

Witnessing Suburbia: Conservatives and Christian Youth Culture. By Eileen Luhr. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009. 208 pages. \$19.95.

Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, brothers Steve and Jim Peters hosted “burning parties,” events at which teens would destroy books, posters, and music that represented youth culture, particularly rock culture. They burned paper, smashed vinyl—destroyed thousands of dollars of material in emotion filled evenings. These events were designed “not to ‘censure’ rock groups but rather to break youth culture’s hold on young people” (30). Yet within only a few years, Christian metal magazine *Heaven’s Metal* reported that Christian artists wanted to tour with their secular counterparts, musicians like Bon Jovi who were out there “roaring for the kingdom of darkness” (120). How did such a dramatic shift take place?

Eileen Luhr’s *Witnessing Suburbia* addresses this central question in post-war evangelical culture. During the early days of rock-and-roll, Eisenhower-era conservative Christians saw popular culture, particularly music, as anti-family, anti-American, and anti-Christian. How then did some conservative Christians come to use rock music as a mode of Christian witness? Luhr’s work traces this shift and then explores precisely how some evangelical Christians found ways to claim a Christian countercultural identity. In doing so, she carefully probes the relationships among suburbanization, popular culture, and evangelical Christianity. She argues that as the American ideal became wedded to the consumption-oriented suburban home and nuclear family, evangelical Christians could no longer frame themselves as separate from consumer culture. The creation of an explicitly evangelical popular culture increased the evangelical influence within the new, suburban American home.

Implicit in the development of Christian youth culture was a significant shift in attitude towards youth culture more generally. Luhr explores these topics through two approaches. First, she demonstrates the ways in which evangelical conservatives in many walks of life (parents, youth, community leaders, artists) framed their political and cultural actions as a defense of symbolic cat-

egories such as “youth,” “family,” and “nation.” Second, she illustrates how evangelicals’ social locations “converged within consumer culture,” so that Christian conservatives could create forms of cultural expression that delivered their religious messages to a suburban population. According to Luhr, evangelical Christians in the post-war era viewed musicians like Elvis as anti-family and anti-Christian because of their embrace of sexuality and youthful rebellion.

The world, however, was changing. By the mid-1960s, evangelical leaders such as David Noebel could rail against the Beatles as much as they wanted, but John Lennon had something of a point when he quipped that the Beatles were “bigger than Jesus.” Luhr demonstrates that as the pull of consumer culture became more central to American identity, Christians could no longer maintain a strong stand against consumption of popular culture. The creation of Christian rock culture linked the countercultural aspects of youth culture with what evangelicals saw as the potentially countercultural message of Christianity.

The book’s chapters move both chronologically and thematically. The introduction outlines the concern that conservatives felt for the souls of American youth, which they viewed to be under siege from a communist-tinged youth culture. The first chapter then explores the forms of critique that Christians leveled against secular popular culture, demonstrating the shift that occurred as parental activists came to find fault not with the genre itself, but with the values modeled by the lyrics of rock music and by the lives of the stars. Additionally, these activists became more focused on family in their rhetoric, framing themselves in the public square as parents rather than as Christians.

Chapter two directly follows this argument as Luhr teases out the ways in which Christian groups like the “Jesus Freaks” then took the step, which they viewed as compelling and not inherently problematic, of shaping a Christian youth culture that she describes as “rebel with a cross.” To be a Christian, groups like the Jesus Freaks suggested, was to be truly countercultural. Luhr points to Christian magazines that drew from drug culture to depict Jesus, including their creation of a “wanted poster” that gave the Christ “aliases, an identity (‘notorious leader of an underground liberation movement’), charges (including ‘practicing medicine, wine-making, and food distribution without a license’ and ‘associating with known criminals, radicals, subversives, prostitutes, and street people’), an appearance (‘hippie type’), and a generalized warning” suggesting that youth were particularly vulnerable to his message (78). In addition to the Jesus Freaks movement, Christian fan cultures emerged, pulling from the evangelical themes that most suited their needs: messages of personal salvation and piety that drew on a pan-evangelical Christian language that transcended denominational differences. Christian rock then grew out of these broader Christian claims to being countercultural, reshaping the message of rock-and-roll by focusing on its gospel music origins and countering secular tales of drugs and sex with images of rock stars telling their female fans about Jesus—rather than taking them to bed.

Chapter three addresses Christian music’s contribution to Christian mission, analyzing the strategies through which Christians attempted to use rock, metal, and punk to bring the message

of Christ to non-believing music lovers. The fourth chapter argues that youth culture merged with other family-centered issues for the Christian right, including abortion and gay rights. The epilogue does a masterful job of collecting these threads to demonstrate that by the late twentieth century, Christian rock and youth culture intertwined with the morality rhetoric of conservative politics.

Luhr's historiographical contribution comes in her linkage of conservative Christianity's public and political activism with its cultural expressions, a fusion that she suggests gave conservative Christians both voice in the public arena and a venue through which to influence home life. Her argument pulls from ongoing conversations on both popular culture and studies of conservative religion and politics, drawing on the work of scholars such as Colleen McDannell, Lisa McGirr, and Heather Hendershot. By putting those conversations in dialogue, Luhr demonstrates the ways in which popular music and political circumstances resulted in the creation of a vibrant and ideologically inflected cultural machine. Luhr points out, for instance, that even though most Christian music tried to distance itself from the "controversial language" of Rush Limbaugh, Christian music sales spiked after 9/11, and she argues that "the increased integration of Christian consumerism in exurbia paralleled the increased integration of conservative evangelicals [like George W. Bush] in the political process" (195). Participation in those forms of cultural production then provided Christian youth with means to participate in the rebelliousness of youth culture without actually rebelling against the values of family and nation that were central to late twentieth-century conservative ideology.

Witnessing Suburbia provides an impressive array of data and compellingly demonstrates how a culture that reacted to Elvis in fear could create a Christian music scene that includes both punk and heavy metal. Historians will find in Luhr's work a detailed analysis of the creation of a genre of popular culture, though they might wish for more links built between musical messages and social movements. For example, how did the modeling of rock musicians as family men, pure until marriage and faithful afterwards connect to campaigns for abstinence education? Those within religious studies will be inspired to use Luhr's rich exploration of a cultural framework to ask questions about how meaning was created for participants within the culture. Those working within lived religion, for instance, may ask how youth brought their own interpretations to Christian punk, above or against the meanings being inscribed by musicians and leadership.

Luhr's work fills a significant gap within histories of conservative Christianity and popular culture. Using carefully selected and wide-ranging local examples, Luhr amasses the particulars of many American suburbias into a national cultural shift. It no longer mattered if rock music was "bigger than Jesus" because in at least some venues, rock music and youth culture were Jesus—another way of hearing, spreading, and living his message.

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