

Documentary recounts the glory and mess of Christian music

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NASHVILLE (RNS)—The contemporary Christian music industry survived scandals, pushback from televangelists and the wholesale disruption of the record industry over the past 50 years and kept rolling along.

Then last spring, COVID-19 brought it all to a halt.

Artists who'd spent decades on the road were suddenly stuck at home, their tour buses unpacked, with no clear indication when they'd be able to get back to playing music in public. For Christian filmmakers Andrew and Jon Erwin, who began their careers making music videos, the pandemic seemed a once-in-a-lifetime chance to get their musical heroes on camera.

"For the first time in history, all of these artists are off the road," Andrew Erwin told Religion News Service.

So the Erwins, a pair of brothers who've made faith-based movies such as *I Can Only Imagine* and *October Baby*, called up Christian music legends Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith and pitched the idea of a documentary about the history of Christian music. The two said "yes" and signed on as producers. Before long, the project was underway.

"The Jesus Music" traces CCM history

The result of their efforts is *The Jesus Music*, a documentary that traces contemporary Christian music from its beginnings among hippies at Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, Calif., in the late 1960s to the global worship music empire of Australia's Hillsong Church.

The documentary debuted in early October, earning just over a half-million dollars at the box office in limited release, according to *Deadline Hollywood*, which covers the entertainment industry.

Andrew Erwin said he and his brother interviewed about 100 artists, including some of the biggest names in Christian music, including Kirk Franklin, TobyMac and other members of DC Talk, Chris Tomlin, Bill Gaither, Lecrae and current chart-topper Lauren Daigle.

Distributed by Lionsgate, the film is anchored around the experiences of Grant and Smith, who became some of the biggest names in the business beginning in the 1980s. Early on, Grant gives an interview in what was once the Koinonia Christian Bookstore and Coffeehouse on Nashville's music row.

At the time of the interview, Grant—who has sold tens of millions of records—was a few weeks away from having open-heart surgery. She recalls visiting the coffeehouse and hearing people singing with guitars about Jesus. The experience, she said in the film, changed her life.

“It was unlike anything this Southern religious town had seen,” she said during the interview.

“A lot of hymns are, close your eyes singing to God,” Grant said, in describing the music she dreamed of making. “I wanted to sing songs with my eyes wide open, singing to each other.”

Rooted in early 1970s Jesus Movement

The strongest part of the film comes in the first hour. The Erwins use vintage footage and interviews with California pastor Greg Laurie and Tommy Coomes of the early Christian rock band Love Song to recount the movement's early days, when former hippies, disenchanted by sex and

drugs, formed what was known as the “Jesus movement” of the early 1970s.

That moment had its own soundtrack with guitar and drums—epitomized by the long-haired songwriter star Larry Norman, whose songs about the end of the world, racism and the emptiness of drugs and sex made him the movement’s first rock star.

At one point, interviewees recite lyrics of “Why Don’t You Look Into Jesus,” one of Norman’s early hits, which begins with the line “Sipping whiskey from a paper cup, you drown your sorrows till you can’t stand up,” then goes on to talk about shooting up drugs and getting a sexually transmitted disease on Valentine’s Day.

John Styll, the former president of the Gospel Music Association and founder of Contemporary Christian Music magazine, said such lyrics would be banned on today’s Christian radio.

“No way would they play it,” he said in the film.

The movie also highlights Explo ’72, a massive Christian music event that featured Christian music stars alongside performers such as Johnny Cash, Rita Coolidge and Kris Kristofferson. During that event, which brought more than 200,000 young people to Dallas, evangelist Billy Graham gave his stamp of approval to the Jesus movement and Jesus music.

“True faith ought to be applied to the social problems of our day,” Graham said in a speech at the event that’s featured in the film. “Today, Christian young people ought to be involved in the problems of poverty, ecology, war, racial tension and all other problems of our generation.”

‘We wanted to understand the struggle’

Lonnie Frisbee, an influential preacher in the movement’s early days, also is featured in the documentary. Frisbee played an important role in the Jesus movement but was long overlooked after his death from AIDS in the early 1990s. The film also mentions some of the scandals that engulfed Christian music stars such as Grant and Sandi Patty.

“We did not have any intention of chasing scandal, but we wanted to understand the struggle,” said Jon Erwin in a video interview. “There were a lot of complicated people within the timeline of Christian music.”



Kirk Franklin in “The Jesus Music.”
(Photo courtesy of Lionsgate)

The film also denounces the racism that separated white Christian stars from Black gospel musicians. It includes an interview with Kirk Franklin, whose comments about seeking racial healing were cut from a broadcast of a Christian music industry awards show.

“When we don’t say something, we’re saying something,” Franklin said during the speech, which addressed the killing of Black men.

One of the film’s most touching moments comes in footage of the funeral

for Truett Foster McKeehan, the 21-year-old son of TobyMac, one of the founders of DC Talk. McKeehan died of an accidental overdose in 2019, and his father recounts his son's passing in an emotional interview.

Among the film's surprises is a section on the Christian metal band Stryper, whose members became Christians after watching sermons of televangelist Jimmy Swaggart. After their conversions, band members became stars known for playing metal music that praised Jesus and for throwing Bibles at their fans during concerts, only to see Swaggart turn on them.

Most of the musicians in the film said if they had the chance, they'd do it all over again. But their fame came with a cost, warns Michael Tait, one of the founders of DC Talk. Tait would go on to be the lead singer of the Newsboys, another influential Christian band.

"I would not wish fame, or fortune, or notoriety on anybody," he said. "Anonymity is not a bad thing. Trust me."