the book. The songs and artists that appear on those playlists are indicated in the text, endnotes, and appendix 2 with the icon 🎧. I have also created discographies for many of the artists I discuss; these artists are flagged in the text with the icon 📀, and the discographies can be found in appendix 1.

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*God Rock, Inc.* addresses the roles of markets in the production, distribution, intermediation, and consumption of niche popular music in the United States. I have defined *markets* as “realms in which popular music is commodified, produced and distributed, bought and sold, or imagined to be.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, popular music markets are spaces in which the interactions of musicians, listeners, and cultural intermediaries (those professionals who connect musicians to listeners and vice versa) are grounded in the production and consumption of music. Individual markets might be defined by their constituent musical genres or styles, audience demographics (age, class, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, sexuality), geographic regions, participants’ ideologies, important infrastructural components (such as performance venues, radio stations, or record labels), or some combination of these. Markets are real, populated by actual people, institutions, and musics. But markets are also imagined and idealized, with both artists and audiences often described in homogenous terms that generalize about a market’s typical sound and “average” listener.

Mass markets are the biggest markets, with the largest numbers of consumers and the greatest potential for making the most money: mainstream pop, Top 40, celebrity artists, and contemporary hit radio. Niche markets, on the other hand, are smaller, more discriminating, with specialized audiences: the subgenres and substyles of popular music that attract passionate music connoisseurs. As Eric Weisbard shows in his study of radio formatting in the 1970s and later, markets coexist alongside each other (sometimes literally so, on the radio dial); pop music is not defined by a single mainstream, he demonstrates, but rather by multiple, concurrent mainstreams.<sup>2</sup> Markets are not mutually exclusive but overlap and intersect like complicated, multidimensional Venn diagrams, often sharing artists, audiences, industry professionals, and infrastructures. They are not static and have evolved from identifiable (if not uncontroversial) origins; over time they change, splitting and merging, growing and contracting.

This book is specifically about the market for Christian popular music, which I trace back to the Jesus People movement in the late 1960s. Hymn writers had been influenced by popular music since at least the nineteenth century, and in the twentieth century, Christian record labels emphasized Black gospel and white Southern gospel, genres that are largely indigenous to the United States.<sup>3</sup> But the Christian music

that accompanied the Jesus People movement represented the first collective effort to produce, perform, and circulate music that addressed Christian themes using youth-oriented, contemporaneous styles of commercial popular music: folk, pop, rock and roll, and others. As a category, Christian music can include subcategories such as Jesus music, Christian rock, contemporary Christian music (CCM), and contemporary worship music (CWM), among others. These subcategories are neither unchanging nor immutable; like the secular categories of “rock” and “pop,” over time they have frequently overlapped and converged. As David Brackett observes, although musical characteristics might not change, their categories do: “music that was once ‘pop’ (and before that ‘rock’) is now classified as ‘easy listening.’”<sup>4</sup> Rather than tease out the specific musical differences between any of these categories, in *God Rock, Inc.* I am more interested in how this market emerged and has transformed over four decades. I use the term *Christian music* (or sometimes *Christian popular music*) to refer to this category in general, only discussing more specific subcategories when the distinction is important. In the pages and chapters that follow, I discuss Christian artists and bands, Christian festivals, Christian music magazines, and Christian record labels to examine how Christian music industry executives and festival directors make business decisions, what Christian artists’ music and performances reveal about their beliefs, and how the reactions of Christian fans and music writers contribute to the market’s overall discourse.

This book is also about popular music markets in general—about understanding the various forces that construct, police, alter, and enable the transgression of their aesthetic and social boundaries. Popular music studies does not lack for conceptual frameworks or hermeneutic categories. Scholars and music critics talk about genres and subgenres, tracing musical developments, influences, and intersections. We address the sociology of scenes, subcultures, and tribes as important elements that inevitably impact those genres. We consider how these constituent social and aesthetic components function in local, trans-local, regional, and global contexts, increasingly paying attention to the impacts of migration and movement on popular music. And we necessarily examine the commercial industries that promote and profit from music, often in ways that are inequitable, mirroring long-standing social hierarchies and other disparities of power and representation. The problem, however, is that scholarship situated within any one of these analytical frames—genre, subculture, scene, geographic region, industry—often

has little to contribute of theoretical importance to scholarship situated within a different analytical frame. As a result, popular music scholars frequently talk past each other, focused on their topics contextualized within a (relatively) small body of specialized literature but paying less attention to how their arguments advance discourse in the field as a whole, or even society in general.

One solution is to broaden the analytical frame as wide as possible, as Brackett does by redefining popular music genres as expansive categories in which musical characteristics are but one of many defining features.<sup>5</sup> The solution I propose and model differs by using an expansive category (markets) within which other taxonomies remain valid and useful. Studying popular music markets can unify an otherwise diffuse body of literature and enable broad comparisons. It might be difficult, for example, to explain how genre studies might inform the sociology of popular music, or to draw larger conclusions from individual case studies of music subcultures, technologies, and record labels. But consider, instead, asking what we might learn about *markets* from studying genres, audiences, subcultures, technologies, or industries, either separately or together, as does Richard Peterson when parsing the various explanations for the popularization of rock and roll in the mid-1950s, or Keir Keightley when considering the broader effects of the competing microgroove record formats (the  $33\frac{1}{3}$  LP and the 45) on popular music during a similar period.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, because markets contain all of these constituent components without negating the importance of any single one, they better enable comparisons and avoid essentializing and imposing incompatible theoretical frameworks.

Studying markets also enables popular music scholars to take seriously the same taxonomies and categories that music industries use. Throughout my fieldwork and research for this project I encountered cultural intermediaries (usually record label executives) and published discourse (often in *CCM* magazine) discussing the “Christian market” and the “general market,” by which they meant the larger market for commercial popular music that did not presume or promote Christian identity as a core characteristic. (Sometimes they referred to the general market as “the mainstream” or as “the secular.”) But they rarely talked about Christian music as a genre or framed it as a scene or a subculture. Cultural intermediaries outside of Christian music think and talk about their work in terms of markets also, as I have learned while researching music festivals, radio stations, and record labels. In part, this reflects the influence of capitalism, the commodification of

music, and the importance of knowing who your consumers are—that is, who you anticipate will attend your festival, tune into your station, or stream or buy your recordings—so that you can better meet their needs and expectations, thus securing a larger market share and your own financial health. I am not an apologist for capitalism and the inequities it perpetuates, but I do think it is important both to acknowledge that contemporary popular music is always already immersed in capitalist systems and to develop theoretical frameworks for popular music scholarship that explicitly address the material conditions of capitalism. Grounding our analyses of popular music in the same categories that its industries use situates our criticisms and interventions within actually existing practices.

One way to do this is to research cultural intermediaries and the work of cultural intermediation. Ethnographers of popular music have long focused on audience and reception studies: researching concerts, fandom, festivals, local scenes, music listening, nightlife, and other topics as participant-observers from the perspective of audiences. Daniel Cavicchi's study of Bruce Springsteen fans is exemplary in this regard.<sup>7</sup> The ethnomusicologist David Pruett argues that “mainstream popular music” scholarship would benefit from more ethnographic studies that explicitly engage artists' perspectives, describing as a model his own methodologies in conducting fieldwork with the MuzikMafia, a group of commercial pop-country artists including the duo Big & Rich and others.<sup>8</sup> But I think this call is unproductive: traditional ethnographic research methodologies value building sustained, informal relationships with interlocutors, yet gaining ethnographic access to mainstream pop artists is difficult if not impossible for most academic scholars. What little access we might have is often constrained by an artist's need to maintain their celebrity persona, promote a project or agenda, or shield their private lives from public view. Without the opportunity to build rapport over extended periods of time, formal interviews and other interactions yield the same scripted, sanitized information that artists and their publicists make available to journalists and talk show hosts.

Cultural intermediaries, on the other hand, are often more accessible than artists (aside from those who are themselves celebrities) and can be more willing and able to speak about their work without resorting to press-friendly talking points, even when they are likewise engaged in promoting projects or agendas. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has given as examples of cultural intermediaries “the producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or the critics of ‘quality’ newspapers and

magazines and all the writer-journalists and journalist-writers,” distinguishing this group from the decision-making “gatekeepers” who control access to the means of production.<sup>9</sup> In the music industries, cultural intermediaries may not create the music, but they are central to its dissemination. The work that they do—what Devon Powers describes as processes “by which art, music, and other forms of cultural production circulate, assume meaning, and gain value”<sup>10</sup>—establishes the material conditions in which musicians write, record, and perform music, and audiences listen to music. In doing so, the cultural intermediation of popular music is a constituent component of “musicking,” which Christopher Small defines as “tak[ing] part, in any capacity, in a musical performance.”<sup>11</sup> Insight into the decision-making processes and practices of cultural intermediaries can help us understand broader trends in music markets.

Much of this work has already been done in music industry studies, an interdisciplinary field of study that attempts to understand the processes of music production and distribution. One strand of this field has emphasized the roles of record labels, exemplified by the work of R. Serge Denisoff in the 1970s and ’80s, David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus in the 1990s, and Alex Ogg in the 2000s, among many others.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting John Williamson and Martin Cloonan’s reminder that music industry analysis need not be conflated with studying only record labels, many others have addressed the economies, histories, politics, and regulatory environments of the business of music more broadly, including David Bruenger, Simon Frith, Reebee Garofalo, Fabian Holt, and Richard Peterson.<sup>13</sup> Recent scholarship by Eric Drott, Lee Marshall, Jeremy Wade Morris, and others has examined the impact of online streaming on the music industries.<sup>14</sup> With few exceptions, however (Negus and Holt being the most obvious), relatively little music industry scholarship incorporates ethnographic research methods. Ethnomusicologists studying cultural intermediaries and their work are poised to make significant contributions to our understanding of the production, circulation, meaning, and value of popular music: *God Rock, Inc.* thus joins Shannon Garland’s analysis of *Fora do Eixo* (a Brazilian network of cultural collectives), Timothy Taylor’s study of Burger Records, and Alesia Whitmore’s research into the label World Vision, among others, as modeling a crucial approach to the ethnography of popular music and music industries.<sup>15</sup>

Christian music is a fascinating lens for this work because it is both niche and mass, marginal and mainstream, related to but in many ways

distinct from its general market counterparts; understanding its boundaries can help us understand the boundaries of other music markets and their relationships to each other. A market's boundaries are important because they reflect and perpetuate its conditions of inclusion and exclusion, conditions that comprise the accumulated actions, beliefs, decisions, and values of everyone who participates and has invested in that market. By everyone I mean *everyone*—not just the C-level executives in record label corner offices in New York, Los Angeles, and Nashville, but their artists, musicians, and songwriters, their audiences and fans, and every entertainment industry professional in between. Markets are not just top-down constructions, prescriptive categories of consumption imposed by music industries. Nor are they only bottom-up, reactionary grassroots movements uninfluenced by the needs and forces of capitalism. Rather, markets represent negotiations between acts of production and reception, prescription and reaction, creation and consumption, with every interaction confirming and altering boundaries. Participants involved in the work of cultural intermediation rely on boundaries—both implicitly and explicitly—to justify business decisions that have real-world consequences for the music and artists to which listeners and audiences have access. Boundaries teach participants what is welcome and what is forbidden in any given market—both what music *sounds* good (the market's aesthetics) and what acts and behaviors *are* good (the market's ethics). And because markets change over time, their boundaries are inherently flexible, responding to changes in the aesthetics and ethics that participants value.

Ethics and aesthetics are mutually co-constitutive in music markets, at times explicitly, but more often implicitly so.<sup>16</sup> Ethics of production, distribution, mediation, and reception both define and limit markets' accessibility. Because a market's ethics can impact its material and ideological conditions, they can prescribe both acceptable and inappropriate musical elements. But they can also set preconditions for participation that have seemingly little to do with the music itself. Christian cultural intermediaries, for example, have long negotiated a tension between circumscribing their market by their target consumers' faith identity on one hand while promoting accessible, derivative popular music largely indistinguishable from contemporaneous mainstream pop on the other hand. Consider indie rock as another example: while constituting little more than an aesthetic category by the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is rooted in the do-it-yourself (or "DIY") anti-corporate ethic of U.S. punk and hardcore in the 1970s



and '80s.<sup>17</sup> Shadow infrastructures, parallel to and yet distinct from those of the general market, developed around both of these markets, further inscribing their marginality. Their ethics became aesthetic mappings that sounded something meaningful to listeners and cultural intermediaries, even if those aesthetics did not explicitly articulate or index the market's ethical values. In other words, while we may not be able to define what Christian or DIY ethics sound like, we can interrogate their relationships to the sounds of their markets in particular contexts.

At the heart of contestations over Christian music's boundaries are contestations over its meaning and purpose. For example, the long-running contestation between commerce and ministry as competing objectives illustrates the central question of all conflicts within the Christian market: what is Christian music *for*? No other popular music market that I know of has to navigate between these two specific goals; thus, explaining the history, nuances, and repercussions of this conflict clearly distinguishes Christian music from other popular musics. I do so by exploring commerce, ethics, resistance, and crossover in the context of the U.S. Christian market, grounded in case studies and illustrative examples between the 1960s and 2010s. But although Christian music may be novel to many readers, it is not irrelevant to broader discourses in and about popular music. Echoing Simon Frith, who notes that the boundaries of popular music genres often rely on "a basic (if unstated) agreement within a genre about what their music is for," I challenge you to think of a defining conflict in a popular music niche market or subgenre that you know well and boil it down to a central question that does not resemble this one.<sup>18</sup> What is indie rock for? What is Chicago blues or Italo disco for? What is Detroit house, mumble rap, or third wave emo for?

Jay Howard and John Streck address these differences of opinion over the purposes and objectives of Christian music and Christian artists in their book *Apostles of Rock*. They divide the Christian market into three categories: separational, integrational, and transformational. Separational Christian artists, they write, "maintain a stark distinction between Christian and secular culture while at the same time remaining committed to reaching non-Christians and making converts."<sup>19</sup> Integrational artists, on the other hand, are "opposed to the idea of withdrawing into an isolated Christian subculture [and] developed new rationales for their music that would allow them to integrate themselves, as well as their Christian beliefs, into mainstream culture."<sup>20</sup> These two positions reveal competing approaches to ministry: the first

suggests that evangelism works best if Christianity (and, by extension, Christian culture) provides a true alternative to the secular world; the second understands effective ministry as taking place within the (non-Christian) culture it hopes to change. Crudely put, this is perhaps the difference between *drawing people in* to Christianity or *bringing it to* them. Transformational artists adopt something of a mediating position, in which music is valued for its aesthetic qualities and not for its religious or commercial utility; their goal is “not to enter or to withdraw from mainstream culture but to enable its transformation.”<sup>21</sup>

These different positions reflect distinct perspectives on the appropriate degree of intersection and interaction between the Christian and general markets, perspectives that are grounded in theological arguments about the appropriate degree to which Christians should engage with secular culture—the degree, for example, to which Christians can safely be *in* the world but not *of* it (that is, not adhering to secular values despite living in a secular society). Crucially, they also indicate different opinions on the proper role of capital. Transformational artists—for whom “the choice to pursue artistic purity has often meant commercial obscurity”<sup>22</sup>—must choose between their aesthetic goals and those prescribed by market pressures. Stories of critically lauded artists who never achieved significant commercial success anecdotally reinforce this perception, as do those of artists who became successful after following the aesthetic and stylistic suggestions of their record labels. Integrational artists emphasize entertainment over the pursuit of aesthetic and ministerial goals. From a transformational perspective, integrational artists abandon their artistic visions; from a separational perspective, they water down Christianity’s message for commercial gain. From an integrational perspective, however, commercial success is legitimizing: it proves that popular music from a Christian perspective can connect with listeners and consumers on a mass scale and provides worldly evidence of God’s influence and validation. In other words, according to Howard and Streck, “integrational artists argue that because the music sells it must speak to the hearts and minds of Christians and non-Christians alike; therefore, it must be authentic.”<sup>23</sup> Separational music is explicitly theological, charged with “reaching the non-Christian with the gospel message, encouraging Christians in the daily exercise of their faith, and/or offering praise and worship to God.”<sup>24</sup> But some critics charge that it commodifies religious beliefs and practices and can even negatively impact the faith of artists who must balance commercial viability against their religious beliefs. The results are often oriented