
A stark black background. A wash of tie-dye color. A figure clad in bell-bottoms. An arm sheathed in a Jesus tattoo. A nod to the Rolling Stones’ hit song about Lucifer. The cover of David W. Stowe’s No Sympathy for the Devil suggests a fascinating mix of two contradictory concepts: youthful rebellion and conservative Christianity, and it doesn’t disappoint in that regard. Stowe’s general premise is that music shapes just as much as it reflects American culture. More specifically, he contends that the 1960s hippie movement and 1970s Jesus movement led to the evangelical conservatism of the 1980s by emphasizing personal relationships with Jesus and end-times prophesy, by creating new styles of worship, and by expressing Christian beliefs through commercial pop culture.

The book’s title, which flips the name of the Rolling Stones’ 1968 hit song, “Sympathy for the Devil” on its head, represents America’s shift from free love to the Religious Right. The Jesus movement, which Stowe says has its roots in the 1967 Summer of Love, was, at least in part, a reaction against the “antireligious” nature of early rock ‘n’ roll, as illustrated by the Stones’ song. It was also an antidote to the diplomatic and economic challenges facing America during the 1970s. Stowe explains that war between Arabs and Israelis “threatened to draw in the United States and the Soviet Union, heightening fears of nuclear Armageddon.” Amidst growing fear that the end times were near, many Americans looked for a source of hope and salvation. A small but steadily growing number of hippies were inspired by echoes of their adherence to peace, love, and tolerance in the New Testament. Some were so struck by the hope Jesus represented that they became street preachers, approaching passing strangers to evangelize, thereby spreading what came to be known as the Jesus movement.

Stowe explains convincingly how the importance of music to hippie culture, as evidenced by festivals like Woodstock, and the spontaneous nature of worship favored by the Jesus movement influenced Christian worship. The movement brought guitars and “praise bands” to services. It projected hymn lyrics on church walls, which “motivat[ed] people to actively participate rather than sit back and let the music wash over them.” Congregants were encouraged to offer up extemporaneous prayers, and some were moved to speak in tongues.
Active, inclusive worship services and large festivals featuring Christian music groups drew more and more young people, including many famous pop, folk, and R&B artists, to this emerging form of Christianity. As festivals grew in popularity and included more Christian musical acts, the line between worship and festival blurred. Through meticulous research, Stowe shows how artists from Aretha Franklin and Stevie Wonder to Al Green and Marvin Gaye to Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan fueled the Jesus movement by recording songs with Christian messages that climbed the pop charts. Even Broadway shows elevated the status of Christian music and messages within popular culture. Stowe explains that “musicals like Godspell, Jesus Christ Superstar, and even Hair provided a musical apprenticeship for some of the leadings lights [stars] of the Jesus movement.” Singers who gained notoriety playing roles in these musicals often went on to successful careers on the pop charts. As young people became enamored with these artists, their music, and their message, local community theaters and even public high schools began performing the Broadway shows, spreading the Jesus movement further beyond hippie culture.

Stowe’s passion for music (in addition to teaching English and religious studies at Michigan State University, he also plays drums and saxophone) is evident in the detail with which he narrates the rise of artists who established a genre later known as Contemporary Christian Music (CCM). CCM’s influence in American culture and politics is reflected in its commercial success. Stowe claims it has become “one of the fastest-growing genres of music, its records outselling those of classical, jazz, and New Age combined.”

Stowe’s grasp of history and politics is also impressive. His description of America in the 1960s and 1970s is engaging and accessible, even—perhaps especially—for readers who didn’t live through those decades. But while the book’s content is fascinating, informative, and painstakingly documented, its structure is problematic.

No Sympathy for the Devil appears at first to be unified by a chronological narrative of U.S. culture, with biographies of important individuals woven in. However, the chronology falls apart in Chapter Two. Stowe is an impeccable researcher, but at times he gets so carried away by his research and passion for the topic that he loses sight of his central premise. Individuals’ stories are begun, left, and then returned to over the span of several chapters, so that readers struggle to remember where they left off in an individual’s life story and what role that individual played in America’s transformation. Some anecdotes also don’t appear to have been edited for relevance. For example, in explaining the rise and fall of Johnny Cash’s tele-