

Top Ten Christian Artists

by Russ Breimeier

Christianity Today celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2006, a benchmark indicating the breadth of history and culture that the magazine has reported on. In that time span, somewhere in the late 1960s and early '70s, the Contemporary Christian Music genre (or CCM) was born, with roots tracing back to varying forms of gospel and pop before that.

In honor of the occasion, it seems only fitting to scan the history of CCM and highlight the most important artists in its approximate 40-year history. Here is a list of ten artists who have helped shape the scene and had long, healthy careers. Not merely pioneers, but also innovators—those whose music have endured for years as powerful expressions of artistry and faith to the Christian community and beyond.

Bill Gaither

Few music careers last more than ten years, and fewer still remain relevant for more than twenty. Bill Gaither has been making music since the early '60s—not long after *Christianity Today's* 1956 debut. While the popularity of most Christian artists fades with time, album sales suggest that Gaither is as relevant today as ever. **Though he certainly didn't invent Southern gospel, he's been the primary driving force that has sustained it for more than 40 years,** when the former schoolteacher began writing inspirational hymns. Over the years, Gaither has built an audience through albums, television, and his hugely popular Homecoming concerts. Singer, songwriter, musician, entrepreneur ... no other Christian artist has had a more long lasting impact on multiple generations.

Andraé Crouch

In the 1950s, Ray Charles dramatically revitalized rhythm & blues by injecting it with pop, rock, and controversially, gospel. It would take nearly another twenty years for someone to accomplish the same in reverse—**broadening gospel music to include pop, rock, and R&B.** Such is the indelible mark left by Andraé Crouch. Signature songs like "The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power," "Through It All," "Soon and Very Soon," and "My Tribute (To God Be the Glory)" have become standards that reside next to timeless gospel classics and spirituals. His music didn't only transcend genre either—during the height of Crouch's popularity in the '70s, his music appealed at least as much to young white Christians as it did to blacks. Today, Crouch is content with a relatively more low-key profile as a pastor and worship leader, but his musical legacy remains deeply felt throughout gospel music and the Church at large.

Petra

Though Petra is best known as a success story throughout most of the '80s, they actually started back in 1974. And since they officially retired in late 2005, **Christian music's most well-known rock band was also its most enduring,** in spite of dramatic changes to the lineup and sound. **For about a decade, Petra was the Christian answer to '70s arena rock bands like Foreigner and Styx. During the '80s, they evolved**

into a pop-metal band along the lines of Bon Jovi and Motley Crüe, and in the '90s, they toned down into a pop band with an affinity for praise songs—indeed, they were ahead of their time with the concept of modern worship. The common thread? A passion to openly share the hope of Christ to the youth of the day.

Keith Green

Keith Green's career lasted for little more than five years, his life tragically cut short in a 1982 plane crash. Yet because **he was so influential** in that short time, **his impact on Christian music remains strongly felt even today.** Green was **Christian pop's first bonafide singer/songwriter**, writing with musical quality and lyrical depth that was unparalleled for its time—a piano man in the spirit of Elton John and Billy Joel. Most would say, however, that **his considerable talent was outshined by his radical lifestyle, boldly challenging others to shun materialism and fearlessly live out their faith. Uncomfortable with "selling the gospel," he eventually chose to stop charging money for his albums and concerts, relying on freewill offerings instead.** Green was an appropriate finale to the Jesus movement—a rare combination of boundless talent and passion for the Lord.

Amy Grant

In 1975, when she was only 15 years old, Amy Grant started writing songs to encourage her friends—and two years later, **as a high school junior, she had a recording contract with Word.** She would go on to become **the First Lady of Christian Pop** with classic albums like *Age to Age*, *Unguarded*, and *Lead Me On*. She would effortlessly cross over to the mainstream side of the music business with 1991's *Heart in Motion*. Grant didn't invent Christian pop, but she certainly revolutionized it. Though she's weathered some personal challenges—including a very public divorce and remarriage—in the last ten years, she remains a relevant personality in Christian music, indulging a passion for the old hymns while pursuing a new career chapter as a television personality on NBC's acclaimed reality series *Three Wishes*. Not too shabby for a teenage girl with a guitar.

Sandi Patty

There's a long stretch in the history of Contemporary Christian Music where Sandi Patty was more than just another vocalist singing inspirational pop. Winning the GMA Award for Best Female Vocalist for eleven consecutive years (1982-1992), Patty in essence *was* inspirational pop. As such, she will forever be associated with a specific orchestrated style of music that glorifies God with a heavenly sound, but **her famed four-octave soprano eventually broke beyond the confines of Christian music. A stellar performance of *The Star Spangled Banner* brought her to the attention of the country at large, and with regular appearances at patriotic government celebrations she has become one of America's premier vocalists.** Like Grant, Patty has experienced some very public personal challenges—adultery and divorce—but a devoted fan base remains enthralled with

her music 25 years since her start.

Michael W. Smith

Few Christian artists have had more enduring success over a long career than "Smitty," a singer/songwriter who seems to have done it all. After **beginning in the early '80s by writing hits for Sandi Patty and Amy Grant, he soon became the keyboardist and bandleader on Grant's tour. Smith's natural stage presence and artistic skills soon launched his own solo career,** fueled by his beloved classic "Friends." Subsequent **albums in the late '80s and early '90s established him as the leading innovative pop/rock artist in Christian music, even yielding a brief period of crossover success.** Since then, Smith has also found success as a producer, film composer, worship leader, and record label executive (Rocketown Records); 2006 also marks the debut of Smith the actor in *The Second Chance*. But with consistent hit albums to his credit for the last twenty-something years, don't expect Smith the singer/songwriter to disappear any time soon.

Steven Curtis Chapman

Forty-nine Gospel Music Awards to this guy's credit ... and counting, making him **the most awarded Christian artist in CCM history.** Chapman is not known for reinventing the wheel when it comes to songwriting, and his ever-evolving style of acoustic pop/rock isn't innovative, but he has managed to connect with audiences through relatable lyricism, heartfelt faith, catchy melodies, and a charming boy-next-door persona. Though he made his debut in 1987 with little fanfare, Chapman began to make significant waves with his fourth and fifth albums, becoming a bestseller in Christian music throughout the '90s and demonstrating the importance of giving an artist time to develop. Though Chapman believes he's gradually entering the "mentoring phase" of his artistic career, he's bound to be influential in CCM for many years to come.

Jars of Clay

Interesting that Jars of Clay reached the pinnacle of their career (so far) when they started in 1995. Their acclaimed debut generated instant mainstream credibility and led to **high-profile tours with both Michael W. Smith and Sting.** Although the folk/rock band has yet to reclaim that level of success, Jars has remained a mainstay in Christian music for more than a decade, committed to their artistry and the desire to be salt and light to the world. Never one to be bound by trends, Jars shifted toward Americana right when they seemed most comfortable with being a rock band. For years, they refused to jump on the worship music bandwagon, and then released a collection of reworked hymn texts in 2005. Jars has also long been passionate about putting their faith in action by serving impoverished nations. In short, Jars treads a unique path in Christian music—always have, always will.

Switchfoot

No one can say with certainty which artist best represents the future of CCM, but plenty indications suggest that this Southern California group is in for a long, prestigious career. Some bands spend much of their time identifying their sound and struggling to develop it, but Switchfoot seemed to know who they were from the get-

go, and have demonstrated clear musical evolution ever since. **After debuting in 1997 as a confident garage rock trio with intelligent lyricism, they had amassed a loyal following by their third album and developed into one of Christian music's best modern rock bands. By 2001, they had attracted mainstream attention and began playing to the indie rock circuit. Crossing over with the multi-platinum selling *The Beautiful Letdown*, the band earned several Gospel Music Awards, including 2005's Artist of the Year. Now Switchfoot is poised to become a hugely popular arena rock act,** and God only knows where they'll go from there.

Ten More Honorable Mentions in the History of CCM

Larry Norman—Though his songs haven't had the long-lasting impact of other CCM legends, this **pioneer and "father" of the genre** nevertheless sparked a generation of Jesus freaks and Christian rockers, many of whom name Norman as their inspiration.

Carman—**Part musical evangelist and part flamboyant pop star,** his importance to the history and growth of Christian music during the '80s is undeniable, and he remains a record-breaking concert act in the genre.

U2—Though the **world-famous Irish rockers** don't identify themselves as a "Christian" band, this **spiritually informed** group has been influenced by CCM and continues to shape the industry, directly and indirectly.

Rich Mullins—**Best known for "Awesome God" and "Step By Step,"** and moreover one of the greatest singer/songwriters and musicians in the history of Christian music, we **lost this talent too soon in a 1997 car crash.**

dc Talk—An innovative and successful **rock/hip-hop trio** from the '90s that has since dissolved into the individual careers of Kevin Max, Michael Tait, and Toby "tobyMac" McKeehan.

Newsboys—Peter Furler and his band have undergone dramatic changes since starting in the late '80s, but their spiritually focused, sometimes worshipful **Euro pop/rock has made them a popular mainstay** for most of that time.

Kirk Franklin—By blending genres, transcending race, and even making some waves in mainstream music, Franklin became the **best thing to happen to gospel music since Andraé Crouch.**

Rebecca St. James—A **plainspoken and enduring pop/rock artist, author, and actress from Australia** who quickly established herself as a leader in Christian music/culture, and poised to remain one for many years to come.

Delirious?—This **quintet** remains the **United Kingdom's greatest contribution to CCM**, and one of the pivotal contributors to the popularity of the **modern worship** movement.

Third Day—**Blending roots rock, pop, and modern worship** over the course of their career, this band from Atlanta has been **regarded as one of the best in Christian music for more than 10 years.**