
COUNTRY AND CHRISTIAN MUSIC SALES SHINE

IN THE WAKE OF THE TERRORIST ATTACKS

In the Weeks Following the Tragedy, Contemporary Christian Music Sales Increased by as Much as 20 Percent While the Rest of Music Retail Sales Were in Double-Digit Decline

by Amy Sue Macy

In a year when overall music sales experienced a significant decline, country and Christian music sales showed stability and growth. Some say that these sales were not in spite of the September 11 tragedies, but that the terrorist attacks may have fueled sales in these specific genres. Even before the tragic events of September 11, music sales were off by 1.2 percent, with the majority of sales loss occurring in the following seven weeks. For the first negative growth the overall industry has seen in 10 years, the year-end numbers reflect overall sales off by five percent and album sales down by 2.8 percent. These figures represent the music industry loss of 22 million album sales for the year.

As the center of country and Christian



continued on page 31

WRM Presents THE
WAY OUT WEST
COWBOYS

RODEO
★
MUSIC
★
SONG
★
COMEDY



FUN
★
FUN
★
FUN
★

Featuring SKINNEY
BOB and HIS MUDPUDDLES

music, Nashville should be pleased with its industry-leading genres. Country music showed an increase in sales for the first time since 1998. Prior to 2001, country music market share had slipped continuously as overall music sales had grown. As the pie has gotten bigger, country music's slice has been trimmed, from 10.8 percent in 1997 to 8.6 percent in 2000, while the overall industry has increased by 20 percent in the same period. Year 2001 could be a turning point for country music, with an increase in market share nearing nine percent.

At the top of the country music charts for 2001 is the soundtrack *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, driven by the sleeper hit movie of the same title, selling more than 3.4 million units. The album lingered for 24 weeks at the top of the Billboard Top Country Album Charts and won CMA Awards for Album of the Year and Single of the Year for "I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow." This album also ranked No. 9 as one of the best selling records in all genres for the year and won the Grammy for Album of the Year. A fourth-quarter release, Garth Brooks' *Scarecrow* album, landed in the No. 2 position, selling 2.2 million. His commercial endorsement with Dr. Pepper also increased his visibility going into the critical selling season while profiling country music on a national level. Other standouts include albums from Tim McGraw, *Set This Circus Down* and *Greatest Hits*, along with Toby Keith's *Pull My Chain* and Lee Ann Womack's 2000 release *I Hope You Dance*.

Country music has long been known as the music of the people, with lyrical themes of everyday life set to music rich with instrumentation in the rural tradition. Alan Jackson's January 20, 2002, album release *Drive* shifted into high gear mainly because of the single he debuted on the CMA Award show a few weeks after the attacks. The song, "Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning)?" reflects a thoughtful tribute to the September 11 tragedies and has placed Jackson's album at the top of both Billboard's Country Music and pop music's Top 200 charts, selling more than 423,000 units in its first week alone.

According to Mike Weiss, vice president and sales manager of Music City Record Distributors, the past year in sales was a challenge. For

the regional retail chain featuring Cat's Music Stores as well as one-stop shops where independent music stores purchase music, country music has always been a strong genre, with a new focus on folk and Americana music. Clearly, the outstanding sales of *O Brother* along with releases by singer/songwriter types such as John Hiatt are a substantial part of Music City Record Distributors' sales within the genre.

For Nashville, Christian music sales are the big success story, garnering a 13.5 percent increase in 2001. Contemporary Christian and gospel album sales topped 49,965,000, a record according to SoundScan (the database on which music retailers share sales information to determine national record sales). When tracking sales throughout the year, contemporary Christian music sales prior to September 11 were already growing by 3.5 percent, but in the weeks following the tragedy, contemporary Christian music sales increased by as much as

20 percent while the rest of music retail sales were in double-digit decline (Figure 1, page 32).

"Once again our nation has turned to God during this time of national crisis. Christian music helps to express all the emotions that people are feeling right now—everything from the hope they are seeking to the faith they

hold onto and the many questions that still linger. That may

explain why retailers are reporting increased traffic of consumers looking for our music, and that is definitely showing up in our SoundScan numbers," said Frank Breeden, president of the Christian Music Trade Association (CMTA).

A look at where Christian music sales occur reflects a movement afoot. A few years ago, the predominate place to purchase Christian music products would have been the Christian bookseller outlet, specializing in Christian lifestyle products. These products now also do well in the mainstream marketplace, as reflected in the gradual shift of market share. Mainstream outlets such as Wal-Mart and Hastings are garnering more than 53 percent of music sales for the genre, leaving the Christian bookseller with 43 percent. The remaining sales come from the growing market of direct offerings such as those on television, including top sellers such as *Songs 4 Worship*.



Country music has long been known as the music of the people, with lyrical themes of everyday life set to music rich with instrumentation in the rural tradition.

Sales at Hastings displayed a shift in taste: Christian product sales reflected the national average.

Sales at Hastings, a national entertainment store chain that features music along with books, video, video rental, software, and a lifestyle section dedicated to Christian products, displayed a "shift in taste." Storm Gloor, head of music purchasing for Hastings, noted that 2001 was a difficult year and sales are continuing the trend of significant decline in early 2002. Christian product sales at Hastings reflected the national average, performing well prior to September 11 but exploding in the weeks after the attacks.

Other big sellers included patriotic theme products including compilations and re-releases of strong sellers such as Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." Gloor said the various artist packages of charitable events for tragedy victims were well received, though no specific offering was a runaway hit. Labels offering these products acted in a philanthropic nature, without the usual hard sell, which Hastings appreciated.

Lifeway Stores, a national Christian bookstore chain headquartered within the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville, are a part of the Christian Booksellers Association. According to Lifeway associate music buyer Mark Garrison, music sales saw a significant increase during the weeks shortly after the tragedies, but several big-name artists including Steven Curtis Chapman and Michael W. Smith issued releases during that time. Garrison added that sales have

returned to normal seasonal levels since Christmas. Other big sellers during the fall included patriotic accompaniment tracks for soloists.

Topping the charts in Christian music sales are P.O.D.'s *Satellite* album; *Songs 4 Worship*; Donnie McClurkin's gospel offering *Live In London*; Michael W. Smith's best selling album to date, *Worship*; a couple of WoW compilations; Steven Curtis Chapman's *Declaration*; and *Free to Fly* by Point of Grace. It is interesting that mainstream offerings such as Mannheim Steamroller's *Christmas Extravaganza* and the *O Brother* soundtrack are

included in the Christian sales charts. Based on SoundScan information, Christian music sales represent 6.5 percent of all music sales, a growth of nearly a percentage point from last year.

The music industry has long been a staple within Nashville's economic profile. With country music showing signs of a turnaround and explosive growth in

Christian music sales, Nashville's music industry should feel the pulse of its heart growing stronger. Though no one would like to see the tragic events of 2001 replicated, Music City would welcome the sales trends that were established for this and many years to come. ■

Amy Sue Macy, assistant professor in MTSU's Recording Industry Department, has worked for many record labels creating strategic market plans for launching new releases and was responsible for national sales at RCA.

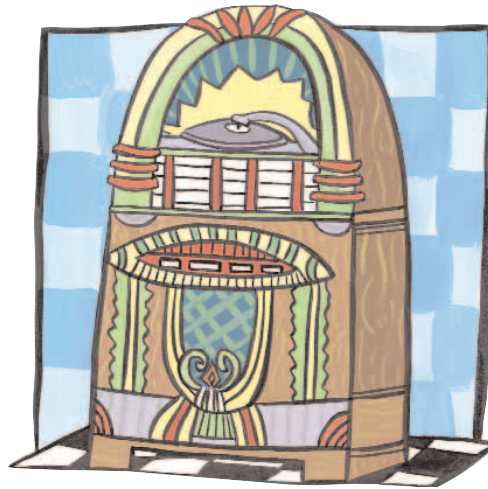


Figure 1. Album Sales Percentage of Change 2001 by Week

