

From the Archives: Ichthus Music Festival- The World of Christian Music Comes to Wilmore

It was the “dawning of the Age of Aquarius” as the 1967 musical *Hair* told us.¹ The hippie and New Age Movements were in the ascendancy. The U.S. was in the middle of the Vietnam War. In 1969, it seemed like the counterculture exploded when on August 15-18 the Woodstock Music Festival was held near White Lake, New York. Political and cultural shifts were occurring at a breath-taking pace, and the evangelical church seemed to be desperately trying to figure out how to respond. However, Wilmore remained isolated from much of this cultural change. Yet while cut off from much of what was going on in the U.S. culturally in 1970, an idea emerged, led by students (called the Christian Service Brotherhood) and their faculty advisor, Dr. Bob Lyon of Asbury Theological Seminary, of a Christian music festival as a counterpoint to Woodstock. Using the Wilmore campground, the site of many traditional Holiness camp meetings, the first Ichthus festival was established. It would continue as one of the major Christian music festivals in the U.S. until 2012, for 42 years, and would be called by at least one writer, the “granddaddy” of all Christian music festivals.²

Music plays a crucial role in youth culture, and rock and roll has been the defining genre of music used by young people since the 1950s within the context of the United States. While rock and roll partially grew out of gospel music, it took its own secular form of development and so was often actively opposed by many conservative Christians. As the academic study of Christian music has pointed out,

The dilemma for Christian adolescents then is clear. On the one hand, rock and roll music plays a critical role in establishing identity and defining their social groups, but at the same time it appears to contradict many of

the values they hold as Christians... Standing in the gap between evangelical Christianity on one side and youth culture on the other, contemporary Christian music offers evangelical Christians who cannot identify with what they see on MTV their own set of alter egos. With its angelic waifs, strutting arena rockers, choreographed girl groups, guitar-strumming folkies, flannel encased grunge acts, posturing rappers, and wordy singer-songwriters, contemporary Christian music provides the evangelical audience with the same ethereal voices, the same driving guitars, and the same chunky rhythms that can be found anywhere on the radio dial- but with one important difference: rather than challenging predominant evangelical values, this music affirms them.³



The primary goal of the Ichthus music festival in its later years was to reach out and share the gospel message to young people through contemporary Christian music.

(Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

Understanding how the modern contemporary Christian music genre has developed includes understanding how music and the church have interacted for centuries. Some have even argued a direct line from the popular camp meeting tradition to Ichthus to modern festivals such as the Cornerstone Festival that started in 1984, TOMfest (1995), HeavenFest (2008), Lifest (1999), and the Agape Festival (1977).⁴ Scholars seem to accept that Larry Norman's 1969 album, *Upon This Rock* (Capitol Records) was the first Christian rock album, occurring contemporaneously with the growth of Jesus Rock in the late 1960s and 1970s from the Jesus Movement, as well as the popular musicals *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and *Godspell* (1971).⁵ At the start of this movement, the Ichthus music festival was born with an evangelistic emphasis, according to Bob Lyon, "to use the medium of young people to reach young people."⁶ As sociologists Steck and Howard note,

A key component of the evangelistic rationale of contemporary Christian music is the tradition of music festivals that mark the summer season. With Christian bands for the most part lacking access to the tours and club circuits that support mainstream musicians, the Christian music industry was forced to develop its own resources in order to create opportunities for live performances. And while churches and coffeehouses to some degree replaced the standard clubs and bars, it was the summer music festivals that became the focal point for CCM's (contemporary Christian music) live performances; here is where audiences and performers connect.⁷

The context of Wilmore in 1970 is also important to the development of Ichthus. The cultural turmoil of 1969 had really led to a faith crisis in the evangelical streams of the church, which often functioned as if it was still the 1940s or 1950s. Even while Wilmore seemed remotely isolated from these cultural changes, both Asbury College (now University) and Asbury Theological Seminary were feeling the stresses like the rest of the country and the need for some type of Christian response was increasing. On February 3, the Asbury Revival of 1970 broke out in Hughes Auditorium at Asbury College and began to spread around the nation. This was one important spiritual response focusing on inner spiritual renewal and awakening. Ichthus was an equally spiritual response to the cultural context, but focused instead on an outward cultural engagement and evangelism, even though it was completely separate from the Revival. As

Dr. Steve Seamands, Professor Emeritus of Christian Doctrine at Asbury Theological Seminary and a part of the first Ichthus in 1970 notes,

Even though Ichthus was not directly connected to the Asbury Revival, years later I began to realize that it probably would have never happened if there hadn't been a revival. The revival created a spirit of openness and boldness. There was a passion for evangelism and outreach, a desire to witness for Christ, that had emerged in the Wilmore community as a result of the revival and that created the impetus for Ichthus.⁸

Those involved with Ichthus at the start note no connection, (and even a bit of skepticism about the Revival) and also point out the divisions between the College (where the Revival occurred) and the Seminary (where Ichthus began) were wide at this time, but it becomes almost impossible to separate these two spiritual moves, which are really two almost simultaneous spiritual responses to the cultural context of 1969. It is highly likely that the Revival triggered enough of a change in the environment of Wilmore itself that allowed for Ichthus to emerge, even when no direct connection existed. Inner renewal by the Holy Spirit was necessary for outward cultural engagement (also a part of the work of the Holy Spirit), and both required a spiritual freedom from the traditional confines of a church caught in outdated cultural patterns. This combination of spiritual renewal and social engagement has become much of the norm in holistic mission today, but in the 1960s and 1970s they remained very separate ideas.

The Ichthus music festival was a groundbreaking effort that helped launch contemporary Christian music and provide a working model for its future growth, while aiming to contextualize the gospel message for a new generation. As Gary Baker, the executive director of Ichthus wrote in 1997,

This ministry was started out of a response to meet the needs of the youth of this country who were looking for substance in a world in which they had lost faith. In this endeavor, Ichthus Ministries has always been a catalyst for spiritual and social change in youth, as well as a leader in festival ministries. Ichthus is the first and oldest Christian festival in the nation. We find our greatest strength in whose we are and who we are as a festival ministry. As festivals spring up all over the nation, more and more they start out of a mode to entertain rather than to minister the gospel. It is to this mission that Ichthus has always remained loyal, to present Jesus Christ to the

youth who attend the Ichthus festival, that their lives may be changed for the glory of God.⁹

This was a bold new ministry for its time and fitted to its cultural context. It challenged traditional ways of doing evangelism and opened doors to allow the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of young people impacted by the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s.

To really understand how the music of the 1960s impacted the context in Wilmore, it is important to go back a few years before Ichthus. Ed Kilbourne came as a student to Asbury College in 1962 from a well-known missionary family in Korea.¹⁰ He had learned how to play the guitar on the mission field, since it is a portable way to make music and there wasn't much else for him to do for entertainment. As a result, he was one of the few people on the campus who could play the guitar, and this novelty led to groups gathering in the dorms around him and even to informal singing on Saturday nights in the semi-circle in front of the administration building on Lexington Avenue. They would sing popular folk songs such as, "If I had a Hammer," "Michael Row Your Boat Ashore," and "Where Have All the Flowers Gone," along with popular works by Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie. As these sing-alongs became more popular with students (sometimes even gathering as many as 300 people), Ed was called in to see President Z.T. Johnson. The Asbury College president felt that Ed was "out of sympathy with the school" and even told him, "You can't do God's work with the devil's music." Johnson encouraged Ed to transfer out of Asbury College, but his mother intervened to prevent that from happening. Ed continued with his music, even using the Methodist Church in Wilmore to record music with Rev. David Seamands' permission (he was a friend of Ed's father, Dr. Ed Kilbourne, former president of Seoul Theological Seminary and an OMS missionary/leader). Ed's first album, *I Know Where I'm Going*, was recorded at the Arthur Smith Studios in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1964, while still a student. By the time he graduated from Asbury College, he was able to hold a small concert in Hughes Auditorium. He went on to Asbury Theological Seminary, where he took all of Dr. Gilbert James' classes on the role of the Church in society that he could take. While he graduated from the Seminary in 1969, a year before Ichthus, most of the early leaders remember Ed coming back to perform at the first Ichthus. Ed also recounts leading others at the college in practicing folk music in an informal group called "The Villagers," who helped him work on developing

the use of a sound system by sneaking onto the Wilmore campgrounds when it was not in use and setting up mock performances on the stage. Ed Kilbourne notes that Asbury had created a famous “bubble” of holiness isolation by keeping out other influences, such as intercollegiate sports, but that it was becoming “harder and harder to hold off the world.” He also commented that, “it was the music that broke the bubble.” Ed Kilbourne set the stage for the introduction of Ichthus as a formal organization.

It would be easy to dismiss Ed Kilbourne as a typical youthful rebel going against the religious authorities in power in Wilmore, but that would be too simplistic. Influenced by the mission field and yet also influenced by the events of the culture around him, Ed was (and still is) a gifted musician with a progressive theological point of view. Even in the 1960s he was creatively “tweaking” popular folk songs to give them a spiritual bent. A good example is his reworking of Petula Clark’s 1965 hit, “My Love,” which he recorded as “His Love.”



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

“My Love”

Petula Clark

(Written by Tony Hatch)

1965

My love is warmer than the warmest sunshine,
Softer than a sigh.
My love is deeper than the deepest ocean,
Wider than the sky.
My love is brighter than the brightest star that shines
every night above,
And there is nothing in this world that can ever change
my love.

Something happened to my heart the day that I met you.
Something that I never felt before.
You are always in my mind, no matter what I do,
And everyday it seems that I want you more.

(Chorus)

Once I thought that love was meant for anyone else but me.
Once I thought you'd never come my way.
Now it only goes to show how wrong we all can be,
For now I have to tell you every day.

(Chorus)



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

"His Love"

Ed Kilbourne

(Lyrics modified by Ed Kilbourne)

1965

His love is warmer than the warmest sunshine,
 Softer than a sigh.
 His love is deeper than the deepest ocean,
 Wider than the sky.
 His love is brighter than the brightest star that shines
 every night above,
 And there is nothing in this world that can ever change
 His love.

Something happened to my heart the day that You walked in.
 Something that I never felt before.
 And that something is that He has buried all my sins,
 And everyday it seems I love Him more.

(Chorus)

Once I thought that this love was meant for anyone else but me.
 Once I thought that no one knew the way.
 Now it only goes to show how wrong we all can be,
 'Cause now I have to tell it every day.

(Chorus)



First Fruits
 THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

This type of inventive contextualization, along with his willingness to share his knowledge with others at Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary about folk music, sound systems, and even how to play the guitar, was not just foundational- it was crucial to making Ichthus a real possibility, even though Ed was not directly connected to the organizing of Ichthus. It changed the atmosphere in Wilmore just enough to break the “bubble” of isolation and make dramatic change possible. The fact that almost all of the early founders of Ichthus pointed to Ed Kilbourne as an important influence only highlights the significance of how one person can influence and change entire institutions.

Ichthus

Early Christians were forced to meet secretly. To them the easily drawn fish became an important symbol. ΙΧΘΥΣ (the Greek word "fish" is pronounced "ik-thoos") is composed of the initial letters in the Greek words "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior". Each time a fish appeared on a house, meeting place, or even in the catacombs it stood as a silent witness to the Christian faith. No longer do Christians meet secretly yet the fish remains a vivid symbol depicting the Christian experience. Jesus Christ, Son of God, is Savior in 1970. Christians seek to proclaim this through every media. Ours is a musically oriented society. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 moves into that realm with power. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 is a weekend of contemporary expression of the Christian faith through music. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 provides togetherness for hundreds of Christians from colleges across the nation. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 brings to you folk and folk-rock groups from many schools and areas. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 presents the best in entertainment with a message. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 offers to you two days of music for less than the price of one album. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 is a demonstration of the society of the committed. ΙΧΘΥΣ 70 is your thing. Hurry and get your registration fee in. Sleeping facilities are available and meals may be obtained at a low price.

wilmore, kentucky MAY 9-10

CONTACT:
 For registration and tickets: Dave Hogue
 For information and publicity: John Park
 SPO 1970
 Wilmore, Kentucky 40390

The poster and advertising for the very first Ichthus music festival in Wilmore, Kentucky. Held May 9-10, 1970.
 (Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

First Fruits
 THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

The story of Ichthus as an actual festival begins in the cafeteria of Asbury Theological Seminary one day in mid-March of 1970.¹¹ A group on campus called the Christian Service Brotherhood was holding an executive meeting with their faculty advisor, Dr. Bob Lyon over breakfast. The Christian Service Brotherhood consisted of a very small minority of the student population who had a genuine concern for social issues, such as racism, the Vietnam War, and poverty. One of them, John Park, had been involved with Dr. Gilbert James' project of taking students to New York City in 1969 to work in ministry in urban areas and become more aware of urban social problems and needs. While Dr. James was not directly involved with Ichthus, his teaching both prior to and after the founding of Ichthus influenced a number of students who would be involved. The Christian Service Brotherhood was really very much on the fringe of the student body at this time. This meeting in the cafeteria included Dave Lewis, the chairman of the Brotherhood, John Park, Peter Emmett, Charlie Paxton, and Larry Minner. While Wilmore was very disconnected from events in the wider culture, reports of Woodstock definitely had disturbed the local community. John Park remembers very clearly when Dr. Lyon said, "You know, there ought to be a Christian alternative to Woodstock—a place for young people to raise the name of Jesus!" Right there at the table, the plan was worked out. John Park even suggested a name for the event. During the summer of 1969 when he had been with Dr. James in Central Harlem, he and a friend had gone into a small shop and bought a fish cross. For him, the cross stood for the original use of the fish symbol in early Christianity as "an announcement, or declaration" of our faith in Christ (the Greek letters being an acronym for "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior"). The group accepted the idea and the name Ichthus was attached to the new musical event. Dr. Lyon liked to ask probing questions among his students and stimulated ideas about faith and society in his role as a professor, and as the faculty advisor of the Christian Service Brotherhood he led and supported their work, although indirect support also came from Dr. Gilbert James and Dr. Kenneth Kinghorn, who were all relatively new faculty at the time, coming in 1965-1966.

With only six weeks left to hold the event, and with three of the group planning to graduate that spring, the plans for the event were made quickly and on the spur of the moment. There was no real budget, perhaps \$300 (and \$100 of that was a gift from Dr. James, and the rest appears to have come from Dr. Lyon and Dr. Kinghorn), but in short order John Park

took over the advertising side of things, designing the first poster, printing it off on *The Herald* printing press on campus on the cheapest brown paper stock. Since they didn't know how to publicize the event so quickly, they sent out copies of this advertisement to all the colleges in driving distance of Wilmore, sometimes just addressing them to the student body president, or sending them to friends they knew on the campuses. They had been particularly careful in designing the information to limit the term "rock" and to focus on acoustic folk music of the time avoiding the negative connotations of the psychedelic music of the late 1960s. Dr. Lyon helped arrange the use of the Wilmore campground and provided the leadership while the Christian Service Brotherhood divided much of the work among themselves.

Musicians were almost all local talent, pretty much anyone who could play an instrument and perform. The Christian Service Brotherhood used their contacts to pull together the musical acts. While Ed Kilbourne had graduated, his brother Kent and his younger cousins Ron and Bill Moore had followed in his footsteps and some of them performed at the first Ichthus along with Ed. Bill Moore had not only learned from his cousin, but from 1967-1968 he had traveled to Europe and Asia with an Asbury College group called the New World Singers with Youth for Christ International. As with Ed Kilbourne, this College group sang a mix of secular and religious music in a folk style "sharing their faith through music." They had even produced an album called *Who Will Answer?* with one side containing secular music and the other side sacred. Ron and Bill Moore had also put out their own album in 1969, entitled *Lo and Behold* (it is interesting to note that Ed Kilbourne's influence was so strong that Ron Moore wrote a song "Eddie Was a Pioneer" in honor of their cousin). With their experience and connections, it was possible to pull the music for the first Ichthus together. As John Park relates with a chuckle, the Christian Service Brotherhood had three goals: to see if they could do this, to see how many people would come, and to try not to be run out of town! The first poster and advertisement for the festival reads in part,

Ours is a musically oriented society. Ichthus 70 moves into that realm with power. Ichthus 70 is a weekend of contemporary expression of the Christian faith through music. Ichthus 70 provides togetherness for hundreds of Christians from colleges across the nation... Ichthus 70 brings you folk and folk rock groups from many schools and areas. Ichthus 70 presents the best in entertainment

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

with a message. Ichthus 70 offers you two days of music for less than the price of one album. Ichthus 70 is a demonstration of the society of the committed.

The tickets cost \$2.50 if you preregistered (\$4.50 with housing) and \$4.00 at the gate. (By 2010, full event tickets were \$99.00 and single day tickets were \$47.00 at the gate.) The performers in 1970 included: The Awakening, New World, Rick Bonfin, and Wind Song, while Dr. Bob Lyon was the main teacher.

There definitely was concern on campus and in the town of Wilmore, with even a secret meeting held by business owners worried about the possibility of drugs, communists, and the hippie counterculture coming to Wilmore, but the Christian Service Brotherhood did not find out about this until long after the fact (John Park only learned of this in the 1990s). Also, the Christian Service Brotherhood was not exactly unaware of such different positions on social issues. The shootings at Kent State on May 4, 1970 of four students at an anti-war rally in Ohio a week before the Ichthus festival, led the Christian Service Brotherhood to put up a small table on campus covered with a black cloth, with a sign reading simply "Kent State" and displaying a cross for each of those killed. The opposition was so fierce, they were forced to remove the display by the middle of the day. Nevertheless, the group went forward with their plans, painting a simple banner on painter's canvas and hanging it in the tabernacle on the Wilmore campground. Students from Asbury Theological Seminary, especially the Christian Service Brotherhood, worked that festival and eventually many volunteers would follow, most coming from Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary as the festival became more accepted. From those picking up trash and providing stage security to those serving in prayer tents and working concession stands, there were many roles to be filled over the years.



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY



The idea that music is a key part of identity formation among young people is part of what made Ichthus a successful vehicle for communicating the gospel from 1970 to 2012.

(Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

On May 9-10, 1970, the first Ichthus music festival was held at the Wilmore campground in Wilmore, Kentucky. The Wilmore campground was a site for traditional Holiness camp meetings, which continued to be held at the site until 2015 after 125 years of service (currently it is the home of Adventure Serve Ministries). At first there seemed to be little problem with using the campground, since no one knew what Ichthus really was about. Over the next few years increased concern did arise due to the “loud music and long hair” of the counterculture, according to Dr. Seamands, but several voices of older leaders including J. C. McPheeters and Rev. David Seamands, who were on the Wilmore campground board, supported the festival. E. A. Seamands (known as “Tata”), a veteran missionary from India, would attend Ichthus and tell his grandson, “This is not my kind of music, but if it’s reaching these kids, why not?” Dr. Bill Moore recalls seeing “Tata” Seamands dancing alongside the stage at one of the early festivals. Steve Moore, the program director from 1973-1976 even remembers “Tata” Seamands speaking from the stage about his time in India. Gradually Ichthus would win over those most concerned with the festival as it brought

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

economic benefits to local merchants, encouraged recruitment for Asbury College, and provided a stable rent income for the Wilmore campground.

John Park also relates how the very first Ichthus drew about 300 to 350 people. Because there was not much contemporary Christian music written at this time, and they did not want to have a simple hymn sing or focus on Southern Gospel music, many of the performers played and sang secular folk music on the first night of the festival. The group had planned a worship service for Sunday morning to help emphasize the Christian nature of the event. One event especially remained strong in John Park's memory. A young lady playing an acoustic guitar and singing in the style of Joan Baez had performed on Saturday night and someone had criticized her for not playing enough "Jesus music," so she asked to sing again on Sunday and performed a beautiful folk version of the hymn "I'd Rather Have Jesus." Park notes that the memory still remains of this young lady singing as one of his most powerful moments of the festival,

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold.
I'd rather be his than have riches untold.
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land.
Yes, I'd rather be led by his nail pierced hands,
Than to be the king of a vast domain and be held by sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.¹²

Larry Minner, one of the original founders, recalls how some funds were used to buy bread and cold cuts and make sandwiches to feed the crowd. He even laughs as he notes that some of the musicians also helped make egg salad and cold cut sandwiches to pass out to the hungry attendees. Minner notes, "We weren't trying to be different, just have fun with our friends!" Dr. Bill Moore remembers how Seminary wives were involved in preparing food and how his wife had to make ten pounds of potato salad for the event!

This first Ichthus was meant to be a one-time event- a counterprotest to Woodstock. The Christian Service Brotherhood was first and foremost focused on responding to Woodstock, and while Ed Kilbourne and the Asbury Revival of 1970 probably both paved the way for Ichthus in terms of the overall environment in Wilmore, neither was a part of their conscious decision in organizing the event. As the Christian Service Brotherhood gathered at Dr. Lyon's house for a cookout to celebrate the success of their endeavor, Dr. Lyon had hung their canvas banner up at his house. The group

was excited about the turnout and how well everything had gone, when someone said, “Why don’t we do this again next year?” Until this time no one had really considered this possibility, but at that moment the idea of an annual music festival was born. Minner also added that he thought there was some additional money left over from the success of the first festival and so they thought to spend that the next year. John Park wasn’t even sure they broke even.

Dr. Jack Harnish,¹³ who was the program chair for 1971 and the general Ichthus chair for 1972 noted that the early years of Ichthus were a bit “haphazard,” but soon became organized. The festivals of 1970 and 1971 were rather small in number (with attendance in the 100s to maybe 1,000) and took place in the tabernacle on the Wilmore campground as attendees were housed in the campground dormitories. Musicians were primarily chosen locally or based on “what we could afford” since there was no outside funding except from ticket sales. While the Seminary student body was generally supportive, there was still a lot of concern in the community. Members of the Wilmore campground’s board were worried about potential damage to the trees or buildings, local people roped off their lawns to keep people from walking on the grass, and even Asbury College would not extend their curfew to allow students to attend. At the time, the major concerns at Asbury College were “the length of the men’s hair and the women’s skirts,” while at Asbury Theological Seminary there was only a small minority of the student population that protested the Vietnam War and challenged assumptions on campus. Primarily the entire Ichthus event was student led and organized with limited faculty support and encouragement, although Dr. Lyon remains as the primary person behind the idea and was on the board of directors throughout the 1970s.



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY



Part of the poster and advertising for the third Ichthus music festival in Wilmore, Kentucky. Held April 28-29, 1972. (Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

By the third year in 1972, registrations began to come in and the fledgling festival organizers gave up on the idea of housing the growing numbers, turning to tents and camping instead. Dr. Jim Garlow¹⁴ was the program director for 1972 and he led the idea for the festival to be moved out of the tabernacle into the field behind the Wilmore campground, where

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

a flatbed trailer served as a stage for around 1,200 to 1,400 attendees (Dr. Seamands estimates closer to 2,500). Dr. Harnish suggests that this growth could be traced to Asbury Seminary graduates who brought their youth groups to the festival after graduating. He did the same, bringing his youth groups from the hills of Pennsylvania for a number of years afterward, where Ichthus often became a spiritual highpoint for many of the youth. Dr. Garlow agrees with this assessment calling it a “built-in success factor,” as increasing numbers of Seminary graduates returned with youth for an informal home-coming each summer. Ed Kilbourne noted that even Asbury College had to embrace Ichthus, as the festival became “an incredible tool” for publicity, drawing in students for the College who had attended Ichthus as young teens. Such was the influence of the emerging music festival that it helped put Asbury College on the map.

Dr. Jim Garlow, who had some experience in performing with his mother and brother in Kansas before coming to Asbury Theological Seminary, remembers visiting the work of George Dooms and his youth ministry in Evanston, Indiana (which has held an inside concert event called Faith Festival since 1970) to help use his experience with Youth for Christ to find music groups for Ichthus. Dr. Garlow also managed to secure funds from an older businessman in the community to fund a film crew to film some of the 1972 Ichthus concert. This film, titled “One Way, Jesus Way” was about 25 minutes and was sent out to local colleges and churches to promote Ichthus. Dr. Garlow remembers meeting with Seminary President Frank B. Stanger along with Jim Harnish (Dr. Harnish’s twin brother) to negotiate some of the tensions and concerns over Ichthus’ growing popularity. It was the elderly “Tata” Seamands who came to the festival’s defense, stating that it was similar to things done in India on the mission field and was an important missional event. So, as a special honor, Dr. Garlow recalls that they made sure to film “Tata” Seamands standing near the stage clapping along with the music for the final film. Dr. Garlow returned to Ichthus as the Master of Ceremonies for 1973 and 1974. Dr. Garlow also relates the story of how his brother had died in an airplane crash in April of 1974, and then a month later he needed to stand on stage and speak to the crowds throughout Ichthus. He tells how he made it through the entire festival until the very end, when Andraé Crouch and the Disciples ended their performance with “It Won’t Be Long.” Through his tears, Dr. Garlow told the crowd about the death of his brother and how it had affected him, and Andraé Crouch right then and there, sat down

and wrote a song about Jesus coming back for us. The entire event was a powerful moment in his life and also impacted many of those in attendance who heard the testimony.

In 1973 Rev. Travis Hutchison was the General Chair of Ichthus, and with a background in business and experience from working his family's ranch in the Dakotas, he brought more organization to the Ichthus experience. Since he was also eight years older than most of the others and had helped with publicity in an informal way in 1972, he understood some of the unique challenges of the festival. He created multiple teams to oversee different parts of the festival including people in charge of tickets, traffic, the tent city, and a former military member to put in charge of security. While he attended a couple of meetings with Seminary President Frank B. Stanger to convince him that they were not "hippies from Mars," he had good success from having participated earlier in one of Stanger's voluntary groups on healing prayer at the Seminary. He recalls the Wilmore campmeeting board as a bigger challenge. There were concerns about feeding the crowds (there ended up being about 4,800 people present based on ticket sales that year), which he handled by hiring a food service company to set up long tables with sandwiches and McDonalds for Sunday lunch. Another concern he remembered had to do with possible sexual promiscuity on the grounds. Travis laughs when he remembers that John Fitch (of Fitch's IGA) stood up on their behalf and told the board about the former soldier who would be leading security and ended saying, "there won't be any more babies conceived here than in the campmeeting days!" One of Travis' major concerns was to leave enough funds to help support the following year, and because of his work Ichthus in 1973 was able to bring in more well-known groups.

Steve Moore had been a high school senior in 1971 and a part of Jim Garlow's youth group. He was so impressed by the experience he had as a youth at Ichthus that he chose to attend Asbury College as a result. While a college student, Steve became the program director of Ichthus from 1973 to 1976. He notes that his approach to choosing the musicians was "to get the best people you can and turn them loose." Steve worked with Andraé Crouch and the Disciples as well as the Archers, and Earthen Vessel. He remembers when bad weather was threatening to break up the performance early in either 1973 or 1974 that Andraé Crouch turned around on the piano stool while Steve was discussing what to do with Jim Garlow and remarked, "Well, they're going to get wet anyway!" He

also reminisced about how Andraé Crouch was following a group singing songs from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, when he addressed the audience with, “Well folks, I gotta tell you, Jesus is more than a superstar to ole’ Andraé!” While sometimes criticized for spending too much money, Steve Moore was responsible for setting a pattern of inviting headliners who could help draw a crowd. Yet, it wasn’t just about popularity. Steve also remembers in 1976 how the Holy Spirit moved at the invitation given by Bill Glass, the speaker at the time, when the counselors were overwhelmed by the young people who responded. They were “no longer one-on-one but more like one-on-five or six!”



Andraé Crouch, one of the more memorable musicians performing at Ichthus in the early 1970s. (Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

In reflecting on his involvement with Ichthus, Dr. Harnish noted that his biggest takeaway was “learning as a pastor to think creatively. What if we tried this? - Not being afraid to take a risk.” Dr. Garlow noted that it was “impossible to calculate the spiritual impact” of Ichthus. Dr. Bill Moore defined it as a “pivotal spiritual experience” for the young people who attended. Steve Moore agrees that his time with Ichthus was spiritually meaningful and he remembers the musicians as “phenomenal people.” Travis Hutchison reflects back on the impact of Ichthus by relating the story of a Jack Daniels whiskey bottle found during the cleanup, which he still treasures as one of his prized possessions. Inside the bottle was a note indicating that the young people who brought the bottle had come to drink and party, but had found the Holy Spirit instead and no longer needed the whiskey they brought. By 1996 the event recorded 14,000 people in attendance and almost 1,000 people who committed their lives to Christ that year alone. There were around 20,000 people present in 2004 before the festival moved to a later date in the year.

Reflecting on how Ichthus was started, it is hard to pin down any one factor. Rather it was a perfect symphony of events led by the Holy Spirit. Ichthus would never have happened without the musical skill, leadership, and cultural challenge brought by Ed Kilbourne to Wilmore. It never would have happened without the earnest concern of Seminary students for reaching out to their generation in a culturally relevant way despite opposition. It never would have happened without the leadership, financial support, and encouragement of young faculty members like Dr. Robert Lyon, Dr. Gilbert James, and Dr. Kenneth Kinghorn at Asbury Theological Seminary. It never would have happened without the support of local businessmen like John Fitch. It never would have happened without key religious leaders such as “Tata” Seamands, David Seamands, and even Frank Stanger being willing to have a vision for something different. And it never would have happened without the Holy Spirit paving the way with both the Asbury Revival and a genuine concern for social needs.

Music, of course, remained the primary draw that brought young people to the Ichthus festival. A wide range of artists were typically chosen, from the more popular contemporary acts to more *avant garde* and cutting-edge musicians. While a general trend can be seen in moving from folk music styles and gospel music to contemporary Christian rock to Christian rap, punk, grunge, and even Goth and heavy metal, the entire range of Christian music was represented. Steve Moore laughs as he notes, “We just

called it Jesus music!” While Ed Kilbourne remains critical of contemporary Christian music for creating a new “bubble” that isolates Christians from the serious social and political concerns of the outside world, which were often addressed by the folk music genre, Ichthus festivals would headline the music of many well-known groups including:

Crimson Bridge (1972)
Andraé Crouch (1973, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1995)
The Imperials (1976, 1988, 1990, 1991)
Ken Medema (1977)
Honeytree (1978)
Andrus, Blackwood, and Company (1978, 1979, 1980, 1984)
Jessy Dixon (1980, 1981)
Joe English Band (1982, 1983)
Petra (1983, 1991, 1996)
Benny Hester (1983)
Phil Keagy (1984, 1989, 1996)
Larry Norman (1984, 1985, 1993)
Michael Card (1984, 1988)
Altar Boys (1985, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1991, 1993)
Crumbächer (1986)
White Heart (1986, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1996)
Servant (1986, 1988)
Steven Curtis Chapman (1988, 1989, 1992, 1995)
David and the Giants (1988)
Rich Mullins (1990, 1996)
DC Talk (1990, 1992, 1994)
Newsboys (1990, 1991, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010)
Michael Peace (1990)
The Choir (1992, 1993, 1996)
Hoi Polloi (1993, 1995, 1996)
Michael W. Smith (1994)
Audio Adrenaline (1994, 1995)
Out of Eden (1996)
MXPX (1996, 2008)
Jars of Clay (1997, 2000, 2007)
Caedmon's Call (1997)

CeCe Winans (1997)
 Rebecca St. James (1997)
 Third Day (1997, 2004, 2007)
 Skillet (1998, 1999, 2000, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2011)
 Delirious? (2001, 2003, 2006)
 TobyMac (2006, 2010, 2012)
 Casting Crowns (2006, 2008)
 David Crowder Band (2006, 2007, 2008)
 Family Force 5 (2007, 2008)
 Superchick (2010, 2011)
 Switchfoot (2012)



In 1981 Jessy Dixon headlined the Ichthus Music Festival.
 (Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

However, Ichthus organizers also sought to bring in Christian teachers to preach, teach, and evangelize during the course of the festival. Teachers would include: Don Wilkerson (1973), Tom Skinner (1974, 1979), Bill Glass (1976), Josh McDowell (1980, 1989), Steve Camp (1981, 1984), Tony Campolo (1983), Coach Floyd Eby (1986) along with many names

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

of Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary professors. Sometime about 1973 when Dr. Lyon went on sabbatical, Dr. John Oswalt was asked to be the faculty representative on the committee. Somewhere about this same time, organizers noticed there were empty spots in the program as the musical groups were changing and setting up. As Dr. Oswalt¹⁵ remembers, “so they asked me if I could do some 3-6 minute talks to fill those spots. Daunting to think of speaking to thousands of milling teenagers! But I said yes, and did four or five of these each year for three years. I always wondered if I was connecting with anyone in all the hubbub. However, there have been a few occasions when someone has reminded me of something I said during one of those times, so apparently there was some connection.” Dr. Oswalt also noted that there was a definite concern that entertainment might become the driving force of the festival and so sessions were created to address particular topics, often each having its own tent and being presented a number of times during the festival with seminary students as teachers. Steve Moore definitely recalls Dr. Oswalt and his “incredibly powerful teaching vignettes” as well as his strong support for Ichthus as important moments of his own time with Ichthus.



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY



Dr. John Oswalt of Asbury Theological Seminary teaching from the stage at the Ichthus Music Festival in the 1970's during one of his sessions between performances.

(Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

One of the earlier performers who made a serious impact was Andraé Crouch. While he performed at least five times at Ichthus, primarily in the 1970s, his influence was widespread. Dr. Steve Seamands, who was an associate pastor at a United Methodist Church in New Jersey in 1974, brought his youth group to Ichthus. As he relates,

Saturday night, during the last few hours of the festival something happened that I'll never (forget). Andraé Crouch and the Disciples were singing and leading the crowd of about 5,000 in worship. Our youth were sitting together as a group on the hillside.

All of a sudden, many of our youth were crying and hugging each other. I looked at the people sitting around our youth group and they seemed to be unaffected. They were just listening to the music.

I was somewhat skeptical at first. "Is this just teenage emotionalism brought on by several days of sleep deprivation?" I wondered. I suspect some of that was a part of it, but it didn't take me long to realize that something profoundly real had happened to our group.

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

It was as if the Holy Spirit, the very presence of God had fallen upon our youth group.

As a result, I took a revival back to New Jersey with me. On the trip back, the youth would spontaneously break into singing on the bus. I especially remember them singing the words from one of Andraé Crouch's songs: "Jesus is the answer to the world today. Above him there's no other. Jesus is the way!"

The following Sunday evening when the youth shared what had happened to them at Ichthus, the presence and power of God was there. Youth who hadn't been able to go to Ichthus were deeply touched. For the next six months incredible things happened in the life of the church. Lives were transformed. Many young adults came to know Christ. What had happened at Ichthus had a leavening effect on the whole church.

Dr. Seamands also notes that several of these youth felt called into ministry and a number continued on to Christian colleges including Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary.



Andraé Crouch and the Disciples, often referred to as the "father of modern gospel music," performing at Ichthus in the early 1970s.

(Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

However, the youth in Dr. Seamands' youth group were not isolated in this experience. Tanya Goodman Sykes (of the Happy Goodman Family, a well-known Southern Gospel group) wrote at Andraé Crouch's passing in 2015,

I can still remember how the rain felt on my skin that day. I was 15 years old, and my friends and I had driven to Wilmore, Kentucky, to attend the Ichthus Festival at Asbury College. We were beyond thrilled because Andraé Crouch and the Disciples were headlining that year. There was a steady drizzle the entire drive up, and just before Andraé took the stage, it gave way to heavy rain, but it didn't dampen my enthusiasm. There was a palpable sense of excitement in the air that day as an entire hillside of dripping wet, mostly teenagers sang along- "Jesus is the answer for the world today..." Truly, I have never experienced anything quite like it before or since. And I certainly have never stood in the pouring rain to hear anyone else.¹⁶

Travis Hutchison recalls one Saturday evening when Andraé Crouch was performing and Travis was standing on the stage looking out over the crowd and the "raptured" look on their faces as the Spirit was really working. Suddenly he noticed in different parts of the crowd several groups of 7-15 people who seemed to fall down suddenly to the ground, and into his mind came the thought, "this is the dancing hand of God" and he really understood that God could do anything with his life. Dr. Jack Harnish, also remembered the passing of Andraé Crouch in 2015 writing,

The highlight of the weekend was a performance by Andraé Crouch and the Disciples. If the whole notion of a folk-rock festival was a bit shocking for the town of Wilmore, the fact that the headliner was an African American was even more controversial. But once he took the stage, no one could question his spirit and his gift... I remember him closing the festival that weekend with, "It won't be long, soon we'll be leavin' here; it won't be long, we'll be goin' home."¹⁷

By 1998, the Wilmore campground was becoming too small of a venue for this growing musical event, so a 111-acre site, known at the Ichthus Farm (now called Servant Heart Farm) was purchased and became

the site of the festival from 1999 till 2012. The space allowed for more stages, bigger venues, and more room for campers. After the move to the new location, the festival had six stages including: The Main Stage, The Deep End, The Edge, two separate Indie Stages, and The Galleria Stage. This reflects both the growth of the festival, but also the diversity that had occurred in contemporary Christian music.



Camping at Ichthus and dealing with the unpredictable weather was part of the Ichthus experience.

(Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

Ichthus was also well known for the amount of rain it seemed to attract. Originally held in early May or late April, (which allowed the festival to make use of a large number of volunteers from Asbury College and Asbury Theological Seminary before the summer break in classes) by 2006 the organizers decided to move the festival to mid-June. Part of this move was due to the weather in 2005. Choosing the rather unfortunate theme of “Let it Rain,” did nothing to help matters. As one reviewer noted on the Friday afternoon,

Then, the theme of Ichthus 2005, “Let it Rain,” manifested itself. Only it did not just rain, it poured. A tornado warning forced campers to evacuate and take shelter in their vehicles. Cassie and I struggled against the wind and the rain to take down our tent. After the storm blew over, I was very dismayed to hear the rest of the concerts for the evening had been canceled... Saturday, the weather got even stranger. The gravel on the roads helped make them less muddy than last year, but there was still quite a bit of mud. It was also unusually cold... We had hoped to see Day of Fire during the afternoon, but we could not stand the cold. As we were leaving the Extol concert, the unthinkable occurred. It began to snow. I have seen wild weather at Ichthus over the years, but I never expected to see snow.¹⁸

In 2004, the rain was so bad it shut down the road system on the Ichthus Farm, and as a result paved and gravel roads were added. Another writer noted, “The problem with rain started in 1983, a year that became known as the ‘rain year’ or ‘Mudthus.’ However, it rained even harder at the 2002 festival. Last year (2005) set the record for the coldest temperatures.”¹⁹



In 1992 DC Talk and Steven Curtis Chapman both performed at the festival with the theme “Rock Solid” demonstrating some of the rapid diversification of contemporary Christian music that was developing. (Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

Christopher Jackson, a Lutheran pastor from Lexington, attended the 2007, 2008, and 2009 festivals with his youth group. He notes that Ichthus in 2009 attracted around 14,000 people and the festival reported 581 first-time commitments to Christ. He describes the atmosphere and the concert itself,

The concert area is a huge, fenced in compound on a hill above the campground. Inside the gate you pass two side stages that host bands outside the mainstream of Contemporary Christian Music, bands that either haven't "made it" yet or offer musical styles that are less popular than those on the main stage. Most offer either heavy metal or punk rock. Some bands are more artsy-one stage even featured two violinists- and some defy categorization, like the Psalters, a group of bohemian acoustic musicians who mix such elements as Eastern European melodies, African drumbeats, and the Sanctus into their music.

The side stages also host breakout sessions, when concerts and other activities cease so that festival-goers can hear presenters. In recent years these have included Shaine Claiborne, Matthew Sleeth, M.D., Dr. Devin Brown of Asbury Seminary [*actually Asbury University not Seminary*], and XXX-church, a ministry aimed at preventing and freeing people from the use of pornography.

A little farther in are prayer tents, a Compassion International booth where you can sponsor a needy child, and the merchandise tent with an energy and feel all its own due to the eclectic mix of vendors. Every band sets up a table where they meet fans and hawk CDs, posters and T-shirts. Some vendors sell "Jesus Junk"- buttons, bobble-heads of biblical characters, and apparel. T-shirts reading "It's a relationship, not a religion" are popular...

Past the merchandise tents you finally encounter the main stage, a massive steel and cement structure, with huge speakers and video screens. This is where popular, commercially successful groups play, artists like David Crowder, Skillet, Toby Mac, Grits, and Family Force 5.²⁰

While Jackson clearly admired many aspects of the festival, as a traditional Lutheran pastor he also was a bit skeptical about the clothing, tattoos, Mosh pits, and loud music!



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY



Vendors often sold T-shirts and other faith-related items during the Ichthus festival, like this vendor in front of Sims Drugstore on Main Street Wilmore. (Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

No matter what people thought of the festival itself, Ichthus had a major impact on young people's lives. And some of those lives continue to have an impact. In an article in *Charisma* magazine Leslie Montgomery tells the story of how United States Vice President Mike Pence found Christ. A key part is detailed when she writes,

A few weeks later, (Mike) Stevens (a fraternity brother from college) invited Pence to attend the annual Ichthus Christian music festival in Wilmore, Kentucky. It was there that Pence's life was transformed.

"I heard lots of great singing, and I heard lots of wonderful preaching," Pence says, "On Saturday night [while] sitting in a light rain, ... my heart really finally broke with a deep realization [that] what had happened on the cross, in some infinitesimal way, had happened for me. And I gave my life and made a personal decision to trust Jesus Christ as my Savior."²¹

The 1978 Ichthus festival at which Vice President Pence committed his life to Christ was held April 28-29, 1978, where much of the teaching was by

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

Bob Laurent, and the performers included: Honeytree, Andrus, Blackwood and Company, Good News Circle, Pat Terry Group, New Hope, and Selah. In an interview with Rev. Chip DeWitt, who served as the General Chair of the 1978 festival, he shared how as a newlywed senior at the Seminary he and his wife were asked to lead the 1978 festival. Many people advised him against this because of all the work involved and because he was just newly married, but they decided to take on the task. As Chip and his wife, Marge were preparing for the festival, it began raining and they felt concerned that the rain might be a problem, and so the couple walked around the grounds and prayed that God would not let the rain prevent the important work that needed to happen. Little did they know the future Vice President of the United States would be there. At the urging of people in his church, Rev. DeWitt shared the story in a letter with Vice President Pence, and they received not only a personal letter in response, but also a private meeting with the Vice President in Jacksonville, Florida. In the letter from Vice President Pence dated July 10, 2020, he wrote, "I thank God every day for that rainy night in Wilmore. Now I know who else to thank."

With the last Ichthus festival in 2012, it might be useful to think about why the festival ended. Mark Vermillion was called in as a consultant in 2008-2009 and then served as the CEO of Ichthus from 2010-2012.²² He notes that there were a number of key factors that led to the end of the Ichthus festival. While attendance had dropped from its peak in 1999 and 2000, this was not really the deciding factor. The move of date from April/May to mid-June also had an impact. The later date conflicted with other music festivals and various summer events. As Vermillion notes there was very little going on in April in terms of youth activities like prom, graduation, or even major sports events, but while the move to June was great from a weather perspective, Ichthus suddenly found itself competing with summer camps and other activities. The change in date certainly impacted the number of volunteers Ichthus could count on from Asbury College (University) and Asbury Theological Seminary for working the festival, so that important connection was also minimized. The mortgage on the festival site was also a heavy burden, which Ichthus was not able to get out from under. Although as Vermillion points out, Ichthus was also committed to giving large amounts of money raised to help other ministries and still kept that focus even when they could have used the money for their own costs. In addition to the mortgage on the property, the costs of upkeep and liability continued to create a situation where the festival started each

year needing to make a sizeable amount before it could even begin work to break even.

Yet beyond the unique challenges that Ichthus faced, there were other factors that played a larger role. Realities that were true not just for Ichthus, but for all other Christian music festivals and may help account for a decline in the entire genre. The Cornerstone Festival ended in 2012, TOMfest in 2009, HeavenFest in 2016, and the Agape Festival in 2013, so Ichthus was not alone in ending its ministry in this time period. Vermillion points out that changes in youth culture led to a decline in interest in camping or “roughing it” (especially among youth pastors) and an increased interest in luxury camp or hotel experiences. While Ichthus responded to this with single day passes that grouped artists from specific genres on the same day, Vermillion responds, “it was too little, too late.” However, it is also interesting to note that the same type of trend was being noticed in secular music festivals as well. Large-scale traditional festivals were aimed at die-hard fans, but crowds, rising prices, the increasing age of those attending (along with an increased desire for comfort over camping and mud), and venue problems led to an increase in smaller, more niche-focused secular festivals during the same time period.²³

Given the shift away from Christian music festivals in the early 2010s bigger possible factors are changes in the music industry and in music technology. If Steck and Howard were correct, part of the importance of contemporary Christian music festivals was the ability of various Christian musicians to connect with fans outside of occasional performances at churches and coffee houses, since other avenues were closed to them (such as bars and clubs). Music distribution changed drastically with the iTunes Music Store in 2003, Amazon Music in 2007, and Spotify in 2008 bringing the music world into a digital age (this legal use of digital music followed the earlier free exchange of music through Napster and other peer-to-peer networks). This led to an even greater diversification of music into specific niche markets while at the same time leading to a loss in profits for the music recording industry. It so happened that 2012 (the last year of Ichthus) was also the first year digital music sales outpaced physical sales.²⁴ The greater ease of accessing music by mobile devices and smartphones also changed the way fans interacted with music. Musicians increasingly connected to their fan base through social media and the Internet, and as this happened the importance of the concert experience, and especially the music festival experience became less essential for contemporary Christian music. Mark

Vermillion adds weight to this argument. He notes that digital sales of \$0.99 singles through iTunes drastically reduced the sales of albums. This meant that recording artists needed to make up for lost revenue through increased touring schedules. The market became oversaturated and artists sought to charge more for performing at festivals outside of their touring schedule. All of this led to greater costs at the same time that attendance was slipping. Vermillion also points out that there were very few big headliners in contemporary Christian music and so this led to hiring the same six or seven groups each year and this in turn affected creativity.

Vermillion recalls that he and others were becoming increasingly disappointed in how “‘Christian’ became a marketing label.” He noticed how more “Christian” groups were being formed as a business approach, while genuine people of faith in other genres were excluded. He feels this same disillusionment about the contemporary Christian music industry was also growing among Millennials. Ichthus attempted to solve some of this concern with the Galleria stage, which tended to promote singer-songwriters (often acoustic or unplugged) who had publicly declared their faith, but were part of more secular genres of music. Millennials, like Ed Kilbourne and others involved in the folk music scene of the 1960s, felt that secular music could effectively convey spiritual truth without being specifically labeled as “Christian” and separated out from other musicians. In some ways, Christian music had come full circle at the Ichthus festival. As Mark Vermillion laments, “We couldn’t be ‘Christian’ enough for some, but for others we were too ‘Christian.’”



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY



No matter what people may think of the music or the festival itself as a contextualized way to do evangelism, it cannot be denied that Ichthus definitely had an impact on many young people’s lives.

(Image courtesy of Asbury Theological Seminary Archives and Special Collections.)

The truth is that album sales, tours, or music festivals no longer drive Christian music. The industry has changed along with the technology that drove the changes. In a 2015 article by James Rickman, Josh Caterer, a Christian musician and worship director is quoted as saying,

Christian music is driven by a much more tightly controlled industry than secular music is. And it pertains to very specific revenue streams that don’t exist in secular music because of CCLI—Christian Copyright Licensing International, which is basically the Christian version of ASCAP or BMI. CCLI keeps track of all the songs that are performed in churches—every church is supposed to pay an annual fee to CCLI. Then CCLI will pay royalties to the songwriters and publishers of that music. So what you have is a situation where, in secular music, it’s becoming more difficult to make music because people aren’t buying CDs the way they used to, and the music industry is freaking out, but in Christian music, there’s this performance revenue stream that comes from churches performing worship songs every week and that is completely unaffected by album sales.

THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

I happen to know from talking to people in the industry that generally they don't care as much about trying to sell albums. Making an album is only a way to get people to perform these songs in their churches, because if a song takes on a life of its own in church world as being a popular worship song, that can become a huge revenue stream, even if they never sell any records. They could give the music away; they just want people to perform it in churches.²⁵

This insight into the world of contemporary Christian music helps to better understand why contemporary Christian music no longer needs to depend on Christian music festivals to drive album sales among fans. With both revenue from digital music sales and with a special source of revenue through worship song licensing, there is no longer an industry-driven need for musicians to attend music festivals.

Christian music festivals do continue to occur, as is evidenced by the Christian Festival Association, founded in 2006, which currently lists 26 Christian music festivals as their members; although the fact that they also currently list 25 of 28 Christian music festivals as postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021 may signal some future warning signs.²⁶ Mark Vermillion made a thought-provoking point when he observed that even if Ichthus had made it to its 50th year in 2020, it would have likely been the last festival anyway due to the current pandemic (or most likely it would have been postponed and then closed due to revenue losses). When asked about the impact of Ichthus, Vermillion concluded the interview by relating a story. After Ichthus ended he was in Memphis at a hotel wearing an old Ichthus T-shirt when a man approached him and asked about his ties to Ichthus. Then the man told him that he had been in the 2012 Ichthus and that festival had radically transformed him from a life of drugs into a life of faith. Vermillion concludes that even when he was feeling down about the end of Ichthus, "God wanted to put an exclamation point on it and say, 'I was at work!'" Even in its closing days, God was still changing lives through Ichthus.

In the same way that Ichthus began with God's perfect timing in a symphony of events and people, Ichthus ended with the same complex mix of factors. Rising costs tied to the purchase of the farm as a festival venue, along with costs for liability and upkeep, hindered the growth of Ichthus at the same time that changes in the youth culture and the changing of the April/May date for the festival reduced the attendance and number

of volunteers from Asbury University and Asbury Theological Seminary. But these factors alone are not sufficient to explain the end of the festival. Changes in music technology which spawned radical changes in the music industry all contributed to an environment which was no longer sustainable for a Christian music festival in Wilmore. What is clear is that God did not waste any time or talent. The last Ichthus festival was just as spiritually powerful as the first.

Despite the shift in the Christian music culture over time, it is important to recognize the contextualization of rock and roll, and the adaptation of the music festival setting, has been a major factor in the Christian culture in the United States from 1970 to the present. While the form itself may be in a decline from its peak, events like the Ichthus music festival demonstrated that evangelical Christianity could adapt to the complex youth culture of its time. Spiritually, Ichthus and the Christian music festivals that followed provided a context where young people could come together, drawn by a cultural love of relevant music, be affirmed in their Christian identity, and for many find the relationship with Christ that would grow, guide, and sustain them through adulthood. As with any ministry involved with cultural engagement, it may have been useful for only a moment of time, but for the people who encountered Christ in that moment, it became an eternity.

Special note: **Do you have a special memory of Ichthus? Was your life and walk with Christ changed as a result of the festival? Did you volunteer your time while a student? We would love to hear from you!** Please send us written accounts of your experiences or scans of photographs you may have of the festival. We are hoping to add to the collection of Ichthus materials for future researchers and want to preserve your stories of this incredible ministry. Send your stories or photos to: archives@asburyseminary.edu. We look forward to hearing from you!

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary's mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase

or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.

End Notes

¹ All images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images, unless otherwise noted. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images.

² See Greg Robinson, chapter one, "The Granddaddy of Them All: The Ichthus Festival" in *Christian Rock Festivals*, Rosen Publishing Corporation: New York, NY 2009:7-14.

³ John M. Steck and Jay R. Howard, *Apostles of Rock: The Splintered World of Contemporary Christian Music*, University of Kentucky Press: Lexington, KY 2004: 5.

⁴ Joshua Simon, "Hard Rockers, Holy Rollers." *Life*. Vol. 22 no. 8 (July) 1999: 80.

⁵ Steck and Howard, *Apostles of Rock*, 29-30.

⁶ Steck and Howard, *Apostles of Rock*, 56.

⁷ Steck and Howard, *Apostles of Rock*, 59.

⁸ Email correspondence with Dr. Steve Seamands, August 5, 2020.

⁹ Gary Baker, *Ichthus Through the Years*. Ichthus Ministries, Inc.: Wilmore, KY 1997: 1. Published privately as a directory of past administrators and brief history of the Ichthus festival. Copy in the Archives and Special Collections of B.L. Fisher Library, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY.

¹⁰ Special thanks to Ed Kilbourne for an in-depth phone interview about music and the context of Wilmore during the 1960s, August 11, 2020.

¹¹ Special thanks goes to Rev. John Park whose excellent memory and engaging stories provided much of the information in this section through a phone interview, August 5, 2020 (and a follow-up interview on September 3, 2020), as well as Rev. Larry Minner who provided additional and supporting information in a phone interview, August 6, 2020 and Dr. Bill Moore who also provided information about the music in a phone interview, August 14, 2020.

¹² Published in 1922, with words by Rhea F. Miller and music by George Beverly Shea, the lyrics and music copyright are held by The Rodheaver Co. (a division of Word Music, Inc.). The lyrics themselves are in the public domain, being written before 1923, but the use of these lyrics is

also in line with Fair Use for scholarship reasons as advocated by the best practices of the American Musicological Society. The same applies to the use of the publication of the lyrics for “My Love” by Tony Hatch earlier in the article.

¹³ Much of my information in this section comes from an in-depth phone interview with Rev. Jack Harnish, August 4, 2020.

¹⁴ Special thanks to Dr. Jim Garlow for a lengthy phone interview, August 11, 2020. Additional phone interviews with Travis Hutchison (August 14, 2020) and Steve Moore (August 26, 2020) were also invaluable sources of information for Ichthus from 1972-1976.

¹⁵ Email correspondence with Dr. John Oswalt, July 31, 2020.

¹⁶ “Remembering Andraé Crouch.” April 1, 2015. *Homecoming Magazine* online. Available at: <http://www.homecomingmagazine.com/article/remembering-andra-crouch/>

¹⁷ Jack Harnish, “‘Soon and Very Soon’... He’s Gone to Meet the King.” *Monday Memo* blog. January 11, 2015. Available at: <https://jackharnish.wordpress.com/2015/01/11/soon-and-very-soon-hes-gone-to-meet-the-king/>

¹⁸ Laura Nunnery, “Ichthus 2005 ‘Let it Rain’.” May 5, 2005. *Jesusfreakhideout.com*. Available at: <https://www.jesusfreakhideout.com/concerts/ichthus/2005/default.asp>

¹⁹ Cassi Haggard, “The Ichthus Experience.” *The Times-Tribune*, Corbin, KY. June 14, 2006. Available at: https://www.thetimestribune.com/community/the-ichthus-experience/article_c6db4682-7a76-5203-bd25-3fa4fcb18422.html

²⁰ Christopher Jackson, “Rock Formation: What I Saw & Heard at the ICHTHUS Christian Music Festival.” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity*. Vol. 23 no. 5 (Sept./Oct.) 2010: 44-46.

²¹ Leslie Montgomery, “The Faith of Mike Pence.” *Charisma*. Vol. 44, no. 11 (June/July) 2019: 36. Leslie Montgomery is also the author of *The Faith of Mike Pence*, Whitaker House: New Kensington: PA 2019. Also special thanks to Rev. Chip DeWitt for an in depth telephone interview about his meeting with the Vice President on September 17, 2020, and also for sharing a copy of the personal letter the Vice President sent him on July 10, 2020.

²² Special thanks to Mark Vermillion for a Zoom interview on August 27, 2020, which confirmed and emphasized the variety of causes that led to the end of the Ichthus music festival.

²³ Eventbrite blog. Career and Lifestyle, “The Rise and Fall of Mega-Music Festivals- And What Comes Next.” March 7, 2019. Available at: <https://www.eventbrite.com/blog/rise-fall-of-music-festivals-what-comes-next-ds00/>

²⁴ Laurie Segall, "Digital Music Sales Top Physical Sales." *CNN Money*. January 5, 2012. Available at: https://money.cnn.com/2012/01/05/technology/digital_music_sales/index.htm

²⁵ James Rickman, "Inside the Sprawling World of Christian Music Festivals." *Paper Magazine*. March 16, 2015. Available at: <https://www.papermag.com/inside-the-sprawling-world-of-christian-music-festivals-1427524567.html>

²⁶ <https://www.christianfestivalassociation.com/about-us>. See also, Aisha Harris, "The Fragile Festival Economy." *The New York Times*. April 21, 2020. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/opinion/coronavirus-music-festivals-canceled.html> for a more in depth view on how the coronavirus may impact secular festivals and the local economies they support. Similar dynamics are likewise true for Christian music festivals.



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY