

## Metal Missionaries to the Nation: Christian Heavy Metal Music, “Family Values,” and Youth Culture, 1984–1994

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On June 26, 1987, members of the Christian metal band Stryken attended a Motley Crüe concert in San Antonio, Texas. It was not uncommon for Christian bands to attend secular concerts; indeed, many bands explained that they did so in order to keep current on musical trends. But Stryken arrived at the show ready for confrontation. According to the Christian metal magazine *White Throne*, the band, “wearing full suits of armor . . . and bearing a 14 x 8 foot wooden cross,” “stormed the doors of the arena, pushing through the crowds of teenagers and television cameras down the corridor towards the inlet to the main stage.” At this point, the “boys in armor” erected the cross and “began to preach to the massed [*sic*] of kids who were gathering all around.” The authorities quickly intervened, and, “ordered to remove ‘the cross’ or face arrest, the members of Stryken continued to speak openly about Jesus Christ, and were one by one hand-cuffed and forcibly removed from the arena.”<sup>1</sup> Stryken’s actions—which invoked the persecuted early Christians described in the Acts of the Apostles—offer some insights into Christian metal during the 1980s. Motley Crüe’s music and the lifestyle of its members were designed to shock middle America, but the band had become one of the most successful acts of the 1980s. By upstaging Motley Crüe’s over-the-top behavior with their bold act, Stryken attempted to claim heavy metal’s reputation for outrageousness for Christianity. Moreover, by getting removed from the concert, the band successfully positioned itself as the persecuted minority—the authentic outlaws of American music in the 1980s.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, Christian heavy metal bands like Stryken conducted a campaign across the United States to promote Christian values. While much scholarship about Christian conservatives has focused on the impact of political efforts organized by, for example, Gary Bauer’s Family Research Council or Pat Robertson’s Christian Coalition, less has been written about white evangelical Christians’ expanded cultural practices—and the po-

litical impact of these practices—during this period.<sup>2</sup> Christian heavy metal bands offer an excellent opportunity to examine the cultural activism of conservative Christians during the 1980s because, along with their secular metal counterparts and activists, such as the members of the Parents Music Resource Center, they helped to politicize “youth” as a category linked to the “family values” debate in national politics.

In the aftermath of the social movements of the 1960s, some Christian conservatives were so alarmed about the harmful effects of youth culture—including heavy metal—that they spoke of the teenager as an endangered species. The evangelical magazine *Moody Monthly* went so far as to name the adolescent “one of the world’s critical mission fields” because “adolescents are the future of our country and the future of our churches.”<sup>3</sup> At the same time, evangelical Christians were acutely aware that consumer culture offered young people an ever-expanding range of choices. They used popular music as a way of introducing young people to their conception of morality while fulfilling youths’ desire to stay abreast of contemporary music styles.

Despite the tendency to link American Protestantism to concepts such as “work,” “thrift,” and “sobriety,” scholars in recent years have shown the long-standing connections between consumer culture and Christianity. R. Laurence Moore has suggested that, as a consequence of the First Amendment’s disestablishment clause and the growth of market culture in the early nineteenth century, religious groups were forced to compete with commercialized entertainment, resulting in innovations such as Dwight Moody’s use of modern business techniques and the Salvation Army’s affinity for street shows.<sup>4</sup> Historian Colleen McDannell has shown how, during the second half of the twentieth century, independent Christian bookstores catered to a growing evangelical population that believed that Christianity was a “lifestyle” as well as a belief system.<sup>5</sup> This trend was driven in part by the Jesus Movement, a revival in the 1960s and 1970s in which thousands of young people converted to Christianity. Free from the organizational hierarchies of established churches, young believers incorporated contemporary music into their faith by establishing record labels (Maranatha!), convening music festivals (Explo ’72 in Dallas), and starting music magazines (*Contemporary Christian Music*, later *CCM*).<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to the early years of Christian contemporary music—in which Christian bands played largely to and for believers—the Christian metal bands of the 1980s and early 1990s cultivated a secular audience, played on bills with secular bands, and occasionally signed with secular labels, all in an attempt to increase their influence and fan base in the mainstream music world.

Christian metal bands attempted to put metal's well-established themes and styles—which included topics such as good and evil and the occult—into service for God, and they sought to do so within (rather than removed from) the world of metal music. White metal, as it was often called, therefore represented an attempt at “cultural reform” among Christians. As anthropologist Susan Harding has noted, during the 1980s religious leaders like Jerry Falwell tried to change their flock from “fundamentalists,” who limited their engagement with and commitments to secular society, into “‘conservative Christians,’ who would fight worldly battles and who sought worldly power and influence in the name of ‘Christian values.’”<sup>7</sup> Rather than continue to promote a separate space for Christian culture—thereby surrendering popular music to the world—Christian heavy metal bands sought to engage, and perhaps redeem, the genre.

The increased efforts at Christian cultural activism mirrored white evangelicals' political mobilization during the same period. At the same time that the members of Stryken were storming the gates of the concert hall in San Antonio, other evangelical Christians were demanding entry into the political arena. White Christian conservatives, considered political novices in 1984, were by 1994 considered savvy political activists who were knowledgeable about the political process, mobilized at the local level, and vocal in promoting their national agenda. They had also established themselves as one of the GOP's core constituencies: more than 70 percent of white evangelicals voted for Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush in the victorious Republican presidential campaigns of 1984 and 1988, and in 1994 Christian leaders claimed to have played a vital role in bringing about the “Republican Revolution” that swept the first GOP majority since the early 1950s into Congress.<sup>8</sup>

During these key years of cultural and political mobilization among conservatives, heavy metal became one of the most important genres of American music. Heavy metal first emerged during the 1970s, when bands like Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, and Judas Priest fused elements of blues rock and psychedelic music. The genre exploded during the 1980s, when it fragmented into subgenres such as melodic (or glam) metal and speed/thrash metal. While often scorned by critics, heavy metal became big business: MTV put metal videos on frequent rotation in 1984, and while the network subsequently curtailed the genre's airtime, in 1988 metal accounted for 15 to 20 percent of industry revenue.<sup>9</sup> According to sociologist Deena Weinstein, heavy metal fell into two basic categories, both of which questioned established power and authority: Dionysian metal, which celebrated hedonism in the realms of sex and drugs, and Chaotic metal, which dwelt on emotional issues such as injustice, death, and rebellion and often used imagery drawn from Judeo-Christian

traditions.<sup>10</sup> Many of these themes were emphasized through visual means such as logos, album covers, music videos, and other band merchandise, as well as in live performances through costumes, lighting, and choreography.<sup>11</sup> There was also a distinctive sound to metal, which, as musicologist Robert Walser explains, featured powerful and loud vocals and guitar work that prized virtuosity and control and attempted “to communicate experiences of power and transcendent freedom” to listeners.<sup>12</sup>

As a result of its popularity and themes, metal drew fire from parental and religious groups. The resulting debates offer insights into concerns about the health of youth, youth culture, and national values during the 1980s. When the members of the Parents Music Resource Center appeared before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in 1985, they made heavy metal—or “porn rock,” as it was described during the session—the centerpiece of their testimony for establishing a system for music labeling. The popular press echoed these concerns, as *U.S. News and World Report* warned readers in a cover story that “America’s youth” was being bombarded by “electronic visions of a world so violent, sensual and narcotic that childhood itself appears to be under siege.”<sup>13</sup> A similar line of argument developed among conservative intellectuals, such as Allan Bloom, who lamented that rock music and television had supplanted parental authority over children’s moral education “at a time when no one else is seriously concerned with it.”<sup>14</sup>

Like the activists who railed against the content of heavy metal, Christian musicians believed that music—and the people who created music—influenced what young people thought and how they acted. Rather than simply condemn heavy metal for its assault on adult authority, the “metal missionaries” of these years saw an opportunity. The genre’s emphasis on theatrics and power—along with its use (or desecration) of sacred symbols—provided a perfect way for Christians to enter into a dialogue with secular culture while trying to attract young people to faith. Their efforts, in turn, caused controversies within the Christian community, as critics remained skeptical that musicians could reform such a worldly genre without corrupting their own values.

This essay analyzes the cultural politics of Christian heavy metal music created between 1984 and 1994, a period when conservative Christians mobilized both political and cultural forces in an effort to extend their influence and power in American society. An examination of Christian metal bands and their music provides insights into American evangelicalism as well as the larger culture. Popular music was vital to Christian conservatives’ intervention into American public life because they emphasized the importance of changing

hearts (a cultural issue) rather than votes (a political issue). But as bands proselytized among nonbelievers, they still had to prove to Christian audiences that they remained unchanged by “the world”—a difficult feat given some of the styles popular within the metal scene.<sup>15</sup> Christian participation in the metal world also speaks to ideas about American cultural contestation. By seeking out secular audiences, Christian metal bands broadened the conversation of American popular music to include a wider array of perspectives and confirmed the fluidity of oppositional cultural themes such as “rebellion” and “alienation.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Behind Enemy Lines: Spiritual Warfare with the Secular World**

In his analysis of religious sects in American history, R. Laurence Moore suggests that Christians’ accusations of subversion have often demonstrated their intense sense of dispossession from, and antagonism toward, dominant culture.<sup>17</sup> Evangelicals’ tradition of dissent has allowed them to approach American life as disfranchised populists, a status with—ironically—considerable cachet in both politics and popular culture. During the late twentieth century, conservative Christians embraced outsider rhetoric as they condemned the nation’s perceived moral decay, evidenced by the Supreme Court decisions on abortion and school prayer, the spread of secular humanism, and the inroads made by the gay rights and women’s rights movements. In 1992, Pat Buchanan delivered a speech at the Republican National Convention that encapsulated conservative believers’ feelings of alienation. After denouncing the recent riots in Los Angeles, Buchanan, a devout Roman Catholic, declared a “cultural war” and called upon American voters to “take back our cities, take back our culture and take back our country.”<sup>18</sup> Christian political and cultural activists of this era echoed Buchanan’s call to arms, as they urged their fellow believers to end their exile (whether self-imposed or forced) from public life. Ralph Reed, the executive director of the Christian Coalition, emphasized the political dangers encountered by believers when he famously invoked the guerilla warfare of the Vietnam War to describe his organization’s successful “stealth tactics” in local elections.<sup>19</sup> But conservative believers were also aware of cultural dangers, a concern made evident when Christian novelist Frank Peretti published his first thriller, *This Present Darkness*, which depicted spiritual warfare resulting from a New Age cult’s attempt to take over a small town.

During the mid-1980s, Christian musicians likewise found that the evangelical language of dissent gave them an entry point into the linguistic styles of metal music, a genre that emphasized themes of power and struggle. Chris-

tian metal bands described their forays into nightclubs, bars, and arenas across the country as part of an ongoing war against evil in which they were the underdogs. Steve Shannon of Idle Cure told *Heaven's Metal*, "Sometimes you have to go out on the battle lines. Sometimes you have to go out against Satan and use your shield of faith against him. Sometimes you need to go out in the world full-force, dressed in worldly garb, and be a light."<sup>20</sup> Some bands declared their objectives through their names. While secular metal bands had names like Anthrax, Mayhem, and Quiet Riot, the Christian metal scene produced bands such as Vengeance (later Vengeance Rising), which drew its name from the Bible's promise of punishment for those who do not obey God.<sup>21</sup> Another band, RECON, offered a more earthly model for exacting retribution. In an interview, George Ochoa explained the military model for his band's work:

All the outfits of the Armed Forces have [reconnaissance units], but I like the Marines because they do the down and dirty work, such as when the enemy has one or several hostages, they will be sent in, and they sneak their way in and [are] very wise about it, and blast their way in there, destroy the enemy and get the hostages out . . . I feel that's what we do basically spiritually—going behind enemy lines in enemy turf, the clubs . . . this world. We go there and proclaim the light of Jesus Christ and set the captives free . . . We don't hang around to get destroyed by the enemy.<sup>22</sup>

Ochoa's remarks demonstrate his band's hostility toward the world: the band needed to blast its way out of "enemy" territory, lest they get destroyed. Moreover, by suggesting that heavy metal fans were "captives" or "hostages" who were waiting to be rescued, the band implicated secular bands as the source of problems in the music world. Finally, by comparing his band's music to military special operations work, Ochoa suggested that the group's efforts held strategic moral importance.

As they battled on the frontlines of the music world, some Christian bands, like Gardian (later Guardian) and Stryken, came dressed for war (fig. 1). Gardian bassist David Bach explained the band's name and its approach to stage theatrics, which included futuristic battle armor:

We see [all] Christian bands [as] guardians. Guardians of the truth: God's Word. Especially in a world of secular metal . . . We do take our imagery from Ephesians 6:10–17—putting on the full armor of God. The armor we wear is theatrical armor, but it's symbolic of the real spiritual armor we wear. When we speak of our warfare image, it's symbolic of the real spiritual warfare that's goin' on right now in this world.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 1.**

Members of the Christian metal band Stryken wore futuristic battle armor that underscored their desire to conduct spiritual warfare with the world. Photograph courtesy of Stryken.



Unlike RECON's aggressive rhetoric, Gardian's armor suggested a defensive posture. Their gear still reflected combat readiness: certainly, the same armor would not be necessary for a band that played exclusively for Christian audiences. Yet Gardian also believed it had to reclaim its role from a hostile world—which, to use Paul's description of the conditions encountered by early Christians, was unfairly controlled by illegitimate powers: "the rulers," "the authorities," and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." The metal band Stryken, which drew its costume imagery from the same section of the New Testament, moved the notion of spiritual warfare from the metaphorical to the literal level, as when, in June 1986, band members joined Citizens Against Pornography in picketing a Texas adult theater in their stage costumes.<sup>24</sup>

With such negative characterizations of the world, one might assume that Christian bands avoided their mainstream counterparts. Such separation would not have been impossible, since many cities had a Christian club or a sympathetic church where bands could have played. Yet, in a tendency that reflected evangelicals' simultaneous embrace of reform and alienation, many bands were eager to share the stage with secular acts. Aside from spiritual warfare, which could be waged only on the enemy's turf, Christian bands often claimed that they were playing at nightclubs in order to reach "the lost." Jim LaVerde of Southern California's Barren Cross reasoned that his band needed secular groups to open for it because "the motivation to get a non-Christian to come [to a show] is to see a secular band."<sup>25</sup> Christian bands remained hopeful about nonbelieving fans, who were believed to need only a moral alternative to secular music. Roxalt drummer Jim Brandt explained how a heavy metal fan could be seduced by metal music. Bands used "satanic lyrics" that promoted a lifestyle intended "to bring in anarchy and . . . total degeneration . . . from everything God has planned for humans." Christian bands intervened at this degraded level by providing "good, wholesome entertainment that Christians and non-Christians can come and listen to."<sup>26</sup> Since nonbelievers could not be counted on to attend a religious service, Christians bands responded by bringing a revival into urban nightlife. At least one promoter deftly turned the moral duality into a marketing opportunity by offering a "Heaven and Hell" night that featured Christian and satanic metal bands on the bill.<sup>27</sup>

Christian metal groups played all over the country, but there was a particularly strong community of bands in Los Angeles during the 1980s, some of whom began to perform at popular Sunset Strip venues like the Palace and the Roxy. These bands, which included Holy Soldier, Eternal Ryte, Gardian, Stryper, and Barren Cross, viewed themselves as an important counterbalance to Los Angeles-based secular metal bands like Motley Crüe, Van Halen,

W.A.S.P., and Ratt. There was even a local church, Sanctuary, that specifically ministered to heavy metal fans and went so far as to establish a band, Vengeance, charged with, in the words of its pastor, “[infiltrating] the underground thrash metal scene”; the church also kept a list of endorsed bands who had submitted to a screening process of members’ lifestyles, church ties, and “history with Christ.”<sup>28</sup>

When bands actually played at nightclubs, they found that, as in the demon possession stories in the New Testament, the devil was not easily exorcised from venues: although they claimed some success, unsaved fans received bands with indifference or even hostility. A band’s message had something to do with its reception. Although Christian bands were meeting nonbelievers on their turf, they did not dilute their message. Holy Soldier vocalist Lary Dean, whose band played at both Christian clubs and at non-Christian venues with bands like Omen and Pandemonium, described his group’s reception at secular bars to a Christian magazine: “You walk on stage in a bar with a Bible, and the place is going to empty out, or you’re going to be wearing beer.” Maybe it was something he said: Dean then explained that the band did not alter its spiritual message when it went into the clubs. He later mentioned that the band once held an altar call—an invitation to commit one’s life to Jesus—during a performance at the Whiskey, a popular nightclub on the Sunset Strip. In an earlier interview, Dean optimistically recalled that most audience members “really responded to what the Spirit was saying on their heart.”<sup>29</sup> Other bands found that certain tactics could compel the devil’s minions to abandon territory in full retreat. This too was considered a success, although for different reasons. In 1987, Gardian was invited to play at a show at the Palace called “New World Rock Playoffs,” where the audience comprised mostly non-Christians. The band gleefully reported that, while praying before the show, they decided to preach the gospel rather than perform their usual set. After a few songs, the lead singer began to preach. Their efforts were not well received, evidenced by the fans who were “trickling back to the bar one-by-one,” then “leaving by fives.” Another band member added that “some of the people were givin’ us the finger and shouting stuff at us, so it was definitely a night of warfare.”<sup>30</sup> In this instance, band members viewed themselves as holy messengers to an unrepentant crowd.

Not all bands with Christian members were eager to share their beliefs with secular audiences. A few, like King’s X and Trouble, considered themselves to be “secular” bands and therefore avoided the “Christian” label (in part because not all members were believers), even as Christian magazines published features about them. Other bands suggested that their counterparts who sought

secular audiences had betrayed their values and given in to worldly temptations: these bands had “sold out” their Christianity for success. To avoid the taint of the music industry, Sardonyx produced its own album and newsletter. In one issue, singer Tom Denlinger expressed disdain for worldly success, arguing that “every successful band that has experienced secular approval has hardened [itself] against ministry.”<sup>31</sup> Sardonyx would be validated not by album sales but by persecution, which “drives the church into a deeper fellowship with one another and their Lord.”<sup>32</sup>

The “secular approval” that worried Denlinger was a relative term. When measured strictly by industry standards, Christian metal bands were only modestly successful—especially in comparison to the impressive sales garnered by Christian pop artists such as Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith. But even if Christian metal bands achieved only a small market share, they nonetheless succeeded in infusing their beliefs into the discourse; despite the inflated claims of mantles like “the Moral Majority,” some Christian political activists believed that influencing 6 or 7 percent of voter turnout could make a difference in an election.<sup>33</sup> Still, a few Christian metal bands began to appear on the pages of secular magazines like *Kerrang!* and *Hit Parader*, on MTV, and, on a few

**Figure 2.**

During the 1980s, Christian metal bands attempted to cross over to mainstream audiences by appearing in popular magazines. Robert Sweet, the drummer for Stryper, appeared on the cover of *Kerrang!* in December 1985. The article proclaimed Stryper to be “avenging angels” who would “strike a chord with the increasingly straight-laced, God-fearing U.S. populace.” Photograph courtesy of Ross Halfin/Idols UK.

occasions, on the *Billboard* pop charts (fig. 2). While mainstream radio airplay remained beyond the grasp of most Christian metal artists, they could take solace in the fact that the venerable metal groups Iron Maiden and Judas Priest had established their reputation through touring rather than via Top 40 success.<sup>34</sup> Stryper, best known for dressing in yellow and black and for tossing Bibles to its audience at performances, was the most successful Christian metal act. The band had a recording contract with Capitol Records (their label mates W.A.S.P. threw raw meat to its audience) and released several gold and platinum albums with videos that received airplay on MTV. Crossover album sales remained low in the 1980s, however, because most acts were affiliated with Christian labels that distributed their product primarily in religious bookstores. But by the late 1980s, mainstream labels began to establish a foothold in Christian music through distribution alliances or outright purchase, leading *Billboard* to predict that Christian music could be “the Next Big Thing.”<sup>35</sup> The sales numbers supported these forecasts: about 20 million albums were sold in 1984, a figure that jumped to 33.3 million albums in 1996 and 49.8



million in 1999, reflecting the broader availability of Christian music at large retail outlets like Wal-Mart and Tower Records.<sup>36</sup>

While Christian metal bands achieved mixed results on the music charts, they were more successful in establishing a sustained discussion with secular metal musicians. One evangelical fan magazine highlighted this dialogue by opening its pages to secular bands, thereby acknowledging that Christian and secular bands shared common musical influences—and sometimes beliefs. *Heaven's Metal*, renamed *Hard Music* (*HM*) in the early 1990s, primarily covered Christian hard music, but in each issue the magazine printed a transcript of a staff member's interview with secular musicians such as Kirk Hammett of Metallica and Scott Rockenfield of Queensrÿche. At some point in the session, the interviewer always asked two questions, "What do you think of Jesus Christ?" and "What do you think of [Jesus'] claims to be the way, the truth, and the life?"<sup>37</sup> *HM* interviewed Dave Mustaine of Megadeth, a thrash metal band that, like other secular bands, used religious metaphors and imagery in songs such as "Looking down the Cross." *HM* editor Doug Van Pelt found that they shared not just a common taste in metal music but also a similar value system:

DM: . . . I've seen more stuff than you could possibly ever see in your lifetime . . . My own pastor said that I could do more by living my life right, playing hard, and doing my gigs, than going around saying, "Hallelujah, Jesus loves you." And I know that God knows that too, so I don't do that shtick . . . I'm a father, I'm a husband. I'm loyal to my wife and family, and that's the best thing that I can do for them.

DVP: . . . The true definition is "Christ-like" . . .

DM: . . . you know, me being in a 12-step program, one of the main tenets of this program is to treat people like you want to be treated. And that goes back to the Sermon on the Mount, where there are the two new commandments that Christ put down. One about, "love God with all your whole heart, soul, mind and body," and the other one about, "Love your neighbor as yourself." . . . Those are the two core things I live by.<sup>38</sup>

Mustaine sought therapeutic as well as religious solutions to his drug addiction, but the interview showed readers that some mainstream groups held "Christian" values even if they did not evangelize.

### The Message in Christian Metal Music

Heavy metal provided an appealing arena for cultural contestation in part because the genre addressed themes and used imagery that were important—even sacred—to Christian audiences. The common symbols, while used in divergent ways, provided an entry point for evangelical commentary. As Rob-

ert Walser explains, the genre's sound emphasized themes of power and freedom, which were concepts that Christian metal bands could reinterpret to express the benefits salvation and faith.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, metal bands had long used religious tropes in different aspects of their work. As Deena Weinstein points out, bands such as Iron Maiden and Judas Priest mined Christianity (and pre-Christian European religions) for references to chaos and struggle.<sup>40</sup> Other bands used religious terms for band names (Shotgun Messiah, Judas Priest) or album titles (Dio's *Sacred Heart*, Black Sabbath's *Heaven and Hell*). Still more bands referenced the devil as a companion (a longtime theme of blues music) or hell as a destination, and many critics accused bands like Led Zeppelin and, later, Slayer of cultivating an association with Satanism or the occult. Christian groups responded to these themes by writing songs that emphasized divine power and the importance of faith in prevailing over chaos; one Christian disc jockey succinctly explained the difference by suggesting, "Secular bands ask the questions [that] Christian bands answer."<sup>41</sup>

Christian bands thought that heavy metal directly influenced what its young fans believed and how they acted. They argued that secular metal artists had at best ignored their responsibility to young fans and at worst had used their work to encourage disorder, so it was no wonder that America was experiencing a blight of social problems among adolescents. However, as much as Christian musicians wished to curtail the authority of secular artists, they did not want to eradicate the influence that music had on American youth. Rather, they aimed, first, to limit the effect that secular rock musicians had on listeners. Second, they hoped to use the existing relationship between culture and social power as well as the existing themes of heavy metal to insert "Christian" ideas about authority and responses to alienation into the minds of young people. By usurping the vaunted cultural position that secular artists already held, Christian bands believed they could provide models for moral living and, in turn, inspire a return to submission to the authority of parents, God, and churches among their youthful fan base.

Bands tended to use all aspects of their work—including interviews, lyrics, liner notes, album art, and music videos—to convey a "Christian" perspective. The messages can be placed into two categories. First, Christian metal bands tried to impart not just the virtues of salvation but also the values of personal responsibility through their music. Christian bands usually approached the lessons through straightforward exhortations for faith in Jesus or through first-person narratives that talked about salvation.<sup>42</sup> Despite a tradition of focusing on spiritual rather than social issues, Christian metal bands expanded their repertoire to include a second kind of message, which commented on

contemporary events. In these songs, bands explicitly addressed cultural and political topics such as abortion, drugs and alcohol, divorce, and national values.

Christian metal bands understood the importance of making their message of salvation clear to their audience. At a time when local and federal governments pressured the record industry into beginning a labeling system for rock lyrics, bands like Sardonyx and Vengeance offered listeners lyrics, thematic explications, and scriptural information for further study.<sup>43</sup> Bands like Holy Soldier and Whitecross shared the concern about clarity, as they told interviewers that their songs employed “upfront” language—not “Christian-ese” that used phrases like “born-again” or “saved”—that made their work “accessible” to non-Christians.<sup>44</sup>

Bands also used their music to address social issues. These songs resembled the outlook of other conservatives of the 1980s, when many on the Right became involved in single-issue campaigns that reflected concern about “domestic corruption” such as pornography, gay rights, and abortion.<sup>45</sup> Although the efforts by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson to mobilize Christian conservatives for political activism are well documented, metal bands were an integral part of the cultural work of the Christian Right. While Robertson’s 1988 presidential campaign built on Civil Rights-era practices of voter registration drives and voter guides, Christian rock bands used music to comment on contemporary society.

Christian metal musicians’ issue-based songs reflected their sincere belief that young listeners used lyrics as guidelines for behavior.<sup>46</sup> Christian bands often described their work as counterpoints that explained the “Christian point of view” on topics affecting young people, including suicide, drug use, and sexual promiscuity. Metal acts like Ozzy Osborne, AC/DC, and Judas Priest were accused of promoting suicide in songs, and in an effort to counteract this trend, Empty Tomb, Rapture, and Bloodgood each recorded a song about suicide.<sup>47</sup> Secular bands like W.A.S.P. and Motley Crüe paid tribute to drugs and alcohol, and substance abuse was a topic of concern for Christian bands—many of which included preconversion drug users. Still more bands registered songs on hot Christian topics such as evolution (One Bad Pig’s song “Let’s Be Frank”), cults (Barren Cross’s song “Cultic Regimes”), gay rights (Torn Flesh’s “Gay Rights?”), and abstinence/premarital sex (Zion’s “Sold you a Lie” and Lust Control’s “Virginity Disease”).<sup>48</sup>

Abortion received by far the most attention from Christian metal bands, which were uniformly pro-life. During the 1980s and 1990s, several bands wrote at least one song that addressed abortion: REZ (“Fiend or Foul”), Barren Cross (“Killers of the Unborn”), King’s X (“Legal Kill”), Holy Danger

("Don't Slaughter Your Daughter"), Hellfire ("Abolish Legal Murder"), Guardian ("World Without Love"), and Lust Control ("Planned Parenthood" and "Operation Rescue").<sup>49</sup> Holy Soldier also used abortion as a theme for its video for "See No Evil" (1990).<sup>50</sup> Other bands, like Exodus II ("Choose Life"), featured booths offering anti-abortion literature and stickers at concerts; according to *Heaven's Metal*, the booth referred pregnant young women to "a nearby pro-life crisis pregnancy center" for assistance.<sup>51</sup> The issue even inspired Christian musicians to produce a benefit song in the vein of Band Aid, the mid-1980s musicians' benefit for victims of famine in Africa. In 1985, Christian artists ranging from pop music's Debby Boone to heavy metal's Barren Cross recorded "Fight the Fight" to benefit Americans Against Abortion.<sup>52</sup>

While Christian artists of all genres recorded pro-life songs, the punk/thrash band Lust Control offered one of the most strident condemnations of abortion.<sup>53</sup> Band leader Doug Van Pelt later explained that he started the group as a ministry that addressed issues ignored by the church. According to Van Pelt, "God was not silent on these issues, so we screamed out some answers."<sup>54</sup> The band's 1992 release, "We Are Not Ashamed," included two songs that directly addressed abortion. The song "Planned Parenthood" began by praising "godly" parents, teachers, and preachers but quickly condemned Planned Parenthood before moving to the chorus, which directly accused the organization with the lyrics, "You justify murder and fornication." The song later drew more battle lines and connected the organization to another contemporary movement, gay liberation: "You are pro-abortion/You are pro-gay rights/I know one thing that you're against/You are anti-Christ!!!"<sup>55</sup> While Lust Control accused Planned Parenthood of being "anti-Christ," they viewed Operation Rescue more favorably and even wrote a song about the movement. In contrast to the accusative "you" of "Planned Parenthood," the lyrics for "Operation Rescue" were written from the perspective of someone within the movement.

Bands did not just allow the lyrics to speak for themselves; they frequently expounded on social themes in interviews. Although the sound and content of the music suggested confrontation, musicians wanted their work to serve "traditional" ends. Jim LaVerde of Barren Cross, one of the more politically minded bands, explained the message in his band's music: "We don't promote violence, drug traffic, or sex. We promote something very positive, something that would get the family back together as a unit."<sup>56</sup> The band believed it needed to guide converts on complicated contemporary issues that arose in the lives of even the most devout believers. Singer Mike Lee told an interviewer, "I'm a very politically minded person, and I regard [Barren Cross] as a very socially conscious band. There's a lot more to life than just 'Jesus saves.' . . . We

try to meet people's needs in areas like suicide, drug abuse, children of alcoholic parents, abortion."<sup>57</sup> As part of their effort to be a "socially conscious band," band members penned a song, "Killers of the Unborn," that offered "God's view" on abortion.<sup>58</sup> Steve Whitaker recounted a story of how a woman approached him after a show and asked him to sign an autograph for her "unborn child."<sup>59</sup> Whitaker thus suggested that the song had strengthened a bond between mother and "unborn child": by securing an autograph, the young woman was already acting at the behest of the fetus.

As the comments by members of Barren Cross indicate, Christian bands frequently spoke about how their music addressed and affected young people. In many ways, Christian bands saw the same alienation that was expressed in punk music of the same era, but their explanation for its causes and the necessary response to this issue differed. While hardcore punks of the same era refused integration into family, school, work, or consumerism, the Christian metal bands of the 1980s and early 1990s attempted to reconcile young people to these institutions and practices through a youth culture that offered an intense religious experience, personal salvation, and a strict moral code, but with a "rebellious edge."<sup>60</sup>

The Christian metal/punk band One Bad Pig typified this approach to using youth culture to induce young people to accept middle-class social norms. Band members particularly emphasized their concern for children of divorced parents, as when Paul Q-Pek told *Take a Stand* about some of his group's fans, which included "kids from broken homes coming for prayer and healing," "confused kids that don't understand what's going on in their lives," and even Christian kids who had "fallen away" but wanted to "become victorious over" sin.<sup>61</sup> Like its hardcore counterparts, One Bad Pig found plenty to criticize about suburban culture, but their targets differed. Whereas hardcore punks fought the existential voids created by postsuburbia with what historian G. Dewar Macleod has called "a violent, individualist, anti-political politics of refusal," One Bad Pig pointed to what the group perceived as the pervasive nihilism, secularism, and permissiveness within suburban culture and sought to use music and religion to salve these social wounds and create new beginnings.<sup>62</sup>

Concerned that they might fail to excise the anti-authoritarian elements of rock from their work, bands attempted to redefine "rebellion" as resistance to sin and obedience to parental, church, and divine authority. When asked what he wanted to say to *Heaven's Metal* readers, recording artist Steve Camp described metal as "a very radical form of music" that adults associated only with "rebellion." In response to these accusations, Camp advised readers, "Use [metal music] to cause rebellion against hell. Use [metal music] to cause rebellion on

the world that's trying to conform people against Jesus Christ."<sup>63</sup> In a sense, Camp was reiterating a generational refrain: adults just didn't understand. But Camp's meaning diverged from the old message, as he suggested that conformity to contemporary society's will rested in sin, not prayer. In this interpretation, Christians were those truly in opposition to prevailing social norms: obedience was the true transgression, and personal morality became the basis for reform. Similarly, when a magazine asked musician Michael Bloodgood to write an article about "What's Wrong with Christian Music," he focused on the "rebellious attitude" as one area in need of improvement:

Now I'm all for rebellion: rebellion against the world's eroding values and morals (i.e., legalized abortion, pornography, etc.); rebellion against the violations of our fellow man's rights; rebellion against any authority who tries to suppress my freedom to worship as I choose . . . rebellion against any world system that goes against the Bible and the things of God. However, the attitude of rebellion that I'm talking about must be centered in God's love; not in uncontrolled emotionalism or with disrespect for those who might not agree with us. The latter group might include our teachers, parents, and pastors who might not share your enthusiasm for rock and roll.<sup>64</sup>

"Permissible" rebellion, according to Bloodgood, included either a specific stand against abortion and pornography or a defense of freedom of religion. Bloodgood vaguely blamed the world for curtailing values and rights: one could surmise that he advocated rebellion against society—for eroding values—or possibly against the government—which allowed legalized abortion and pornography. But Bloodgood specifically warned that rebellion should not include "disrespect" for embodied authorities such as teachers, parents, and pastors. Bloodgood later reminded readers that even Jesus submitted to his earthly parents. Other bands defined "rebellion" in relation to their responsibilities as Christian musicians in a secular musical universe. When asked if Stryper used its music as "rebellion against evil," Michael Sweet carefully sought to avoid the "rebellious" label, then defined his band as one that was "trying their hardest to get rid of the Devil in rock 'n' roll," which meant "getting rid of drugs" and "sex outside of marriage" in rock music.<sup>65</sup>

While Michael Sweet seemed reluctant to accept the word "rebellion" in relation to his work, the metal/punk band One Bad Pig enthusiastically embraced the word as it discussed its position in the punk music industry. The band claimed that it had been rejected by a major label because of its Christian identity, leading Paul Q-Pek to say,

Even in a movement that has as its very purpose to be offensive, to break rules, being just anti-whatever else there was, here we were: a band with a hardcore sound speaking about

Jesus. What could be more controversial and offensive than that? It just seems like the message of the Gospel will offend even the ones who have a goal to offend people.<sup>66</sup>

More than a decade before Q-Pek made his remarks, Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols had roiled audiences by declaring “I am an antichrist” in the song “Anarchy in the U.K.,” only to have his band’s record label cease production and distribution of its album—effectively banning the band from British airwaves—after band members misbehaved on national television.<sup>67</sup> Blending the traditions of Christian and punk outsiderdom, One Bad Pig rested its claim to rebellion on songs that suggested “Anarchy Is Prison,” religious testimonies that proclaimed the Gospel, and rejection from secular record labels. The band even incorporated this rebellion into its first independent release, titled “A Christian Banned.”

### Justifying Metal to the Conservative Church

Although greeted somewhat incredulously by the secular world, Christian musicians received their harshest criticism from their conservative brethren in the church. Members of secular bands had it easy: they only had to negotiate the perils of sex, drugs, and rock ’n’ roll, whereas Christian bands had to worry about the pitfalls of theology and doctrine as well as condemnations from outraged ministers who asserted that “Christian rock” was a contradiction in terms.<sup>68</sup> Bands were confronted with a dilemma that had vexed conservative Protestants since the Scopes Trial in 1925: they could remain “separate” from the world and play only to religious audiences, a path chosen by fundamentalists during much of the twentieth century, or they could engage with the world while being careful to avoid internalizing its values, a choice favored by evangelicals. By selecting the evangelical route and seeking secular audiences, Christian metal groups faced the difficult task of explaining to believers how they could successfully replicate rock ’n’ roll (evidence of their role “in the world”) without becoming corrupted (evidence of being “of the world”).

When Christian metal bands entered into the mainstream music world, they drew upon a rhetorical tradition of dissent as well as the religious themes addressed in mainstream metal. Conversations with Christian audiences, however, required a separate source for justification, and both anti-rock critics and metal musicians reached for their Bibles for textual evidence of God’s will on the issue of “Christian rock.” Both sides managed to find ample evidence to prove their argument, and the resulting discussions demonstrated the difficulty of trying to interpret the Bible literally. Jimmy Swaggart—a fundamen-

talist, Southern gospel recording artist, and cousin of rock 'n' roll pioneer Jerry Lee Lewis—was one of Christian rock music's most ardent critics. In one pamphlet, Swaggart argued that, regardless of lyrical content, secular and Christian rock were indistinguishable; the problem with Christian rock was that “it strives to make Christ acceptable to man rather than man acceptable to Christ.”<sup>69</sup> As evidence, Swaggart invoked one of fundamentalists' favorite biblical passages (2 Corinthians 6:17), in which Paul warns the Corinthians to “be ye separate . . . and touch not the unclean thing.”<sup>70</sup> Yet Christian metal musicians also used scriptural evidence to support their stance. Glenn Kaiser of REZ, one of the oldest and most respected Christian rock bands, told *Heaven's Metal* that there were “380 verses in Scripture that speak to music: 40 in the New Testament and 340 in the Old.”<sup>71</sup> Swaggart countered that while music was indeed used for worship in the Bible, there was “not one scriptural reference in the Bible tying music and evangelism together.”<sup>72</sup> Christian musicians persisted and even tried to instill their work with religious significance by likening their work to preachers like Billy Graham. Guitarist Michael Cutting of Holy Soldier even compared his band's efforts to Jesus' work among the unwashed of his time. Just as Jesus “went to the sinner” and “ministered to them [*sic*],” some bands had “a special calling” to minister to the lost who frequented contemporary clubs.<sup>73</sup>

Even as Christian bands insisted that they drew their goals from biblical mandate, they allowed some rather worldly practices to define their understanding of professionalism. As much as the bands defined themselves *against* secular bands in terms of morality and discipline, they strived to emulate secular metal in sound quality, live performance, and appearance and felt compelled to explain why these similarities were necessary for evangelical success. There was a simple division in Christian thought: that is, Christian artists and fans disagreed whether metal music should be a lifestyle or a tool. Metal as a lifestyle presented Christians with a broad set of problems, as it suggested that personal preference took precedence over faith. On the other hand, if metal was a tool, Christians could clothe themselves in the culture's accoutrements because it aided their goals as missionaries who sought to bring glory to God.

Perhaps the most controversial syncretism involved costume and hairstyle. In the metal world, artists often used clothing and hair as a means of transgressing conventional understandings of gender (especially masculinity) and sexuality; as Robert Walser suggests, approaches have included misogyny, “exscription” of the feminine, and androgyny.<sup>74</sup> Many Christian bands favored “glam” rock, which featured ornate costumes and hairstyles as well as a sound that emphasized melody rather than aggression. But for conservative Chris-

tians, clothes and hair provided important insights about gender roles: long hair on men suggested effeminacy, and conservatives were as likely to denounce this type of cultural challenge to “traditional” gender norms—regardless of its prevalence in the mainstream—as they were political ones like the Equal Rights Amendment. Moreover, some Protestant translations of the Bible used “effeminacy” and “sodomy” interchangeably, so the challenge to “manliness” presented by long hair and glam makeup posed a further threat to heterosexual norms at a time when Christian conservatives blamed gay men for the AIDS epidemic, applauded the 1986 Supreme Court decision to uphold sodomy laws in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, and organized anti-gay rights ordinances in local communities. Echoing the stance of their politically active brethren, Christian bands like Contagious cited the pride of gay rights activists as a sign of the coming rapture, while Torn Flesh boasted that homosexuals who had called the band’s “Mosh Hotline” to complain about the song “Gay Rights?” had first heard a five-minute sermon on “what God thinks of the issue.”<sup>75</sup> Homosexuality was certainly taboo for Christian musicians: in 1999, after *HM* editor Doug Van Pelt published a lengthy (and sympathetic) interview with Doug Pinnick of King’s X in which they discussed Pinnick’s homosexuality, conservative fans angrily denounced the musician.<sup>76</sup>

Because bands feared that their intentions would be misconstrued, musicians explained that they needed to use certain styles to look professional. They distanced themselves from the clothes by referring to them as “stage makeup,” “costumes,” or “uniforms.” Guitarist Bob Smith of Eternal Rye assured readers that the band’s stage appearance was just an act: “All the stuff we use on stage as far as what we wear and how we look and what we do to our hair; when we leave that stage, it all stays there.” Smith’s band mate emphasized that fans judged them by standards set by secular bands, so Christian bands needed to be a “step ahead” because they were “out there representing God.”<sup>77</sup> Hairstyles proved particularly difficult to justify, since, unlike a costume, long hair could not be removed when band members were offstage. As in their attempts to justify Christian rock music, bands scoured the Bible for a directive that justified their position on long hair. One interviewer asked Jim LaVerde about long hair, in light of a biblical passage (1 Corinthians 6:9–10) that suggested to the interviewer that “effeminates won’t inherit the kingdom of God” and the common notion that “guys with long hair are effeminates.” LaVerde responded by claiming that Jesus and the apostles had long hair, as did Samson. But he also countered the author’s reading of the verse by quoting from a later passage in the same book (1 Corinthians 11:11–14), arguing that it simply talked about “neat, clean hair.”<sup>78</sup> At other times, bands dis-

missed the controversy over long hair as cultural, as when a member of the band Gardian told *Gospel Metal*, “Long hair is a cultural attitude.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite reassurances that musicians were leading heterosexual lives that conformed to conservative Christian interpretation, there was concern that their clothing suggested otherwise. Some musicians seemed unconvinced that costumes did not undermine both gender roles and sexuality. David Raymond Reeves explained that he had left Neon Cross because he viewed the band’s decision to go “glam” as a “compromise”: “With the makeup, I felt that I was dressing as a girl.”<sup>80</sup> Fans were at times similarly unnerved by the genre’s gender-bending tendencies, demonstrated in a 1987 *Heaven’s Metal* reader’s poll that asked fans to name the “biggest problem in Christian rock”; the “effeminate appearance by many Christian metal artists” registered as the sixth greatest concern among fans.<sup>81</sup> A few years later, *White Throne* ran a photograph of the male lead singer for Virginia Creeper, who wore makeup as well as fishnet stockings, leather gloves, an off-the-shoulder shirt, a rhinestone choker, and hoop earrings. Outraged readers declared that the singer had violated moral and gender guidelines. One man wrote, “It’s bad enough for men to dress like women but this Virginia Creeper guy is dressed like an immoral woman.”<sup>82</sup> In a sense, Christian bands were vulnerable to questions about masculinity in ways that their secular counterparts were not: after all, Motley Crüe and W.A.S.P. sang about their (hetero)sexual conquests, gave interviews in which they discussed their sexual exploits, and made videos that featured scantily clad women. Christian publications assuaged fears about Christian beliefs and metal lifestyles by offering features like “Rock ’n’ Roll Wives,” in which the wives of the members of Barren Cross spoke of “the importance, responsibility, and balance of family in a music ministry.”<sup>83</sup>

Critics also worried that metal styles provoked heterosexual desire in both fans and musicians. Bands were particularly worried that they were distracting female fans from worshipping God. When asked about “groupies,” some bands claimed that they resisted groupies with the help of the Holy Spirit.<sup>84</sup> Others expressed disgust at fans who idolized them, as when a member of Deliverance complained to *Heaven’s Metal*, “It’s mostly girls I talk to and it’s, ‘Oh they’re so cute’ . . . You never hear any ministry comments or where, ‘They’re so into the Lord.’ . . . if they’re idolizing Christ through us, fine. But if they’re idolizing the band, I have problems with it.”<sup>85</sup> The musician worried that fans had merely substituted a Christian rock idol for a secular idol and that while the band had reached the flock, the flock had not heard the message. Other artists implied that they had replaced sexual desire with religious faith. When *Hit Parader*, a magazine that was usually filled with tales of the sexual exploits

of mainstream bands, asked Robert Sweet how Stryper dealt with flirtatious female fans on the road, he responded that women who wanted “to go back to the hotel with us” would approach the band backstage. Sweet then explained, “We’re only too happy to oblige—but not for the reason you probably think . . . They probably come to us for sex, but we try to tell them we’ve found something even better than sex—the word of Jesus Christ.”<sup>86</sup>

Judging from a fan letter sent to *Metal*, a mainstream fan magazine, bands’ fears about idolatry may have been well founded. After a reader disparaged Stryper, Miss Jane Ann Evans of Henrietta, Texas, defended the group in a letter that argued that the band “kick[s] some serious rock ’n’ roll” while noting that critics who wanted the group banished would get their wish when Rapture occurred. But the letter writer also professed a physical attraction to the band: she bragged about the hundred pictures of the band that adorned her room and maintained that “Robert Sweet is the most GORGEOUS babe I’ve ever laid eyes on!”<sup>87</sup> Just as bands like Stryper blurred the line between Christianity and the world, fans also mixed secular and Christian behaviors: while the letter writer was a professing Christian, she was also a fan who idolized her favorite band in a manner comparable to secular fans.

## Conclusion

The significance of Christian metal rests not in commercial success or in the originality of its form but rather in what it reveals about evangelicals’ relationship to the dominant culture and music of the period. Evangelicals’ involvement with heavy metal represented a part of the renewal of their reformist impulse, as it coincided with the high tide of the nation’s “culture wars.” Many of the battles in this sustained fight centered on competing discourses about “youth” created by secular and evangelical culture. Within organizations like Operation Rescue and the Christian Coalition, Christian activists undertook public campaigns in the name of children and families, but they did not directly address young people. Popular culture represented another arena for contestation, especially since entertainment provided an accessible example of the challenges posed to “traditional” authority; it also allowed Christians to proselytize among young people. Given the negative publicity surrounding the heavy metal genre in both religious and secular circles, it was generally agreed that metal represented the extreme of the music world. While moral activists like the PMRC attempted to limit the content of popular music from the confines of Senate hearing rooms, Christian metal musicians framed their critique within the genre’s musical conversation and ventured directly into

secular nightclubs and charts. By engaging with secular metal, Christian musicians signaled that, in the “war of position” over American youth, evangelicals were not willing to cede even the farthest reaches of the music world to either secular or satanic control.

Christian heavy metal music also provides insights into traditions of opposition in American society. Much of the scholarship on youth culture (particularly among the working class) has emphasized its potential as a source of resistance to dominant ideologies, but the cultural work of evangelicals proves that the definition of concepts such as “rebellion” and “alienation” have no fixed meaning. Christian metal bands redefined the nature of “rebellion” in an effort to show that in a post-Christian (and post-1960s) world, true rebellion was to be identified as obedience to biblical authority and resistance to a sinful world. Yet Christian metal bands possessed a legitimate claim to themes about “rebellion” and “alienation,” even as they sought to deploy them to advance acceptance to white middle-class values such as family, marriage, and “traditional” gender roles. But given some of the gender-bending styles of the genre, it seemed as though bands were often undermining the categories they sought to reify. Still, to proselytize within the dominant culture in the 1980s, Christian bands did not have to invent a new vocabulary or “co-opt” secular culture. Rather, as bands sought to become cultural insiders, they drew upon their long-standing traditions of dissent and engagement with the secular marketplace to reinterpret the meaning of popular music themes.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the American Historical Association, Pacific Coast Branch meeting in 2002, and at the American Studies Association meeting in 2002. I would like to thank the following people for their comments and suggestions: Jon Wiener, Mike Davis, Thelma Foote, Vicki L. Ruiz, Mike Masatsugu, Marita Sturken, Stacey Lynn, Heather Hendershot, and an anonymous reader for *American Quarterly*.

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76. A version of the interview is available online: <http://www.hmmagazine.com/oc/archives/000367.php?page=all> (accessed January 20, 2004). The lack of openly gay artists was not exclusive to Christian metal: only a year before, Rob Halford of Judas Priest became the first secular metal artist to acknowledge that he is gay.
77. "Eternal Ryte," *Heaven's Metal* 2, no. 2 (1986), 3.
78. "Barren Cross Interview," *Gospel Metal*, fall 1987, 25–27. In the New Revised Standard Version, 1 Corinthians 6:9–10 reads, in part, "Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God." In the King James Bible, the word "effeminate" replaces "sodomites." The second passage referenced reads, in part, "Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" 1 Corinthians 11:14–15, NRSV.
79. "Gardian," *Gospel Metal*, fall 1987, 22–27.
80. "Neon Cross," *Gospel Metal*, fall 1987, 15–18.
81. "Results of Readers' Poll," *Heaven's Metal* 3, no. 3 (1987), 20–21.
82. Dave Muttillio, review of *Power Down in the Fun House*, by Virginia Creeper, *White Throne*, no. 11 (1992), 61; Sound Off, *White Throne*, no. 12 (1992), 9.
83. Christy Arnold, Randy Rocker, and Tara Jensen, "Rock 'n' Roll Wives Interview with Christine Whitaker and Lisa Lee of Barren Cross," *Take a Stand*, December 1988, 3–4.
84. "Interview with Sacred Warrior," *Gospel Metal*, no. 6 (1989), 20–21.
85. Deliverance, "Quotable Quotes," *Heaven's Metal* 2, no. 6 (1987), 14.
86. Andy Secher, "Stryper: Angels with Dirty Faces" *Hit Parader*, January 1987, 56–57.
87. Chain Mail Section, *Metal*, December 1988, 4.