

Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock by Andrew Beaujon. Da Capo Press, 2006. 219pp., Pb. \$16.95/£9.99. ISBN-13: 9780306814570.

Kimberly Rae Connor, University of San Francisco, connork@usfca.edu

Keywords

Rock and Roll, music, evangelical Christianity, American youth

Recently I was among the lucky spectators who went to see the Broadway hit *Book of Mormon*, just a few days after it won nine Tony awards. Because the creators of the show (also the creators of the cartoon *South Park*) are legendary for their irreverence, towards just about anything, but especially religions, critics and viewers were poised to sing along in their praise of what they assumed would be the latest cynical send-up of religious idiocy. Well, we got that, but we got something more, too: we got heart. What the show's creators (Parker, Stone, and Lopez) understand about religion is more fundamental and meaningful than much of the discourse in academic circles these days. As seen through the gaudy spectacle of Broadway, refracted by the equally gaudy theology of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints, the show affirms that religions are supreme acts of human imagination.

Andrew Beaujon, author of *Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock*, understands something similar about another imaginative output that links high and low, pop culture with transcendent experience. Writing as a journalist rather than an academic, Beaujon investigates Christian rock groups, in part to understand his own attraction to the music, and to answer the question posed by a fellow journalist from Europe: "But why do they need their own music?" Like a new mother who sways, even without a baby in her arms, the author looks for an answer, because he couldn't resist some of the beats, despite an urge to proclaim Christian Rock an oxymoron.

To his credit, Beaujon is more interested in the actual practitioners and *aficionados* than he is with the culture critics and rock impresarios looking down on the spectacle of Christian rock from on high. He gives us a breezy ethnography that may not possess the social science rigor of an academic study, but finds a respectful balance between the emic and etic, and lets those he studies tell their own stories. Beaujon seldom steps in to offer an expansive meta-narrative or intellectually informed analysis, but

he freely admits how, as an indifferent agnostic, he benefited from learning more about the faith traditions that inspire the music, and even about the biblical text from which many of the songs derive. In a brief nod to acknowledge a tradition of academic study of religion, Beaujon explains his decision to use the NRSV version of the Bible (as opposed to the New International Version translation preferred by the evangelical Christians who perform and listen to Christian rock), by citing the recommendation of a friend with a Masters of Divinity degree.

Nonetheless, despite its not fitting comfortably in an academic niche, this book offers a great deal to those whose trade is the academic study of religion. First, it is not disingenuous about its aims or its subjects. The author does not use his investigation as an *entrée* to lampoon Christian rock or its musicians and listeners. His tone is not superior, but engaged, and kindly respectful. Second, he doesn't try to over-write in either substance or style. He presents what he sees in clear and clever prose that doesn't resort to gimmicks; and he lets his subjects speak for themselves, instead of trying to wedge them into arbitrary categories or conventional labels. He is not snarky, which cannot be said about many journalists investigating an evangelical Christian topic, and he is modest; he does not pretend to interpret what he does not have the intellectual background or training to support. Academics exploring the implicit religiosity of contemporary society will do well to emulate Beaujon's restrained point of view and readable prose.

The structure of the text is key to understanding Beaujon's approach. His method achieves a perspective not unlike one promoted by the poet Billy Collins, when asked how to read a poem. Don't ask what it means, he advised, ask where it is going. Beaujon does not try to impose a top-down reading of Christian rock; rather, he lets us meander our way through Christian rock to find out where it is going. He organizes the chapters around events and people, alternating a concert experience with brief profiles or character studies, based on interviews with performers from across the spectrum, from well known to the indie obscure. This swing between the personal and the cultural, the particular and the general, establishes a helpful way to absorb the material that is also theologically correct, in the context of evangelical Christianity as practised in America. Beaujon understands that the churches have finally opened up to rock and roll, but he wonders if Christian rock can ever become "an enduring part of American culture," or if the mainstream is ready to accept that Christian rock can possess both theological and musical integrity.

His answer, like much of the book, does not promote a finality or arrival,

but simply and effectively points out where we are going and identifies interesting sites to observe along the way. Like Broadway musicals, Christian rock resides in paradox but of different terms, depending on who is articulating the paradox. For musical snobs and cultural cynics, Christian rock is an oxymoron, satisfying neither the criteria of rock and roll aesthetics nor the requirement for sane and enduring cultural fulfilment. But for Beaujon (as for the creators of *Book of Mormon*) the creative expression of religious faith presents paradox as performance—a transcendent experience that lures us to believe in the possibility that our lives may someday be as joyful and rewarding as a Broadway spectacle. Both transport people the way religion can, and Beaujon sincerely tries to understand the people behind the religions. As a result he can laugh at the absurdities and inconsistencies of human expression, without laughing *at* people. Like the creators of *The Book of Mormon*, Beaujon has created (what Matt Stone describes as) a “radical middle,” a little island between two giant extremist land masses that currently divide our communal conversation about religion, where one person’s blasphemy is another man’s scripture. Religions and the music they inspire can be hilariously insane and completely authentic, at the same time.

Andrew Beaujon understands that paradoxical nature of religious cultural production, and doesn’t try to force a false resolution. Because Americans will “continue to try out identities till they find one that suits them,” Beaujon reads Christian rock as a map for that journey towards meaning. “The tessellated world of Christian music is really just a guide to the many ways to navigate the muddled, mottled landscape of just one of those choices.”