

The Jesus Factor

Amy Grant
and her Band of Christians

She's one of the biggest female rock acts ever, with three Grammys and millions of records sold. This month, with little advertising, she's sold out one (and almost two) concerts at Auckland's Logan Campbell Centre. Her name is Amy Grant. Who?

Grant is a Christian rock singer, and the reason we've heard so little about her is that the Christian music scene is almost an underground industry of its own. Grant makes born-again Christian music for born-again Christians; her records are sold and her concerts promoted through those bookshops one never feels the urge to enter.

But Grant doesn't conform to whatever one's idea of what a Christian rock star should be like. Her music and her image isn't too far removed from Pat Benatar. Her band of Christians plays full on American

stadium rock, and while Grant doesn't wear lurex leotards, her looks are just as important as Benatar's in her marketing to a crossover Christian/secular rock audience. A fresh-faced 25-year-old with long flowing hair, Grant sports a snug-fitting leopard skin jacket in concert, and is often quoted speaking frankly about her sexuality. As Mark Jacobson from *Esquire* quipped, "What a genius marketing device! Guess Christian boys got to whack off, too."

As her music reflects, Grant's tastes are for the mainstream — Heart, Billy Joel, and Bryan Adams are three acts she enjoys, though she hasn't seen them in concert. Critics have noticed less references to "Jesus" and "God" on her latest million-selling album, *Unguarded*, and the fact that her audience is exactly split 50/50 Christian/non-Christian shows that her crossover is complete. "I figure a lot of people come because they want to hear



Amy Grant

the music, and I work with a very talented band," she says. "I think somebody could come that doesn't even speak English and have a blast."

Barbed Bouquet

Predictably, the "rock is the devil's music" school of strict fundamentalists have little time for Amy Grant. Last year at a Detroit concert, Grant was given a bouquet. Inside was a message: "Turn back now. You can still be saved if you renounce what you've done." But Grant is unconcerned by these critics: "I don't think they buy any of my records, and I don't think they come to the concerts. I've read a few articles that say that they think I'm kinda out there a little bit, but really there's nothing you can do if someone holds an opinion about you. I don't feel like I have to publicly say anything to fundamentalist groups — that would just seem like I was trying to win an argument, and it's not an argument, we're just all doing what we think we're supposed to do."

At the last US presidential elections, both candidates quoted Bruce Springsteen to try and attract the younger vote. Grant has been asked to support several political groups, but up till now has turned them down. "That might change in the future, but for right now, it just seems like it would muddy the water a little bit," says Grant. "I'm not trying to make a political statement with my life, I'm trying to make a moral statement and a spiritual statement — and it seems like everybody's hanging on by a thread anyway, so you can only do so much!"

Does she notice more young people turning to Christianity in these volatile times? "I think it's just that young people speak more openly about their feelings about God now; they speak more openly about everything. I don't think it's just Christianity that's popular — I think everything's popular. Everything from nasty to holy is popular, and everyone's just talking a whole lot more."

There are less overt references to religion in your recent records. Is that the way you're going, or is it in the hope of reaching a wider audience? "Well honestly, I feel that the content of the songs is probably as outspoken as any of the songs that I've sung. The difference is that I'm not using, ah, spiritual lingo. I'm not trying to remove the 'Jesus factor', but I'm trying to get solid teaching into songs in a more subtle way."

"But it's so funny. The way we're talking makes me sound like I'm a calculating preacher. Honestly. If I decide to sing 'Jesus loves me' on my next album, I will. I'm really not trying to preach. I'm writing the songs because that's what my own heart needs to hear. I'm not trying to slip one over anybody. If they want to listen, great, if all they want to do is dance their brains out, that's fine with me."

Face Value

A lot is made of your appearance. Apart from any moral objections Christians may have to the way you dress, there's the feminist aspect. Do you like your looks being used as a selling point? "It's funny," says Grant. "When my first album was put out, I was 16 — I had spots all over my face, I was right smack out in my adolescent years, I was a little bit overweight. And I heard back from a sales meeting of the record company that one of the salesmen had said, 'I could sell this record if you would take her picture off. This is the ugliest picture I've ever seen on a record cover. I'm 25 now. Thankfully I've lost my baby fat and I don't have pimples anymore. And now it has to be an issue that they're using my face to sell an album. The whole thing is ridiculously funny to me. I don't think I would be known for my looks first. I know many women who are far more beautiful than I am — I'm a very normal looking person!" she laughs.

Are all the members of your band Christians? "Yes they are, as a matter of fact," says Grant. "There have been times that I've had people in the band that weren't Christians, but honestly, I find a little more support when everyone on the stage is geared in the same direction ... it just seems like the sensitivity to one another is heightened when we're a little more of one mind. We don't all agree on everything, you know — different people go through times sowing their wild oats, or someone might be flipped out or on an emotional high, or someone will be depressed. It's not like we're a bunch of machines. We're just people — but we do share the common belief."

How do you feel about the seedy side of rock music that seems to dominate the industry? "I don't listen to it, so it really doesn't affect my life. It disappoints me that so many talented people are being a little insensitive to the children that are listening to their music. But it's avoidable, you don't have to be exposed to it. I kind of go my own way."

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Pop Mechanix Tune Up

Andrew Snoid and Paul Scott, Pop Mechanix.



There weren't any fanfares when the Pop Mechanix reunited nearly a year ago. If it hadn't been for news heard on the grapevine, one might have thought the posters for their gigs were relics from the past. But that was the way the band wanted it.

"It's easy to be cynical about reformations," says songwriter/bassist Paul Scott, "so we wanted to avoid coming in on a media level — we wanted to come in on a playing level. We weren't going to do anything unless it worked, and we liked what we heard. And with the live circuit not really working, we all had qualms."

Because the band didn't restart with a single or video, the audiences weren't huge, but their reaction was so good it encouraged the band. They played solidly for eight months and have just emerged from a two-month layoff with a new single, 'Celebration of the Skin'. Now only three old Pop

Mechanix songs remain in their live set: 'Now', 'Jumping Out a Window' and 'Cowboys'. There is one new player in the band, the keyboardist Brent Williams. Chris Moore rejoined at the time of the reunion, but pulled out two days before the first concert due to commitments to his solo country and western act. Vocalist Andrew Snoid and drummer Kevin Emmett complete the lineup.

'Skin' was written by Scott and guitarist Paul Mason and has been released on Hit Singles; a video was made for *Radio With Pictures* by the young Wellington film-maker Paul Middleditch, who won the *Spot On* video competition last year. Although the video missed its *RWP* broadcast due to the programme's suspension, it may be shown on the new TV rock show.

The B-side of the single 'Land of Broken Dreams' was recorded by the band in Melbourne under their Australian moniker NZ Pop during sessions for their *Zoo* album. Eddie Rayner produced, and those timpani that give the song its characteristic sound were left in the studio after a *Mad Max 2* soundtrack session.

This month the Pop Mechanix return to the stage, with gigs in Christchurch and Auckland. All sorts of prospects and ideas are in the wind, but Paul Scott seems happy for the band to gather its own momentum: "We want to build our profile by working — through our records and our live gigs — and we want to enjoy it. We'd be stupid to try it any other way." CB

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