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CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN MUSIC CRAZE

The Twin Cities is among the top markets for this rapidly-growing brand of hip, commercial-sounding music with a message

BY JOHN NEMO

WEARING A CONSTANT BUG-EYED EXPRESSION fueled by what must be a strong supply of coffee, KTIS morning-show personality Chuck Knapp leans close to his microphone, listening as call-in winner Deb from Brooklyn Park says she works as a bioterrorism inspector for the federal government.

“Watch out, she’s a fed!” Jon Engen, a Baptist pastor and Knapp’s on-air partner, quips. “You know, Chuck, in all my years of marriage, with my entire family, we’ve won only one thing.”

“And what was that?” Knapp asks.

“A five pound bag of dog food,” Engen says. “And we didn’t have a dog at the time.”

“So how did it taste?”

Engen is unfazed: “You add a little sugar and milk, it’s really not that bad.”

So the banter goes between two of the men at the forefront of a musical explosion that has quietly been taking place for the past decade. Sales of the contemporary Christian music (CCM) played by Christian radio stations like Roseville-based KTIS (98.5 FM)—owned and operated by nearby Northwestern College—have increased 80 percent in the last 10 years, from \$381 million in 1995 to more than \$700 million in 2004, according to the Christian Music Trade Association (CMTA). At the same time, CCM sales at mainstream outlets like Target and Wal-Mart have doubled since 1996. And according to the CMTA’s 2005 annual report, the Twin Cities is now the 10th biggest national market in the CCM industry.

Locally, Knapp and Engen’s morning show has climbed all the way to second in

recent Twin Cities Arbitron ratings, trailing only perennial powerhouse KQRS-FM's show led by Tom Barnard. KTIS, founded by evangelist Billy Graham nearly 60 years ago, is the second-most listened-to Twin Cities station in the coveted demographic of women ages 25 to 44. It pulls in more than \$5 million a year from an estimated 317,500 listeners, which covers the station's operating expenses, and its spacious, sparkling \$10 million brick building was paid for entirely by listener contributions. Donations also keep the station commercial-free.

"There are no political commercials—oh, how sad!" Knapp jokes. "No car dealerships. Sorry. No personal products—you won't hear Viagra on KTIS. Thank the Lord for small favors there!"

Off the air, morning show producer Tim Marks finishes taking down Deb from Brooklyn Park's information on the phone while Engen cracks: "Does she inspect White Castles? Because that's pretty close to bioterrorism."

Engen, 50, and Knapp, 61, are part of an increasingly hip and popular CCM scene that sounds nothing like the organ-driven, scratchy AM radio instrumentals of decades past. Today's Christian music is the kind of polished pop one might expect to hear on commercial Twin Cities radio stations like Cities 97 or KS95. "This Christian music boom people are talking about... the quality of the songs, the quality of the production is just unbelievable," Engen says off air while a song from CCM superstar Michael W. Smith—who has sold more than 15 million albums—plays in the background. From pop balladeers like Smith to hard rock acts like Third Day to family-friendly, a cappella acts like Go Fish, CCM is rocketing further and further into the mainstream.

"Thirty percent of our listeners at KTIS make no claims for Jesus Christ," Engen says of the music. "They're here because of the fact that it's fun, it's joyful, and it's encouraging. I think people are tired of music that is always speaking to the negative side of life."

Fishing for fans

You can forgive Go Fish's Jamie Statema for dwelling on the negative side of life as he holds up a pair of flimsy, see-through pajama pants backstage before a concert inside

Northwestern College's Maranatha Hall. The popular a cappella trio, which the 33-year-old Statema started in St. Paul more than a decade ago, has sold nearly 8,000 tickets for a half dozen shows that are taking place during the span of a single weekend.

"[Our merchandiser] Murray's going to be here this morning," Statema tells the group's Nashville, Tennessee-based manager, Mike Smith. "So if you see him, and he asks how we like our stuff, tell him we're not happy with this."

Smith grabs a pair of the pajama pants that feature Go Fish's colorful logo.

"I'll say, 'What *is* this? What is this see-through stuff?'" he says in his southern twang, bringing laughter to the dressing room gathering. "This is a Christian group! We can't have this see-through crap!"

Smith has helped steer Go Fish from the brink of complete failure a few years back into unparalleled success that includes a national distribution deal with Warner-owned Word Entertainment. By year's end, Go Fish's brand of family-friendly songs selling in every major retail outlet across the country.

"It ain't me," Smith says, watching group member Jason Folkmann brush his teeth before one of the shows. "These guys are so smart, they run such a tight ship, they don't need a lot of direction."

Go Fish, which features Statema, Folkmann and Andy Selness, released a handful of CCM albums after signing with a national label in the late 1990s and even filled St. Paul's Xcel Energy Center with more than 14,000 fans for a 2001 Christmas concert. But by early 2003, Go Fish was ready to call it quits—frustrated by the record company's repeated attempts to make three admittedly "uncool" white guys with angelic voices into a boy band, a rock trio, or something else.

"We were all getting tired by that point," the Selness, 28, says, sitting back in a white T-shirt and jeans and peeling an orange as he talks. "We had this idea of doing a fun side project of kids' songs, and the label rejected it. We left the label, and we thought this could be our last hurrah. And if anything we wanted to do something fun for our kids. And it turned out to revive our career."

The group recorded 2003's *Splash* CD—a kid-friendly collection of catchy, percussion-driven vocal tracks laced with plenty of goofball moments—on a shoestring

budget and sold it locally through Christian retailers like Northwestern Book Stores.

In less than two years, *Splash* its 2004 follow-up, *Superstar*, sold more than 150,000 units. Families began flocking en masse to the group's shows. Go Fish, now on its own record label and with complete artistic control, parlayed the stunning success of those two albums and the related tours into the Warner distribution deal. Demand also drove the group to release kid-friendly DVD (*Showtime*) and a new CD (*Snooze*) back in March, and Go Fish is also in talks with numerous Christian radio stations to begin producing and starring in a national radio show aimed at kids.

"We've always had families coming to the shows, and now that we're finally gearing this just for the kids, it feels like it's the perfect fit," Selness says. "We don't have to try and be cool anymore. We can just goof around and have fun."

The first, but not the last

For the record, Joel Hanson's six-year-old daughter loves Go Fish.

"They are such likeable guys, and while the message of God's love that they are sharing is tried and true, they're doing it with a really unique voice," says Hanson, the music and worship pastor at the Church of the Open Door in Maple Grove. "They are all family guys, so this makes sense for them."

Hanson, a Minnesota native, founded Pray For Rain (PFR), the most well-known CCM act to emerge from the state, back in 1989. The rock trio—which featured Hanson on guitar and lead vocals along with bassist Patrick Andrew and drummer Mark Nash—created a brand of instrumentally driven pop rock that mixed master musicianship, lyrics that went beyond the typical "Praise Jesus" to explore deeper life themes and sweet-as-sugar vocal harmonies to win the praises of CCM critics and fans around the country.

"I think we were just a little bit different than anything else at the time during the early and mid-1990s, and that gave us the spotlight more often," Hanson says during an interview in his office in Maple Grove. As he talks, he glances out the window to watch a pair of bald eagles streaking across the skyline. PFR officially broke up in 1996, then released three more albums and continued occasional touring with national CCM acts like

Jars of Clay.

“We kind of never say never,” jokes Hanson, who is married with two daughters and rarely takes to the road despite releasing a pair of solo albums in recent years. Asked why Christian music has boomed so much in Minnesota over the past decade, Hanson doesn’t hesitate.

“Well, there are a lot of Lutherans here, you know,” he says. “We have a large Christian radio station in KTIS and a handful of very large churches that are very suited to having a national act come in and do what they do on a large scale. These guys don’t have to go try and play at the Orpheum.”

Goin’ clubbin’

Christian bands can also play in downtown Minneapolis without much hassle. That’s because the nation’s largest and longest-running all-Christian nightclub, Club 3 Degrees, is located in the heart of the Warehouse District at 113 North Fifth Street.

Since 1989, the club—formerly known as the New Union—has hosted national Christian acts while also doing its best to promote local Christian bands through an annual music competition that attracts national talent scouts from all over the country. More than 80 bands competed in the 2005 tournament, and national acts like Go Fish and PFR credit their early success to the opportunities provided by the New Union/Club 3 Degrees.

“We have a unique ability to bring in a lot of different bands from all different CCM genres,” says Nancy Aleksuk, a nondenominational Christian pastor and codirector of the club, which moved into its new downtown digs about two years ago. When it opened, Club 3 Degrees received heavy national publicity—*Rolling Stone* called it “one of the sleekest, most pristine nightclubs in the Twin Cities.”

The three-level, 18,000-square-foot facility features a high-end sound system that can compete with any club in the area and holds up to 1,700 people. Along with the music, Club 3 Degrees also holds rock-oriented Christian worship services and reaches out to the Minneapolis nightlife crowd by opening its doors once the bars close down during the warmer spring and summer months, selling pancakes and low-key fellowship

during the **early** hours of the morning.

A Twin Cities church, the Living Word Christian Center, underwrites the club, according to Aleksuk.

“One of the reasons we’re the only full-time Christian nightclub in the country is because of the finances involved when you don’t serve alcohol,” Aleksuk says. “It’s difficult to cover all the costs of running a facility like this just through ticket sales.”

Challenges are created

With the kind of commercial success that Christian artists are having, numerous ethical questions arise—is the genre getting too commercial? Is the message of getting lost amid the increased focus on record sales and endorsement deals—Chevrolet, for instance, is now the “official vehicle of Third Day,” the Grammy-winning, Atlanta-based CCM rockers who have sold more than five million albums over the past decade. What about life on the road? Unlike hotel-room-wrecking rockers and drug-addled artists, are Christian musicians supposed to adhere to a higher set of standards?

“I think that last question is a big misconception about Christianity in general,” Statema says. “Really, the only difference between Christians and other people is that we realize what big screwups we are and that’s why we’ve asked for forgiveness and God’s help. Being a Christian doesn’t make you perfect.”

Selness says he’s glad the Go Fish guys have one another to lean on while touring.

“I think as Christian people in a ministry where we’re influencing younger lives, we feel that we’re more susceptible to the opposition,” he says. “We’ve all said on several occasions that we’re glad we’re not solo artists, because I don’t think any one of us could probably handle a lot of those things. But it’s nice to have that accountability.”

As for “selling out,” Go Fish’s Mike Smith says it’s inevitable that some Christian artists will compromise their beliefs in order to try and make a buck in a booming industry. “We’re a fallen people,” he says. “It’s our job to keep checking [such instincts]. The real question is, are artists staying true to what they say they are? It’s always been about the message.”

That message, according to Engen, is one that sets CCM apart from secular pop.

“These songs, they’re not just about a lost love or, ‘I’m going to fall in love,’” he says. “It’s about an eternal love that comes from God and, man, you can’t beat that message.”

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