

The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music: Pop, Rock, and Worship

Don Cusic, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music: Pop, Rock, and Worship*. Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 2010. 505 pp. \$85.00. Hardcover. ISBN: 9780313344251.

The *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music: Pop, Rock, and Worship* consists of over 200 entries arranged in alphabetical order. Many are biographical sketches of the musicians who sing, play instruments, and record contemporary Christian music. There are also entries on record labels, music executives, politics, Christian culture, and “Jesus music,” along with histories of both contemporary Christian music and other religious music in America. Entries cite works for further reading, and many include discographies and lists of awards for major artists. The *Encyclopedia* includes a bibliography, an index, and many photos. Editor Don Cusic, professor of music business at Belmont University, has authored many of the entries. Other contributors include Christian acts promoter Liz Cavanaugh, Belmont professor James Elliott, independent writer Becky Garrison, journalists Bob Gersztyn and Vernell Hackett, and Belmont professor and radio programmer Rich Tiner. Short affiliation statements for each contributor are provided. Some of the artists included are Amy Grant, U2, ZOEgirl, Elvis Presley, The Archers, Pat Boone, Andrae Crouch and the Disciples, Steven Curtin Chapman, Children of the Day, Mustard Seed Faith, Good News, Point of Grace, Servant, Parable, PFR (Pray for Rain), Bill and Gloria Gaither, and Bob Dylan.

The preface states that “very little has been written about contemporary Christian music outside the realm of Christian publications” (xv). According to the editor, the book is written “for those in the secular world who want information about Christian artists and Christian music presented in an objective, straightforward way” (xv). However, he also hopes that the work will be useful to those who are fans and participants of Christian music. The Greenwood website (<http://www.greenwood.com>) declares that the *Encyclopedia* “is the first comprehensive reference work on a form of American music that is far more popular than nonfans may realize. It fills a major gap in the literature on American music and Christian culture”

The writing style in the *Encyclopedia* is one that is breezy, fact-laden, and in readable, non-scholarly prose. For example, Vernell Hackett writes, “Keaggy had a bad experience during a drug trip . . . Keaggy has always walked both sides of the path . . .” (283). Cusic’s prose is similar, although a bit less colloquial: “Bart Millard grew up in Greenville, Texas, and had to enroll in chorus after he broke his ankles playing high school football . . . Millard began to sing more and do solos” (299).

The longer articles are in a similar style, with some questionable statements. The brief, terse nature of the entries omits information that would be valuable. For instance, the article “Religious Music in America, a History” purports to tell the story of the whole of religious music from Luther, Calvin, and Henry VIII to George Beverly Shea and Billy Graham in some twenty pages. “There was religious dissension in Europe before Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the Wittenberg door in 1516, however, it was this act—and the subsequent life and trials of Luther—that led to the Protestant Reformation in Europe and the rise of the Anglican church in England. The split with the Catholic Church in England was a result of Henry VIII wanting a divorce from his wife” (361).

Another difficulty with this article is its lack of references. There are only eleven citations “for further reading” at the end of the article, so it is unclear from what sources Cusic derived his statements, such as that Luther wrote only thirty-seven songs (361), that religious music was predominant in America during the nation’s first 100 years (365), or that as the first half of the nineteenth century ended, the old-time religion faded as the cultural environment gave way to the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War (370). Citations for these “facts” are essential for serious scholarship.

The question as to whether this book is the “first comprehensive work” about the contemporary Christian music scene can be addressed by searching in Google and Amazon, where two other works are cited. Mark Allan Powell’s *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002, ISBN 1565636791) is an alphabetical list of artists with approximately 1900 entries and 1088 pages. There is an extensive index, a list of recordings for the artists, and well-written articles. All this can be had for \$18.21 new and \$4.00 used, as found during a recent search of Amazon.

Another “encyclopedia” is *The Billboard Guide to Contemporary Christian Music* by Barry Alfonso (New York: Billboard Books, 2002, ISBN 0823077187). This book includes a long article on “Contemporary Christian Music Today: Challenges and Controversies,” along with “Testimonies: Interviews with Christian Artists,” the “A-Z Encyclopedia,” a “Chronology of Contemporary Christian Music,” “Sources and Contacts,” an introduction, afterword, a few photos, and an index. The artist entries contain lists of recordings, but on the whole, the articles are shorter than those in Cusic. Recently, Amazon offered a used copy for 21 cents and a new copy for \$2.91!

The claim that the Cusic book is the first comprehensive reference work on the subject is, therefore, advertising hype. It is true the Cusic’s is the newest book and contains much relevant information about contemporary Christian music. This reviewer wishes that it was more scholarly, with more references and links to other musicians and genres. However, it remains a good “read” if this deficiency is noted. The book could be a useful tool for educating the secular audience about Christian music, and it could continue to inform those who are already knowledgeable about this genre. All of the books cited above enlighten the reader about this art form, which, in Alfonso’s view, many do not accept as a legitimate one. According to Alfonso, “Contemporary Christian music continues to be stigmatized, ridiculed, and dismissed by many mainstream listeners” (*Billboard Guide*, 7). Cusic writes about the difference between secular artists and Christian artists, and states that Christian artists use all types of music “to convey the Christian message” (xv). Reading the Cusic book was enlightening for this reviewer, both for the information contained therein and for the recognition of this art form as a legitimate one. The book would be useful for the church musician involved in contemporary worship and could be of interest to others, but it is only a starting point for information about contemporary Christian music for the serious scholar.

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