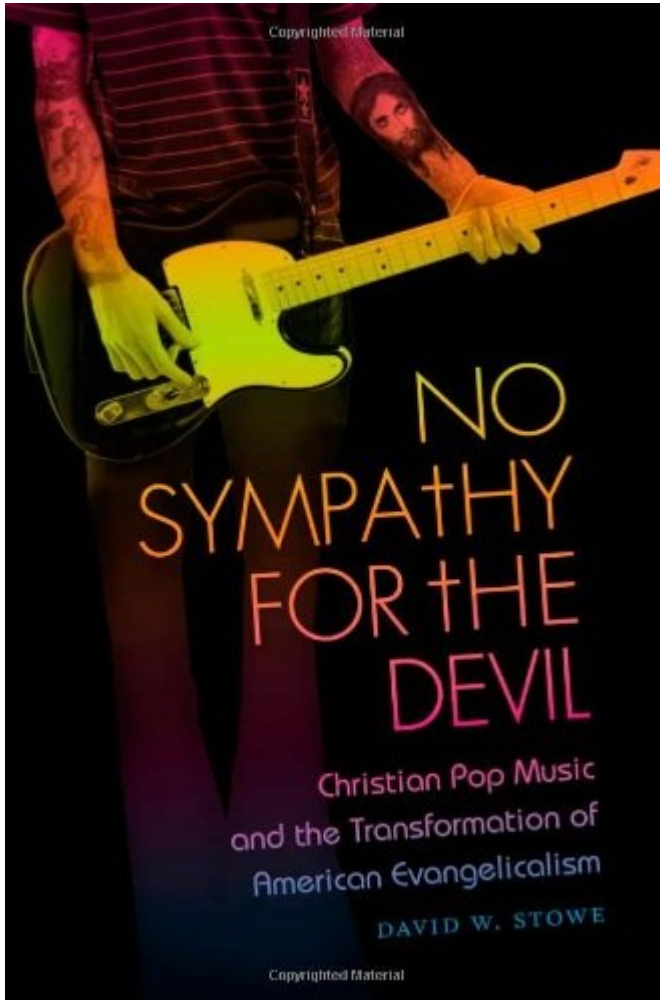


Jesus music

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

May 18, 2011

In Review



No Sympathy for the Devil

by David W. Stowe

University of North Carolina Press

RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

David Stowe has a new book about Christian pop music, and he recently placed a [teaser article](#) as a *New York Times* op-ed.

Stowe's basic argument makes sense, though it's unsurprising: Jesus came up more often in mainstream pop music before 1980 or so, after which the growing Christian Contemporary Music industry--and its association with social conservatism--created a "religious/secular rift in pop music." Mainstream artists avoided Jesus because of his new cultural baggage, and conservative evangelicals avoided mainstream music because they didn't need it anymore.

That sounds about right as far as it goes. But as Tom Beaudoin [points out](#), classifying music as religious or secular based on explicit references to Jesus is an awfully primitive framework:

Jesus does not have to be named in a song for people to take music into their prayer, meditation, justice-seeking, discernment, wonder, creativity, and sense of the larger whole of which their lives are a part. And even when Jesus is named, people do not necessarily make of that anything significant for their religio-spiritual practice.

The latter point Stowe acknowledges, noting that among the Jesus references in the 60s and 70s, "few signaled a deep theological commitment." (I'd add that the ones that *were* somewhat more serious signaled little else worth remembering--a world of strict religious/secular dualism has its problems, but a world in which we have to hear "[Eve of Destruction](#)" on the radio is far worse--but that's just me.)

Beaudoin's first point, however, is important: Jesus name-drops aside, a lot of pop music speaks to religious concerns. This was true in the 60s, and it's true today.

Occasionally such music even makes the top 40. Stowe highlights Lady Gaga's "[Judas](#)" as a striking (and 11th-hour) counterexample to his thesis. He might also have mentioned U2 or even a shorter-lived success like Creed, both of which charted high with thoroughly (if somewhat abstractly) religious material long after the Religious Right and CCM emerged.

But in general, the biggest pop hits just don't have much to say about *anything*. This, too, is nothing new--which is why it's odd that Stowe uses Mike Huckabee's classic-rock band alongside John Ashcroft's gospel-schmaltz hobby as examples of

how "popular music is a critical component in the new conservatism." What do Chuck Berry covers have to do with "[Let the Eagle Soar](#)," much less with the evangelical movement?

Traditional gospel, however, presents an interesting case. Secular artists have drawn from old gospel music for decades--sincerely, ironically or in some ambiguous combination of the two (see the [Louvin Brothers](#) or, more recently, the [Violent Femmes](#)). Others in folk and alt-country scenes play and even write gospel songs as a religion-free way of honoring the traditional-music canon. A lot of this music is relatively obscure; on the other hand, a whole lot of people have heard someone's version of "[Orphan Girl](#)."

Of course, I could list lots of small and medium-sized bands that have spent their careers resisting the secular/religious divide in one way or another, and a lot of you could help me. But Stowe's focus on big-time, mainstream pop music isn't just a way to avoid most (again, not all) exceptions to his thesis.

It also suggests that what's he's after has less to do with a particular kind of music than with the overall pop-cultural zeitgeist. "Jesus," he says, was "a highly resonant symbol for many '60s youth." That's a lot less true today, and that says something--even if Beaudoin is right that "the conversation in theology and popular culture is beyond" simple distinctions based on explicit Jesus talk.

I wonder whether Stowe's thesis ultimately says more about the symbol of Jesus in the 60s youth culture--or the reduced meaning of symbols *generally* in today's--than about evangelicalism or pop music in particular. I'll have to read the book to find out.