‘The Devil’s Music’ delves into Christians’ reaction to rock ‘n’ roll

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SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

“Gospel and rock ‘n’ roll were cut from the same cloth,” Tav Falco, leader of the psychedelic group Panther Burns, once observed, “even though one is considered to be the devil’s music, and the other sanctified music. It was played by the same people, and appealed to the same audience.”

As he rails against rock ‘n’ roll as “the pulse and tempo of hell” in 1959, Pentecostal youth pastor David Wilkerson made much the same point. With the shaking, the prostration, and “even the speaking in vile tongues,” Wilkerson declared, rock concerts resembled perverted Pentecostal services.

In sermons, services

In “The Devil’s Music,” Randall Stephens, a professor of history and American Studies at Northumbria University, reminds us that for decades Christian leaders denounced rock ‘n’ roll as a demonic cultural force, ignoring the influence of evangelical churches on so many of rock’s iconic performers.

And yet, Stephens demonstrates, since the 1970s many pulpit-pounding evangelists

is repetitious) does not challenge or change the conventional wisdom on this topic.

Pentecostal influence

Moreover, “The Devil’s Music” may exaggerate the influence of Pentecostal churches on the origins of rock ‘n’ roll. Nor does Stephens address attitudes toward rock ‘n’ roll of African-American Christians.

When Stephens turns to the advent of Christian rock, “The Devil’s Music” becomes much more informative and illuminating. The experiment began in the late 60s, he reminds us, amidst concerns about rampant secularism, declining church attendance, a dominant youth culture, and generational conflict.

Christian publications began to use Pop Art to attract readers. Billy Graham let his hair grow out longer. Younger evangelicals (especially Pentecostals) began to suggest that God was not all “that far from the enjoyment of rock.”

Fourth Great Awakening

By the 1970s, Stephens indicates, Christian rock had emerged as a distinct, sustained musical genre.

Featuring a “soft Jesus” (in concerts, on Broadway, and in films) in a casual, free form, “mood and emotion-oriented age,” God Rock fed and was fed by what has been called “The Fourth Great Awakening” in America.

At first, Stephens reveals, many fundamentalists were appalled. Jerry Falwell, Bob Jones, Tim LaHaye and other prominent ministers agreed with Jimmy Swaggart that “You cannot proclaim the message of the anointed without the MUSIC OF THE DEVIL.”

But the 1990s, however, accompanying “a larger shift of fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism” and the growing popularity of Christian rock, most of them had come around. Since then, Stephens reports, it has become “entirely normal to set the message of sin and salvation, defeat and triumph to the music of the moment.”

A niche genre

In the 21st century, Stephens points out, rockers (inspired, perhaps, by Bono) have moved in and out of Christian circles.

In a country in which 59 percent of Protestant teenagers consider themselves born again or evangelical, it may seem strange, wrote one observer, “that Christian rock even exists as a niche genre; if rock better reflected American demographics, then secular rock would be the niche.”

Although for “the uninitiated,” Stephen writes, Christian rock remains “unhip, standard, bogus, a pale imitation of the original,” the old debates about long hair, idolatry, and the devil’s music “seem a distant memory.”

As long as evangelicals seek to relate to the larger society, they will, he concludes, “find new and innovative ways to worship, entertain themselves, and evangelize.”

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