

Pop music preaches Gospel message

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — About five years ago, Chris Brooks and the devil were getting ready to shake hands on what Brooks perceived as a good deal.

That's the way the long-haired, 25-year-old singer looked at the record contract he and his fellow bandmates in Miami were on the verge of signing when Brooks decided to leave the group.

"The devil gave me everything the world had to offer," Brooks recalled of the months leading up to his departure from the group. The devil may have offered the rocker the world, but eternal salvation was what Brooks really wanted.

He now sings about the love of Christ over the hard-rockin' rhythms of Holy Saint, his current band which is based in Greece.

Brooks' story is echoed throughout the world of rock and roll, as increasing numbers of former and fledgling rock musicians opt to take their careers on preaching the Gospel.

Contemporary Christian music runs the gamut from heavy metal to pop as young Christians — who were weaned on pop radio — attempt to evangelize their peers through the music they love.

One Rochester-area music store employee noted that such traditional types of Christian music as gospel and hymns don't necessarily appeal to the average young person.

"Some Christian musicians might be more influenced by Billy Joel ... rather than old gospel singers," commented Mark Aman, music buyer for Logos Bookstore, a Christian-oriented retail outlet in Greece.

Aman noted that with the advent of music video channels in the 1980s, young people were exposed to a wider variety of popular music than ever before. Aman added, however, that rock music — some of which celebrates illicit sex and transitory pleasures — can serve up a spiritually empty plate for the young Christian.

"Sometimes we'll get people in who have recently turned onto Christ," Aman said. "They'll have a whole collection of music they don't want to listen anymore ... music too close to their old ways."

The music buyer observed that the majority of his customers are young women — the group most often exploited by the rock music and video scene. Christian bands, whose lyrics emphasize individual dignity, may be more appealing to a young Christian woman than many rock bands that portray women in a negative light, Aman said.

Interestingly enough, a woman is the unquestioned leader of the contemporary Christian music scene. Singer Amy Grant has been belting out soft rock tunes about the Gospel and its implications for her life over the last 11 years.

During that period of time, the 28-year-old Grant has picked up Dove and Grammy awards, had her own TV special and has toured internationally several times.

Grant even had a No. 1 hit on the pop charts in 1987 with "The Next Time I Fall," a duet with former Chicago lead singer Peter Cetera. While her fans saw the hit as vindication of her ability to compete with the best secular singers, some conservative Christians criticized her for "abandoning" the Christian world.

"I don't understand what it means to abandon the Christian world," Grant said in a 1988 interview with *Contemporary*

Christian Music magazine. "I feel like as far as having an influence on the world we are pretty useless if we are all cloistered together."

Grant's contention is shared by the members of Holy Saint, who observed that local Christian ministers have sometimes been skeptical of the band's desire to rock for Christ.

"They argue with us until they come to our show, and then they stand behind us," noted Holy Saint's lead guitarist, "Radical Rod," in reference to conservative Christians. Although none of the band members use alcohol or drugs, the group does occasionally play in bars. When asked how they reconciled their sober message with venues that sell booze, the guitarist remarked that the group is following the example of the Lord they preach.

"The Bible says, 'Preach the Gospel everywhere,'" he said. "Jesus ate with sinners ... To go into bars and share the Gospel with people who never get a chance to hear it is great. We just hit them where they live."

Aman echoed the guitarist's belief that the Gospel is the Gospel, no matter what the musical vehicle. "For the most part, I believe that diversity is good, and I think (music) is a good tool for spreading the Gospel," he said.

Such a belief compelled one of Rochester's three Christian radio stations, WWWG-AM, to start scheduling an entire Saturday night of Christian contemporary music in 1986.

"We felt that there wasn't a vehicle for teenagers to get good, wholesome Christian music," recalled Peter Quartier, operations manager at WWWG. The Saturday night program, which runs from 8 p.m. to midnight, draws a mostly young



female, evangelical-Protestant audience that samples the sounds of such Christian music stars as Grant, Sheila Walsh, DeGarmo and Key, and David and the Giants.

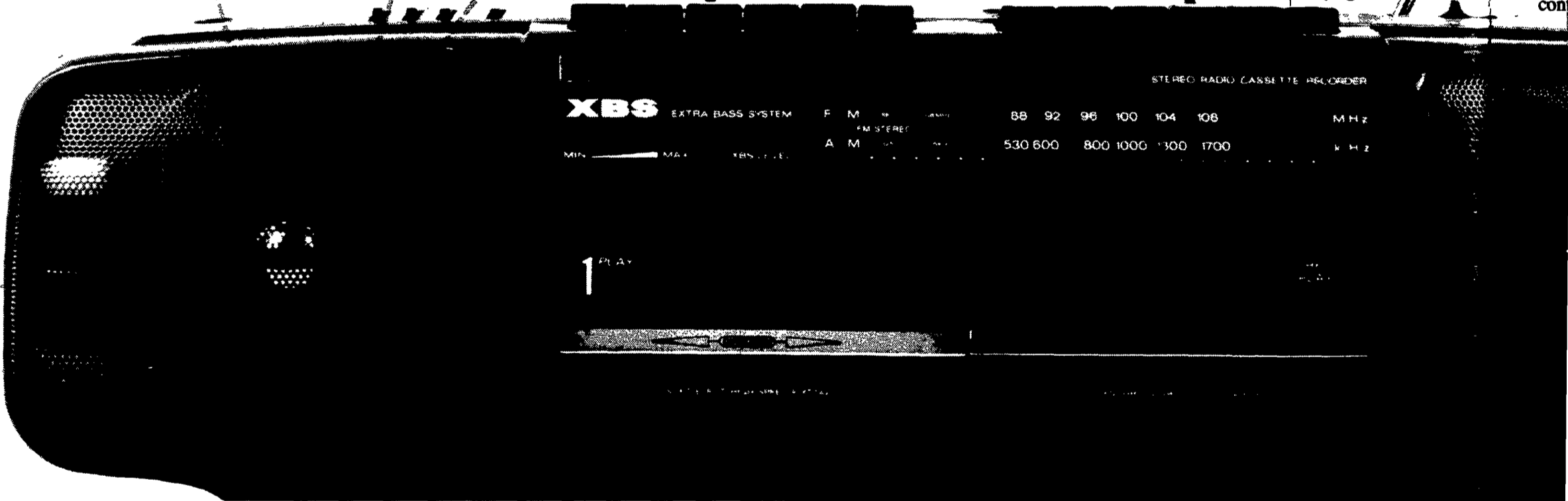
The station has even played Christian rap music by Rochester artist Michael Peace, but Quartier noted that such music would not generally be found on the station's song lists. WWWG also stays away from Christian hard rock because of listener preferences, he said.

Given that even Christian stations may not play hard rock and rap with a Gospel message, where then does the young convert to Christ turn to listen when he's forsaken Motley Crue and Ozzie Osborne? If his favorite Christian rock band is good and popular, he should have no problem hearing it on the Rochester rock station WCMF-FM, according to Stan Main, program director.

"Everything that gets played on this station gets played because the audience listening to it wants to hear it," noted Main, who said he has programmed songs by Christian rock bands in the past. Yet, he said, his attempts at breaking Christian rock on the air have not been met with market success, which is the bottom line for a commercial radio station.

Aman speculated that there might be resistance on the part of secular stations to play contemporary Christian music, but he also said that Christian record companies generally don't promote Christian bands via the secular radio market.

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