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Book offers peek at pop artists' faith

By Jason White

Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Moby praising pornography and Jesus. Johnny Cash singing gospel songs while strung-out on drugs. P. Diddy rapping about guns and God.



These are just a few of the conflicting images at the heart of a new book on religion and music, "Spiritual Journeys: How Faith Has Influenced 12 Music Icons." The book, which includes contributions from five authors, explores the religious beliefs of some of the biggest stars in pop music today, from Bono to Bob Dylan to Lauryn Hill.

Foundational to the book is a notion that pop stars are like modern day preachers, singing songs with messages more powerful than one hears Sunday mornings. In trying to understand these messages, the book takes pop stars and their religious beliefs seriously.

"We don't trust the guy in the suit reading to us from the Bible, banging the pulpit and shouting about the end times. We do, however, trust the guy in the baggy pants and FUBU jersey telling us what life is like, what relationships are like, where hope can be found," Jason Boyett writes in the introduction to the book.

Boyett says the goal of the book is to understand the pop stars for who they are in and of themselves, not to cram them into some traditional understanding of what a religious person should look like.

“The purpose is not to pigeonhole them into a certain faith tradition or to 'out' these musicians as believers—we're not stamping 'Christian' on their foreheads. ... Rather, the goal is to explore the way their spiritual paths have intersected with their art. What kind of faith is evident? Where is it evident? And what does it mean for the listener?” he writes.

Boyett's comment could be read as a metaphor for the book itself. Just as the authors avoid stamping “Christianity” on the musicians' foreheads, so they avoid calling their own book “Christian.”

Yet the book does appear to have been written from a Christian perspective, and the artists it covers are all connected to Christianity in some way.

“The intention of this book is to shed light on the spiritual journeys of many significant musical pop culture icons that our target audience—Christian twentysomethings—have enjoyed listening to over the years,” said Cara Baker, managing editor of Relevant Media Group, the book's publisher.

Baker stressed the book is not intended to be evangelistic.

“It is not meant to persuade anyone to Christianity. It is meant as an entertaining read, written as a biography-style anthology for those who have enjoyed these artists' music to delve a little deeper behind what influences them,” she said.

One of the stronger essays in the book is about Johnny Cash, the legendary country singer whose career hit a revival before his recent death, even landing a hit song on MTV, a rarity for a gray-haired drawler.

Author Steve Beard describes Cash's faith as a rather straightforward brand of Christianity, with enough hellfire and brimstone references to satisfy a backwoods Baptist preacher.

The catch is that Cash's own life was a rollercoaster affair that saw him swing from highs of singing gospel tunes to the lows of his drug addiction. The two sometimes mixed in the same performance.

Another chapter explores the religious beliefs of Bob Dylan, the mercurial singer-songwriter. Scott Marshall, author of the Dylan chapter, writes that Dylan was born Jewish, but converted to Christianity in 1979.

"In early 1979, Larry Myers and Paul Emond, two pastors from the Vineyard Church, visited Dylan's home in Brentwood, Calif. and shared the gospel. Not long afterward, Dylan came to faith in Jesus, was baptized and enrolled in a discipleship class through the Vineyard," Marshall writes.

Despite converting, Dylan continues to support Jewish causes and charities. In 1997, for example, Dylan sang a benefit concert for the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish charity in Los Angeles.

Later that year, he sang for the pope, leaving Dylan-watchers bemused.

In addition to Cash and Dylan, the book explores the religious beliefs of Sean Puffy Combs (also known as P. Diddy), Lauryn Hill, Moby, Al Green, Wycleaf Jean, Scott Stapp, Destiny's Child, Lenny Kravitz, T-Bone Burnett and Bono.

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