

Disney movie inspires Christian musicians' project

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—If Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* awakened movie studios to a huge religious market, Disney's *Chronicles Of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* is trying to tap it for all it's worth—with a loud boost from the contemporary Christian music industry.

The strategy's centerpiece is an "inspired-by" project—music about, but not in, the film—by EMI Christian Music Group. The *Narnia* album features contemporary Christian stars Jars Of Clay, Jeremy Camp, Rebecca St. James and Steven Curtis Chapman, among others.

Denise George, the label's marketing coordinator, says the idea of writing songs for a movie based on C.S. Lewis' children's classic captured the imagination of leading Christian musicians. While neither Lewis' nor Disney's *Narnia* is explicitly religious, Christians have long seen spiritual symbolism in the fantasy tale written by the Oxford-educated Christian intellectual.

“We couldn't get the artists to stop talking about it. Some turned in three or four songs for it,” George said. “I think Steven Curtis Chapman wrote five.”

A friend of Chapman's works for Disney and leaked word to him several years ago that a *Narnia* film was in development.

“What I've felt most inspired by is that, like Scripture, when you reach the end of the story, it's a new beginning,” Chapman said.

Chapman focuses on the Lewis character of Lucy, who at the novel's end reflects back on what's happened to herself and her siblings and declares that “every time she sees the first sign of spring, she'll remember” all that's happened on their journey.

Chapman's aptly titled single, *Remembering You*, has shipped to both Christian and mainstream radio stations, as has Jars Of Clay's *Waiting for the World to Fall*.

That song, said Jars of Clay's Matt Odmark, came from “the idea of being in a season and having a taste or intuition of the way things ought to be but aren't.” Odmark said. “We were struck” with the idea of “being frozen in anticipation of new life to come,” which reflects the film's icy winter scenes.

Singer/songwriter Nichole Nordeman's *I Will Believe* focuses on the relationship among the children:

“One of us is big and brave

One of us is tenderhearted

One of us is tempting fate

And the last but not least of us

Has faith enough for each of us.”

"I love that Lewis didn't dummy down to his audience, even though it was children," Nordeman said, referring to Lewis' seven-part *Narnia* series. "The books deal with life themes—failure and betrayal and camaraderie."

The big question for Walt Disney Pictures and Walden Media, which jointly created the movie scheduled for release Dec. 9, is this: Will the *Narnia* record drive Christian listeners to see the big-budget film?

Glen Lajeski, an executive vice president for Disney's Buena Vista division, said the film doesn't lend itself to a typical soundtrack, but that music "helps broaden the audience and make people aware" of the movie. He cites recordings for films like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and *Armageddon* that were "huge albums" that helped create buzz.

This isn't the first such project for a religious-themed film.

The Prince of Egypt, a 1998 animated film retelling the life of Moses, was accompanied by three soundtracks in pop, country and gospel/contemporary Christian flavors. The Christian project featured dcTalk and Shirley Caesar, among others, and sold more than 300,000 copies. But that was less than half what the pop project, featuring Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, sold.

A secular *Narnia* soundtrack also was supposed to promote the film, with an Oct. 25 release originally planned. But that release date was dropped, and the secular soundtrack itself reportedly is very much in doubt.

Though these projects may be handy marketing tools and special events for music fans, segregating them by market rankles some. Mark Joseph wrote *Faith, God & Rock 'n' Roll* about Christian artists impacting the mainstream and co-produced a *Passion of the Christ* inspired-by project. He also consulted Walden Media for the *Narnia* film.

Instead of relying solely on Christian and gospel artists, the *Passion of the Christ* disc reached into the mainstream rock and R&B worlds to create a project with a far-reaching appeal, inspired by Bob Briner's popular book *Roaring Lambs*.

"Our goal was to create a record that would hold up in both secular and Christian camps," he said. Indeed, the project helped launch Scott Stapp's solo career and scored Tonight Show performances for Chapman and other Christian artists on the Passion CD.

Joseph insists marketers naturally look for niches they can neatly target, but he said that impulse is "at odds with the Great Commission," the biblical mandate to spread the gospel and "share a story with everyone."

"I was not a fan of the *Prince of Egypt* approach," Joseph said. "I don't think a Christian artist gets up in the morning hoping their music won't be heard by people who disagree with them. We need to be more creative and see how we can reach everyone with one project. That's what we tried to accomplish."

He lauds EMI's efforts to get the Jars of Clay and Chapman songs a broader hearing for *Narnia*.

Too often, churches aren't aware of faith-related films, Joseph said, citing *Luther* as an example—a film that could have appealed to the same religious demographic that saw *The Passion* but vanished quickly from theaters.

"*Luther* is what happens over and over—a great movie is made, but the Christian community doesn't know about it until after it's gone," he said.

If Disney has its way with the musical marketing of *Narnia*, that won't be the case with this film.

in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.