4  Let There Be Rock! A Tale of Two Christian Music Festivals

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Introduction

Many years ago, when this paper's second author was a teenager struggling to survive on the roller coaster that is an ordinary American high school life, she would often attend Christian concerts and gatherings with a close friend's youth group. Given the remoteness of the town where she lived, attending such events usually involved a considerable bus ride and at least one night spent in a hotel. These trips always felt like an incredible adrenaline rush, combining the social dynamics of getting away from one's parents and normal home environment with the inevitable dramas of friendships and romances, and the high-pitched fervour of the emotional spiritual experiences to be had under the swirling lights, as Christian rock and pop musicians worked the stage, their messages of testimony pouring out of the loudspeakers, carried along on waves of thumping bass and percussion. It was hard not to be swept away into this environment — to ground oneself in the weight of the promises on offer. Following Jesus and living in accord with his plan would bring peace and happiness (not to mention eternal life!) — a welcome prospect in the world of stress, loneliness and uncertainty that often characterizes teenage existence. His plan would not always be free of difficulty, but not taking the easy road would definitely pay off in spiritual rewards.

But there were always fissures in this inviting picture, small cracks where doubt could creep in. In a story told at one gathering, participants were regaled with a tale (no doubt fictional) of a cohort of Christian youth, just like themselves, who were attending a concert in an auditorium when a group of armed persons appeared, locked the auditorium doors (thus holding the concertgoers hostage), and gave those who would reject Jesus and denounce their faith the option to leave the locked room. Once the faint of heart had recanted and left the building, so the story went, the would-be terrorists revealed themselves to actually be Christians as well, on a mission to flush any inauthentic elements from gatherings of the truly faithful. The story was told triumphantly and accusingly, putting the question to the attendees of the present gathering whether they, too, would have the courage to stand up for their faith, like the brave souls who had remained in the auditorium, or whether they would deny their Messiah and head for the hills. There was a sense of awe

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and admiration among the young, scarcely teenaged audience members. How righteous of the armed Christians to seek to flush the poseurs from their ranks! How noble of the Christian youth who held their ground, remaining in the auditorium and refusing to denounce their faith, regardless of what might come! The second author’s parents, mainline Protestants who had been loosely affiliated with counterculture Christianity and the hippie movement in their own youth, were rather less impressed upon hearing this story and its use as a technique for inspiring youth’s commitment to the faith upon their daughter’s return home from her trip. ‘Perhaps fleeing the auditorium was a reasonable response to the fearful situation of the youth in the story’, they suggested. ‘Perhaps the prospect of living to see another day, in which they could continue to practice the principles of their faith, seemed more attractive than martyring themselves in a silly hostage situation’. They were not so convinced that there was anything in the idea of frightening people by taking them hostage or seeking to separate the true believers from the fake that was particularly cool or courageous.

Little did the second author know, in her days attending Christian concerts and gatherings, hearing various messages about her religious tradition at home, at church and at events with various friends’ youth groups, that her activities were part of a much larger pattern in the Christian rock and pop music scene, where events of larger and larger scales continue to gain momentum to this day. Indeed, over two dozen Christian youth music festivals now occur annually, on multiple continents, attracting tens of thousands of participants (Howard and Streck, 1999; Johnston, 2011). As the opening anecdote illustrates, however, these festivals have an importance that goes well beyond the sheer number of participants involved or the economic impacts that they produce by attracting tourists: they are spaces in which different forms of Christianity and Christian identity are constructed and negotiated – spaces of ideological production.

This chapter summarizes a research project conducted at two popular American Christian youth music festivals, Lifest and Cornerstone. The goal of the project was to better understand the phenomenon of these festivals and to explore them as spaces of ideological production and identity development. While the discussion here is necessarily brief, being intended to serve only as a digest, much more thorough explorations of the insights gained through this work can be found in two other articles: ‘Christian music festival tourism and positive peace’, published recently in the Journal of Tourism and Peace Research (Caton et al., 2013); and ‘Rock of our salvation: ideological production at the Christian youth music festival’ (currently under review for publication and available on request by contacting this chapter’s second author). The first of these articles explores the vastly different ideological agendas of the two festivals and questions the role of these ideologies in the furthering or thwarting of peace between social groups on the American landscape. The second takes a more overtly anthropological approach and considers the Christian youth music festival as an ideological apparatus, querying the ways in which this unusual social setting functions to consolidate and reproduce particular Christian ‘imaginaries’. This chapter provides an overview of the project as a whole, touching on each of these issues in a summative way, and hopefully inviting readers to explore the other articles in more detail, in order to truly appreciate more of the nuances of these fascinating social spaces.

Methods

Given the lack of extant work on Christian music festivals, the study of which a digested version is presented here proceeded in an inductive and exploratory manner, using what has been referred to in the qualitative methods literature variously as a mini- or micro-ethnographic approach, or a compressed time ethnographic approach (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004; Hammersley, 2006). Compressed time ethnography adapts traditional anthropological practice to fit instances when lengthier field engagement would be infeasible or
impossible—a situation that is clearly the case in the study of festivals, which by their very nature involve groups of people from dispersed geographical areas who gather for brief but intense periods to undertake a shared social activity. The participant observation undertaken in compressed time ethnography is often supplemented with other methods of engaging with a subculture, such as off-site interviews, participation in Internet discussion groups, analysis of documents, secondary research and so forth, and this was also the case in the current study.

The fieldwork for the study was conducted by the first author between 2010 and 2012 and was anchored by participant observation in the summer of 2011 at two important Christian music festivals in the USA: Lifest and Cornerstone. She spent a total of 11 days attending the two festivals, camping on site, unobtrusively observing attendees, participating in various aspects of each event and conducting more than 30 informal interviews, which ranged in length from 15 min to 2 h, and were carried out with attendees, performers, staff and volunteers. Observations and casual interviews took place at campsites, music performances, retail markets, exhibitions, activities and seminars at each festival site. Participating in the same activities as the other festival attendees facilitated a quick sense of trust and rapport between the researcher and the study participants, although all participants were made aware that the researcher was attending the festival for research purposes as well as to participate in the celebration of Christian music, and that her goal in conducting informal interviews was to better understand the phenomenon of Christian music festivals and the experiences of attendees and performers at these events.

Interviews with festival organizers were more formal in nature and lasted between 1 and 2 h. In these interviews, the first author sought to gain an understanding of each festival’s history and of its organizers’ purpose in producing their respective events. She also sought to understand the organizers’ perceptions of the effects of their festivals on attendees and the relationship of each festival to popular youth culture at large. An additional formal interview was conducted with Andrew Beaujon, author of Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock (2006), an engaging book that offers a journalistic snapshot of the unique subculture surrounding Christian rock. In his interview, Beaujon was able to offer the perspective of an ‘outsider’ who had spent significant time exploring Christian rock festivals; this helped to complement the researcher’s more emic perspective—as she has participated in the Christian youth music subculture for several years, as well as the obviously emic perspectives of Lifest and Cornerstone attendees, organizers, performers and volunteers. Finally, the research included consideration of textual materials, including the official websites of each festival and the organization behind it, event programmes, educational leaflets and advertisements found on-site at the festivals, and Web discussion boards for Christian music enthusiasts.

A Tale of Two Festivals: Lifest and Cornerstone

One of the major reasons that Lifest and Cornerstone were selected as festivals to consider in this research, aside from their geographical and temporal proximity to one another in 2011, was an anticipation (based on the festivals’ official websites) that they represented two very different kinds of Christian music events, despite key similarities in structure and format. This perception turned out to be quite accurate, thus providing the hop-on-grist for the social theory mill, as reflected in the discussions in the two following sections. But first, a bit of background on the festivals themselves.

The Lifest Festival, now in its 14th year, is held each July at a community exhibition grounds in Wisconsin. A 5 day event, the festival attracts about 16,000 attendees on any given day, from across the USA and Canada. Some of these attendees camp on-site, and some simply drive in for the day, typically with their parents or a church youth group, as most are under the age of 18. Slogans for the festival include ‘Party with a
Purpose’, ‘More than Music’ and ‘Where Kids Have the Time of Their Life without Hiding from Their Parents’ (Lifest, 2012). The 2011 Lifest event, at which fieldwork was conducted, featured live Christian music acts, comedians and speakers on multiple stages, as well as seminars and workshops for youth pastors, leaders and general attendees.

Lifest is run by Life Promotions, a non-profit organization that produces faith-based programmes and events for churches and value-based programmes for US public schools, and emphasizes the need to reach youth before the age of 18, through a focus on intervention and education to encourage positive life decision making (Life Promotions, 2012). Programme topics include abstinence, cults, domestic discord, alcohol, pornography, drug abuse and so forth (Life Promotions, 2012). Ideologically, Lifest is characterized by its affiliation with what has alternatively been termed conservative, evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity, which is discussed in more detail in this chapter’s next section. Essentially, the festival exists to convert young people to Christianity, to help those who already identify as Christian to strengthen their faith and their ties to the Church, and to provide a space in which Christian youth can experience elements akin to mainstream popular culture that they will find attractive (e.g. loud music, edgy fashion), but in a protective setting in which the ideological messages of these elements are tightly controlled. It is hoped that by drawing on elements akin to popular culture, the festival organizers will be able to communicate with youth in ‘a language they understand’, in order to deliver what is ultimately an evangelical message, as well as other secondary messages about a safe and healthy way to live their lives according to conservative Christian principles.

In contrast, the Cornerstone Festival has a much longer pedigree, dating back over a quarter of a century to 1984, when it was founded by the Jesus People USA movement (or JPUSA, pronounced ‘japooza’), a counterculture Christian group that sprung from the hippie movements of the 1960s, again discussed in much more detail in the next section of this chapter. Jesus People movements were commonly found throughout the USA in this era, but they declined with the general collapse of the hippie subculture, and JPUSA currently refers specifically to a particular group descended from this legacy, which remains active near Chicago, living communally and sharing all goods and property. It is this group that organized the Cornerstone Festival for 29 years until the event officially came to an end in 2012.

Cornerstone was held in an open field in rural Illinois and ran for 6 days each summer, with most attendees camping on-site and spending their days taking in music acts, seminars, art exhibits and workshops. The festival attracted predominantly young people (although an older demographic than Lifest, perhaps 16–30 years old on average), but there was also a significant component of older attendees who returned to the festival year after year, and this group was especially prevalent in 2011, as the organizers pushed for a ‘reunion’ theme in an attempt to shore up declining participant numbers, with festival attendance having tanked from a height of 20,000 participants to fewer than 10,000 in recent years. Like Lifest, Cornerstone drew event tourists from a wide geographic area; licence plates from most US states were observed in 2011, and a significant Canadian contingent managed to find one another to create an impromptu celebration of Canada Day.

Counterculture values were core to Cornerstone: the festival functioned to counter both the mainstream world values of materialism and intense individualism, and the socially conservative values espoused by fundamentalist Christianity – especially the notion that hard rock and metal musical genres are sinful. Indeed, the history of JPUSA is one of individuals ‘united in a general distrust not only of secular society but also of mainstream religious institutions’ (Johnston, 2011, citing Di Sabatino, 1999). JPUSA has garnered criticism, and sometimes even ridicule, from wider Christian and secular circles for being too radical in its pursuit of communal living and too avant-garde in its artistic sensibilities (Trott, 1999), but this has not stopped the group from continuing to articulate its own notion
of Christianity, which is purposely resistant to more entrenched expressions of Christian doctrine and practice. The group draws on Christian scripture to emphasize values of creativity (Psalms 33:3; 149:3), distrust of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures (Romans 13:3), freedom (Psalms 119:45; Isaiah 61:1; John 8:36; Acts 13:39; Romans 8:21; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1), pleasure (Ecclesiastes 8:15; 1 Timothy 6:18), direct and honest contact among persons (Romans 12:16; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:1; 2 Timothy 2:15) and the need to discard restrictions and inhibitions (2 Samuel 6:22; Matthew 6:26). Cornerstone, in the almost three decades it lasted, was enacted to be a living articulation of this vision.

In 2012, Cornerstone closed its gates for the last time, with organizers citing the festival's inability to maintain financial viability in a poor economy. Bands that once found acceptance in few places besides Cornerstone are now seeing more luck on the mainstream music scene, as popular culture becomes more tolerant of Christian identity, and so Cornerstone organizers expressed in their interviews that there seems to be less need for the festival than there once was (though certainly the event's diehard fans continue to heartily disagree). One suspects that the festival's refusal to compromise its principles and seek sponsors who offer donations based on the number of 'souls saved' by the event – a tactic pursued by many other Christian music festivals – may also have been key to its undoing, rendering it harder hit by the economic recession than other events in the sector (Johnston, 2011). Finally, Cornerstone's closing may be due in some measure to the simple vagaries of the life courses of key individuals involved in its production, as its long-time director moved on after the 2011 event, and follow-up contacts by the first author revealed that several other festival organizers were in the process of leaving the JPUSA commune to transition to other life projects.

**Christian Imaginaries**

Speaking of Christian youth music festivals as a 'notable niche market' within the larger festival and event landscape tends to imply that such festivals are relatively homogeneous in their aims, content and demographics but, as the previous description of the two festivals considered in this research clearly demonstrates, considerable diversity exists among these events, especially from an ideological perspective. Lifest and Cornerstone espouse very different interpretations of Christianity and Christian living – differences that are articulated through the festivals' experiential elements, including the types of artistic performances featured and the themes of talks, seminars and information booths. These differences are due to distinct discrepancies between each of these religious community's imaginaries about everything from the figure of Jesus, to the proper approach to engaging with scripture, to the meaning of holding a Christian identity and living a life that is an expression of this identity.

As already mentioned, Lifest is an expression and supporting apparatus of American conservative Christianity. Affiliates of this strand of the faith, like most Christians, in general follow the teachings of Jesus Christ, who they hold to be the son of God and the Messiah, who has been sent by God to redeem the world from sin and evil. They are differentiated from some branches of Christianity by their view that the Bible is the literal, complete, and inherent word of God, which is provided as a guide for how human beings should live their lives; by their belief that Christians bear a responsibility to proselytize; and by their belief that acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah is the only path to salvation. Conservative Christianity also tends to be characterized by its promotion of traditional social values, which are often viewed by its members as being under attack by mainstream culture.

Conservative Christianity derives from the American evangelical movement of the 19th century, its own piece of the much longer story of evangelical Christianity that dates back to the activism of Martin Luther and his revolutionary stand against prevailing Christian doctrine and practice, in what history remembers as the Protestant Reformation. In short, Luther felt that the Church
had badly misconstrued God’s message by coming to focus on a theology of works, in which one earned salvation through actions (hence the idea of purchasing pardons for one’s misdeeds), rather than through a theology of grace, in which salvation depended simply on embracing Jesus Christ as the Messiah, whose crucifixion had redeemed humans from sin. Luther advocated a return to the gospels, or the ‘good news’ of Jesus Christ come as humanity’s saviour, and the word evangelical derives from the Greek expression for one who shares the good news (Nichols, 2007).

Evangelicalism thrived in the American colonies, and through the period of nation building, with most adherents accepting an interpretation of scripture called ‘postmillennialism’, which held that Jesus would return to Earth at the end of a 1000 year golden age of peace and prosperity, representing the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on Earth. Evangelicals were often at the forefront of social reform efforts in this era, logically viewing their efforts as necessary work to help bring about this golden era and the return of Christ (Weber, 1987; Balmer, 2010). Over the course of the 19th century, however, evangelical theology underwent a massive shift, with some segments of the movement beginning to adhere to a ‘pre-millennialist’ interpretation of scripture, a position propounded by the former Anglican priest John Nelson Darby. Darby argued that all of human history could be divided into distinct ages, or ‘dispensations’, with each era representing a different covenant between God and humanity. As Balmer (2010, p. 34) explains, according to Darby, ‘God had struck a particular deal, or covenant, with Adam, for instance, and another with Noah and Abraham, and with the people of Israel’. When the Israelites failed to accept Jesus as the Messiah, another dispensation ended, and Israel was essentially ‘replaced’ by the Christian Church, which became the latest group to be on the receiving end of God’s favour. (This position is also known as ‘replacement theology’, for this reason.) Darby argued that humanity was living in the final dispensation and that Jesus would return at any moment to fulfill God’s promise of taking his followers to heaven in the rapture, leaving the rest of humanity behind to face the great tribulation, after which point the millennial kingdom would be established (Weber, 1987; Balmer, 2010). Darby’s position became increasingly popular in 19th century America for a variety of reasons, including disillusionment with the possibilities for social reform, induced by what felt like a never-ending civil war in which the moral righteousness of the North’s anti-slavery position might very well not ultimately prevail, and by a host of problems in the country’s overcrowded industrial cities, which only seemed to be intensifying despite attempts at progressive social activism.

By the beginning of the 20th century, pre-millennialist evangelicals (hereafter referred to as ‘conservative Christians’) had begun to feel firmly at odds with others in the evangelical movement who had not taken the pre-millennialist turn: most notably, the mainline Protestant denominations, such as Presbyterianism and United Methodism. Mainline Protestantism was viewed as having sold out to the forces of ‘modernism’, with churches failing to strongly condemn social practices like dancing, drinking alcohol, embracing immodest fashion trends and consuming entertainment products that promoted lifestyle elements of greed, materialism and sex outside of marriage. Hence, conservative Christians felt that their values were becoming in need of protection from the quickly secularizing popular culture around them. To insulate themselves and their children, conservative Christians constructed a rich subculture, complete with its own schools, artistic products and avenues of entertainment (Carpenter, 1997; Schultz, 2002; Marsden, 2006; Belhassen, 2009). They generally withdrew from politics, perceiving, in line with their pre-millennialist views, that the world was hopelessly lost to sin and evil; instead, they focused fully on living piously and converting others to the faith so that their souls would not be lost at the coming of the rapture, when Jesus would lift his followers into the air, carrying them to heaven to avoid the great tribulation before
the golden age of the millennium would finally be ushered in—a series of events felt by most people in the movement to be imminent.

Twentieth-century evangelicals’ distrust of mainstream culture did not stop the movement from drawing on rhetorical forms from popular culture in order to engage followers, especially youth. Evangelicalism had long had somewhat of a theatrical element to it, even dating back to the open-air preaching of George Whitefield in the 1700s, which had all the trappings of good dramatic oratory and spurred listeners to emotional responses. As the times changed, evangelical leaders were not hesitant to employ new technologies and cultural forms, such as televangelism programmes, radio broadcasts, film and the Internet, to promote their message among their laity (Erickson, 1992; Melton et al., 1997; Zaleski, 1997; Cobb, 1986). At the same time, evangelicals needed a safe space from mainstream culture, where they could raise their children in ways that minimized contact with the values and practices of the outside world, which they considered corrupting. Thus, an evangelical subculture began to take form, existing in parallel with mainstream America and providing its own ‘Christian versions’ of all things deemed essential to a 20th century life, including leisure and entertainment options. Enter the Christian youth music festival.

Festivals like Lifest can be situated directly within this pre-millennialist legacy. The goal of the festival is to provide a safe space where Christian youth can experience desirable entertainment that echoes the more mainstream cultural idiom, without having their spiritual beliefs and values challenged—indeed, while actually enhancing their religious convictions, and even creating an environment in which new converts may be gained. To attend Lifest is to be immersed in the conservative Christian imaginary, where scripture is the literal word of God (and more mainstream Protestant interpretations are simply shortcuts of convenient biblical misinterpretation, devised to allow misguided Christians to avoid some of the social difficulties of living in the way God has really called them to), and where the figure of Jesus is much less important for his actual works on Earth and more important for his existence as the son of God and for the role he will play in the future of humanity’s end times.

Cornerstone, in contrast, represents and furthers the counterculture Christian community, which does not necessarily diverge from the conservative Christian community on the basis of theology, but definitely holds its own distinct imaginary of the figure of Jesus and the meaning of living a Christian life. As noted above, Cornerstone was born from the Jesus People movements of the 1960s and 1970s, which unfolded in the hippie idiom and sought to evangelize to young people, especially those who were struggling with addiction, unemployment, unhappy family situations and a general lack of direction (Stowe, 2011). Featuring such colourful characters as Lonnie Frisbee, famed for reading the Bible on LSD and taking groups of friends out into the canyons of southern California to paint giant murals of Jesus on the rocks and re-enact biblical scenes with the aid of psychedelic drugs, the Jesus People movement held the figure of Jesus Christ, rather than the myriad and sometimes contradictory rules expressed in scripture, to be the centre of Christianity’s meaning: and they read this figure in a radically different way from their more mainstream conservative evangelical forebears. Stowe (2011, p. 22) recounts thoughts expressed by Ted Wise who, together with his wife Elizabeth, is generally regarded as one of the founding parents of the Jesus Movement:

I was confronted with the fact that I was always putting down Jesus…but I never actually read the New Testament. So I did. And I really liked Jesus. But he was so different than I thought he was. It was a complete surprise to me. He was so cool. I would have thought from what I heard around Christian people that he was a sergeant in the Marine Corps, you know? Or at least a Republican.

To the people of the Jesus Movement, Jesus was a pure rebel, and one with a serious cause: standing up for those who were
underprivileged, disempowered and unloved, and promoting a message of peace, harmony and care-taking among people.

As Stowe (2011) explains, music was always an important part of the hippie Christian scene, owing to its general importance to young people, and particularly to the baby boom generation, and also to its more calculated use by some church leaders, who opted to team up with movement leaders from the street, realizing that this was a recipe for success in bringing more young people into the institutional fold. Although Jesus People often drew on old-fashioned Protestant gospel songs, of the type popular at the camp meetings and revivals of old, in practising their expressive style of worship, contemporary genres were also fair game, and current radio hits were sometimes re-lyricized to give them a Christian twist (e.g. ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’ being converted to ‘Jesus in the Sky with Angels’) (Stowe, 2011). Ultimately, an entire new genre sprang up, as musically inclined young Christians, influenced by both their religious convictions and the popular sounds of the times, found an outlet for their creativity, emmeshed as they were in a supportive community of believers like themselves, who did not hold secular music trends and Christian identity to be in conflict with one another.

Such musicians, however, were not readily tolerated by conservative Christianity, which held rock music to be, at worst, the work of the devil and, at best, something that was extraneous to a religious life (Stowe, 2011); they also were largely shunned by a mainstream secular music industry that was becoming increasingly shy of offering label space or airspace to music that was overtly evangelical in character (Thompson, 2000). The Cornerstone Festival arose to create a gathering space for the live performance of music from this new ‘Christian rock’ genre. Its vision of the appropriateness of rock music to Christian worship practice is perhaps best expressed in the interpretation of Jesus Christ set forth by John Thompson (2000), a sympathetic commentator who has studied the history of the Christian counterculture music scene extensively:

Who was more rebellious than Jesus of Nazareth? He railed against authority, spoke against personal and religious corruption, and took a stick and a whip to the temple. He healed the sick on the Sabbath, and he encouraged people to walk away from their jobs, sell their belongings, and give their money to the poor. He even refused to remain dead, according to the account of the resurrection. He owned only the clothes on his back, and had no home of his own, and got his tax money from the mouth of a fish. He was such a rebel that the religious leaders had him executed. Find one rocker with even a tenth of that rebellious fire. Yet Jesus has been reimagined in our postmodern world as a slow-moving, gentle, cryptic, and painstakingly polite rabbi, not the ruffian whom the San Hedrin thought was so dangerous... From a certain perspective, Jesus and rock music are perfectly suited to each other.

For both Lifest and Cornerstone, then, live music is a way of bridging popular culture meanings and experiences – so central to the lives of youth – with particular imaginaries of Christianity, in order to ultimately sustain each type of Christian community, conservative or counterculture. Christian youth music festivals are sites of ideological production, and there is more than one message on offer.

The Festival as Ideological Apparatus

The previous section of this chapter focused on the distinctive differences between Lifest and Cornerstone, and sought to demonstrate that Christian youth music festivals are not homogeneous in their constituencies or in their ideological tenor. Despite their heterogeneity and complexity, such festivals do bear resemblance to one another in key ways, in terms of the mechanisms through which they advance their ideological agendas. Through the ethnographic research conducted
at both of these festivals, we were able to identify three key similarities between them in terms of the way that they function to advance their distinctive imaginaries of Christianity. Exploring these mechanisms can help us to hone deeper insight into how festivals function as ideological apparatuses on the ground.

First, both Lifest and Cornerstone excel at producing a sense of liminality. Rooted in the work of van Gennep (1960), and elaborated by Turner (1969) and Turner and Turner (1978), liminality is the notion of moving outside of one’s ordinary life space, where cultural norms are suspended and one feels ‘betwixt and between’, not at home but not firmly within the bounds of another cultural system either. Tourism is a natural activity through which liminality may be experienced, given that it involves ‘being away’, but only in a temporary capacity, in which one does not really become part of the visited society; this anthropological concept has been applied to great effect in the study of tourism settings. Typical features associated with the experience of liminality are a sense of freedom to behave differently from how one might at home, the ability to more readily pursue and achieve a state of existential authenticity and the creation of *communitas*—or intense bonding with strangers sharing the experience.

At Lifest and Cornerstone, a sense of liminality is created effectively in several ways, beginning with the physical way in which the events are organized. Both festivals are in rather remote locations, though Cornerstone more so than Lifest. Festival organizers encourage attendees to camp on-site, and this was almost a necessity at Cornerstone, given its rural location. Camping on-site encourages attendees to socialize with each other and to share supplies, which promotes bonding. The remote location of the festivals also forces attendees to shed many modern conveniences, such as indoor plumbing, creating a feeling of being stripped ‘back to the basics’ of life. Although this effect is less pronounced at Lifest—a much more sanitized production, with grass-covered exhibition fields (as opposed to the dust and mud of Cornerstone) and clean shower facilities—such conditions nevertheless feel exotic and exciting to participants, who tend to be younger teenagers leading more sheltered lives. In both cases, being removed from the ordinary conveniences of modern life allows attendees to open up and to focus on their spirituality—to commune with God and fellow members of their subculture. Festival organizers also make production choices about which musical acts to feature with the idea of supporting a liminal environment in mind. The entire concept of a Christian rock festival revolves around the use of a form of artistic expression that is considered fringe and potentially dangerous to mainstream Christian values, but which, none the less, has an allure for many Christian young people (Howard and Streck, 1999). In many ways, the goal of festival organizers and performers is to create a safe haven, where members of the Christian subculture can gather to feel included and accepted, given that such youth often feel alienated from a mainstream culture that can be hostile to their spiritual identities. Thus, the festivals’ sense of liminality is important in creating an atmosphere where *communitas* can unfold, and attendees can open up to one another to share expressions of faith in an ambience of trust and support.

Secondly, Lifest and Cornerstone, like festivals in general, owe part of their power to their immersive, emotional dimension, which derives from the immediate sensory stimuli that envelop participants and evoke an immediate affective response (Duffy and Waitt, 2011). Hearing music that is deeply meaningful—music that one has perhaps played repeatedly alone with one’s thoughts, but which one now experiences with an awareness of the co-presence of both the performer of that music and others who are similarly moved by it—can be euphoric. Such emotions become all the more intense when the music in question functions symbolically as a sort of refuge from a world in which one feels misunderstood. While this experience feels intensely personal, it has a profound social dimension as well: Christian youth music festivals function as sites of ritual performance, where attendees use
to state that all conservative Christians are politically active, or that of those who are all lean toward the right, the historical record renders it clear that conservative Christianity has become increasingly enmeshed with right wing politics in the USA (Thumma, 1991; Jelen, 1994; Hunsberger and Jackson 2005; Baugartner et al., 2008), embracing a shared agenda that includes, most prominently, opposition to abortion rights, opposition to gay rights and, especially, marriage equality, support for the state of Israel and a hawkish approach to American foreign policy in the Middle East. Festivals that socialize youth into the conservative Christian movement may thus perpetuate an ideological agenda that is in many ways at odds with social justice, equality and international peace, if they do not overtly challenge the dogma of the religious right (and we found no evidence at Lifest that challenging such dogma was the case). One of the raisons d’être of festivals like Cornerstone is to resist just this sort of thing – to imagine Christianity in a way that is not at odds with social inclusiveness and progressive politics. If the fact that Cornerstone has now closed its gates is any indication, however, it seems that conservative Christianity will continue to be the more mainstream form of American evangelicalism, and that the entertainment and tourism activities within its orbit will continue to be the dominant forms of evangelical subculture leisure expression, at least in the near future. We must continue to attend to religious leisure festivals – Christian music themed and otherwise – for in an era in which life meaning increasingly unfolds through leisure, consumption and lifestyle choices (Maffesoli, 1998), festivals and events are sure to have more to tell us than ever before about who we are and what dynamics of power we can expect to observe on our ‘socioscape’ in the future.

Notes

1 More thorough descriptions of each festival can be found in Caton et al. (2013).
2 For a much fuller description of the history of American evangelicalism in relation to Christian youth music festivals, please see Caton et al. (2013).
3 A much fuller, more ethnographically descriptive and more theoretically grounded discussion of these outcomes is available in Pastoor, Caton, Belhassen, Collins and Wallin (under review); please contact the author (E-mail: kcaton@tru.ca) to obtain a copy of this manuscript prior to publication.

References


