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Constructing Alternative Christian Identity: An Ethnography of Jesus People USA's Cornerstone Festival

Brian Johnston
University of South Florida, appareo@hotmail.com

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Constructing Alternative Christian Identities:

An Ethnography of Jesus People USA’s Cornerstone Festival

by

Brian Edward Johnston

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor: David Payne, Ph.D.
Co-Major Professor: Jane Jorgenson, Ph.D.
Fred Steier, Ph.D.
Maria Cizmic, Ph.D.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my son, Oliver, and to my love, Samantha.

I would like to thank Sabra Vanderford Godair for recommending Cornerstone Festival as my dissertation topic. Additionally, I wish to convey my regards to those fellow-travelers who accompanied me to my first and subsequent Cornerstone Festivals.

I am grateful to John Herrin for giving me access to the festival for this study and to JPUSA for allowing me to visit their community in Chicago, Illinois.
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Abstract

This dissertation examines processes through which alternative Christian identities are constructed, maintained, and performed at the annual Cornerstone Festival in Bushnell, Illinois. Organized and managed by Jesus People USA (JPUSA), an urban commune in Chicago, Illinois, the festival includes non-traditional methods of religious expression including rock music, making camp, play, and community-building. Cornerstone Festival attracts and includes members of the Christian faith who would not otherwise be included in traditionally organized Christian groups and fosters interaction between these less enfranchised members and more traditionally minded and socialized Christian practitioners. JPUSA appropriates the festival format as a method of religious expression and practice that successfully includes marginal or fringe Christians by offering a site of “play,” and thus avoids the more traditional frames of recruitment and membership of orthodox religious services.

In order to better understand Cornerstone Festival’s complicated place in the American religious experience, a theoretical framework is developed from research in social constructionism, rhetoric and cultural studies. This framework is used to extrapolate the festival’s significance as a site for socialization, its role in the cultivation of alternative Christian identities, and the purposes for which attendees use the festival as a site for community-building. The primary source of data for this study is drawn from ethnographic fieldnotes and interviews gathered at the 2008 Cornerstone Festival. I
conclude that Cornerstone Festival is a coproduced, ephemeral site buttressed by a symbiotic relationship between structure and communitas. Evangelical faith and practice receive a new treatment at Cornerstone Festival where rock music, rather than a point of contention, is in fact a unifying aesthetic experience.
I’m standing outside the Manchester Grand Hyatt Hotel in San Diego, California an hour before my second and final presentation at the 94th annual National Communication Association Convention. I don’t smoke, but I want a cigarette.

Four months ago I was in Bushnell, Illinois camping out with twenty thousand Christians at Jesus People USA’s Cornerstone Festival. My hope is that the forthcoming Scholar to Scholar session will help me translate that experience for an academic audience. My satchel is over-packed with a baker’s dozen worth of black-matted photographs of Cornerstone, copies of my curriculum vitae, and business cards.

In the back corner of the presentation space, I annex a portion of the floor and begin putting the photographs together. The design is spontaneous: part aesthetic and part storied. It is a collage of my phenomenological experience of Cornerstone’s festival grounds. These grounds are not limited to mere geography or the permanent and transient structures, but rather encompass coproduced social realities that are cultivated from personal-public experiences and relationships.

In the top-center I place the first photograph of Rubin, a professional protestor who travelled to Cornerstone from Los Angeles. Next to Rubin is “Brother Red Squirrel,” a Jesus People USA commune member who mingles Jam Band rock with spontaneous prophesying. Cornerstone’s Main Stage, which boasts a forty-foot video screen and a sound system that any touring musician would envy, is juxtaposed to a long-
haired shirtless folk-singer, strumming his acoustic guitar amidst a large grassy field. My favorite photograph, however, is a 1970s Jesus People era van that is completely covered in bumper stickers, including the profound, the mildly offensive, and the kitsch: “When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace,” “Christian bashing: The only Acceptable form of hate left in America,” and a frog postulating the inevitable, “Where are you goin’ when you croak?” Completing the collage is a group of near-naked attendees dancing pagan style to the deafening, fiercely paced sound of a hardcore band.

Fifteen minutes before the session begins I’ve achieved a genuinely swank booth space. The photographs are tacked precisely into place, descending into my shameless labyrinth of self-advertisement. I steal a pitcher of water from a nearby suite in the hotel, along with cheap plastic cups. The stage is complete for my first foray into a Scholar to Scholar session.

“What did you find?” asks an early visitor. I start to speak, then pause. *What did I find? I found weird.* “I found that for me, as a communication scholar, being there matters. I found that applying theories of human communication from an office desk to the muck and mire of a real space with real folks in real time doesn’t cut it. One thing I found that I would not have imagined was how JPUSA’s presence at the festival imbues the space with their communal values without attendees really being aware of it, but certainly responding to it. I guess that’s one rhetorical aspect of the festival that I figured out because of the ethnographic approach.”

Satisfied, she moves on to the next booth and I pour a glass of my own stolen water. All this time, after the fieldwork and drafting the paper for this presentation, I had
merely focused upon the peculiar qualities of Cornerstone without genuinely exploring what those qualities accomplish. In point of fact, my theoretical frame for this festival truly began to develop during this Scholar to Scholar Session, through conversations with visitors facilitated by the collage.

By the end of the hour long session I’ve come into my own, delivering a talk that is both succinct and entertaining, bringing questions and points of interest derived from prior visitors’ conversations into each subsequent interaction. In eight years of “conventioneering” this is the first time I feel like I’ve received my money’s worth. The Scholar to Scholar session facilitated genuine dialogue, from which I gleaned a more sophisticated understanding of the dissertation’s topic including processes of coproduction and play derived from visitors’ responses to the collage and performed in this unique presentational process.

***

Cornerstone Festival is the annual destination of approximately 20,000 attendees, hundreds of bands, and members of the Chicago-based Christian commune Jesus People USA (JPUSA) who organize and manage the week-long event. The festival includes seminars, a movie theatre, an after hours dance club, sporting events, attendee-sponsored venues such as tea and coffee houses, a meditative labyrinth, and a skate-board ramp. Most notable is the communal-styled setting that participants, including attendees, bands, seminar speakers, and JPUSA commune members share.

I first attended this festival in the summer of 1995, returned in 1997 as an attendee and again in 1999 as a documentary filmmaker. However, while I obtained over 100 hours of video footage and audio recordings – including interviews, concerts, and press
conferences --, I could neither formulate a clear picture of how this festival fit into the larger scope of American religious experience, nor articulate a sense of what the event meant for participants. Nearly ten years later I returned to this site, this time as an ethnographer studying the event for my PhD dissertation research.

As cliché as it might seem, my coming into understanding of this festival meant first of all coming into understanding of myself, which included processing my personal migration from committed evangelical Southern Baptist Convention member to agnostic. My goal is that what follows draws my self and readers into a space that is as hopeful as it is critical, whereas a study of human communication is as much a collaborative production of what might be as it is an argument for what is.

Research projects keyed toward interests in the American evangelical movement enjoy increasing popularity. Cornerstone Festival is among the most marginal yet impactful events that maintain this movement’s intergenerational credibility. Although this study breeches historical, social, and theological points of interest, it exhausts none of these. Rather, the point of this ethnographic study is to elucidate a rhetorical and dialogic space that is both derived from and cultivated by the festival’s varied and representative participants.

The year of this study marked the 25th anniversary of Cornerstone Festival.
Chapter One:

Convergences of Faith and Identity

Communication scholars, particularly rhetorical scholars, have long been interested in religious experience, as religion is par excellence the realm of persuasion (Burke, 1961). Communication scholars have also been interested in the processes of socialization as persuasion (Burke, 1950; Payne, 1989) as such processes directly involve the strategic uses of communication techniques and environments. Indeed, the theory and philosophy of symbolic interactionism that founded communication study in the 20th century is bound up with how we form self in interaction with community, and how social practices embed and manipulate self/social or “psychosocial” processes for institutional and ideological purposes. This perspective is manifest in the current interest in the “social construction of reality” so ubiquitous in communication study (Bochner, 1997; Cissna & Anderson, 2002). The socialization processes through which social reality is created, maintained, and transformed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) are seen distinctly as determined in and through the practices of communication.

In this study I consult heavily the work of Peter Berger, whose work with religion (Sacred Canopy, 1967) provides much of the experiential backdrop to the larger philosophical framework of social constructionism. Berger’s work points to the phenomena of “legitimation” and “resocialization.” Legitimation identifies processes whereby the traditions or objectified meanings that buttress an institutional order are
passed on from one generation to the next (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 92). The institutional world “requires legitimation, that is, ways by which it can be ‘explained’ and justified,” and this comes to society members as a tradition. Subsequently, as conduct becomes increasingly institutionalized, “the more predictable and thus controlled it becomes” (Berger & Luckmann, p. 62). Because we are more likely to reject programs of conduct that others set for us, practices must be developed by which social members make those meanings their own, internalize them, or otherwise reify those meanings in their own terms yet retain their essence. The purpose of “resocialization” (p. 157) is to convert persons from one reality or social role to a new social reality. This process includes a reproduction of “primary socialization” insofar as new relationships are formed with significant others who act as guides in the conversion process, facilitating a reinterpretation of the old reality and its set of experiences within the circumference of the new one. The social roles we perform – father, teacher, citizen, neighbor, etc. – buttress our primary socialization and to a large extent determine our personal biography. Because we interact with others, both personal and general, as types and in situations that are typical, we validate systems of knowledge through our relationships and conversations. So long as the daily routines of life are not interrupted, our intersubjective sense of reality retains its validity.

Marginal moments, however, threaten our sense of security in this socially constructed world, and in our more lucid moments we sense that, first, things do not have to be as they are and, second, if reality as we know it is a construction, then it can be dismantled and re-constructed as we might prefer. Because marginal moments are not infrequent, maintenance strategies and institutions are developed to bring the “fallen”
back into the fold. Berger and Luckmann cite religious, aesthetic, and psychoanalytic organizations and processes as especially effective in these cases.

JPUSA’s annual Cornerstone Festival certainly fits into this socialization framework, however the festival seems to perpetuate rather than ameliorate what many in the evangelical community consider a threatening, or at least marginal experience: rock music. Instead of recruiting or resocializing attendees into traditional, or typical, Christian membership, the festival envisions an alternative trajectory for the ‘converted’, one that does not fully assimilate, per se, into traditional Christian institutions but rather carves its own self-sustaining niche into the evangelical scene. Indeed, Cornerstone reflects a certain degree of sophistication about socialization as it is organized around a transcendent social phenomenon, rock music. It may be that both the nature and kind of “religious experience” is transformed by the admixture, as well as the kind of membership identities and bonds that are forged through this socialization. There is a sense in which a larger, different, yet more ethereal sense of Christian identity and community are forged at this festival.

Central to my argument is that Cornerstone provides a liminal space for attendees to take as they wish – be that a complete immersion in the scene or mere play – and thereby transcend the popular-traditional boundaries in their everyday emulations of Christian faith. This “per-liminal” integration is seeded at Cornerstone as a communal experience, but is relative to each individual attendee and is furthermore left to the attendees, who so choose, to integrate into their lives after the festival. Repeat attendees invariably tell their tale of their first Cornerstone attendance “opening their eyes” to a more inclusive form of Christian faith and practice, or validating some aspect of their
identity that is marginalized or suppressed “back home.” For these attendees, the festival serves either as an annual renewal of this experience or a type of maintenance-work for the changes they have integrated into their lives, per their Cornerstone experience. Their motivations for attending the festival include travel, play, making camp, and the chance to see rock music performed live and uncensored. They are also seeking validation, and ‘arguments’ for these practices, namely rock music but really a whole variety of religious and popular forms of expression, as ‘okay’. Attendees thereby coproduce the very legitimating scene to which they pilgrimage, and this scene, in turn, provides them with the rituals of initiation, visibility, and community which they so desire.

Jesus People USA

One reason for the festival's appeal as a marginal experience is that the event’s sponsor is itself a marginal member of the larger evangelical order. JPUSA is an intentional community of Christians in Chicago, Illinois located at 920 Wilson Avenue. Approximately 500 people reside in the community and share a collective purse that is generated through the community's businesses. While the community’s stated values reflect evangelical principles, its communal organization sets it apart from traditional religious groups and institutions. Indeed, JPUSA occupies a curious space in American society. The community’s religious commitments align with evangelical Christian faith; however, JPUSA shares ecological values more in line with progressive approaches to living. JPUSA’s Cornerstone Festival perpetuates the fusion of faith and music that the Jesus People Movement heralded in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Jesus People Movement began in California, when counter-culture youth began converting to Christianity yet refrained from joining traditional church groups.
They brought elements of then contemporary popular culture with them into their communities. This included popular forms of entertainment such as folk and rock music, but also communal attitudes toward family, finances, faith, and living off the land (rural communitarians) or city block (urban communitarians). Jesus People were predominately new believers without any theological training in Christianity (Enroth, 1972). While most of these groups eventually dispersed into mainstream churches, others, such as JPUSA, have maintained their communal living style.

JPUSA’s independence from mainstream religious institutions has allowed the group to experiment with new forms of expression and cultivate alternative experiences of Christian faith, thus forging a uniquely marginal space alongside more traditional American religious institutions. It is this experimentation that has also helped JPUSA remain relevant to and influence the trajectory of new generations of Christian youth. Although JPUSA represents a radical departure from traditionally organized Christian groups, the community’s Cornerstone Festival bridges the divide between mainstream and marginal members of the faith. Berger writes that “the historically crucial part of religion in the process of legitimation is explicable in terms of the unique capacity of religion to ‘locate’ human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference” (1967, p. 35). JPUSA’s “frame of reference” differs significantly from traditional American religious institutions, not only in regard to its communal living style but also because of its rock aesthetic. The JPUSA community began as a small group of new believers who traveled the country in a van, playing rock music and preaching the gospel. Each subsequent JPUSA generation has included musicians tuned-in to the musical tastes of their generation, from punk rock to folk; from funk-rock to Goth. As is the case for many of
the festival’s attendees, rock music is JPUSA’s primary aesthetic experience of faith and it sustains the group’s spiritual vitality.

Cornerstone Festival is grafted from the community’s lifestyle and these values are in turn revitalized by the festival’s scene. With Cornerstone, JPUSA achieves a commemorative space where the legacy of Christian faith and popular music that the Jesus People Movement fused continues to impact youth culture. JPUSA’s festival is the most eclectic site for annual gatherings of Christian rock musicians and their audiences. Community member John Trott explains JPUSA’s purpose for Cornerstone as a fusion of faith and music that places otherwise opposed rhetorical communities in a setting where rock music, rather than a point of contention, is in fact the central unifying theme:

We felt that our festival could mirror *Cornerstone* magazine’s emphasis, serving as a bridge between young, culturally radical believers and older, culturally “straight” believers. The young could delightfully shock the old with their serious zeal for God, and the old could lend stability to the young with some great teaching and one-on-one discussion. Both sides could learn to respect and cherish each other. The music could be no-holds-barred rock, punk, or metal, with the sole requirement being that the musicians were believers. (Chapter Six: Cornerstone Festival)

As a continuation of the community’s once cutting-edge and now out of circulation music magazine, *Cornerstone*, the festival embodies an ongoing dialogue over the spiritual efficacy of Christian rock.
Contemporary Christian Music

Rock music is an integral dimension of the Cornerstone experience, however the styles of rock that dominate the festival’s scene are for the most part alternative to the mainstream styles of rock marketed by the Contemporary Christian Music (CCM) industry. In this study, uses of the terms “rock music” and “Christian rock” primarily encompass marginal forms of the genre, including alternative rock, hardcore rock, many variations of metal, Goth and punk rock. Although featured at Cornerstone, the acceptance of rock music into the CCM fold was hard won and remains a controversial if not suspect companion. Rock music was initially rebuked by the Christian community, most notably because of the perception that it encouraged rebellion, which was suspect to a system grounded in obedience. Andrew Beaujon’s book, Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside the Phenomenon of Christian Rock (2006), is among the first serious examinations of CCM from a secular press. Beaujon, a senior contributing writer for Spin magazine, begins his manuscript by citing an experience at Cornerstone:

The three thousand kids jammed into this tent on a former pig farm in Bushnell, Illinois look like the audience you’d see at any rock show. Some have decorated their bodies with all sorts of foreign materials – metal, ink, even giant earlobe-hole stretchers made from wood. Others have wildly colored hair. A lot of them have adopted a look that could best be described as “renaissance nerd” – thick glasses, tight T-shirts, thrift-store trousers – and wouldn’t be out of place at a Dashboard Confessional concert. [. . .] But this is the annual Cornerstone festival, and expectations are different here. (p. 1)
Although most people understand CCM as merely encompassing easy-listening genres of music, the industry includes a variety of musical styles and a complementary variety of audiences. The unifying theme is that the musicians are Christians. However, though there may be a variety of musical genres, the CCM industry is by no means all-inclusive. Some genres of music, most notably those genres considered rock music, are considered by many to be antithetical to Christian faith. The redeeming maneuver within the CCM industry for making the genre more acceptable for evangelicals included inoculating the music with “obvious” Christian lyrics performed by “obvious” Christians.

Mark Allen Powell’s encyclopedia of CCM (2002) is a near-exhaustive collection of Christian musicians including a comprehensive range of genres, from those considered more traditional such as praise and worship and adult contemporary, to punk rock and hip hop. Powell’s seven year project documents nearly 3,000 musicians considered Christian music artists and it is the first compilation of its kind. Powell views the collection as both the history of popular music, as rock music has always included the “square” pegs as part of its aesthetic, and the history of Christianity (p. 7), insofar as contemporary evangelical identity is virtually inseparable from CCM. Indeed, conflicting definitions of “Christian Music” persist and are generally grounded in either artist-centric or content-oriented perspectives. Powell, however, recommends an audience-driven definition: “Contemporary Christian music is music that appeals to self-identified fans of contemporary Christian music on account of a perceived connection to what they regard as Christianity” (p. 13).

Powell traces the beginning of CCM to the Jesus People Movement, and claims that it is unique insofar as it is a genre of music born out of ideological conviction rather
than musical preference. It was because of this ideological conviction, suggests Powell, that early Christian music artists maintained a clear demarcation between their music and that of their contemporaries, either because they “didn’t want to sign contracts with unbelievers, lest they find themselves in the employ of the Antichrist” (p. 10) or because they didn’t see the point, believing that Christ’s return was immanent. Additionally, the ideological tenor of Jesus People Music was a turn-off to those opposed to the Gospel and Christian lifestyle: “Precisely because the music connected so well with its target audience, it failed to garner much appreciation from those on the outside” (p. 10).

Jesus People music pre-dated the formation of the CCM industry. Initially, these musicians were independent artists with little support. Bands were formed within small and spontaneous communitarian groups in California. Those who committed to the performance of music full time supported themselves through constant touring and mail-order purchases of the few recordings that were made into EP or LP albums. The founding members of JPUSA, for example, met in California where they formed a community before traveling to Milwaukee for Bible and discipleship training. While in Milwaukee the community formed a blues rock band and, equipped with a van, electric guitars, drums, and amplifiers, hit the road to play rock music and share the gospel. Other Jesus People musicians performed folk rock, folk, and country music. Most notable of these was Jesus People musician Larry Norman, whose long hair combined with his talented songwriting skills became the early standard for Christian rock. Calvary Chapel in California stood out from among other church groups in that it supported many Jesus People musicians, including Daniel Amos whose musical catalogue includes excursions into country, new wave, and alternative rock.
As the Jesus People Movement waned, independent Christian music labels filled the music production void. Jesus People communitarian groups may have disbanded, but their former members still desired Christian music. These labels were often supported by progressive churches such as Calvary Chapel, but included individual sponsors. Although a market for Christian rock was formed from the Jesus People Movement, Jesus People musicians were betwixt and between two worlds, neither of which wanted to claim them. The general market did not know what to do with rock music that promoted Christian theology, and although well-established gospel labels approved of these musicians’ lyrics they were unsure of their merger with rock music.

The beginnings of what is known today as the Contemporary Christian Music industry can be traced to 1976 when the gospel label Word Records was purchased by ABC. Through Word Records, ABC procured independent labels and Jesus People musicians, sparked competition between other general market labels to do the same, and the CCM industry was born. Since that purchase, the majority of music that is produced, marketed, and distributed through the Contemporary Christian Music industry is comprised of pop music in the form of easy-listening and praise and worship. The iconic image of a long-haired Jesus People musician living hand-to-mouth and gig-to-gig – as much at ease performing from a front porch in Florida as a bar in California – was gradually phased out to make way for musicians whose music, lyrics, and presentation were more mainstream and overtly “Christian,” most notably Amy Grant’s unthreatening and easily accessible adult contemporary. Sandi Patti and Michael W. Smith also dominated the CCM scene in the 1980s, making the Christian pop rock of Degarmo and Key “radical” by comparison. Christian metal was also promoted, though sparsely and
strategically so as not to alienate the base. Stryper was among the most popular and successful of this genre of Christian music in the mid 1980s. However, because Christian music was distributed primarily through Christian bookstores, and since the customers for these venues and Christian radio were for the most part evangelicals with a strong distrust of any style of rock music, the CCM industry promoted pop-oriented music in order to appeal to a larger number of its customer base. Subsequently, these bookstores controlled distribution and to a large extent determined the range of “acceptable” Christian music genres.

However, through independently owned and managed Christian music magazines, including JPUSA’s Cornerstone and Doug Van Pelt’s Heaven’s Metal (later, HM for the more inclusive “hard music” genre), an underground scene of Christian rock, and later alternative rock, was cultivated and maintained. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Christian rock bands including Kings X (hard alternative), Adam Again and Daniel Amos (alternative rock), and The 77s (blues rock) garnered significant followings and cultivated a new customer base in CCM for their respective rock music styles. In the mid to late 1990s, bands including P.O.D. and Pedro the Lion (hardcore rock) as well as Sixpence None the Richer (alternative rock, dream pop) and Starflyer 59 (shoe-gazer, alternative rock) solidified the place of Christian rock in the CCM industry. Brandon Ebel’s Tooth and Nail Records and JPUSA’s Grrr Records led the way by developing these and similarly styled bands in the 1990s. During this same time period, JPUSA’s Cornerstone Festival was integral to the maintenance of this burgeoning Christian rock scene, promoting and supporting all forms of Christian music but most notably genres that were either marginalized or completely ignored by the CCM industry, including but not limited
to: alternative rock, blues rock, punk rock, jazz, dance, hip hop and rap, Americana, industrial, and Goth. Furthermore, because JPUSA is a self-sustaining community with beliefs that align closely with evangelicalism but sans the burden of institutional ties, and because the community’s history is so intimately connected to the Jesus People Movement and Christian rock music scene, the community’s festival occupies a relatively uncensored space. Neither the CCM industry nor the evangelical community can force the festival to feature one or another genre of music. In addition to featuring marginalized genres of Christian music, Cornerstone Festival welcomes a variety of CCM forms including the traditional “Separational CCM” (Howard and Streck, 1999) and the more progressive “Transformational” form (Howard and Streck, 1999).

Because CCM is grounded in ideology rather than style, its criteria includes close examinations of both its lyrics (Do the lyrics support Christian theology?) and its presentation (Are the artists Christians and are their performances clearly framed as a Christian event?). Jay Howard and John Streck (1999) extrapolate three forms of CCM to try to explain this complexity. The first incarnation, “Separational CCM,” was meant to evangelize, facilitate worship, and exhort believers. However, because musicians found themselves merely preaching to the “saved,” and because of the rising popularity of CCM, which produced alluring financial possibilities, a new conceptualization of CCM was introduced. An “Integrational” approach to CCM is an effort by the industry to divorce itself from the trap of being framed as evangelical music whose only market includes other evangelicals (Howard & Streck, 1999). Thus, Christian musicians had to stop seeing themselves as “ministers” or evangelists and re-key themselves as entertainers. However, this re-keying placed CCM artists in conflict with the evangelical
community, who see declaring the gospel of Christ the moral responsibility of all believers. In response, the industry argued that CCM was “sanctified music” and that its value was as much in what it did not do as what it did do (Howard & Streck, 1999).

Subsequently, Integrational CCM garnered increased commercial success. These artists tried to walk the line between two industries, the general market and the Christian market; however, while the latter questioned their motives the former did not take their artistry seriously. The third and most recent rationalization of Christian music represents the most intriguing form. Transformational CCM is based in part on a belief that Christ can transform individuals from within their cultural preferences, rather than necessitating that individuals completely abandon their lifestyles:

> For Transformational CCM, mystery, ambiguity, and struggle are at the heart of authentic Christianity and, therefore, authentic Christian music. [. . . ]. So, while at one level committed to the same ideals that drive the separational perspective (the communication of a religious message), those adhering to the transformational make a commitment to art a necessary condition for reaching those goals, suggesting that it is through the revelation of the artist’s struggles with Christianity that the gospel message achieves its redemptive power. (Howard & Streck, 1999, p. 197)

It is in this latter space that occupants of what we might call a “Christian rock aesthetic” take up residency. Although each of these three forms of CCM persists they represent not only a “splintered” Christian music industry (Howard & Streck), but an equally divisive evangelical community that is increasingly invested in CCM as part of its experience of faith and capital. These forms also represent a complicated institutional
order: although Integrational and Separational CCM align operationally and clearly with evangelical doctrine, Transformational CCM constitutes an ideological shift within the evangelical movement insofar as it is predicated upon ambiguity rather than dogmatic approaches to faith.

Cornerstone Festival is a pilgrimage and/or initiation site for Christians who identify with this Transformational form of CCM, and certainly for those attendees who want to hear rock music uncensored and live. Attendees appropriate this festival scene as a site for negotiating an interiorly and communally meaningful identity that is seemingly free from the “sacred canopy” (Berger, 1967) of the dominant evangelical parent culture. Like Dick Hebdige’s punks (1979), these Cornerstone attendees coproduce the rock scene as a space where “alternative identity” can be “discovered and expressed,” linking them to the “distinctive quest for a measure of autonomy which characterizes all youth sub (and counter) cultures” (p. 88). They want to communicate a difference, but they want to retain a community.

However, some critics believe that Christian rock, regardless of the originating impetus, is an abomination to the genre. Robert Walser (1993) dismisses the idea of Christian rock as a substantial cultural phenomenon. In Walser’s view, popular 1980s Christian heavy metal band Stryper, for example, merely appropriated the genre’s sound and style in order to present Christianity “as an exciting, youth-oriented alternative” to general market musicians, offering Christian youth “a chance to enjoy the pleasures of heavy metal and feel virtuous at the same time” (p. 55). Walser’s point is insightful, if not entirely credible. Popular general market bands such as Metallica and Poison were opening acts for Stryper, whose performances brought together audiences consisting of
both Christians and non-Christians. However, Walser’s thesis intuits an intersection of politics and identity in music and especially rock music where “both the pleasure of affirmation and the pleasure of interference” is enjoyed by a marginalized audience (p. 55). Additionally, by dismissing the genre of Christian rock out-right, Walser fails to see the complicated splintering of CCM. Integrational and Separational CCM artists comply with his critique of the genre, however Transformational CCM artists and their audiences pose an alluring counterstatement to assumptions that rock music is merely, and wholly if legitimately, a nihilist form of music. At JPUSA’s Cornerstone festival, rock music and the pleasure it elicits becomes a legitimizing site for marginalized members of the Christian community.

Socialization Processes at Cornerstone Festival

In their treatise on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that as we interact we form concepts for ways of being, doing, and understanding; “reality” is constructed when subsequent generations accept these organizing concepts as given. Personal relationships buttress this reality insofar as individuals’ sense of identity is interconnected to the social roles they perform in everyday life: “The new generation is initiated into the meanings of the culture, learns to participate in its established tasks and to accept the roles as well as the identities that make up its social structure” (Berger, 1967, p. 15).

The relationship between identity and community is therefore reciprocal insofar as a sense of identity “means a sense of being at one with oneself as one grows and develops; and it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community’s sense of being at one with its future as well as its history – or mythology” (Erikson, 1974, p. 27).
However, this “affinity” is problematized by marginal moments that cannot be explained through typical or official forms of sense-making:

Every society that continues in time faces the problem of transmitting its objectivated meanings from one generation to the next. This problem is attacked by means of the processes of socialization, that is, the processes by which a new generation is taught to live in accordance with the institutional programs of the society. (Berger, 1967, p. 15)

Berger (1967) believes that religion is an especially effective gatekeeper for maintaining the overall social structure. It is able to redress marginal moments when the reality of everyday life is brought into question (p. 44). Religious institutions develop rhetorical strategies and membership practices that promise to ameliorate this dilemma, isolating “individual identity as the locus of both the cause of, and solution for failure” (Payne, 1989, p. 16). One residual effect of this process is that it creates a vision of an individualistic rather than a communal world wherein those who stray from their socially constructed identities are labeled as deviants “while the system remains unexamined” (Gergen, 1994, p. 151).

As a marginal Christian experience, Cornerstone poses a peculiar addendum to Berger’s and Luckmann’s treatise. The festival’s organizer, JPUSA, is outside of the traditional institutional order and engaged in aesthetic practices that constitute significant departures from evangelical culture. JPUSA’s goal for Cornerstone is not to bring attendees into accord with any particular denomination of Christian faith, but to facilitate (rather than ameliorate) marginal experience for the purpose of sparking dialogue between otherwise disparate Christian groups and members. In this way, Jon Trott’s
explanation of JPUSA’s primary purpose for Cornerstone, as a site for bringing Christian “straights” and “radicals” into community together, exemplifies the goals of dialogue: “We learn and change when we confront what is not-us and imagine what can be seen and heard from that place” (Cissna & Anderson, 2002, p. 261). Furthermore, the central unifying practice of the festival, rock music, challenges (rather than accommodates) organizing pieties of evangelical faith. In so doing, attendees may be seen as “deviants,” relative to more traditional forms of Christian membership and practice, but they are deviants together. In order to better understand these processes and their implications, I apply an ethnographic method of studying Cornerstone Festival that draws heavily upon participant-observation and ethnographic interviews.

Method of Study

Qualitative research methods in the field of communication encompass a wide variety of procedures for gleaning a meaningful understanding of the complexities of social life for the purpose of developing more effective and humane ways of relating to others. These procedures range in their expression from the rigorously scientific to the more artistically oriented. James Paul (2005) argues that methods of research are interconnected to philosophies of education, which are themselves products of ongoing contemporary struggles over the meaning and purpose of how we think about knowledge and its generative practices. Tierney and Lincoln (1997) see an interdependent relationship between our methodological choices and research goals, privileging forms of representation that draw upon authorial reflexivity. Whether it is in the form of the “ethnographic I” (Ellis, 2004), an “autobiology” (Payne, 1996), or an “autoethnographic” performance (Holman-Jones, 2002), artistically styled qualitative research methods
explore the relationship between an exteriorly constructed social world and a meaningful personal life by generating new insights into human communication practices.

For this ethnographic study, I embedded myself in the experience of Cornerstone festival for eight days to investigate how participants express and accomplish Christian identity and membership. Participant observation relies upon the researcher’s active involvement in and with the scene and allows the researcher to elucidate cultural nuances that are likely unattainable through other methods of inquiry. Participant observation is relevant to this study’s research goals in that the processes of doing or making do in a culture are accomplished communicatively and are interrelated to the value system of that culture. The intense physical and mental energy required for a festival ethnography, especially for a festival centered around rock music, is uniquely suited to what Ervin Goffman calls being “tuned up” (1989). For Goffman, participant observation is a process of gathering data by “subjecting yourself, your body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation” (p. 125), as the goal is to “accept all of the desirable and undesirable” aspects of others’ lifestyles. What Cornerstone Festival lacks in longevity as an eight day event, it makes up for in both intensity (of participation) and complexity (of values), which demand a deep, if fleeting “baptism” in its scene.

The ethnographer thus experiences as well as observes a social group’s complex of values, beliefs, and attitudes and, in this case, how these are communicatively constructed. Lyall Crawford’s (1996) holistic approach to ethnographic practice complements Goffman’s deep immersion, in which the researcher is equally attentive to
how she or he is personally affected during the process of fieldwork as a means of more fully appreciating the study’s social group. My role as researcher at this festival was problematical, as I am both a former attendee (1995, 1997, and 1999) and a former believer. However, instead of ignoring this potential conflict of interest, I select an approach to writing ethnography that complements my relationship to the site.

John Van Maanen (1988) articulates the tropes of three types of ethnographic tales. The “realist tale” occupies traditional social scientific ground of qualitative research methods. Realist authors write from a third person voice, include detailed descriptions of everyday life of the people studied, and rely upon pre-established theoretical perspectives for interpretive credibility. Authors of a “confessional tale” reveal both the methodological and personal processes of fieldwork for the purpose of contributing to the legitimization of ethnographic practice. These authors write from the personalized “I” in order to establish intimacy with readers, posturing themselves either as student or apprentice of the studied group or as a “translator” who relates “indigenous texts” and practices to the reader. Mistakes made in the field, challenges to assumed theoretical precepts, and other confessions mark the fieldworker’s point of view in these tales, whereby the findings are naturalized by virtue of the author’s troubling of the fieldwork experience. Although each of these two approaches accomplishes the goals of an ethnographic study, the realist tale and the confessional tale segregate the author from members of the studied social group and from the readers.

This study follows Van Maanen’s model for an “impressionist tale.” The impressionist tale interconnects the sense-making methods of the culture (the known) and the researcher (the knower) by drawing “an audience into an unfamiliar story world” and
allowing it “to see, hear, and feel as the fieldworker saw, heard, and felt” (Van Maanen, p. 103), placing the reader in the fieldwork experience. Participants in these tales are transformed into characters with names, peculiarities, and a role to play in the dramatization. This dramatic control includes a troubling of the fieldwork experience from which the researcher gleans insight into the studied group. The “impressionist tale,” therefore, draws upon the collaborative dynamic of storytelling, as readers imbue the author’s tale with their own connections to the emotional impact of the related experience.

This study also draws upon data collected from ethnographic interviews that were conducted during the 2008 Cornerstone Festival. Participating in the festival facilitated a rapport with interviewees that enabled “unstructured interviewing,” a method that allows respondents to negotiate the interaction along with the investigator and thus coproduce its results (Fontana & Frey, 2005). In unstructured interviewing “interviews are seen as negotiated accomplishments of both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place” (p. 716). One aspect of this determining context includes what Jane Jorgenson (1991) calls the “emerging relatedness” between interviewer and respondent, wherein respondents construct an identity for the interviewer and may structure their responses to fit this projection: “The ways in which interviewees make sense of and respond to the interviewer’s questions depend in large measure on how those being interviewed represent the interviewer and her objectives to themselves – whether as a friend, a detached scientist, a ‘generalized other’ or perhaps all of these” (p. 223). Throughout the course of the festival, I formed relationships with attendees, mostly by chance: waiting in line at the festival entrance, over coffee at a JPUSA sponsored
venue, or volunteering as a member of event security. All of the study’s participants were either already aware or became aware of my dual role of attendee-researcher. Managing this duality, for both my part and theirs, became a necessary part of the ethnographic tale.

Preview of Chapters

In Chapter Two I historicize Cornerstone Festival by examining in more detail the Jesus People Movement and the JPUSA community as part of that movement’s unique evangelical heritage. James Davison Hunter (1983) positions American evangelicalism in relation to modernity, arguing that evangelicalism successfully infused its ideological preferences with 20th Century America’s modernist trajectory. Hunter believes that evangelicalism accomplished this parallel to modernism by maintaining a dialectic “with institutional structures and processes of modernity” through carefully articulated forms of both accommodation and resistance. This dubious bargain, however, meant that evangelicalism had to adjust to the vicissitudes associated with modernism in order to maintain the values of its key doctrine, which Hunter cites as: “(1) the belief that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, (2) the belief in the divinity of Christ, and (3) the belief in the efficacy of Christ’s life, death, and physical resurrection for the salvation of the human soul” (p. 7). Differences arose among evangelicals in precisely how to implement this doctrine, resulting in what Jon R. Stone (1997) calls a liberal and conservative divide. While groups of Jesus People, such as JPUSA, share a commitment to the evangelical doctrine that Hunter cites, their desire for autonomy and progressive forms of community set them apart, or marginalize them in relation to the larger
evangelical institutions. In Chapter Two, I retrace Cornerstone’s religious-social development from a handful of two-time drop outs to an eclectic Christian Festival.

In Chapter Three, I explore processes of making camp at Cornerstone, which includes an examination of the festival as a coproduced event. JPUSA frames Cornerstone as an opportunity for bringing together Christians who identify with marginal experiences of Christian faith with more traditionally socialized Christian practitioners. However, it is the attendees who activate this frame as travelers seeking an experience of self, community, and faith that is atypical of their everyday lives and routines. Indeed, one important theoretical thread in social constructionism is the physical or psychological relocation of society members, a repositioning of self, so that a new vantage is gleaned from which assumptions about identity and structure may be brought into question. Attendees’ experiences of Cornerstone are accomplished almost exclusively through what I term “crews,” small groups of attendees who are legitimated by the collaborative effort of navigating to and within the festival. In my first days at Cornerstone, I explore this symbiotic relationship between crews and the festival grounds.

In Chapter Four I examine the ongoing struggle between the evangelical parent culture ideology (grounded in dogmatism) and the burgeoning Christian rock music aesthetic (grafted from ambiguity). This struggle includes the cultivation of alternative orientations to Christian identity and community through the impious-piety of Christian rock. The challenging of pieties is a challenge to a community’s orientation, as well as a potential source of distress for its members; yet, this sort of challenge is necessary for a community’s development. The re-appropriation of a community’s pieties toward the
development of a new orientation includes the merging of categories thought to be mutually exclusive. Ideological ramifications, in this case, include the merging of a rock aesthetic with Christian faith. Two interviews articulate this merger from the vantage of its competing pieties, represented by Rubin, who protests the festival outside its gates, and Ricky, a resident of nearby Macomb for whom Cornerstone was a life-changing event. These interviews raise further questions, including how Christians are to “read” music, particularly the rebellious tenor of rock music, in relation to their faith.

In Chapter Five I examine Cornerstone’s place in the Contemporary Christian Music scene, examining the variations of music experiences and their implications for Christian identity and community. All three of Howard’s and Streck’s forms of CCM are represented at the festival, yet it is the marginalized Transformational form that seems central to attendees’ aesthetic experiences. However, instead of isolating one type of musical experience at Cornerstone, I provide a more holistic interpretation of the forms by placing the total experience within the frame of Christopher Small’s “musicking.” Small (1999) explains that the experience of music involves the production of relationships. The arousal elicited by a musical performance is a sign “that the performance is doing its job, that it is indeed bringing into existence, for as long as it lasts, relations among the sounds, and among the participants, that they feel to be good or ideal relationships” (Small, p. 137). Although many attendees represent contradictory purposes for making the scene, their shared experiences of musicking produce an integrated environment for the performance/construction of alternative identities.

In Chapter Six, I examine the conflicted trajectory of Cornerstone’s role as a socializing agent for alternative Christian identity. The festival forges a sustainable
marginal space that is outside of the parameters of the dominant parent culture, but in the process it becomes a legitimating system. Cornerstone festival is a liminal space for attendees, estranged from home yet cultivating community. Spontaneous instances of community spring from attendee sponsored sites, such as The Tea House. JPUSA attempts to incorporate these communities into a normative framework for the festival by including them in the Cornerstone narrative. Indeed, while “communitas resists the excesses of structure, it can never substitute for it, for when it does, it transforms into that which it once stood against,” writes Frentz and Rushing, adding that structure and communitas “are necessarily symbiotic” (1999, p. 323). In this final analysis of Cornerstone Festival, I explore the relationship between structure and communitas and how this sometimes troubled relationship is necessary for the festival’s ongoing vitality.

Conclusion

JPUSA facilitates a form of religious experience that is outside the parameters of attendees’ daily routines. The festival’s marginality is a significant part of its appeal. In point of fact, it is the attendees’ pilgrimages to Cornerstone and their participation in its scene that confers upon the festival its credibility as an alternative religious experience. By participating in the festival, forging relationships and conducting interviews with attendees and members of JPUSA, I generate a clearer picture of the communicative practices at Cornerstone Festival and how these practices are used to accomplish alternative forms of Christian identity.
Chapter Two:

Jesus People in Golf Carts

In chapter one I discussed Cornerstone Festival as a site for socialization that privileges marginalized forms of religious expression, most notably rock music but including a variety of religious and popular forms of expression. It is an ephemeral space from which attendees achieve objective markers of identity through processes of ritual, visibility and community. Cornerstone attracts and includes members of the Christian faith who would not otherwise be included in traditional organized Christian groups, and fosters interaction between these less-enfranchised members and more traditionally minded and socialized Christian practitioners.

Cornerstone Festival operates at one level to commemorate the existence, survival, and good works of the JPUSA organization. It is a celebration-exhibition of their primary aesthetic, rock music, and it effectively publicizes and perpetuates their existence and status as a Christian organization. The festival is not a recruitment mechanism, not directly; however, it does serve as a means to sustain community membership as a working vacation for commune members. Additionally, for some attendees it is a chance to “make the scene” at one of the most eclectic Christian music events. For others, it is a pilgrimage, often annual, to re-experience and reaffirm a long-standing loyalty to the Jesus People Movement, or perhaps JPUSA specifically; but certainly, and most notably, to the event itself.
In this chapter I examine the roots of Cornerstone’s scene, including its uses of rock music founded in the original Jesus People Movement. The cultural possibility and impetus for this festival, and its own “identity” or credibility in the Christian scene (and Christian music scene), are to be found in this historical movement. I argue that JPUSA uses the music festival format as a method of religious expression and community-building that successfully includes marginal or fringe Christians by offering a site for “play.” At Cornerstone, play is a form of socialization whereby attendees’ experimentations with self-social identities and roles accomplishes a reorientation to (or renewal of) Christian faith.

The Jesus People Movement

In his exhaustive annotated bibliography and general resource of the Jesus People Movement, David Di Sabatino (1999) refers to the Jesus People as “the offspring born of the peculiar marriage of Christianity and the counterculture” and considers the subsequent movement “the most unexpected social development of the time” (p. 5). The Jesus People Movement began in California when counterculture youth, who had already dropped out of mainstream American society, started converting to Christianity. Sociologist and Jesus People scholar Ronald Enroth (1972) cites the years 1967 and 1968 as the starting point of this movement. These counterculture converts, hippies turned Christians, left the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, California for other locations along the West Coast. Converts opened coffee houses, formed folk and rock bands, and proclaimed a message of salvation through Jesus. However, this was not the typical gospel message:
The most important defining characteristic of the Jesus People is their fundamentalist insistence on the simple gospel, an essentially anti-intellectual and anti-cultural view of the world as a wrecked and sinking ship from which as many as possible must be saved. Another defining characteristic is their strong apocalyptic belief that we are living in the last days and that they are the last youth generation that will live on the earth. A third trait is their espousal of the charismatic gifts, primarily speaking in tongues, but also physical healing and other manifestations generally associated with Pentecostalism. (Enroth, p. 16, 1972)

The Jesus People were united in a general distrust not only of secular society but also of mainstream religious institutions. They were particularly frustrated with churches’ inability to relate the gospel to their generation (Di Sabatino, 1999).

Though some groups of Jesus People garnered support from established churches, part of the defining characteristic of the Jesus People was their self-sufficiency, both in living communally and re-tooling a traditional gospel message for a new generation. The primary reformulation of this otherwise traditional evangelical message was through rock music:

The synthesis of rock music and Christianity seemed a natural consequence of their spiritual conversions. If The Jefferson Airplane (one of San Francisco’s most prominent ‘60s bands) could openly sing about drugs in their paean “White Rabbit” (“One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small”), then a hippie Christian could sing about that which was most important to them, namely
Jesus Christ. The development of Jesus rock music proved a viable medium for unique expressions of faith. (Di Sabatino, pp. 135-136)

Converts were encouraged to form communes, usually in cities, where service to the poor, the strung-out, and the dispossessed could be directly engaged. Di Sabatino cites “The Living Room” in Haight-Ashbury as the first of its kind:

The group gained modest financial support from a group of Baptist ministers whose attitudes toward the zealous converts was best described as cautious but open. Their daily activities revolved around evangelistic efforts, walking through the Haight to talk with anyone that would listen and inviting them back to the Living Room for food and further discussion. (p. 8)

Enroth explains that these are houses where young people who want to get back on their feet can also become grounded in scripture.

While the Jesus People benefited from financial and theological support from mainstream churches, they also bridged a generation gap, and possibly a credibility gap, between the non-religious counterculture and the traditional Christian congregations. However, while some viewed the movement as an opportunity for relating the gospel to a new generation, others viewed the Jesus People as a new market for selling kitsch commercial products:

While most of the church’s adoption of the style and mood of the movement is a sincere but shallow attempt to transform the message of the establishment into the groovy gospel, the motives of other fringe elements are somewhat more calculated than evangelistic. The revolution itself is not free of commercialism, but most of it – sale of buttons, stickers, books (a few), record albums, and other
paraphernalia – is designed to support the movement’s various operations. Some, however, are not so pure in heart, most notably a privately manufactured Jesus Medallion sold mail-order for $14.95 through the *Hollywood Free Paper*. Melodyland, of Anaheim, California, sells Jesus People watches and similar novelty items. (Enroth, p. 153-154, 1972)

Enroth concludes his study of the Jesus People unsure what the legacy of the movement might be, though he does acknowledges its potential:

The communal style of life adopted by a substantial portion of the Jesus People may last for a long time, whatever the attitude of church people may be. It has many potential advantages: the sense of spiritual belonging, a substitution for fatherless or otherwise deficient family units, and economy in meeting material needs. But it also isolates a small group of believers from the larger household of faith, and so far this disadvantage has outweighed the potential advantages more often than not. (Enroth, p. 219, 1972)

The movement effectively fused evangelicalism and counterculture activism. However, for Enroth, the Jesus People’s separatist leanings and a tendency toward anti-intellectualism raised doubt about the vitality of the movement.

Although the JPUSA community has its roots in the Jesus People Movement, JPUSA seems to have evaded some of the movement’s trappings, such as exploitative commercialism, separation from secular society, and anti-intellectualism. Indeed, JPUSA’s departure from the latter of these could not be more apparent at Cornerstone. The festival includes seminars that appropriate methodologies for understanding contemporary society and the increasingly fragmented nature of peoples’ relationship to a
suspect social order, including: postmodern philosophy, psycho-analytic theory, gender studies, and de-constructionism. Furthermore, although JPUSA believes that Christ’s return is perpetually nigh, a theological point that can lead to an apathetic view of socio-cultural and environmental causes, the community invests its energy in helping the poor, the maltreated, and the dispossessed in its local Chicago community. In this combined effort of servicing its local Chicago community and developing rock bands that tour both nationally and internationally, JPUSA has solidified a space for itself in the margins of the American religious experience where the cultivation of a Christian identity independent of the evangelical parent culture is possible. This peculiar identity, played out at Cornerstone, is grafted from the community’s attitudes and values of communal living in Chicago.

Jesus People USA’s “Friendly Towers”

Intentional communities are in the tradition of Utopian societies in that they seek out more positive alternatives to the status quo (Miller, 1998). It is a community’s vision that ultimately determines its vitality:

The search for community is also a quest for direction and purpose in a collective anchoring of the individual life. Investment of self in a community, acceptance of its authority and willingness to support its values, is dependent in part on the extent to which group life can offer identity, personal meaning, and the opportunity to grow in terms of standards and guiding principles that the member feels are expressive of his own inner being. Commitment to community norms and values, or moral commitment, involves securing a person’s positive evaluative orientations, redefining his sense of values and priorities so that he
considers the system’s demands right and just in term of his self-identity and supporting the group’s authority becomes a moral necessity. (Kanter, 1972, p. 73)

JPUSA embodies this role today while also meeting the requirements for communal sustainability that Kanter describes. JPUSA’s commitment to communal life and a shared purse sets the community apart from mainstream religious institutions. This same commitment places JPUSA within the tradition of progressive approaches to housing.

The community promotes its religious beliefs by marketing its domestic values. JPUSA does not believe that communal living is the only correct way for Christians to live, nor does JPUSA believe that everyone is called to live communally. However, JPUSA is proud of its independence from mainstream secular and religious institutions, and this includes its commitment to a collective purse:

All finances brought in through these businesses are pooled, and all expenses, from house payments and utility bills to shoes and birthday parties, are met from this fund. All cars are shared in common. When we are blessed with much we all abound; when there is little we abase. The secret is to be thankful in all situations.

The Lord keeps us on our knees. (www.jpusa.org)

While these businesses provide the community’s income, the gain is distributed for the good of the group rather than the profit of an individual. New members perform domestic tasks such as washing dishes, serving food, building maintenance, and cleaning. As members’ talents are gauged, they are assigned work in one of the community’s businesses or ministries. Members of JPUSA include adult and youth singles as well as families. Singles are encouraged to gravitate toward a family for emotional and spiritual support. JPUSA has a unique perspective on this process: “An interesting thought is the
traditional idea of the ‘many mansions’ in the Father’s house given way to ‘many rooms’ in the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament. Wouldn’t it be fitting if the redeemed are to live in an eternal community relationship with one another in the Kingdom?” (www.jpusa.org). Singles share a room with members of the same gender. These rooms are large enough for a writing desk, chest of drawers, and triple-high bunk beds. A married couple or a single parent with a child over four years of age is given a single bedroom, rather than an efficiency space to occupy.

For long-term members of JPUSA, including those who are born into a family in the community, this arrangement is comfortable. However, prospective new members are encouraged to visit for two to four weeks before committing to this style of living. In lieu of potential arguments and litigation between members leaving the community and JPUSA, certain parameters have been set for the turning over of assets:

The concept of turning over one’s material assets is a delicate one, and in order to help everyone involved be sure of their purpose and motives (and not be swept away by a whim of the moment), JPUSA has instituted certain safeguards. First, members are not obligated to donate any assets. Second, members are not permitted to donate substantial assets (except vehicles) to JPUSA until they become regular members. (www.jpusa.org)

In order to join JPUSA, prospective members must fill out an official form that designates how long they would reside if admitted to the community. A one-year residency is followed up by an evaluation that includes the members’ peers and the community’s leadership of nine elders. Upon ratification by the elders, a member can renew residency for an additional one to two years. At the end of the second contract, the
member has the option of renewing residency for two to five years. This contract, called a “Term Commitment,” is also considered by the community to be a covenant, which is viewed as a “reification of what appears to both the community and the person as God’s will at least at this time” (www.jpusa.org). JPUSA acknowledges that the process of leaving involves difficulties for both the individual and the group:

Who will help you move? We would hope that your actual departure date would be one where friends say good-bye to friends. Maybe those on your floor could be asked to help you pack up. We again would hope that you might meet with the board of pastors to pray together one last time. We hope your final days here will be days of fondly remembering our shared community experience as well as looking toward the future with expectation. (www.jpusa.org)

After the successful completion of a five year contract and subsequent approval for another five year contract, one might be considered a regular.

JPUSA has maintained its community for nearly forty years. During this time the community has experimented with theological concepts they found lacking and with ways of living that were ultimately unfulfilling. JPUSA’s presence in Chicago is unsettling to those suspicious of communitarians and quick to brand JPUSA a “cult,” and their collective purse and shared living space is unappealing to an increasingly incorporated religious industry. Unlike other communitarian groups, JPUSA has not withdrawn to rural spaces or private lands, but rather maintains its community in Chicago. An essential aspect of this community’s maintenance is its ongoing commitment to the production and performance of rock music. At JPUSA’s Cornerstone
Festival, the group’s fusion of rock music, communal living, and Christian faith resonates with nearly twenty-thousand attendees.

Cornerstone Festival

There are approximately twenty-five Christian music festivals each year in America. Many of these festivals include rock music on its playbills, however the manner in which these events’ sponsors try to frame and control attendees’ experiences of the music differ significantly from JPUSA’s Cornerstone event. Spirit West Coast, founded by a conglomerate of five families, is held bi-annually in May and July in California. The festival draws popular CCM acts and well known Christian authors. Charter busses take out of town attendees from camping grounds and hotels to festival sites, including several merchandise tents. Conversions, baptisms, and altar calls are an important facet of the festival. Ichthus, sponsored by local Asbury Theological Seminary, is a weekend-long festival held in June in Wilmore, Kentucky. Conceived in 1970 as a Christian answer to Woodstock, it is the longest running Christian festival. The highlight of Ichthus is a mass communion, sometimes consisting of more than 20,000 attendees, toward the end of the weekend event. Creation Northeast in Mount Union, Pennsylvania is held at the end of June, every year beginning in 1979 – Creation Festival Northwest was inaugurated in 1998 as an expansion of the original. Creation’s venues are strictly managed, appealing to particular demographics such as children, late night concertgoers, and both easy-listening and “hard” music fans. The festival’s primary concern is documenting attendees’ conversions and recommitments. Invited musicians must sign contracts indicating that they haven’t participated in un-biblical activities in the
past three years. Creation Festival’s website toasts itself as the largest Christian music festival and cites an attendance, including both events, of over 100,000 in one year.

While these festivals enjoy continued success, book some of the industry’s most popular musicians and speakers and garner impressive numbers of conversions, recommitments, and baptisms, JPUSA’s Cornerstone Festival maintains a comparatively low-key presence. Cornerstone was not conceived as an “answer” to general market festivals, such as Woodstock. Additionally, JPUSA’s event is not structured to “target” attendees for conversion, recruitment, or recommitments of faith. While there are formalized settings for worship services and conversion testimonies, during which altar calls are part of the performance, these are clearly cited in the festival program, avoiding the bait-and-switch tactics of typical evangelical services. Proclamations of faith may also occur during music performances, and indeed upon occasion some attendees make proclamations of faith in Christ and even ask to be baptized in Cornerstone Lake. However, JPUSA does not engage in the same itemization of these proclamations as is typically the case at other festivals, which must often meet a certain quota of conversions and recommitments of faith in order to appease sponsors and financiers. For these reasons, including JPUSA’s religious and economic autonomy, Cornerstone enjoys a cachet of “legitimacy” among attendees, musicians, and speakers that other festivals do not. Bolstering this legitimacy is JPUSA’s historical link to the Jesus People Movement.

JPUSA’s founders converted to Christianity in San Francisco where they joined a pre-existing Christian commune. After a year of discipleship training in Milwaukee, which included Bible Study and street witnessing training, the group formed a blues rock band, purchased a van, and traveled the country playing rock shows and sharing the
gospel, including a stint of approximately one year in Gainesville, Florida. Thus, before settling in Chicago, JPUSA developed its identity in relation to its mobility. For years, the community’s van was its home and a change of clothes and musical instruments its only possessions. This nomadic-styled mobility complemented its theology that the “Kingdom of God” is believed to be within the individual and realized through collaborative community-building (as opposed to permanent church buildings or competitive denominational tenets), and testifying to others about Christ as “Lord and Savior.” The group’s identity as a traveling blues rock band was the medium through which JPUSA endeavored to accomplish its mission.

Cornerstone is in one sense a commemorative site that integrates these unique aspects of the community’s faith – rock music and communal living. Commemorative events are related to institutional change and maintenance as “memory is the self-reflexive act of contextualizing and continuously digging for the past through place. It is a process of continually remaking and remembering the past in the present rather than a process of discovering objective historical ‘facts’” (Till, p. 11). JPUSA’s annual act of commemorating the Jesus People Movement at Cornerstone renews the festival’s heritage and buttresses the community’s legitimacy as a socializing agent for alternative Christian identity.

Those who attend Cornerstone festival as an annual, ritualized pilgrimage contribute to JPUSA’s historical heritage and contemporary credibility. During opening ceremonies, Elder Glenn Kaiser invites attendees desiring more information about JPUSA to visit the community’s web site:
Indeed, throughout the history of the community, JPUSA’s approach to new media and technologies has been one of prayerful openness and experimentation, seeking to find room under the Lordship of Christ for all manner of human creativity and expression. We are particularly excited about the possibilities suggested by the World Wide Web. And while as Christians we value “face to face” communication most of all, we sense a powerful kinship between particular features of community living to what has already been identified as “community” online. (www.jpusa.org)

At Cornerstone, the attendee’s bodily presence becomes JPUSA’s site for reifying this relationship between the past (Jesus People Movement) and the present (the JPUSA commune). However, as the festival program demonstrates, Cornerstone is concerned with more than merely celebrating JPUSA’s eclectic past or educating attendees about the Jesus People Movement.

The 2008 Cornerstone Festival Program is an artful, well-crafted, reference guide to the festival. On the inside pages, festival director John Herrin, in his welcoming statement, calls the 2008 event a “celebration” of twenty-five years of Cornerstone (p. 3). He calls special attention to “Burning Brush,” the name given to an interactive monument that marks the occasion. The title is drawn from the Old Testament story of God, in the form of a burning bush, telling Moses to embark on a visionary mission to re-enter the site of his exile and rally his people to freedom. This recalls JPUSA’s journey: leaving California in a van, settling in Chicago, purchasing the farm and burning away the brush to create this space. Herrin writes: “In the twenty-five years since that first festival, Cornerstone has been shaped by every new generation that’s embraced it, made it their
own, and so broadened our idea of what Cornerstone is – and who we are” (Cornerstone Program, 2008, p. 42). Director Herrin (p. 3) adds that because of the struggling economy, JPUSA will help attendees make it to Cornerstone by offering ticket rebates for volunteers. The ticketing is strictly itemized in an attempt to be fair (p. 63):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchased By:</th>
<th>APR 30</th>
<th>MAY 31</th>
<th>JUNE 20</th>
<th>GATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Event w/4-Day Access</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult (12 &amp; up)</td>
<td>$115</td>
<td>$120</td>
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<td>$135</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>$110</td>
<td>$115</td>
<td>$120</td>
<td>$125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth (6-11)</td>
<td>$38</td>
<td>$39</td>
<td>$40</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child (5 &amp; under)</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>FREE</td>
<td>FREE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family (2-parents w/3 Children)</td>
<td>$311</td>
<td>$313</td>
<td>$315</td>
<td>$325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (1 parent w/3 Children)</td>
<td>$261</td>
<td>$263</td>
<td>$265</td>
<td>$275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These prices go up by approximately $10 per extra day of attendance. My ticket for attending as an adult purchased at the Gate, for the entire week, cost one hundred thirty-five dollars.

The program lists nearly two hundred hours worth of seminars. Indeed, one of the longest lasting, non-music based facets of Cornerstone is the extensive lecture series. A quote from Maya Angelou introduces the lecture series section of the program: “History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage, need not be lived again. Lift up your eyes upon the day breaking for you, give birth again to the dream.” Herrin’s promotion of the seminars sums up the primary themes of interest:

Please take time to read about the 200 hours of seminars, workshops, and discussion groups covering music, social justice, practical spirituality,
relationships, and a host of other important issues. It is this annual opportunity to share together and renew our vision that brings so many of us back year after year. (Cornerstone Program, 2008, p. 40)

The “Underground and Urban Alternative Subcultures Tent” and the “X-Change” series’ lectures offer the most provocative gaze into JPUSA’s orientation to faith and culture.

The Underground and Urban Alternative Subcultures Tent envisions ministering to members of a “post-post-modern” culture, including “Punks, homeless youth, artists, travelers, ravers, rainbows, Goths, the music scene-the scenes that really birthed post-modernism through their anti-modern, anti-corporate, and anti-Christian affinities” (p. 34). This series exemplifies JPUSA’s self-identified role as an urban Christian commune and speaks to the community’s ongoing mission to facilitate others’ entrepreneurial evangelical spirit. Brad Culver’s lecture series is called “Micro-Missional Communities / Invitation to a Revolution,” in which he examines “principles that facilitate the development, nurturing and maintaining of vibrant, holistic, caring, intimate, outwardly focused, intergenerational ‘colonies of heaven on earth’, where loving God and neighbor are the primary mandate” (Cornerstone Program, 2008, page 34). Jason Barr’s presentation, “Sacred Anarchy: The Image of God and Political (Dis)Order,” views anarchism “as a critique of the relationship between the church and political power,” redressing misconceptions of “anarchy” as mere chaos, violence, and destruction (p. 35).

The Cornerstone X-Change hosts over 35-topics. The speakers include eighteen men and twelve women. Some of the more notable topics include: “Theo-political Imagination,” “(De) Constructive Criticism: Postmodernism, Truth and Faith,” “Us vs. Them: Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation,” “Mama Don’t Preach: Scripture, Gender and Social
Justice,” and a “FREE Vegan Potluck Discussion Group.” Cornerstone’s lecture series’ are as eclectic as they are intended to be intellectually stimulating. However, music is the main draw.

JPUSA invites over ninety-one bands to Cornerstone to play at approximately twelve venues. Including the generator stages, there are over six hundred bands playing at this year’s Cornerstone. The Project 12/Grrr Records Stage (p. 14) is the official JPUSA tent. The “Phantom Tollbooth” hosts the daily press conferences in this tent. The Underground Stage (p. 13) includes some of the edgier genres of Christian rock, including: punk rock, speed metal, and Goth. Robert Goodwin, a JPUSA member, hosts this stage. He resides next to the tent in a trailer and plays MC during shows, which begin at 1pm and end at 1am. From 1pm to 5pm, Thursday through Saturday the Underground Stage becomes the “New Band Showcase.” The play bill for these shows is pre-selected by fans’ votes via the festival’s web site and with one of the sixteen gathering the most votes plays a pre-determined time at Cornerstone’s Main Stage.

I spend the majority of my time attending shows at the Gallery Stage (p. 18), which in its A.M. incarnation is a coffee house. This locale is my anchor amidst the chaos of activity at Cornerstone. For the first part of each evening, when I’m processing fieldwork, I double-up my time by sitting in the back, taking in music performances. I am camped between venues Encore-1 and Encore-2, known during the afternoons as the Indoor/HM Magazine and Label Showcase. JPUSA reaches out to un-signed bands looking to make the scene. At the “Impromptu Stage,” daily drawings are held to determine who will play later in the day: “One band member must be present at this drawing to confirm the slot. Bands perform 12-6pm. Bands selected have a 15-minute
set, 15-min. change over. Backline gear is not provided. Bands confirmed and scheduled
to play must arrive backstage 20-min. prior to set time or will lose their set and will not
be rescheduled” (p. 16). The four best bands from subsequent performances get to play
during one of the most popular festival time slots beginning at 6pm on Saturday night.

If there were a competition for the most eclectic page of the program, the winner
would be page 18, where Goth subculture shares advertisement space with the “Kiddie
Village.” The latter, tailored to young children, features both Vacation Bible School
styled events, such as sing along songs, and Bible instruction through performance,
magic, and comedy. “Jesus Village” shares this page with “The Asylum,” a Goth
subculture safe-house described as “a candlelit gathering place for discussion, thought,
fellowship, music, and art. The Asylum tent is run by a collection of believers who
minister within the Gothic sub-communities” (p. 18). Although attired in black, from boot
heal to top hat and draped in leather and chains, this group of attendees is surprisingly
elusive. I found a sole advertisement for their Asylum penned to a small board outside of
an attendee-sponsored Tea House. Their sense of humor is as endearing as it is creepy:

Figure 2.1: Asylum Tent Advertisement

The “Sanctuary Stage” is also on this page, dedicated to worship bands and musicians for
those so inclined at Cornerstone.
“Artrageous” and “Creation Station” host activities for young children, ranging from painting and clay sculpturing to a steeplechase event and “the royal palace”:

“Upstairs and downstairs in the royal palace, the Creation Station players discover what it means to be royalty and how to use their hidden strengths and talents to serve the true King. The spice mice, knights, ladies in waiting, maids, and jester princes will all be there to help them on their quest” (p. 51). A puppet troupe and someone named “Mr. Nicky” also provide entertainment. A scriptural theme is drawn from Luke 12:31: “Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and he will give you everything you need.”

“Breakaway” is a special event series for young teens, scheduled from 10:30am-12pm, Thursday through Saturday at the Gallery Stage:

Breakaway is a perfect place for your youth to connect with one another and teens from across the country. The purpose of Breakaway is to develop a community within the larger community of Cornerstone, and to experience times of great sharing and worship that will encourage and challenge your teens in their personal journeys with God. (p. 36)

Speakers for “Breakaway” include Brian “Head” Welch, whose band is a featured performance at Main Stage. Welch, the advertisement proclaims, “formerly of the mega rock band Korn, will share his journey to faith, how he found God, quit the band, kicked drugs, and lived to tell his story” (p. 36). Games for older attendees include 3-on-3 basketball tournaments, 7-on-7 soccer tournaments, and a skatepark that also hosts a Bible study at selected times.

The “Imaginarium” is by far the most unusual festival installation. This year’s cultural focus at the Imaginarium is “Britania,” with an emphasis upon the politics of
“empire,” featuring special activities “from Tea & Crumpets to a Cricket Match to the ‘British Invasion Dance Party’” (p. 44). A more seriously toned aspect of the Imaginarium is a lecture and film series entitled, “Balkanization/Reconciliation: And Other Borderline Insanity” (p. 45):

Violent fragmentation along ethnic lines has been called “Balkanization” – for good reason. The cinema of the Balkans expresses deep divisions and woundedness, often with a dark humor and psycho-punk gypsy energy. Yet giving in to the temptation to view the seemingly irreconcilable differences of the Balkans as utterly alien to ourselves requires forgetting nearly identical conflicts across the planet and throughout history. The possibility of reconciliation (as seen, for example, in South Africa) seems an urgent matter for all of us who must live with Otherness. (p. 45)

Additional seminars and lecture series at the Imaginarium include, “From Her to Eternity: Nick Cave as Christian Apologist,” and “Dracula, Myth, & Fact” (pp. 46-47). The film series highlights a Cannes-winning title, *Four Months, Three Weeks, Two Days* (Cristian Mungiu, 2007) about abortion and *Once* (John Carney, 2006), an alternatively styled musical about a Dubliner and a Czech immigrant who put together an independent record album.

At the end of the Cornerstone Program is an extensive “General Information” section. Opportunities for volunteering and recycling are covered in detail. Smoking is permitted and foul language is tolerated to a point. No pets, alcohol, illegal drugs, fireworks, open fires, or unauthorized merchandise sales are permitted. The festival grounds provide free water, however attendees are on their own regarding food (A
supplies tent has modest non-perishables for sale). The list of FAQs has at least two helpful sections, including “When I Get There, What is the First Thing That Happens” and “What Else Should I Bring?” The latter is extensive:

A tent, sleeping bag, Bible, pen and notebook, spending money, lantern or flashlight, water containers, campstove or grill (if cooking out), cooking utensils, dishpan or basin, table, cooler, canopy, umbrella, sweater or jacket, lawn chairs, campstool or blanket for concert seating and campsite, earplugs, modest swimsuit, towel, rain gear, sunblock, insect repellent, walking shoes, boots or sandals for rain, strollers for wagons for children. (p. 59)

This final section of the program prepares attendees to think of themselves not as mere tourists of Christian kitsch, but as serious travelers – as campers, who bring a pen and notebook as complements to their ear plugs and pocket knife.

The program fames attending Cornerstone as a mindset, a meditative journey of leaving the comfortable, daily routine of home for the unexpected and likely strange. Although a definite structure is built into the festival experience, including daycare for parents’ children and Bible study for young teens, the majority of the festival experience is imbued with a chaotic energy of hard and fast rock music, a vast sea of camping tents and a late night labyrinth of stages. This traveler-camp experience pulls attendees out of their day-to-day consciousness, out of the serious business of participating in the socio-economic realities of daily life, and anticipates one of the key facets of Cornerstone: play.

Play as Socialization

At Cornerstone, play is a form of socialization insofar as it is a means for attendees to experiment with new orientations to Christian faith, or to engage in a
renewal of marginal Christian membership. This includes, for example, translating audience participation practices at a hardcore show as a form of worship, or transforming their appearance from socially-acceptable formal attire to that of a “punk,” complete with spiked hire and temporary (sometimes real) tattoos. For some attendees, the mere attendance of a rock show is a taboo activity; for others, for whom the margins of Christian faith are “home,” participation in rock shows at Cornerstone is a means for announcing their identification with marginal Christian practices.

Attendees’ act of pilgrimage to Cornerstone Festival engenders a phenomenology of play, whereas play is a “performance-oriented action” that requires the “giving oneself over to the situation” of the act of play and thereby “stands in contrast to a normality of the rest of life” (Seel, 2005, p. 135). This process broadens attendees’ perceptions to a more expansive imagination, including reflexive perceptions with which attendees ascertain an identity of their own making, as an object of “appearing.” Attendees experience themselves experiencing an alternative way of perceiving themselves, and themselves in relation to other selves.

Cornerstone is primarily a music festival and the live performance of rock music is a central part of JPUUSA’s aesthetic experience of faith. Listeners’ bodily experience of participating in the performance of live music is simultaneously individual and communal, and is potentially transformative in cases where the performance resonates for attendees as a marginal experience. Some Attendees describe their experience during a rock show at Cornerstone as a harmonious convergence of personal identity and faith within a larger sense of community to which they do not otherwise have access: “Resonating leads us to the edge of our developed capacity to perceive – to where we can
no longer recognize anything but can nonetheless perceive with the greatest intensity.
Resonating, that extreme of appearing, thus acquaints us with a limit of conscious being”
(Seel, 2005, p. 158). One meaning of the term, resonate, is to relate harmoniously. An
attendee’s experience at Cornerstone may resonate in regards to the amelioration of an
internal conflict or validation of an expression of faith or exploration of otherwise
suppressed identity. However, this resonance, by virtue of the communal nature of the
festival, finds its expression realized in a space that is ephemeral (it is only “Cornerstone
Festival” for a week), yet grittily-real (camping out with others). The attendance of rock
shows is one example of play at Cornerstone; however, this form of play is also
communicative insofar as it resonates for some attendees as an agency for identity work
and performance.

Cornerstone Festival is a site for identification beyond the parameters-confines of
attendees’ typical social world. In this sense, play at Cornerstone subverts the tension
between dogmatism and doubt and creates a space for the interplay of alternative frames,
or ways of experiencing faith that is atypical to traditional Christian practices. Stephen
Pepper (1942) explores the interplay of belief and doubt where the latter is a prized
achievement rather than a shameful regress: “Belief is the naïve attitude, while doubt is
an acquisition won through long and hard experience” (p. 4). A dogmatist, according to
Pepper, is one “whose attitude is not in proportion to the grounds of belief” and yet this
person persists in that belief with conviction. Acquiescence to a belief in spite of
contradictory evidence is the definitive characteristic of the dogmatist; conversely a
person of conviction enjoys a “justifiable” attitude on “practical grounds” (p. 15).
“Infallible authority” and “certainty,” both of which are key tropes of evangelical
doctrine, are the primary cognitive criteria for the dogmatist (p. 17). Pepper does not believe these cognitive criteria of dogmatists hold for long: “The evidence finally breaks through if the questions involved are important – unless some powerful authoritarian social institution imposes its dogmatism, and even then the evidence eventually seems to break through” (p. 36). Insofar as one’s sense of self and commitment to faith are interconnected, play at Cornerstone cultivates an exploration of variations of Christian identity in the context of festival.

Paul Auslander (1997) argues that festival is an example of “therapeutic theatre” that facilitates “spiritual renewal by unmasking repressed psychic materials” (p. 13). At Cornerstone, Auslander’s “performing body” is an ideological site. Attendees immerse themselves in a shared, ritualized experience of attending the festival. The “character” played by the Cornerstone attendee is thus a tool for exploring the self, unburdened by the pressures of daily life, and in this way is a potentially liberating experience that lends itself to a reframing of faith through play:

To reframe, then, means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the “facts” of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby changes its entire meaning. (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974, p. 95)

Cornerstone is therefore a rhetorical event as much as it is a ritualized experience.

Play is the primary organizing principle for attendees’ experiences of an event that is essentially concerned with belief, yet challenges stereotypes about how those beliefs are performed. Performance, in this case, is antithetical to the mainstream
religious space that demands reserve, control, and distinct power relations. Play is furthermore dangerous to an institution fearful of change, or invested in credibility derived from dogmatism. JPUSA, however, is predicated upon change and the ability to experiment with alternative expressions of faith, styles of living, relational behaviors, and theological precepts. Cornerstone thus provides a space for attendees to “play with” switching roles: to play at being the other while learning to be creative and find their own paths to faith, which may begin with acknowledgement of the complexity rather than the simplicity of belief:

Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making shift and making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity. Improvisation and new learning are not private processes; they are shared with others at every age [...]. We are called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond.

Even in uncertainty, we are responsible for our steps. (Bateson, 1994, pp. 9-10) JPUSA’s Cornerstone Festival provides a space for “uncertainty” to greet “complexity” in the context of “play” – a medium for attendees to perform identity work.

Conclusion

The Jesus People Movement was a truly provocative cross-pollination of 1960s counterculture and evangelical faith. However, this movement is conspicuously absent from studies of evangelicalism (Hunter, 1983; Stone, 1997), which privilege officially recognized evangelical organizations in lieu of considering the larger religious-cultural impact of the Jesus People. Cruising even lower under the “radar” of serious study of
evangelicalism is JPUSA and their Cornerstone Festival. JPUSA’s relevance as a socializing agent outside the circumference of American religious institutions is made possible by attendees’ use of the festival as a space for play. However, the resulting “socialization” is not for recruitment; it is primarily for the purpose of empowerment (relative to intersections of personal identity and faith) and facilitation (of others’ entrepreneurial evangelical spirit).

In 1984 a group of Jesus People that had been forgotten by the press and the public, and for whom the movement was not a mere fad but a sincere and sustainable commitment to the pursuit of their version of Christian faith, held a music festival at a park near their hometown of Chicago, Illinois. People came to hear bands play rock music for Jesus. They sang songs not only of folksy praise, but also soulful blues, lamenting impoverished housing conditions, increasing divorce rates, and government institutions found to be as ineffectual as they had been indifferent. Twenty-five years later, nearly twenty-thousand attendees convened in Bushnell, Illinois at Cornerstone’s permanent location to make camp and listen to live music. Some came because it was cool, others to make a splash in the alternative Christian music scene; still others came to break their hometown scene for something other: to slip into a sense of self where the fusion of punk attitude and Christian faith is not an anomaly, but a requisite. In the proceeding chapters, I present my case for Cornerstone Festival as a site for the construction of alternative Christian identities.
Chapter Three:
Making Camp

In the preceding chapters I have traced the evolution of alternative Christian identity from the Jesus People Movement of the late 1960s and the formation of the JPUSA commune in Chicago. I have also foregrounded the kind of ideological purposes of socialization that generally inspire JPUSA’s mission and sponsorship of Cornerstone. However, Cornerstone is more than the sum of these parts. As a “festival,” Cornerstone is a celebration of this community and its tradition, and it reaffirms the place of music and alternative Christianity as part of this group’s history and symbolic identity. It is, in this way, commemorative of the past, and JPUSA members no doubt both celebrate and reaffirm that membership identity in their participation in the festival.

As festival attendee, however, I can say that JPUSA’s purposes are only part of the story. As I noted in the last chapter, many people are here to “play,” play socially, play music, take a vacation from their usual lives, and, as we shall see, to celebrate their own personal and community histories with music, Christianity, and the festival itself. While JPUSA is the sponsor for the festival, a festival is itself a site of diversity, drawing in many different interests and connections. As I will show, people are here not only to preach and pray, but to teach and learn, buy and sell, to reconnect with old friends and to encounter new people, to make it as musicians or to make the scene as music consumers, or to simply reestablish or to initiate their membership in a broader community that
Cornerstone symbolizes. This chapter is an ethnographic journey through the first days of the festival, where I witness the coming together of these different elements as they stake out and establish their presence and participation in the festival. It points to the reality that the event itself, and the larger identity it consummates or “makes real” is a co-production of a number of people and purposes.

Waiting at the Gate

It is 1,177 miles from my front porch in Tampa, Florida to Cornerstone’s front gate in Bushnell, Illinois. The first fifteen hours of the drive are a blur of state lines, highway patrol cars, and stale coffee. One night in a posh hotel room rejuvenates my spirit and marks the last time I’ll enjoy a hot bath for the next eight days. I have four hours of driving remaining when I mount the I-64 corridor toward St. Louis and hang a hard right onto back roads that lead me deep into Lincoln’s land.

JPUSA’s “Cornerstone Farm,” the name given to the annual gathering site for Cornerstone Festival, is nestled into an otherwise unspectacular region of the country. I approach one of those intersections where “mapquest” says I go left but I swear I should go right, so I pull over. A storm has rolled up behind me and the wind carries a light mist of rain. I pull out my camera to capture a few images of the sea of corn that rolls in concert with the storm winds. This is where Cornerstone begins, in everyone’s stories: getting there. The location is foreign to everyone including the JPUSA, who translate their urban Chicago communal living style to Cornerstone Farm, and the Bushnell locals, who see their tiny town more than tripled in size by the quantity of attendees. Their fields are transubstantiated by the frightening sounds of Goth, punk, and hardcore rock and are alternately serenaded by the jazzy, folksy talents of bands like Over the Rhine.
Cornerstone is so removed from everything that is “normal” that it is normalizing. This unreality is a kind of credibility, insofar as it is simultaneously sacred and transient.

I understand JPUSA’s attraction to this space. Having visited their community at Friendly Towers and toured their block of Chicago, the farm offers a rejuvenating change of scenery and pace. As an urban commune, JPUSA’s presence is constantly on display. Cornerstone Farm offers a respite from that surveillance. Yet, the group is no less a spectacle if not a mystery to attendees, many of whom are unfamiliar with the festival’s organizers. Cornerstone is a pilgrimage into the strange. Its camp dynamic begins with the physical journey to the site and gradually attunes attendees to its communal sensibility.

Already, the smells are a refreshing change of pace: fresh rain, horses, and cow-shit. These will soon be accompanied by the smells of campfires and sweat. I pull into a roadside diner for a coffee and rest before finishing the last two or three miles. Inside are a handful of travelers, also en route to Cornerstone. They are in their late teens, early twenties at the oldest, and could pass as a punk rock band. I overhear them talking about the festival play list, already mapping out their daily routines around the bands they want to see. These attendees signify the first wave of what some local youths merely see as twenty-thousand Christians playing at being “ punks.” Indeed, if Cornerstone was just a rock music festival it would be easier for me to process, almost typical, but the ideological implications of Christian youths making camp in a space that is outside the parameters of their parent, evangelical culture complicate this scene.

Cardboard signs stating “To Cornerstone” in black magic marker provide the final directions to Cornerstone. I turn right onto a gravelly road and stop behind a line up of a
dozen or more vehicles. The gates are not going to open until tomorrow morning, so I settle into this place in line as my campsite for the night. I watch a group of attendees in an old pick up truck parked directly in front of me, sorting camping gear and negotiating sleeping arrangements for the night. They remove a blue tarp that covers their gear in the truck bed revealing a couch mounted against the cab. It starts to rain as they pull the couch down. I help them tie off their tarp from my car’s front bumper to the back of their truck’s cab. Introductions ensue. When I tell them that I was here as far back as 1995, they are shocked, as if processing those days as antiquated and ancient. Around here, I am the “old guy.”

I set up my camping chair between my car and their pick up truck. For the next few hours, from the comfort of my virtual front porch, I alternate between sucking on sunflower seeds, toking on a cigar, and jotting notes into my spiral notebook; trying to reintegrate my senses into this new generation of Christian cool-kids. In my notes I call these roadside neighbors “The New Crew,” and it’s not long until they’ve invited me to join their hacky-sack circle. There are seven of them and they are nick-named according to how many years they have attended the festival, one through seven. I haven’t played hacky-sack since the sixth grade, twenty-four years ago. I join their circle and manage to keep the sack bouncing a couple of times.

“So if you aren’t here with your crew and it’s been a while, what brings you back?” asks Alicia. She’s not really going for the hacky-sack, just sort of hanging back and watching from the outskirts of the circle. “I’m actually here to work on my doctoral dissertation. It’s about Cornerstone, and I’m wondering what the festival means for the people who come, or what it does for them.” Someone says “Cool,” and I certainly hope
so. I take off my researcher “hat” for a couple of good smacks of the hacky-sack. “So you’ve been attending this festival for several years, some of you at least. Do you have any good stories for me?” A couple of them let loose the requisite inside-joke-chuckles. Yep, they have stories.

“Oh goodness, where does it begin?” Amanda glances around the group with a knowing smirk on her face. “We crucified Larry one year, that was fun,” she continues. Everybody laughs, including me, even though I don’t know the story. “Yeah, my best friend and I,” starts Tyler, who’s been quiet up until now and is interrupted by Amanda’s laughter. Tyler continues, “We would come and his name,” referring to his friend, “wasn’t Larry, it was Dave. And we had…”, “Larry the Cucumber,” interjects Amanda, again. Tyler corrects himself, “Oh, um, Larry the Cucumber from Veggie Tales.” He’s going to finish this story no matter how many times he’s interrupted: “And we would drive, and we would drive here and my best friend – we come from Cincinnati, which is a six hour drive –, we would come and every year would take us a different amount of time because we’d get lost in a different way. And so we’d always buy something on the way that [served as] our mascot for the week.”

Tyler and Amanda debate who was to blame for starting the prank-war that year, but for “Larry” (not a real person, but rather a “Larry the Cucumber” figurine from the Veggie Tales television series) the results were not good. He was mortally wounded during one such foray. “And they buried him and everything,” adds Amanda. They proceeded to unearth Larry and crucify him, tying him to a make shift cross complete with mood lighting from a flashlight. Tyler takes back the lead storyteller role: “And we freaked out. Yeah, it was pretty hard to bear you know. My friend was crucified, after he
died, actually.” Tyler looks around the group, laughing but pretending to still be hurt by the incident: “That’s pretty sadistic, you know. He didn’t really rise from the dead. More or less his grave was robbed.”

Tyler’s tale of Larry the Cucumber’s crucifixion is loaded with the lore of travel and tourism. He and his friend revel in getting lost, to the point that getting lost along the way is part of the journey. Larry was the latest in a series of otherwise meaningless kitsch artifacts that are, by virtue of the travelling and subsequent storytelling, transformed into poignant life markers. The meaning becomes located in the experiencing, the doing of travel as much as the destination. Travelers know that they will return from whence they came; however, that liminal space between home and the return is a kind of freedom.

The stories these travelers tell are the kinds of stories any group of young people might tell about their camp experiences, their band trip to Washington D.C., or their journey one summer to Bristlecone National Park. A view of Cornerstone that considered them only pilgrims come to worship, or “unwashed” come to be indoctrinated would miss the kinds of personal experiences and participation – the play and diversity – with which these kinds of attendees mark their own pleasures, memories, and stories of the festival. These memories and experiences are not usually or completely unrelated to their Christian identities – Larry’s crucifixion is after all interesting – and neither is their music. Yet the workings and functions of the festival have to do with providing a site where other kinds of social and identity work can be accomplished, and this is true of all kinds of sites and places that become objects of tourism.
For their part, JPUSA envisions Cornerstone as a site that facilitates the confluence of conflicting worldviews within an otherwise segregated or highly stratified Christian demographic. One purpose of which is to dismantle processes of “othering” within evangelical culture by reimagining “the body of Christ” encamped in a shared, communal space. From this encampment, JPUSA expects dialogue to arise between more traditionally minded Christians and marginal practitioners of the faith. JPUSA massages attendees’ interactions by not only featuring marginalized musicians and musical genres, but also by providing avenues and spaces for reflection and discussion. Examples include the “Labyrinth,” which is set aside for individual contemplation; the “Imaginarium,” a public space for intellectual-critical discussion of film and social-cultural critique; and the variously themed and placed “Cornerstone Xchange seminars,” which broach issues related to alternative Christian community-building. JPUSA imbues the event with its communal values through loosely framed goals – facilitating dialogue, privileging of the marginal and the marginalized – rather than direct control. In this manner, Cornerstone Festival is a medium through which JPUSA and attendees coproduce an idealized vision of “the body of Christ.” Utilizing the festival as a medium, JPUSA connects the “promise” of Cornerstone as an all-inclusive encampment of varied Christian identities to attendees’ desires for validation, experimentation, and community-building. This integration of self-social negotiations into the festival experience, or “promise,” engenders more than a mere respite from daily life or traditional forms of Christian experience. It may also “establish a new direction, break new ground” or otherwise cultivate new orientations to Christian identity “by presenting new
combinations of cultural elements” (MacCannell, p. 26), such as rock music and Christian values.

It is certainly likely that many of this festival’s participants are here because the site offers something they are lacking at home, be it the freedom to attend a punk rock show or to explore their faith apart from the “sacred canopy” (Berger, 1967) of their home church. In point of fact, Cornerstone’s success as a festival is due to its featuring of otherwise marginalized musicians and alternative forms of Christian membership practices. Attendees, such as The New Crew, coproduce this scene by including it as a form of initiation and ritualized membership to their community of travelers.

Hours have passed since the hacky-sack circle. I’ve gone for a good stretch of the legs. Though still tired from the long drive, I’m too excited to sleep or even nap. A band called “VERA SUN” has mastered the art of the walk-by advertisement. They sport “Christian Cool,” which is indistinguishable from other cool-kids of their demographic. After hours of walking the line of cars and playing their music from a walkman for anyone who’ll listen (except for me: I’m too “old”), they set up for an impromptu concert. They brought their own generator and staging for hosting bands that are hoping to make an unscheduled splash at the festival. Buzz takes over the line and maybe fifty people show up to hear them play. I’m there too, with Brian of The New Crew. VERA SUN plugs into their amplifiers, complete with the seemingly requisite unintended feedback that cuts my eardrums, and conducts a slapdash but loud sound check. Their first song channels the unmistakable sound of hardcore, a style of rock that is popular among this generation. The screeching guitars, crazed rhythm section, and screaming vocals rip into the otherwise quiet cornfield. I realize just a few notes into their first song
why VERA SUN was not officially invited to play at the festival. “They’re terrible, right?” I say to Brian. “I’m not just old?”

The Cornerstone “Land Rush”

I wake up to the Illinois sunlight with a corn field on my right and what would otherwise appear to be the remnants of a pagan bonfire to my left; but this is Cornerstone Festival and a truck load of gear just cruised by, driven by a tatted JPUSA commune member from "Friendly Towers" Chicago. I slept in the backseat of my car last night, with the passenger windows down to let in the breeze. Sometime in the early morning the temperature dropped and the sweat that engulfed my slumber froze. My head on my pillow, my legs unable to stretch out, I covered my face with the hood of my rain jacket. Later this morning, I dug out my cargo shorts and put my freezing feet into the pockets.

The New Crew’s impromptu sleeping arrangements were gloriously slapdash. Two of them slept on the couch suspended across the bed of the truck and up against the cab. One of them slept inside the truck with feet hanging out the driver’s side window. The rest slept inside a large camping tent, tied off between their tent and my car. A make-shift tarp barely held out the rain. This is the stuff of next year’s stories.

Although I am the only person over thirty in line, and most of the people around me appear in their late teens and early twenties, later in the week there will be a large influx of a more varied demographic. Fathers camping with their sons and daughters, thirty-something parents camping with their stroller-bound children, groups of late twenty-somethings camping to reminisce for one last “hurrah!” Church youth groups singing praise and worship songs to the gentle strumming of an acoustic guitar will be camping next to groups of young punks swigging beer and smoking weed (though neither
alcohol nor drugs are officially permitted at Cornerstone), and dating partners or friends will be quietly camping next to large family-reunion-styled enclaves. Locals from Macomb and Bushnell will camp out for a night, if only to get away from their small towns, disappear into this spectacle, and find themselves neighboring travelers from New Zealand or Goths from inner-city Chicago.

The camping locations at Cornerstone are surprisingly varied. The geography facilitates numerous styles of camping to complement the type of experience people are seeking. The bulk of the festivities occur upon a large, relatively flat plateau called the “exhibition area.” Most of the younger attendees and their crews – punks, Goths, hardcore kids and bands trying to make the scene – camp within and immediately surrounding this area for easier access to the festival’s louder spaces. However, another large contingent camps within the tree line off of Cornerstone’s Main Street, which is en route to Main Stage. Here, they enjoy the shade and shelter from the sun and frequent rain storms. This area is sectioned off as a “quiet area” and is meant to accommodate families. Another popular site is the beach. Cornerstone Lake is at the base of a steep drop off from main stage and the exhibition area, and winds around the grounds to the East. Some of the more sporting people camp around the lake, swimming and participating in basketball tournaments and other forms of competition and leisure. A small number of attendees camp around the small strip of gravel road that overlooks both Main Stage and Cornerstone Lake. On the one side they have a premier view of every Main Stage act from 7pm to 11pm, Wednesday through Saturday, and on the other side they have the best view of the annual July 4th midnight fireworks.
The only noticeable segregation is enjoyed by two segments of the Cornerstone population, including the festival musicians and speakers, each of whom has a designated courtesy trailer for refreshments. While some invited guests of JPUSA stay in motels in nearby Macomb, the majority camp among the attendees. The speaker venues include a series of rectangular open-air tents with space and chairs for a small PA system and fifty persons each. This camp is in the back of the primary festival site, where it is well separated though not far removed from other venues.

“Making camp” at Cornerstone can be both strategic and quasi-spontaneous. Invited, performing guests of JPUSA (headlining bands and speakers) are provided the opportunity for private space, and at least one space receives preferential treatment for families. Another tier to this stratum is the unofficially privileged: returning crews that lay claim to camping spots that they have staked out as their own in previous years. These are not necessarily prized for their location, but nostalgically significant as sacred pilgrimage campsites. For first time attendees, or for groups of attendees driving from different locations to meet-up and reminisce at Cornerstone, site selection is spontaneous: Whoever gets there first selects the camping spot and the others must find and adapt to it. For first-timers, part of the adventure includes securing a campsite before having explored the space.

Making camp at Cornerstone is also pragmatic. Those who view the gritty, live performances showcased at the myriad generator stages, or the performances energized by the desperation of “being discovered” at the Indie-Stage, will announce this preference by camping closer to these venues, imagining themselves as no less “gritty.” Families who are passing along their hippie-faith to their children congregate under the tree-line in
the “quiet area.” The parents can linger at a more comfortable camp and migrate to Main Stage during the evenings, while the kids can explore the hardcore ruckus along Cornerstone’s Main Street.

There is a special relationship, therefore, between the JPUSA organizers and the attendees. JPUSA frames the range of experiences by designating the camping grounds, determining the sponsors for the primary and secondary venue sites. However, Cornerstone’s ongoing vitality is energized by the attendees or crews who return annually to participate in the festival and who initiate new members into the scene. For JPUSA, Cornerstone is a commemorative event; but it is the attendees who have invented the festival as a sacred pilgrimage site, which subsequently confers to Cornerstone its credibility as a site for cultivating alternative Christian identity.

Everyone’s energy has been building this morning, in anticipation of the opening of the gates. Rumor has traveled down the line of cars claiming the gates will open at this or that time. A band called “The Robbins” is playing their EP for members of The New Crew. I nod The Robbins my way after they make a sale. If the new “rock star” image is understated presence, The Robbins have it. Except for the lead singer’s perpetually pained face, they look like they just got out of Bible Study. I slide the headphones over my ears and Chase starts the first track. I do a double-take, looking down at the CD player in my hand and back up at Chase. It doesn’t seem possible that this music is coming from these kids. The first track is a brilliant rock anthem: Great harmonies with a nice dosage of angst in the lead vocals, though I can’t make out what, precisely, the angst is targeting. There’s nothing cliché about the composition, and the lead guitar is shamelessly confident. Subsequent tracks are hit and miss.
“So when are you guys playing,” I ask. Chase is the lead singer and guitarist, the shameless one: “We have a show tomorrow, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday.” He explains that the first show is essentially a warm-up gig at one of the generator stages, before an important appearance at the Indi-Stage. I ask them about their musical influences and the first name I’m given is “Garth Brooks.” I’m not sure if this is a joke. It is clear, however, that the Beatles are their biggest influence. This makes sense; they are part of the Millennial Generation, and, par for the course, they identify most strongly with their parents’ music given the ease of access from changes in listening (i-pod) and distribution (i-tunes) technology. Based in Charlotte, North Carolina, the band has been together for three years. Two of the members have been writing songs together since they were ten years old, and they are ready to break out and make the scene.

Chase and Robby are anxious to move further down the line to peddle their music and to distribute play-list fliers for their band. I ask them just one more question before letting them off the hook, already having decided that I’ll catch up with them later: “How much did it cost you to come and play; because you’re not being paid to play here?” Robby is the quieter of the two, but he speaks up first this time, though they both get excited about this question: “One stage was $20. For coming to Cornerstone, for each of us it was about $450, which included finishing up our EP, gas money, mastering the CDs, attendance, and stage fees.” Chase adds that it cost them $150 to secure a set at the Indi-Stage.

They have no idea that the sponsor is JPUSA, and in fact they’ve never heard of JPUSA. But they have heard of musician Glenn Kaiser, JPUSA elder and original member of JPUSA’s REZ Band. Chase and Robby are anxious to move on, so I thank
them for sharing their music. They walk further down the line of cars, cold-selling their EPs and handing out fliers with their show-times.

In an instant, the gate watchers vanish and vehicle engines turn over as the gate opens. The line quickly splits into two rows, consisting of those with tickets and those, like me, without. I purchase my ticket at the gate and rejoin the line. JPUSA members and festival volunteers, who arrived early for this specific purpose, direct us to a large flat field, a waiting area where we form multiple lines with much spacing between. The line of cars stretches all the way around the bend where the gravelly road we were parked at Sunday meets the paved road leading into Bushnell, and even that road is jammed with vehicles at a stand still. Rock music is blaring from car stereos all across the field. I can turn my ear one way and hear Led Zeppelin, another and I hear The 77s, yet another direction and it's the Beatles’ *White Album* (1970). Attendees from the next line over take advantage of a gap in the parking lines and play a game of tackle football.

The line starts to move and I feel anxious. It has been a long while since I was part of the Cornerstone “land rush,” the official moment when vehicles are released into the festival grounds to find a camping spot. I wave The New Crew around and follow them to their campsite, which is cushioned against one of the sporadic tree lines, well off of Main Street but en route to Main Stage. Limbs reach over their site from the tree line to provide a protective canopy, shade that will be much welcomed as the festival progresses and midday naps become a necessity. I am impressed by their preparation and how efficiently they set up camp. I, however, am hesitating. I intended to camp next to them, but something is pulling me away, and otherwise it just doesn’t feel right. I thought I should be here to interview and observe The New Crew, follow them as a case
study throughout the festival. But making camp here feels like settling: situating the tale to an isolated group within a larger festival experience.

I decide to go with my gut feeling and camp elsewhere. It is a risk. At a festival of this size I may not see them again. I break down my tent and hastily load my gear into the car. I explain to The New Crew that I’m relocating to a more familiar site. They understand and wish me luck. I take off, tooling and weaving through the campground.

I backtrack toward the South entrance, turn onto a well-worn grassy path that intersects Cornerstone’s gravelly Main Street and park in an open field. My hope is that this site provides a peaceful space for processing fieldnotes, though I’ve really gravitated towards this location for its nostalgic value. In prior years, the crew that I traveled here with chose this site, which is couched between Encore-1 and Encore-2, as a matter of pragmatism. If we camped here, where the first shows of the day begin and the last shows of the day end, then we could slowly migrate from our site to Main Stage and catch as many shows as possible en route back to camp.

After a quick lunch, consisting of an orange and a turkey sandwich, I sling my digital camera over my shoulder and stuff the laptop and consent forms into my backpack. In dire need of coffee, I make for the food court, hoping that at least one early-bird vendor is brewing today. Pay-dirt comes in the form of a small, portable venue. The front of the café is rolled up and an awning extends out, over a few small tables and chairs. Each table has a candle in the middle, no doubt to draw attendees like moths to the flame during the wee hours of the evening, amidst the cacophony of rock music, sweat, and typical festival activities. My table has a journal attached to it via a
small metal chain. I flip through and see that it’s a public journal for attendees to mark their Cornerstone experience. I make an entry and return to people-watching.

On cue, a Goth couple passes by. They are dressed, nose-ring to boot-buckle, in all black, including long sleeve shirts and light-weight, long pants tucked into heavy, over-sized boots with large metal buckles. His hair is long, hanging down below his shoulders, and finely combed. Her hair is shaved on the sides leaving only a Mohawk. He is walking in front and she behind. *He* holds a long chain leash in his hand. The leash is attached to a dog collar that she wears around her neck. Thirty minutes later, I see this same couple walking back the way they came, but this time he is on the leash and *she* is leading him.

This form of play at Cornerstone is also a performance. The Goth couple is well-aware that, for one, their attire and sadomasochist display is not a typical Christian persona, and, second, they are aware of themselves as spectacle, as an object of others’ gaze. They exaggerate their marginality and thereby turn the festival grounds into a stage. On the one hand, I appreciate this performance for its aesthetic value. Goth style is an outward expression of an inner-struggle to accomplish authenticity amidst what adherents consider a shallow, disposable society. However, the context for their performance, at a Christian toned event, has as its goal something uniquely rhetorical: the merging of two forms, Goth style and Christian faith.

Consider the following formulae, where “A” is the Goth couple and “B” represents other attendees, whose “gaze” is both personal (as individual Christians) and institutional (as individual Christians whose gaze reifies traditional Christian membership practices):
What A does “from within” as an act, B sees “from without” as an event (that is, a scene). The distinction however is complicated by the fact that A can dialectically consider his own act in terms of B, thus to some extent looking upon it from without; and B can to some extent respond to A’s behavior from within, so that it is not felt merely scenically, as a set of signs, but is vicariously participated in (or “incipiently imitated”) as an act (Burke, 1945, p. 283).

Thus, as a marginal Christian group and Cornerstone crew, the Goth couple’s performance of their lifestyle in this space is both a form of play and a rhetorical act. They objectify themselves as a spectacle, and the spectacle elicits from others an interpretation of this merger between Goth lifestyle and Christian faith. The onlookers, by virtue of completing this equation, are made complicit in its construction.

For their part, the Goth couple achieves a validation of their presence, not just at the festival but as marginalized members of Christian faith. They are in fact part of a larger Goth community that has adopted Cornerstone Festival as its respite from their hometown scene, where they are estranged both by Christian and non-Christian social groups. Their appearance at this festival was likely similar to that of The New Crew: a small group of friends come to Cornerstone to see a band they follow and to “get away” from the burdens, troubles, or routines of daily life. The crew’s repeated attendance carved a niche into the festival experience to the point that, though still a small group of travelers, their “Asylum” tent is an officially cited venue in the Cornerstone Program.

In this case, the Cornerstone scene is a medium by which attendees accomplish a multiplicity of purposes – to be seen, to make the Christian music scene, to forge community, etcetera. However, other crews take up residency at Cornerstone in order to
accomplish their own socialization purposes. “The Hippie Preacher,” for instance, uses Cornerstone Festival for purposes of recruitment. He took part in the original Jesus People Movement and has since developed a business model that combines brewing coffee and training young people for missionary work. He was sitting behind me at the coffee tent; noticing my incessant note-taking, he introduced himself and an interview ensued.

**Hippie-Preacher Land**

“I was raised in a United Methodist church,” he says, “which is pretty, you know, conservative . . . out of touch socially. I used to go to a Bible study in a barn called, ‘The Jesus Barn’, where hippies were coming to Christ. He felt called to ministry, but the Bible Institute he attended was unfulfilling: “[I]t was like committing cultural suicide – the rules and all. And so, but I did feel like, while I was there God confirmed my call to preach, but I didn’t want to pastor a church because they were too square, too conservative. I wanted to be a, you know, hippie preacher, so to speak. A Jesus freak, that’s what I was.”

He became an independent pastor, speaking at youth retreats and filling in for vacationing ministers. One such fill-in became a permanent hire and at the age of 21 he was a church pastor. Like many churches at the time, attendance was waning due to an increasing, culturally inscribed generation gap between long-time members and youth: “So . . . I brought in my Christian friends who had a rock band.” The result was a merger of the traditional church sermon with the burgeoning popularity of rock music. Five young people in attendance converted to Christianity at the end of the service and this gave him a free hand to experiment more with alternative church services: “I didn’t have
to conform to the traditional church-pastor setting. So I always had a motorcycle and I always had a rock band and always preached in jeans.”

While we’re talking, he breaks frame and asks if I’m a Christian. I was anticipating this, but I was not prepared for it: “Not exactly. I was raised in a church family, but I left all of that, years ago. So, I’m very much out of the loop.” “That’s what happens,” he says, smirking.

For the Hippie Preacher, the coffee business is a means for preparing young people to be missionaries. “Most of the people back there,” he says referring to the youths working the coffee bar, “are training.” In the summer they come to Cornerstone as a vacation from brewing coffee. The coffee-business allows him to be self-sustaining, rather than dependent upon an organized church group. The business was initially started as a means to supplement his pastoral stipend: “And then it grew to become connected to the vision of enabling people to train for the ministry. By starting a ministry-training center that gives, that pays people a stipend, not according to market value, but according to what they need.” He directs my attention to the coffee bar and explains the different amounts each of the people working the counter take-in: “It’s dependent upon need and they try to think of other people more than themselves and take less if they can, which is a really cool value.” Everything is locked into a “fabulous connectivity,” he says: “We’ll buy youth hostels and start training centers and coffee roasting cafes where people can study for the ministry in Europe and Asia and get free tuition and free housing through this coffee business.”
In his earlier incarnation as “The Hippie Preacher,” he wanted to be “cool,” like other hippie-Christians and cited the original Hippie-Preacher Lonnie Frisbee\(^1\) as his influence. He personifies what Enroth called “the groovy Gospel.” His projection of “cool” signified a passion for a version of the gospel that he could internalize, sans what he refers to as an oppressively institutionalized set of conservative rules.

The coffee-crew utilizes Cornerstone Festival as a working vacation, performing their crew identity as independent missionaries while “vacating” the pressures of their typical training responsibilities. However, The Hippie Preacher’s crew stands in stark contrast to The New Crew. The latter is a loosely organized and spontaneous grouping of friends and travelers, but this crew is highly structured, with a clear hierarchy. Furthermore, their purpose for the festival is not merely play, but recruitment. “Well, hey, thanks for talking to me” I say, needing to end this interview and continue with my explorations. “Yes, no problem. Stop by if you want to stop by. We can put you up in the intern house,” he says, ever the recruiter.

There aren’t many places where a person can announce he or she is a “Jesus Freak” and that becoming a “hippie preacher” was their career goal without having to explain, apologize, or just be accountable. Yet, this self-proclaimed Hippie Preacher turned coffee brew-master draws on the persona of Lonnie Frisbee in a matter-of-fact way that makes his life choices seem inevitable and rational. And for that reason, it is

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\(^1\) David Di Sabatino (1999) explains that Lonnie Frisbee was the original “hippie preacher” and that Frisbee’s spontaneous conversion and ministry embodies the spirit of the Jesus People Movement, attracting like-minded hippie-seekers: “Lonnie Frisbee was countercultural hippie turned Jesus freak evangelist whose penchant for spiritual experimentation would not only shape his own life but the institutional legacies of the revival” (p. 205). However, Frisbee’s experimentation with alternative sexuality, use of LSD and contraction of HIV-AIDS has resulted in a marginalization of his story and role in the movement.
easy for him, even natural, to turn the tables on me during the interview and ask if I am a Christian. When I explain that I am now “out of the loop,” he acts as though he recognizes this pattern, adding “that’s what happens.” In other words, he recognizes the need for resocialization, not because, in his view, Christian faith is somehow lacking, but because the roles and practices that guarantee or otherwise buttress the socialization process are inadequate.

Both this episode and my encounter with the Goth couple exemplify how the festival “legitimates” someone whose identity bridges counterculture and Christianity. However, while the Goth group seeks validation, the coffee house crew uses the site for recruitment. In contrast, The New Crew’s festival attendance is a celebration of their small group of friends and their identification with the idea of diversity within the fold. Together, though variously motivated, these crews coproduce a multi-purposed Cornerstone scene.

A Conversation with Festival Director, John Herrin

After my encounter with The Hippie-Preacher, I introduce myself to the festival organizers by first securing a press badge. Wendy Kaiser, original REZ band member and elder Glenn Kaiser’s wife, requests copies of my IRB credentials, including example consent forms and the IRB’s stamped approval letter. Inside the festival office, I jack in to an outlet adjacent to an ATM machine, where three attendees wait in line to make a withdrawal. I sit cross-legged on the floor, uploading my interviews from a small digital recorder to my laptop. JPUSA opens its gates to everyone, including, in my case, an “ethnologist,” the title that Wendy Kaiser wrote onto my badge. However, once you are in, it is up to you to make of the experience what you will.
While in the office, I inquire after John Herrin, festival director, with whom I’ve been in contact regarding this study and with whom I am seeking an interview. The affable lady working the front counter turns to the woman behind her, and so on and so forth until word comes back from the other end of the trailer that John’s currently unavailable. The colloquial process is as endearing as it is ambiguous. I am told that the best way to speak with John is good timing, and to keep checking in at the festival office.

JPUSA does not hire outside groups to help manage their festival. Approximately 200 members of the community work Cornerstone each year, supplemented by nearly 500 attendees who volunteer and receive significantly discounted ticket prices. These community members and volunteers work alongside each other, fulfilling the responsibilities of managing the festival, including security, hospitality, ticketing and garbage and grounds cleanup.

Eventually, my Southern hospitality-styled pop-in method works, and I secure an interview. John’s office is in the back of the festival office trailer, and it is impressively low-tech. Even the phone has a chord. This entire festival is run from a walky-talky. John has an assistant who is calm and confident. Although I’ve been invited to sit and talk, I can only watch as he’s suddenly bombarded with phone calls and “emergencies” relayed over the walky-talky. As I try to conduct a fluid interview, people walk in from the front office and knock and enter from the side entrance. His assistant works the room expertly, but this only buys us a little time to converse.

Except for his bushy beard and long hair, kept in a pony tail, John is unassuming. He wears cargo shorts, dresses his feet in sandals and ‘sports’ a plain, gray colored T-shirt. His movements are laid back but his mind is constantly multitasking. John grew
up in the commune, from the time that he was a small child. His mother was a member of the original group of people who left California in a van, with changes of clothes, electric guitars and a desire to share the gospel. I ask him what the festival means for JPUSA, and he recollects the story of the commune’s humble beginning as a travelling rock band that was turned-on to Jesus. This story alleviates the anxiety I have felt today, regarding the sheer size of the event. In the course of his telling this story, the festival transforms, for me, from an intimidating site and a daunting research task to a welcoming space and manageable project; from nearly 20,000 strangers-attendees to a few people in a van whose experience of Christian faith seems easily accessible.

I ask John where the first Cornerstone Festival was held and when it was relocated: “Wow, let’s see. The first fest was held [ . . .] at the Lake County Fairgrounds just outside Grayslake, IL. About forty-five minutes north of Chicago . . . We moved Cornerstone [in] 1991 to our present location, Cornerstone Farm.” Approximately 5,000 people attended the first Cornerstone Festival and this number grew to approximately 10,000 in the first ten years. In the 1990s, the festival reached the 20,000 mark. Of these attendees, John estimates from festival records that 75% are between 16 and 35, and 50% fall into the 16 to 25 age range. Only 5% of the attendees are over the age of 50, which means that very few of the attendees have any direct experience with the Jesus People Movement.

I ask John to recollect past years’ headlining acts, but he doesn’t recall, and frankly he doesn’t seem very interested. He suggests I speak with someone who might have access to the archives. “That is, if the archives exist,” he adds. “We haven’t been very dutiful or even that sentimental when it comes to saving Cornerstone artifacts.”
Cornerstone is in its 25th year, has established itself as the most well-respected festival for featuring Christian rock and yet JPUSA may or may not even keep records of prior years’ festivals. I ask John to breakdown the annual expenditures, how much money comes in and how much goes out, and to whom? It will cost approximately $1.5 million dollars to produce this year’s festival, and, per our later correspondence, the festival will have brought in $1 million. This includes the annual upkeep of the grounds, which cost $250,000 per year in mortgage, insurance, utilities, groundskeeper salary and healthcare, equipment, etc. (Although the festival will have lost money in 2008, Herrin explains later that the festival normally breaks even. If there is a surplus, that money goes into a fund to compensate for years such as 2008, to supplement what the festival brings in.) I ask John about the festival’s impact upon the local economy and he estimates that Cornerstone is probably responsible for bringing in about $45,000 annually, not counting the year-round caretaker: “We do hire truck services, purchase food, some tools and gravel as well as mechanic services, etc, locally. Most of the production (sound, lights, staging, tents, talent, etc), comes from out of the area.”

While we’re talking, John takes a call from a prospective attendee needing access to an electrical source of power, for medical reasons. There are already 5,000 attendees here, and that number is now growing by the minute – 15,000 more are expected to arrive by Friday. John is patient, and he speaks with her for at least five minutes. I jot down snippets of the conversation: “Everyone is pretty savvy,” he explains to the woman, regarding the limited access to electrical outlets. “We can’t guarantee a spot,” he continues, adding that “it would take hours to drive around. But we’re flexible about that kind of stuff. You could just get close to a camper spot and run a cord out your window.”
John and the attendee achieve some sense of closure to the interaction, and without missing a beat he handles another flurry of walky-talky and phone calls.

I pick up our earlier thread, about the commune and what the festival means for JPUSA, insofar as it is an extension of the group’s Chicago experience, and what he thinks it might mean for attendees. “I have a family member that doesn’t live at JPUSA,” he begins, but stops again to take another call. He hardly speaks a word during this phone call. He just listens, processes the information and says “Thanks,” then returns, once again, to our conversation. He explains that this family member chose not to live at the commune, but he’s proud of her for choosing her own path: “She and her husband still work closely with the commune,” he adds.

John explains that “intentional community is not for everyone and there is no blueprint. It’s hard.” Still, increasing numbers of people are currently turning to intentional community, whether religious or non-religious, as an alternative means of social organization and sustenance in America since, comparatively, post World War II. While community may be difficult, JPUSA has seen a dramatic increase in the number of people and groups that are attending “Friendly Towers” for mentoring in order to initiate their own communities. Although there may not be a “blueprint,” JPUSA sees facilitating community as part of its ministry. “There are four generations of my family living in the community,” he says. “We started with a van, guitars; but also a purpose besides community for community sake.” Cornerstone is a part of that larger purpose, for JPUSA. John says that living in community requires patience, and he sees that translated here at Cornerstone, adding that “tolerance” is also important to successful community.
I tell John that my goal here is to simply try to understand what sense people make of their experience at Cornerstone; what brings them back if they are repeat visitors. I tell him about The New Crew, whom I met Sunday. I explain my thesis that Cornerstone is a pilgrimage site offering refuge from an overly controlling and dogmatic evangelical religious experience. John intimates that this is a topic he has been considering for years; that one of JPUSA’s goals with Cornerstone Festival is to provide a site that serves as a sort of surrogate mentor for attendees: “If someone gets out of their early years, their teens, and are relatively together, in tact, then they can decide on their own what they’re going to make of their faith; if they’ll still go to church, for instance, without someone forcing them.” This adds new import to Cornerstone as a coproduced site: it is a space for relatively free expression that is, in turn, used by attendees to appropriate their experience of faith to their sense of self, apart from institutional oversight. However, where there is freedom there is likely insult, and I ask John how an atheist can coexist with an evangelical during a hardcore show, such as the one I witnessed during VERA SUN’s performance, and no one gets hurt? He explains, 

We’re patient here. You sorta have to be if you’ve lived as a community with a shared purse for 35, 36 years. People are going to make their own choices. At festivals like Creation, their founders want results, quantifiable by way of decision cards. We don’t do that. A lot of people are just out to have an experience of roughing it, living as a community for one week out of their year. It’s like a retreat for them.

Another phone call comes in, and John has to take this one. He also has visitors at the front desk and in the foyer who want to meet with him. When his assistant hands him a
walky-talky, with yet another person requesting his attention, I offer John my hand and thank him for his time.

On the most basic level, Cornerstone attendees are seeking an experience that cultivates a temporary change from their daily lives. Typical perspectives of the touristic process views tourists as consumers and locals as producers (Gmelch, 2004). However, at Cornerstone neither the attendees nor the JPUSA are “locals.” Because neither is local, both occupy a liminal space at Cornerstone Farm. This adds to the ephemeral experience, or mystical appeal of the event, insofar as its meaning is not bound to or determined or otherwise influenced by a regional ideology or history. “Meaning” is thus derived from making camp which includes how attendees utilize the grounds, from the official and unofficial names that are given to spaces within the grounds and from JPUSA’s practice of designating some areas for particular usages, such as day parking or curfew camping.

Monday is the first official day for the festival and more than half of those who are making their way to the festival will arrive today and stay through the entire week. After this interview with John, I feel encouraged to explore these festival grounds. Back at my campsite, I unload my backpack, re-lace my bootstraps and start my first hike in ten years through Cornerstone’s maze of gravelly streets and grassy pathways.

Virtual Tour of Cornerstone

The “Grounds Map” is located toward the back of the festival program. Cornerstone Farm is divided into regions with titles ranging from the obvious, “Lone Tree Camping” and “Lake Shore Camping,” to the kitsch, “Middle Earth” and “Suburbia.” I learn that the unofficial name for where The New Crew camps is “The Ghetto,” a title conferred to that region by those who habitually camp there due to the
high frequency of breaking festival rules, including, according to The New Crew, drug and alcohol consumption. My campsite is situated between Encore-1 and Encore-2 as both a pragmatic matter and a nostalgic indulgence. It offers a comfortable familiarity amidst the chaos of fieldwork, interviews, volunteer work, and the serious business of enjoying the festival. Even if I am taking a nap, having lunch or going to bed, I can hear music emanating from these venues. By Saturday, the grass between my campsite and Encore-1 will be covered in tents.

![Figure 3.1: Encore-1](image)

Most of the camping at Cornerstone is car-based. Attendees drive to a spot, navigating the multitude of grassy paths that trail off from Main Street, and settle into a nook between venues, or camp within a mass of other attendees exposed to the elements. However, other encampments provide protection from the not-infrequent thunderstorms that roll through the Illinois farm country, and are only discovered by those who venture far from even the most unexpected paths. Conglomerations of tents form pseudo-communities within the larger festival grounds.
Figure 3.2: Tents

My daily treks from camp site to venues, for observation, interviewing, or any number of fieldwork activities, are inundated with advertisements. A run of phone banks was once a permanent land marker at the festival; popularized both as a meeting locale and the only functional form of phoning home. Today, the phone banks are totems to an abandoned form of communication. The portable toilet, however, will never go out of style and remains an all-too active shrine to the festival experience. Inside any given portable toilet is a conspicuous assortment of graffiti, aphorisms and propaganda, including “Peace Makes Change,” “Rock for Life,” and “Porn Rapes the Mind.”

Figure 3.3: Phone Booths and Toilets
The most popular festival billboard is located at “The Drink Filling Station,” which faces Cornerstone’s Main Street. This billboard’s fliers will be covered over by the end of the festival. It is centrally located in the middle of the densest camp sites and next to the showers. Attendees also become billboards, flashing tattoos that announce their faith, permanently etched onto their bodies. Bands trying to make a splash in the alternative Cornerstone music scene prove that the “human billboard” is no mere metaphor.

**Figure 3.4: Advertisements**

The most conspicuous venue at Cornerstone is the Merchants Tent, a marketplace peddling everything from the kitsch (a “Body Piercing Saved My Life” T-shirt) to the sublime (an assortment of anti-war, social activist groups soliciting membership).

Touristic merchandise at Cornerstone also plays to the festival’s communally-themed environment, including a large area of the Merchants Tent where attendees can purchase temporary tattoos, hippie-beads and jewelry. Both independent vendors and vendors more closely aligned with major record labels can rent booth space and sell their wares, including CDs, T-shirts, and stickers. For $575, all officially booked bands can have access to a booth on the day of their performance. John Herrin explained that JPUSA makes around $75,000 from the merchandise tent, most of which comes from booth
rental. Cornerstone may be a “sacred space” for some, but it’s no temple, and part of the pilgrimage is a trip to this venue with a wad of crisp $20 bills.

Ducking out of the merchandise tent, I note that there are about a dozen permanent structures: Three shower houses, a pump house, and a barn. In addition, there are approximately forty trailers or cabins that are occupied or “steward,” as John explains, by longtime volunteers. Where, precisely, members of JPUSA camp is still a mystery to me.

Festival spaces are either determined by JPUSA or appropriated by attendees. Cornerstone’s Main Street is runs through the heart of the grounds and eventually winds around Cornerstone Lake en route to Main Stage. Increasingly, this thoroughfare has been “invaded” by attendees who set up temporary stages powered by their own generators. The smallest generator stage that I encountered included an elderly black man, playing blues riffs in front of a snow-cone stand. Far from this scene I snap a photograph of a long-haired folk singer, who proffers a contrast both to Cornerstone’s massive Main Stage and the proliferation of hardcore rock bands that populate the generator stages along Main Street.
However, not all venues at Cornerstone are centered in music. The Cornerstone Labyrinth is a “contemplative prayer walk” (Cornerstone Program, P. 42) that escorts attendees along the Stations of the Cross. The Labyrinth is intended as an exercise in meditative self-reflection. It is a quiet space, tucked away behind the speaker and music venues, beyond the kitsch food court and removed from the commercialization of the Merchants Tent.
The Cornerstone scene derives much of its credibility from contrast, and this is represented in the festival’s relationship to its host city. Roughly 4,000 people reside in Bushnell, which is, comparatively, one-fifth the population of Cornerstone Festival. The Bushnell Rotary Club has a booth at the festival, managed entirely by women in their fifties and sixties, sporting T-shirts and ball caps with the moniker, “Rotarians at Work.” One of the ladies asks me if I want a “freezy,” a cone filled with shaved ice and smothered in flavored syrup. “We’ve got the only freezies,” Jane says proudly. I ask who initiated this relationship, between JPUSA and Bushnell. “We went to them,” claims Jane, although there was trepidation on the part of the city. Community members were concerned that the festival would bring in copious amounts of alcohol and trouble, reminiscent of New York’s Woodstock festival. Attendees were a spectacle in this small town, embodying townspeople’s stereotypes while performing marginalization: “They were dressed unbelievably [. . .] it was everywhere, it was fantastic! I mean these outfits they would wear – they went to Salvation Army, they went to theaters, they had… it was neat.” Bushnell was founded in the 1850s, built around a railroad intersection that still exists, right along Bushnell’s Main Street. Western Illinois University started here, but has migrated to nearby Macomb. Jane describes Bushnell as a “typical” small town where no one locks their doors.
The Cornerstone committee invited the Bushnell Rotary Club to participate in the event by providing services. From batteries to directions and recently internet access and cell phone chargers, the rotary provides services free of charge: “I would see people go into one grocery store in town. They would buy a gallon of milk and they would stand there and drink it. They would rinse it out and then they would fill it with water. It was that way. So we’ve been out here offering help, our services.” According to Jane, the Rotary Club and Cornerstone enjoy a collaborative relationship:

We put out all the signs that you see out on the highways and direction signs, you know, for Cornerstone. The Rotary does all that. You see we don’t pay the Cornerstone festival committee any money for doing this, we don’t pay for our tent, and all of our stuff that we have here. But anybody that sells for a profit, here [...] they have to pay a percentage to the Cornerstone festival. But we do things for them, so they don’t come to take our poor tent. We’re a service organization.

Jane believes that this relationship is a financially and socially positive exchange for the city, providing the merchants an extra month of revenue. Although the festival has been in this location for twenty-five years, residents still disagree about the festival’s integrity: “I’m in real estate and I was at the office yesterday and one of the real estate agents started piping up about how she’s never been here. She [...] said, ‘I just made up my mind about what that Cornerstone is’. And she says ‘the way those people look and dress, they’re not Christians’.”

Jane sees Cornerstone as a cathartic site for attendees to shed the identities that likely burden their daily lives: “I have met people who have graduated from college, like
yourself, and bankers and they’ve got Mohawks [. . .] and I say ‘What do you do for a living’, you know, just to pass the time. They say ‘This is just a time to cut loose and just be whatever it feels like you want to be’.” Jane believes these Cornerstone identities are transient; but as a form of play, an important and necessary form of release: “You know that guy with that Mohawk, he just did that up and it’s just for this place. And he’ll probably shave the whole thing off when he gets back home.”

There is a pause during our conversation while Jane attends to a customer seeking the cool relief of a Bushnell Rotary freezy. “You have to learn patience when living together like this,” I say. “Yes, but you know the thing that makes patience easy to me is respect. People have respect for each other.” She is proud of the festival’s diversity, including attendees from nearly every state of the union and from overseas. However, this appreciation for “diversity” also includes having one’s values challenged and found lacking. She explains meeting a man in an orange jump-suit: “He was a prisoner. He was up here on some kind of probationary thing and he was visiting. [. . . ]. I was aghast. I mean, he wasn’t a maximum security prisoner but still, he was getting a lesson on how to treat people.” She adds that, for her, “that’s what a lot of this is.”

Conclusion

Cornerstone is a festival, and like many festivals is a coming together of people and agendas that collect around a theme or common interest. While one theme of Cornerstone is Christian identity, another is rock music and the kinds of membership practices that accompany any music scene – following a favorite band, meeting others who are doing the same, initiating new members into a crew. These and other purposes co-exist in the larger event. Yet another common interest or theme to be found here is
travel and making camp; the leaving of home and coming together of people who socialize. Attendees encounter new experiences and forge new relationships no differently than the many tourists and travelers who visit national parks and tourist sites all over the world. Mark Neumann’s (1999) study of Grand Canyon National Park, for instance, notes the multi-layered and thrown-together agendas and forms of participation found at such sites, as well as the kind of tourist/traveler experience-seeking that brings people together. Sites like Grand Canyon “promise” travelers an experience – personal edification, a return to nature, intellectual discovery, or, as Neumann discovers in his article, “Living on Tortoise Time” (1993), alternative travel. While travel includes a liberating break from daily routines and social roles, it may also produce a structure in the form of a communal experience (Neumann, 1993, p. 203).

Cornerstone Festival provides attendees an opportunity to not only distance themselves from a literal home, but also from the “sacred canopy” (Berger, 1967) of their evangelical parent culture, including their home churches’ more traditional forms of Christian practice and membership. Cornerstone is an ephemeral space that is brought into being by attendees, realized in an intersection of physical space and personal identity. “Scenic materials,” writes Burke, “become means,” which individuals or groups employ “in the process of growth and adaptation” (1945, p. 287). The materials of this production are both transient (the generator stages, portable toilet graffiti) and permanent (Main Stage).

I spend the evening attending impromptu performances around the festival grounds, including early-bird bands playing at the increasing number of generator stages. It is nearly midnight when I return to camp. I have tuna for dinner, then check my
supplies, review the day’s notes and pour through the festival program with my headlamp turned to red-light. My tent is small, but of high quality. Once inside I remove my socks and stuff them into my hiking boots, which I place outside of the small entrance. The tent is a womb; inside its protective covering I can let go of the stress of the day’s fieldwork and the anxiety of tomorrow’s goals.

Twenty minutes after finally closing my eyes, I switch the headlamp back on and dig out my notepad to jot down a few loosely contrived thoughts, set to the faint serenade of hardcore music quietly infiltrating the tent. I recall my experience of crewing here at Cornerstone in the mid and late nineteen nineties:

We didn’t just camp to escape our typical daily grind of work and school and relationships, nor was the draw to Cornerstone merely the music that we otherwise had no access to. We certainly weren’t trying to be cool, though we felt cool. We made camp a form of communicating our love for each other, our desire to be interdependent. To camp was to reminisce, and reminiscing was not mere nostalgia binging: it was storytelling, and storytelling is a kind of identity-work. Making camp was a means for bringing the kinds of memories we wanted to have into existence.

Indeed, travel is a migration from one set of relationships, where we perform and reify our roles as responsible members of an institutionalized reality, to another set of relationships. In this liminal space of travel and making camp, the Cornerstone attendee experiences a re-positioning of self relative to his or her typical social role. This process makes possible an alternative perspective of self and other in relation to the parent culture. My first two days at Cornerstone, both outside and inside the gates, marked the
inauguration of my dual role of attendee-researcher. Although attending Cornerstone alone at times affected difficult feelings of isolation, it allowed me to appreciate the crew dynamic of attending the festival.

When The New Crew makes camp, they are also, for the duration of the festival, constructing their own community within the larger festival scene. Although there are elements of the festival, not sponsored by JPUSA, that would draw them into this or that fold, such as the Hippie Preacher’s attempt to recruit attendees into his coffee-evangelist training program, attendees are travelers-together by virtue of their crews. Indeed, the crew experience at Cornerstone supplants an individualistic value of travel, and for that matter of Christian faith, with a communal one, whereas the goal is to privilege a communal rather than a personal experience. Cornerstone crews are thus self-legitimating communities of travelers, formed by chance or intention or a combination of both, who collaboratively navigate to and within the festival. Some crews, such as The New Crew, return to Cornerstone annually and cultivate a shared festival history. First time Cornerstone attendees who travel or meet up with a crew experience an estrangement of their otherwise typified relationships with other crew members “back home” through processes of making camp. As travelers-together, they desire something “other,” but they mediate their search through community. This collaborative act coproduces the scene as a site for leisure, liminality, and play, but also meaning-making through community-building.
Chapter Four:

Constructing a Christian Rock Aesthetic

If the American south is the “Bible Belt,” then East Texas is the garish, over-sized belt buckle. My father was a long-time fifth-grade Sunday school teacher and deacon at Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas. I cannot recount how many clip-on ties worked their way into my rather dapper “Sunday Best” wardrobe, an amalgam of hand-me-downs and second-hand suits, vests, slacks, and dress shoes. We attended “Early Church” on Sunday morning as a family before “Sunday School,” when my brothers and I attended age-appropriate Bible classes. During the evening service, dad humbly distributed the offering plates along with the other deacons before joining us somewhere in the back or off to one side or the other of the church. It was during the evening service when baptisms were performed, which also meant joining the Southern Baptist Convention. Our denomination derived its namesake from the act of fully submerging those making a declaration of faith in Christ as the son of God and our personal Lord and Savior, “buried with Christ and raised to walk in a newness of life.” However, by the time I entered my junior year of high school, this “old time religion” was retooling its youth program.

After the Jesus People Movement, many evangelical churches adopted programs that included newly styled Youth Pastors responsible for mediating between the older and younger members of the fold. Part of their job was to perpetuate a sense of “Christian
cool” that could effectively compete with the popular culture marketplace while inoculating us to “worldly desires” and “lusts of the flesh.” Kissing and dancing, for example, were considered gateway activities to sexual perversion and were thus vehemently discouraged. Although my church’s youth group tried to create an alternative universe of Contemporary Christian Music, PG films, summer camps and all-night roller skate “lock-ins,” I retained at least one source of freedom: access to an eclectic record collection.

During family vacations in the “Goodtimes” van, my parents played eight tracks of Johnny Cash, John Denver, Emmylou Harris, The Righteous Brothers and Eddie Rabbit. En route to school in the morning, it was a radically different scene in my oldest brother’s navy blue 1965 fastback mustang. Steve’s cassettes included Led Zeppelin, Triumph, AC/DC, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix and Talking Heads. After school I pillaged my brothers’ bedrooms, searching for the more sacred texts from underneath their beds, including Bob Dylan’s Blood On the Tracks (1974) and the Beatles White Album (1970). During my later adolescence, and for my contribution, I added the likes of U2, R.E.M., Public Enemy, and Guns and Roses to this mix. My subsequent official split from the Southern Baptist Convention began during my first year of junior college, when the church’s Youth Pastor attempted to dismantle our music collections.

Eric Holmberg is an ordained minister and founder of the video production company Reel to Real Ministries and The Apologetics Group, an organization that promotes Creationism, anti-abortion campaigns, and other conservative stances on social issues that appeal to the evangelical community. In original versions of Holmberg’s video documentary series, “The Sound and The Fury,” rock music is indicted as the root
of all “evil” for the youth of contemporary society. Holmberg argues that the lyrics in combination with the sonic constitution of the music alter listeners’ cognitive processes. Holmberg furthermore believes that “Generation-X” is uniquely addicted to music, due in part to corporate marketing campaigns which sell values as a method for peddling products. Holmberg frames the organizing structure of music as a force capable of negatively affecting cognitive thought processes and implicates popular music as “helping power the engine of the sexual revolution.” The documentary promises to take viewers “on an eye-opening journey into the heart of popular music culture” and cites one of Plato’s maxims: “When the mode of the music changes, the walls of the city shake.” For Holmberg the “city walls” is a metaphor for listeners’ collective sense of values, buttressing his stance that sees popular music as corruptive of Christian values.

Subsequent versions of Holmberg’s documentary series include alternative rock, hardcore and hip hop as part of his indictment of the American music scene. The documentary targets both parents and youth, including reenactments at the start where youth are depicted as flawed and naïve and on the path to self-destruction. Holmberg appears in front of a vast soundboard in a darkened recording studio, projecting an image of music industry insider. He claims that there is “good” music and “bad” music; the latter includes rock music and hip hop because these two genres take over the body, quickening a “depravity of conscience,” and cause a cognitive metamorphosis not unlike, he claims, what happened to the youths responsible for the Columbine school shootings. Holmberg argues that cultural chaos is one result of the musical dissonance found in particular genres of music – most notably alternative rock, hip hop, metal and Goth – insofar as he sees a link between musical and cultural dissonance. Thus, combined with
anti-establishment lyrics, he believes one would “have to be ignorant to deny a linkage” between mass murder and rock music. He implies that insofar as the beats of rock music and rap are derived from West Africa, a pagan mentality is imbued in these genres. Appropriating studies in ethnomusicology and interviews with Keith Richards and Dr. Dre, Holmberg cites cognitive research by Richard Pellegrino that powerful surges in emotional states and endorphin “highs” are elicited by rock music. Finally, Holmberg correlates the effects of music on the brain to social ills, and calls upon parents to intervene in their teenagers’ listening habits, adding that the “heart of man is first of all deceitful” and “fallen” and that through popular music, especially rock music and hip hop, youths are becoming “addicted to evil.”

Holmberg’s documentary series was featured during my church’s Wednesday Night Bible Study sessions. Our Youth Minister expected us to acquiesce to the documentary’s arguments and purge our record collections of both non-Christian music and genres of Christian music that the film indicted. During the weeks that centered upon this topic, I sat quiet during discussions that disavowed alternative viewpoints. When I did voice my opinion, it was after the last session, in the church parking lot: I cranked up the Mustang’s speakers for Led Zeppelin’s version of “When the Levee Breaks” (1971), revved its straight-six cylinder engine more than was necessary, and drove off never to return.

Holmberg’s thesis, though still popular among many evangelical Christian groups, is merely one side of the debate regarding popular music and evangelical faith. In point of fact, during the Jesus People Movement popular music and rock music were considered artistic forms of expression that were well within the purview of God and
faith in Christ. A songbook from the era compiled and published by Yohann Anderson in 1972 and reissued in 1982 contains nearly 750 praise and worship songs. Anderson explains his rationale:

This songbook tries to reflect all of life under God; therefore, all kinds of music about life are included, since God’s creative acts shine on everyone, whether they know it or not. Hymns, folk songs, current popular, and “oldies” are all mixed together and are deliberately kept out of fixed categories to give more of a feel of “life” in its wholeness.

Anderson reiterates in his short introductory essay that this songbook is designed so that musicians can learn the tunes and play them without having to rely on sheet music. The goal is to produce a collective experience of the power of singing without interruption or self-consciousness, a planned spontaneity:

DO NOT PLAY THE TUNE [. . . ]. Half sing and talk the tune with feeling and intensity [. . . ]. Use lots of rhythm instruments, e.g., bongos, maracas, sticks, etc. They really help. The major breakdown in group singing occurs when the leader is not free enough to be sensitive to the people singing. Also, if you want to lead music effectively, you need to listen to it and work with it. If music is the universal language, then it behooves you, as a communicator, to know that language.

Like Holmberg, Anderson links the cognitive power of music to its spiritual potential:

The new studies being conducted on the brain tell us that when the right brain (the spontaneous, artistic and musical side) opens up, it becomes in harmony with the left brain (logical, analytical), which then functions at a much higher rate. New
knowledge is transmitted and new decisions are made faster and easier. We hope to stretch your brain in lots of ways. That’s why MUSIC IS SO POWERFUL. Under the influence of music, learning is easier, enjoyable, efficient, and memory facilitation is greater.

Anderson’s linkage is a more positive interpretation of music’s cognitive effects, at least in comparison to Holmberg’s thesis.

Anderson includes popular music songs of the day as part of the Christian praise and worship experience. As well as select traditional hymns and songs that Anderson and other Jesus People wrote, songs by Paul Simon, Donovan, Barry McGuire, Chuck Berry, Sandy Chapin, John Denver, Neil Young, Don Henley and Glenn Frey, and Elton John are included. Thus, while Holmberg believes the sounds, arrangements, and form of popular music negatively affects the “spirit,” Anderson believes the “Holy Spirit” of God is imbued in these arrangements by the coming together of believers; spirit, in Anderson’s view, necessarily subsumes and appropriates the style that Holmberg views as irrevocably corrosive.

The contradictory perspective between Anderson’s and Holmberg’s application of the same studies linking music to cognitive effects reflects an ongoing split in the Christian community. Indeed, “debates over the nature of Christian music and its appropriate manifestations – traditional versus angst-ridden rock, for example – are to a large degree debates about the nature of Christianity and the Christian experience” (Howard and Streck, 1999, p. 6). This struggle to define the relationship between form and faith in the Christian music scene is uniquely played-out at Cornerstone, a Christian
festival predicated upon the belief that rock music is sanctified music by virtue of the
“spirit” translated through a believer with a telecaster guitar.

At Cornerstone Festival, “scene” and “act” (Burke, 1945) are interdependent. Cornerstone is, in one sense, a touristic site for play; an opportunity for attendees to experiment with alternative forms of Christian faith. The festival is also a scene that promises a marginal experience, insofar as attendees’ participation at Cornerstone is outside of their typical institutionalized roles and experiences. At Cornerstone, marginalized forms of music, most notably rock music, are appropriated by attendees to both validate and announce their identity, which in turn contributes to the construction of alternative Christian identities. This process of appropriating rock music for purposes of identity-work and community-building at Cornerstone Festival is a communicative act with ethical implications:

Action is fundamentally ethical, since it involves preferences. [. . .]. The ethical shaped our selection of means. It shaped our structure of orientation, while these in turn shape the perceptions of the individuals born within the orientation. Hence it radically affects our cooperative processes. The ethical is thus linked with the communicative [. . .] not merely as the purveying of information, but also as the sharing of sympathies and purposes, the doing of acts in common [. . .]. (Burke, p. 250)

At Cornerstone, action in the form of play and coproduction is derived through the impious-piety of Christian rock.

Burke (1954) tells us that piety is devotion to “a sense of what goes with what.” An example of piety in this particular case is the evangelical establishment’s insistence
that certain forms of music are appropriate and other forms are not. Piety is also a system-builder, in that it validates linkages between experiences and meanings and thus situates an orientation for understanding the world, events, and one’s perception of one’s relation to these. Christian community is one example of a shared orientation, and its pieties maintain the community’s ongoing relevance for members. Yet this same orientation also limits the possibilities for choices of action within that environment. For Burke, action is linked to communal orientations, insofar as action “is fundamentally ethical, since it involves preferences” (Burke, 1954, p. 250). It is also trans-generational, as these preferences construct an orientation into which future members of the community are initiated. It follows that our cooperative processes are affected by this orientation, which furthermore links the ethical with communication processes, “not merely as the purveying of information, but also as the sharing of sympathies and purposes, the doing of acts in common” (Burke, 1954, p. 205). Cornerstone, therefore, proffers a curious dilemma. On the one hand “rock music plays a critical role in establishing identity and defining” social groups, argues Howard and Streck, “but, at the same time, it appears to contradict many of the values” that these listeners “hold as Christians” (Howard and Streck, 1999, p. 5).

Cornerstone attendees remake evangelical Christian identity by grafting something that is oppositional to its traditional piety (punk rock, for example), but yet is an integral part of their experience of faith – altering the signifying tropes while retaining the essential doctrine of what it means to be an evangelical Christian. By virtue of their infusion of rock music into their experiences of faith, whole new possibilities regarding attitude and value are introduced. Spiked hair and tattoos at Cornerstone are
simultaneously play and challenges to the evangelical status quo. These become rhetorical practices insofar as they are means of representation, of constructing and communicating an alternative identity. Indeed,

The relationship between experience, expression and signification is therefore not a constant in subculture. It can form a unity which is either more or less organic, striving towards some idea of coherence, or more or less ruptural, reflecting the experience of breaks and contradictions. Moreover, individual subcultures can be more or less ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’, integrated into the community, continuous with the values of that community, or extrapolated from it, defining themselves against the parent culture. Finally, these differences are reflected not only in the objects of subculture style, but in the signifying practices which represent those objects and render them meaningful. (Hebdige, 1979, p. 127)

JPUSA’s stated purpose for organizing Cornerstone Festival includes facilitating intergenerational communication between older, “culturally ‘straight,’” and younger, “radical” Christians. A closer examination of the interplay of the audiences for Christian rock at Cornerstone provides a glimpse into this unique Christian subculture where rock music, typically a dividing line, is here used to bring these two groups together in community.

In what follows I examine more closely what seems at first glance a peculiar marriage of rock music to Christian faith. The conflicting perspective represented by Anderson and Holmberg between music and faith is embodied at Cornerstone in the characters of Rubin and Ricky. Rubin is a preacher from Los Angeles, California who protests the event at the festival gates and Ricky is a festival volunteer who lives in
nearby Macomb. Debates over the fecundity of a Christian faith that is supplemented by rock music are visceral at Cornerstone, insofar as attendees have grafted a rock music aesthetic to their identity as Christians. What was once a mere debate is now a struggle to define the meaning of this kind of experience within the circumference, no matter how marginal, of Christian faith. The stakes of this debate include the retention of new generations of Christian youth within the fold.

The Roundtable, Part I

Wednesday morning feels exactly like three days in a row of sleeping on the ground. Last night, I dozed in and out of others arriving and making camp around my tent. This morning I finish the last of the bread and cheese, then treat myself to an apple and chase the apple with a couple pints of water. My stench can no longer be covered with gratuitous amounts of deodorant. It is time for the infamous Cornerstone sulfur water shower, a short walking distance from my camp site. The shower is cold and it stinks, but it does the trick. Outside the showers, in towel and hiking boots, I keep the personal hygiene enthusiasm rolling and shave at one of the outdoor sinks. Back at camp, I gather my gear for the day’s events. Tuesday I secured my press credentials and volunteered for cart security: Wednesday through Saturday from 4pm to 8pm. Today, I wear the press badge around my neck and stuff the volunteer badge into my cargo shorts. These hiking boots are on their last leg, but they protect my feet well from the elements, including the random pools of mud like the one I just splashed through.

En route to fresh coffee and good conversation, I hear a man yelling through a bull-horn. It sounds like preaching, street-witnessing style which includes a simple script or goal which is then pursued through extemporaneously delivered arguments for the
purpose of eliciting defensiveness on the part of passersby. Often times these evangelists will “push buttons,” or otherwise spew rather outrageous proclamations, accusing women of dressing like prostitutes and men of acting or dressing like “fags.” The goal is to get peoples’ attention and then quote scripture, sometimes any verse of scripture no matter how tangential to the moment, because it is thought that by quoting scripture, in whatever context, the Holy Spirit is made manifest, or conjured, and plants a “seed” in the consciousness of the unbeliever. My first thought is that this pastor is a friend of the festival, but the vim and vigor of his pronouncements seem out of touch with JPUSA’s style. I assumed the words “whore” and “fornication” would be passé these days, even for evangelicals.

At the Gallery Stage, where I was sitting less than eight hours ago, I claim a table by laying down my backpack before purchasing my first cup of coffee. I must look like shit, because the man working behind the counter laughs and tells me it’s too soon to look this haggard. This elicits my first smile of the day, and just like that my Wednesday morning blahs have been obliterated. As he hands me the fresh hot coffee, I notice that the affable server is tatted along one arm. I also notice that he is wearing a pink wrist band. There is a color code at Cornerstone. Participants are “marked” either as attendee, volunteer, or JPUSA according to the colored elastic wrist band they are given – this year, JPUSA wears pink. My coffee-tender explains that a community member designs and produces the mug each year, and that the proceeds go back into the commune.

I proceed to pour through the festival program. I cross-reference speakers with bands, and bands with special events. I sense a presence looming well-over my left side shoulder. “What are you working on?” I respond by inviting this interlocutor to join me.
He introduces himself and typical of Cornerstone introductions, we talk about our drive time, the weather along the way and how exhausted we are. Todd and a friend are here on a combined father-daughter road trip; hoping to either reconnect with their daughters or hang onto the relationship they now have for one more summer, before college and career become their daughters’ focus. “Well, I want to know what sense people make of the experience they think they are having at Cornerstone,” I say, suddenly surprised by my own lack of preparation for any complex motivation, such as Todd’s. He nods, maintaining eye contact and his pleasant demeanor, which includes a perpetual smile-on-the-brink. “Okay. I guess it’s a pretty eclectic experience. So what do you think it means?” he asks, as if sensing my skepticism.

I know where he’s going with this and frankly I’d be similarly curious: what interest does a self-proclaimed atheist from a secular university have with a Christian event? “Maybe I’m not as much of an atheist as I wish I were,” I explain. “I think that part of why I’m here is because I’m seeking closure, the sort of closure that resolves my sense of guilt for quitting this religion. I don’t subscribe to this anymore, but I respect it. Maybe the fact that Cornerstone didn’t work for me the way I’m arguing it works for others is self-defeating to my argument, but maybe it was a positive transition.”

Todd asks me why I left the faith. I explain that I don’t exactly know; that I’m still working out the particulars of my un-faith: “I think there’s something to it all, and I’m all for the more positive facets. The maxims, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’ and ‘Do unto others as you’d have done to you’ aren’t original to Christianity. I love the values those ideas encompass, but I just can’t subscribe to this particular belief system. I believe ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ was a special person with an audacious message of love and
compassion, but I’m not buying the subsequent theological spin,” I explain. Todd is a patient and tolerant listener. “It just sort of happened, over time,” I say. He explains that for him it was the opposite; that he began at the place that I’m currently breeching. For Todd, the process was equally gradual, but the questions that led me away from adherence to this gospel led him to it. I make an “X” with my arms in the air to visualize our intersecting trajectories: “I’ve heard of conversion stories before,” he jokes, “but this is my first de-conversion story.” As Todd and I finish this conversation, his friend, Dan, arrives and joins us for coffee. “You two are far too serious for a Wednesday morning in Bushnell, Illinois,” he jokes.

Todd and Dan have parked their RV behind the speakers’ tents. With the exception of the nearby Dance Club, the locale offers relative tranquility. “Well,” I explain, “my camp site was nice and quiet until the neighbors moved in late last night.” I awoke this morning to a virtual carnival of tents surrounding my otherwise isolated space. I was expecting my neighbors to be tolerably “geeky” Bible Study youths, hosting gentle guitar-strumming praise and worship sessions at night and up early for campfire prayer breakfasts. Instead, I was wakened an hour into slumber to the seemingly call-response chorus of “God damn, fucking shit,” one of their more succinct phrases. I lost count of how many times the words “dick,” “pussy,” “whore,” “bitch,” and “fucker” were launched like fireworks throughout the night. “For some reason,” I confess to Todd and Dan, “I was intimidated. I couldn’t sleep more than an hour at a time and even recorded some of their conversations.” They drank cases worth of Keystone Light (empties littered the site in the morning) and went into town (nearby Macomb) for tequila when the beer was tapped. “I heard one of them bragging about not paying to get into the
festival,” I add. “He wasn’t sneaky about it, either; he just drove in.” Toward the end of the night, they retired to their tents but turned the site into an open-air “sleep-over,” yelling back and forth. “I fell asleep for the last time when two of them decided to drive around the festival grounds at about three in the morning, blasting Foreigner. I’d turn them in if they weren’t such an interesting counterstatement to arguments presupposing that events like Cornerstone merely provide a space for otherwise ‘socially tame’ Christian youth to attend punk rock shows.”

“It’s not that surprising,” says Dan. “Tooth and Nail,” which is one of the edgiest of the remaining independent Christian music labels, “has bands with the Warp Tour and other secular festivals. So, their bands have fans that care less about their theology than their music.” I ask Dan to explain and he adds that it is a provocative cultural exchange: Christian youth follow Tooth and Nail bands to secular festivals, and non-Christian youth follow those same bands to festivals like Cornerstone. “They don’t care what their favorite band’s religious affiliations are,” he adds. Todd points out that this is similar to how he was introduced to Christian faith. “You don’t drop all that at once and then wake up a Christian,” says Todd, referencing the lifestyle of drugs, alcohol, sex, and coarse language that the group from last night demonstrated. “It’s a process,” he says.

Dan’s reasoning suggests that Christian musicians’ intransigent occupation of non-Christian based events is tolerated, yet the inverse is generally not true for general market bands. Furthermore, the audience-exchange is at best conspicuous. Most Christian festivals are quota-oriented, setting as their goal (which they must meet to satisfy their sponsors) a pre-determined number of religious conversions and recommitments of faith. While organizations such as Greenpeace and ONE Campaign
engage in recruitment practices at general market festivals, their efforts are rarely fueled with the same fundamental fervor as their religious counterparts.

However, religious conversion is not a goal of JPUSA’s Cornerstone Festival. This is not to say that if the opportunity presents itself they are not interested in conversion. Cornerstone is already equipped with a rich support group infrastructure for such occasions, but the festival is not organized or managed for that purpose. Neither is JPUSA trying to re-socialize fringe Christians back into “normal” Christianity. If they are at all motivated to that end, it is to encourage those who occupy the margins of Christian faith to stay on the fringe; to be a “light” to others in that space. JPUSA wants to bring older and younger generations of believers together in dialogue through camp – an intergenerational exchange of ideas and experiences. Recalling my conversation with John Herrin, although only 5% of Cornerstone attendees are over the age of 50, “older” is a relative term. While 50% of attendees are age 16 to 25, approximately 25% are 26 to 35 and 10% are 36 to forty-nine.

In terms of socialization processes, this translates as “maintenance” work, but not in service of the “traditional fold” or even the commune; rather, the maintenance function is for the ongoing vitality of Christian faith, however one interprets it, relative to the individual’s construct of that faith’s identifying markers, no matter how peculiar. This is reflected in the festival’s standards for musicians. Where other Christian festivals make musicians sign contracts in which those musicians itemize their sins over the past two years, JPUSA only cares that the musicians consider themselves Christians, in their own rather than JPUSA’s or others’ terms. This self-defining prerogative includes those who are at best confused over their identity as Christians, because JPUSA counts ambiguity as
an opportunity for dialogue. However, JPUSA’s frame of inclusiveness and diversity also invites opposition. After my conversation with Todd and Dan, I pick up the bullhorn’s trail from this morning, which leads me back to the festival’s main gate.

Rubin

The front gate is busy today, with a large influx of new arrivals. I’m en route to investigate the source of the bullhorn from this morning. Rubin is in mid-rant: “Don’t be a lesbian. What’s a lesbian doing at a Christian concert? Read the Bible. [. . . .]. Be a man of God, rather than try to be a queer person. Jesus said be born again; ‘born again’ means to be a new creature. Putting tattoos on yourself [inaudible], being [inaudible] of fashion is not Christianity.” Someone yells back from a passing car: “You need to be blessed!” to which Rubin says he has been blessed.

Figure 4.1: Rubin

I tell Rubin that I’m with the University of South Florida and that I’m studying Cornerstone. I want to know what he thinks about the festival: “I think a lot of its just emotional based; it really has nothing to do with God. I mean if that’s the case, then Jesus really missed it. He had twelve men. He should’ve struck up a band.” Rubin believes that Cornerstone’s music scene is a superficial proselytizing ploy that is
ultimately unsuccessful: “In fact yesterday, we talked to an atheist who was going in and said the lyrics meant nothing to him.” Rubin adds that the proliferation of tattoos of Jesus he sees at Cornerstone, rather than representative of valid alternative expressions of faith, are a form of Christian-cool that amount to “icons of biblical things and that doesn’t make a person a Christian.”

Rubin sees these alternative performances of Christian faith similar to Holmberg’s thesis about music; he worries that both the style of music and the kind of participation it elicits runs counter to evangelical faith. “Hollywood understands the concept of music when it puts together and edits a movie,” claims Rubin, a Los Angeles native and annual Oscar Awards protestor. “Music can actually alter people,” he says, referring to music’s relationship to mood: “And so, uh, when music can actually influence a person more than the Bible, I say that there’s something wrong with that.”

While I’m interviewing Rubin, a small contingent of attendees from inside the gate comes out to join the conversation.

Attendee-1: Would you guys like some water?

Rubin: No thanks.

Attendee-1: Well, we have Gatorade.

Rubin: I’ll take some Gatorade though.

Attendee-1: Sweet, ha-ha, what now? I win!

Rubin: Ha-ha-ha. Hey, what are they charging in there today?

Attendee-1: Uh, it’s $145 for the whole week.

Rubin: That’s ten dollars cheaper. Yesterday it was $155. Thanks, I was just wondering.
These attendees haven’t come out here to offer water, they have an agenda. Rubin recognizes this; he addresses me but he’s reeling them into an argument. Rubin concedes that someone might “get saved” at the festival, however he believes that the form of participation including tattoos and rock music, are mere styles, markers not of a genuine form of Christian faith but a cheap and transient capitulation to popular culture. “If this is a Christian event, I’m assuming you’re going to have some people in this parking lot sleeping together who are committing fornication. This shouldn’t happen, this needs to be mentioned. [. . . .] So aside from feeling real good and the beat, you have people in this parking lot most likely going to hell. And so, music aside, they need to be told this and that’s kind of what we’re doing. [. . . .]. Rubin’s explanation that this “should be mentioned” is a reflection of other Christian festivals and the evangelical parent culture which desire quantifiable allegiance to their doctrine. Ambiguity is unacceptable. In addition, Rubin sees Cornerstone as a misguided if well-intentioned attempt to appease Christian youths’ thirst for euphoric popular entertainment experiences.

As I am packing up my gear to leave, the small contingent of attendees calls-out Rubin for verbally assaulting one of their friends, claiming that Rubin used “the ‘B’ word” as an assault upon one of the female members of their group. Rubin says that it must have been one of the local pastors, from Bushnell or Macomb. This conversation reaches an impasse and Rubin, seeing that I have my tape recorder on, launches back into his critique of the festival as a detrimental appropriation of secularized popular culture. “It’s not just a fad for us,” claims an attendee, “Tattoos, I mean. If you have a tattoo that’s based off of the Bible or based off Christianity that exalts God, it really will never go out of fashion because, like you said, God doesn’t go out of fashion. God’s always
here.” However, Rubin believes their lifestyles are not so much advertisements for Christian faith, but complements to a hedonistic popular culture: “Once it comes out of L.A., then it’s a domino effect nationwide. I see the piercing and so I know [. . . .]. Soon, you guys are going to have piercings because you’ve been influenced by them. I’m simply saying if you want to be a peculiar person, live for God.”

Rubin argues that style subsumes spirit, that the trappings of the world dim the “light of the Lord” within a believer. Conversely, the attendees believe that spirit subsumes style. Both Rubin and the attendees concede that style is superficial, but each party interprets superficiality differently. Because the body and the soul are integral to their identity, the attendees believe that their adornments, whether tattoos or i-pods, are extensions of their faith. Rubin, however, believes that these attendees are not cultivating a style that will communicate their faith to non-believers; rather, he views their performances of an “alternative” Christian identity as mere appropriations of trends set by the popular culture industry.

I ask Rubin if I can take his photograph, and he obliges. His voice, amplified by the bullhorn he wields, represents a dogmatic allegiance to evangelical Christian faith which does not differentiate between pronouncements and performances of faith, the latter encompassing a wide range of “sinful” social behaviors including rock music. Rubin’s presence at Cornerstone as a protestor legitimates the festival as a socializing agent for alternative Christian identity, situating Cornerstone as “liberal” within the circumference of evangelicalism.
Ricky

I met Ricky and his son Dale while interviewing Rubin. Ricky is in his early 50s and sports an unmistakable amalgam of retro-British punk gear, including a red beret, leather vest and combat boots. Ricky’s son works third shift at a McDonald’s in Macomb and is missing a week’s pay to attend Cornerstone. Ricky has attended ten Cornerstone festivals, beginning in 1992 and including consecutive attendances from 1994 to 1996, and 2003 to present. He claims that Cornerstone’s “diversity” is the most alluring aspect of the festival and he sees diversity of faith interconnected to diversity of musical styles. However, this is also a point of contention for Ricky: “There’s a lot of things that I didn’t understand about Christian rock, and God had to open my eyes just because, at one point, I was like some of these people that hang outside our gates and preach against Cornerstone.”

Ricky shares with me his personal testimony of coming to faith in Christ, adding that his love of music and his newfound faith was initially a contradiction that he could not ameliorate: “[O]ne of the fears of me becoming a Christian was ‘I’m gonna have to give this all up,’” he explains. When Ricky became a Christian, he threw out his albums and records, targeting these elements of popular culture as somehow connected to his former life as an unbeliever, “because I was putting my rock music ahead of God.” He went so far as to destroy the albums, not wanting to profit from selling them and as a means of keeping them from corrupting others’ lives.

Ricky’s story anticipates a curious conundrum for converts of his generation, from counter-culture to Christianity. On the one hand, the first commandment warns against adopting any other gods, and in this case “gods” could be interpreted as “rock star
idols” in contemporary society. Yet, these same “idols” have a profound affect upon youth. Ricky explains that “when the lead singer of Head East got saved, and consequently became the lead singer of Petra” his views of music and faith changed, so that he saw the two as more complementary rather than contradictory: “We had Don Francisco, we had John Michael Talbot, we had Scott Wesley Brown; we had all these guys coming out.” Ricky’s framing of these popular musicians converting to Christianity as “coming out” speaks to the ongoing pressures contemporary Christian musicians face, insofar as the evangelical Christian community views the conversion, or resocialization, of these general market musicians as validating the faith; yet, the Christian base expects these musicians to conform to their lifestyles. “But this is the problem when we look at superstars and we expect them to get saved and then become like us,” says Ricky, who is uncertain about the legitimacy of the Christian alternative music scene. Though it pains him, he confesses that he sympathizes with where Rubin is coming from.

Glenn Kaiser’s Resurrection Band, initially a mere substitute for his long-lost pre-conversion music collection, became an indispensible influence to Ricky’s development of personal faith through Christian rock music community. He describes the first time he saw the band perform at Cornerstone:

So these guys were just rockin’ their butts off, you know what I mean? They were going all over the stage, up and down. [ . . . ] Glenn was stopping and doing something to the guitar, and Wendy came up there and made this statement, she said: “You know, I’ve been with the band for quite some time now, and I’ve been in other bands and they always start and they play two and they finish. So I asked the band, I said why don’t we do that? Why don’t we just play our songs
and go home? Why do we stop after each song?” And Glenn said, “Those other bands aren’t in tune, and we will always be in tune.” And Glenn is blushing.

Wendy, I think, is the only lady that can make him blush like that.

Ricky’s recollection of this event draws out a subtle, yet important function of Christian rock. It was not merely the genre of music, or the lyrics, that he identified with: it was the style of the performance that was most impactful. When he cites the band’s on-stage movements, of “rockin’ their butts off” and “going all over the stage,” as well as Glenn’s and Wendy’s romantic openness, he is intimating the potentially transformative power of impious-piety (relative to an otherwise dogmatic and conservative evangelical faith), not just on a personal level, but experienced communally at Cornerstone.

Much of the fashion styles at Cornerstone follow in-suit their preferred genre of rock – punk, Goth, hardcore, etcetera. For Ricky, the outward appearance of attendees’ fashion perpetuates innuendo about what goes on inside the festival, regarding the consumption of alcohol, illegal drugs, and fights. However, he places the onus upon local churchgoers who respond to festival attendees similarly to how early believers responded to John the Baptist, a New Testament prophet who is said to have dressed in animal hide:

Actually, I should be thanking God for those people. I really should, because if everybody said this is a good thing, then we should be worried. And so, is this place perfect? No, you show me a place that’s perfect and I’ll go there. No, I won’t go there because if I walk there it’s not perfect anymore, right? These guys are attacking your Christian brothers. We get that from Macomb as well.
Ricky explains that the local communities have a “hate/love relationship with Cornerstone. They love the music, they hate the weird people.” Our interview has come to a close, but Ricky proffers one final thought regarding the protestors, including the outsider, Rubin, and the local pastors who accompany him:

So Brian, here’s the thing. They don’t want to be proven wrong. If they prove wrong, they’re going to lose their place out there. That is their stage. The guys said “spotlight’s on me.” Hey, the spotlight’s on them when they’re out there doing their thing. [. . . .]. The things of God are mysteries to those who aren’t saved. Would you say those people have compassion in their hearts? No, they can say they do but I don’t see it. What I see is judgementalism, heresyism and they’re gonna exist. And if they didn’t exist, like I said, there’s something wrong with this place.

Ricky is supportive of the Cornerstone scene, however his preferred relationship between faith and rock music aligns less with the ambiguity of Transformational CCM and more so with the exhortation, worship, and testimonial aspects of a Separational form.

Rubin’s rhetoric draws upon a desire to maintain traditionally evangelical pieties; however, Ricky occupies a curious liminal space. Ricky sees general market rock music as antithetical to Christian faith, yet he embraces this genre mediated in the form of Glenn Kaiser’s Resurrection Band. Ricky is furthermore suspicious, though supportive, of Cornerstone’s new generation of attendees that sees itself accomplishing an alternative Christian identity, yet proclaiming an adherence to traditional evangelical doctrine. The attendee that argued with Rubin, defending his right as a Christian to sport tattoos and listen to hardcore or “heavy” music is an example of this perception, which amounts to an
impious-piety mediated through a rock music aesthetic. By definition, the phrase “in the world but not of the world” is a conundrum: these youths are very much “of” the world and yet not “in” the world – they are at Cornerstone Festival. Rubin feels compelled to protest the same festival these attendees feel “called” to defend. For their part, the attendees reveal that their sense of personal identity is interconnected to this scene; to Cornerstone as an ideological campsite where they construct alternative Christian identities.

Cart Security Duty: Wednesday

I decided before arriving at Cornerstone that volunteering would be a good way to view the festival; that it would provide a vantage that most attendees never experience. The Cornerstone security office is a small trailer, located at the nexus of activity. It is adjacent to the festival office and medical center. A small, orange and plastic netted fence marks this important territory and I cross its threshold with some trepidation. The point of my volunteering is to glean an insider’s perspective of the festival, with the hopes of getting to know JPUSA on a more intimate level.

I mount the office steps, knock, and enter, thus inaugurating my time as a member of Cornerstone’s cart security. A young man with brown hair lets me in. His orange vest and walky-talky tell me that he works security, and his tired demeanor tells me he’s been at this since morning.

I set my backpack down in the corner, under a countertop that is bolted onto the side of the trailer. Ron, a tall black man exuding a calm vibe, is one of the heads of security and is a long-time JPUSA member. I’ve walked in on the middle of a minor crisis. Main Street is jammed at the nearby corner, visible from the large window above
the countertop. What sounds like an urgent crisis coming from the other end of the walky-talky is met by Ron with composed assurance. Nothing is resolved, but the sense of urgency is defused. I introduce myself to Ron and he tells me to have a seat. I tell Ron about my study and he seems excited. I him ask how long he has been with JPUSA: “I guess since the beginning. Huh,” he adds in reflection. “I had never thought about that until you asked.” A constant, muffled rumbling permeates the trailer’s walls. It is the sound that a multitude of generator stages hosting hardcore bands produces. “Different levels of their faith is where they’re at,” he says, referring to the various fashions of punk, Goth, and hardcore, adopted by attendees at Cornerstone. Ron calls it, “authentic weird.”

As we’re talking, a call comes over the walky-talky. Plenty of calls have come in, and Ron keys on the important messages: “Be on the look out for fake JPUSA bracelets. This year they’re pink, but some people have been caught with last year’s blue.” Ron asks me if I’m familiar with the bracelet system and I tell him that I was filled in at the volunteer tent. He laughs, explaining that some “gate-crashers” are wearing blue from last year, which means that at the end of last year’s festival they rummaged through the garbage to find the bracelets and have held onto them all this time. When more volunteers arrive, Ron hands me an orange vest (one size fits all), a walky-talky and the key to cart #7: “Take Jeff over to the North entrance,” he says, and turns his attention to another “emergency.”

I meet Jeff outside and hop into the driver’s seat, as if I know what I’m doing and where I’m going. After some fumbling, I figure out where the ignition is located and turn the tiny engine over, only to breech another awkward moment: “Hey man; so, do you
know how to put this thing in reverse?” I ask. “I think it’s the lever,” he says, kindly, which I appreciate because he could have made me feel like an idiot. “Next question,” I say: “Where’s the north entrance?”

I spend the bulk of this security shift figuring out what Ron meant by: “Be a presence.” I stop a couple of times, pulling over to the side of Main Street to watch vehicles roll by, new arrivals searching for a campsite. People making the trek to Main Stage ask if I will give them a ride. Unsure of JPUSA’s policy, I say “No.” I break away from Main Street and travel down a small path that runs beside a pond, slowing down to watch skaters talking ‘skills’ atop the skate ramp. Secure in my presence, I drive slowly along the grassy paths that interconnect along the farthest reaches of the campsites. Some youths throwing a Frisbee move off to the side of the path, smiling and giving me a “thumbs up.” I return the gesture and the smile, throwing a “high five” into the mix. Hanging a hard right, back toward Main Street, my memory of attending the festival and exchanging “high fives” with cart security personnel, so cool in their dark sunglasses, cargo shorts and hiking boots, merges with the identity I’m constructing for myself at this year’s festival.

By the end of my shift I feel invigorated, despite all the highs and lows that go into being “a presence.” I’ve lost track of the roles I’m playing: Ethnographer, attendee, press, confidant and confederate and former true believer turned cart security. Outside the office, Andy, festival security supervisor, runs through the primary rules of conduct which begin with never hesitating to call for backup if I feel intimidated by a situation. He reiterates my primary responsibility. “Part of being a presence,” he insists, “includes remaining calm.” If someone is putting off a bad attitude, he says, go to a “happy place”
and wait it out. “Let people defuse themselves,” he adds. We shake hands and I feel encouraged about tomorrow’s shift.

Reminiscing Camp

I return to camp after exploring the festival grounds and taking in more live music. My understanding of how the Cornerstone scene works for attendees is beginning to crystallize: otherwise marginal forms of expressing and experiencing Christian faith are privileged at this festival. Not only are the processes of this socialization non-traditional, but the end-goal, if there even is one, is that attendees appropriate Christian faith to their lifestyle, rather than adjust their lifestyle to a pre-existing dogma. Cornerstone’s camp dynamic, and subsequent crew-based form of attendance, facilitates bonds and social networks between attendees whose marginalized membership practices are validated. However, while rock music and its many sub-genres is the central unifying theme at Cornerstone Festival, rock music has been, and remains, a marginalized form of expression for Christian youth.

My introduction to Christian rock was inaugurated by two friends who were attending classes at the local junior college by day and working as DJs at the local Christian radio station at night. At “The Scroll,” a Christian bookstore in Tyler, TX, Russell and Chris sat me down in a corner and brought me tape after tape, directing me to this or that song. They pillaged the dusty corners where the misfits of CCM – including alternative rock, blues and metal bands – were stashed. Traditional Gospel, popular and easy-listening forms of CCM dominated the shelf space. I was hooked, immediately, when I heard the opening rift of The 77’s song, “The Lust, The Flesh, The Eyes, and The Pride of Life” (1987). I left that day with a stack of CDs by Daniel Amos, Adam Again,
The Throes and The Lost Dogs. The artistry was top notch even if the production quality betrayed these musicians’ marginal place in the CCM industry hierarchy.

From the late 1970s into the early 1990s, Christian bookstores like The Scroll were the primary power broker in the distribution and sales of Christian Music. This conspicuously well-organized gatekeeper was especially discriminative with rock music:

Christian bookstores, reasonably, decided to take the path of least resistance – to sell music and artwork that couldn’t possibly offend any of their customers – and the Christian music industry was relieved to give the bookstores what they wanted. Christian singers like Dallas Holm and Cynthia Clawson took nonthreatening stances to new heights. Their pleasant music had lyrics that rarely strayed from safe themes like gratitude toward Jesus and was an ideal soundtrack for evangelical Christianity’s new place in the culture [. . .]. By 1980, when Christians were key to the election of Ronald Reagan, the face of Christian music was no longer a hairy ex-hippie with a thatch on his face and a song in his heart. (Beaujon, 2006, p. 29)

Christian rock was developed by Jesus People musicians in the late 1960s. From this time through the 1970s, groups sustained their presence by constant touring and mail-order distribution. However, as Beaujon notes, unlike its easy-listening counterparts, Christian rock was not readily assimilated into the CCM industry.

When the popularity of CCM burgeoned in the 1980s, the rock music that was banned from the churches found performance spaces in coffeehouses and nightclubs, and rack space, if sparse, on Christian bookstore shelves. Today, bands are sought after to perform for youth groups in churches, or at clubs that serve as a “cool” front for
churches, seeking to draw youths into their fold. However, Christian rock was viewed
most suspiciously by church groups:

Jesus Music provoked controversy from its inception. Traditional churchgoers
made no distinction between long-haired Christian rocker Larry Norman or guitar
icon Jimi Hendrix. The established church remained convinced that anything
born out of rebellion would only beget further rebellion. Hippies extolling the
virtues of Jesus to a frenzied backbeat of “worldly music” was nothing more than
spiritual compromise. (Di Sabatino, 1999, p. 136)

But there were those who effectively rebelled against the censorship and created a niche
in the bookstores for alternatively styled Christian music, predominantly rock music but
also including rap, techno, heavy metal and shoe-gazer music.

In lieu of industry support, the Christian alternative rock scene in the early 1990s
recalled the Jesus People music scene of the late 1970s. The ideology of the music had
changed, from dogmatism to ambiguity, but similar to early Jesus People music the
distribution was sparse and the marketing was predominantly word-of-mouth, like my
experience at The Scroll. The music that Russell and Chris introduced me to represented
an edgier Christian music scene. Steve Taylor (alternative rock, pop rock, new wave)
indicted evangelicals for perpetuating segregation and racism; The 77s (blues rock)
replaced a “the Devil made me do it” mentality with personal responsibility, including
owning rather than suppressing sexual desire; The Lost Dogs (country, blues rock) and
Adam Again (alternative rock) broached otherwise taboo topics such as divorce, anti-war
appeals and calls for social activism. These themes may not be especially original in the
general market, however for a Christian youth audience, many of whom were banned
from purchasing non-Christian music and listening to non-Christian radio stations, this was quite radical. As DJs, Russell and Chris pushed back against this censorship, sneaking a song by The 77s or Daniel Amos (alternative rock) into their “graveyard” shift playlist at the local Christian radio station.

Though censored from much of Christian radio, these musicians were easily accessible at Cornerstone Festival, where we could hear them perform these records that proffered a reality that contested traditional evangelical dogmatism. The festival served as a site for the marginalized person of faith to participate in an alternative experience. It was also a time to bond with friends as travelers in a space that was outside of our typical social environment – sharing food, relying on others’ resources, and crewing in a communal space. It was a time for debating the particulars of our Christian faith and the available freedoms and limitations that we perceived within its frame, including the ongoing debate of what it meant to be “in the world, but not of the world,” insofar as this maxim related to rock music and its accompanying aesthetic. Cornerstone was for us a site where we could invent the sort of space, both physical and spiritual, we wanted to celebrate. As fate, or serendipity, or maybe just dumb luck would have it, the timing for the fieldwork portion of this study coincided with an important landmark for Cornerstone Festival.

Celebrating a Quarter-Century of Cornerstone

For Cornerstone’s 25th anniversary, all officially sponsored exhibition area venues are shut down between 6pm and midnight. Main Stage, however, remains open and I join the throng of people walking to the venue. The walk to Cornerstone’s Main Stage is a pilgrimage in its own right. The venue is the typical the primary draw for the festival and
typically features a recent convert musician from the general market. A long-time tradition within the evangelical community has been to recruit popular general market artists into its fold and put them on stage as advertisements for the gospel. Bob Dylan and Alice Cooper are among the most notable, while M.C. Hammer, who played Cornerstone in 1999, is likely the most forgettable. At this year’s festival, Brian “Head” Welch, formerly of the band Korn, continues this tradition of Cornerstone’s penchant for marketing CCM’s most recently “re-socialized” general market musician.

This is also the first year that a film has made it to Main Stage. Director Jim Hanon’s film Miss HIV (2006) argues that although HIV-AIDS is a preventable disease, a seemingly irreconcilable confluence of religious, activist, and political ideologies continue to impede progress toward a more aggressive and comprehensive prevention strategy. Before programs can be successfully implemented, it is argued that these ideological camps must either resolve or compromise their stances on matters of women’s rights, sexuality, and the international community’s moral authority to force social change upon sovereign nations. HIV/AIDS remains a difficult topic for many members of the evangelical community, who view the disease as evidence of God’s judgment against homosexuals. JPUSA’s willingness not only to host but to highlight this film resonates with the more liberally minded of its attendees and challenges conservatives.

I veer off Main Street halfway to my destination, taking an alternate path to Main Stage through a heavily wooded camping area. There are sporadic gatherings around games of horseshoes and cards, all including rock music blaring from boom boxes. The latter is like touring the history of Christian rock. The 1980s heavy metal rockers Stryper
spill out of one site, met by Glenn Kaiser’s timeless blues rock Resurrection Band at the next. I also hear the unmistakable 1970s rock of Larry Norman, the quintessential Jesus People musician. Further down the trail, a sophisticated composition by Charlie Peacock (art rock), with its beautiful melodies and complicated changes, entertains an equally composed group of fifty-somethings, grilling a medley of vegetables and steak. This group camping area is typically a family, or “quiet” camping zone, which means their children are likely kicking up dust in a gauntlet at a hardcore show somewhere in the exhibition area before those venues are closed for the Main Stage celebration.

Instead of delving into the midst of the crowd gathered at Main Stage, I find a spot of cool grass and lie down, resting my eyes while catching fragments of storytelling that recollect and reinvent personal and collective memory. I hear people comparing decades-worth of Cornerstone festivals, from the 1980s and 1990s to the 2000s. I suspect, however, that this is the exception given the more sedated locale I chose to settle into. The average attendee is an early twenty-something and many are here for the first time. Occasions like this, and during the opening ceremonies at each year’s festival, educate audiences regarding Cornerstone’s organizers, JPUSA, and the group’s beginnings during the Jesus People Movement. It is typically the case that new attendees know virtually nothing about JPUSA, including parents who co-travel here with their teenagers. The Main Stage playbill reflects this eclectic generation-bending.

Flatfoot 56, who made their big splash here at Cornerstone in 2006, is a Christian punk band from Chicago, Illinois that features Scottish Highland Bagpipes. Another act, The Lee Boys, are likely the most talented among a generation of young Christian bands who have gotten their start as church “house” bands. This certainly signifies a new trend,
of sorts, for the CCM industry as increasingly rock music is an accepted form of music among evangelicals. However, this by no means suggests a radical shift, insofar as these bands’ lyrics are typically in the tradition of Separational CCM, which features “obvious” Christian lyrics by “obvious” Christians. These first bands serve as opening acts to more traditional festival favorites, including long-time friends of JPUSA: The 77s, The Lost Dogs, Over the Rhine, and Charlie Peacock. Community elder Glenn Kaiser shares the stage with a variety of invited musicians and the David Crowder Band’s innovative praise and worship jam closes out the evening’s musical celebration, which is followed by the annual July 4th Fireworks.

En route back to camp, I divert into a virtual labyrinth of venues in the exhibition area, official and off-grid: Goth, punk, jazz, folk, club, and hardcore. The only genuinely unifying theme among them is that they are, for the most part, marginalized forms of music within CCM. In the past, the CCM industry, along with its parent evangelical culture, could easily control the genre; however, with innovations in both recording and distribution technologies their grip on the scene is slipping. The new “power broker” will soon be a young attendee pod-casting from a generator stage at Cornerstone. Social network sites might complete this swing toward an independent Christian youth community. In the late 1960s it was folk and rock music that made Christianity relevant again to millions of American youth, ushering in a new generation into the fold of a then waning religious movement. What’s happening at this year’s Cornerstone might register another paradigm shift.

The house lighting pours out of Encore-1 as I navigate the maze of rusted metal garbage cans, tents, and fellow zombies. The bands have stopped playing for the
evening, but I can hear the distant rumbling of the Dance Club from the other end of the grounds. This rumbling is complemented by the harmonizing sounds of a small group of attendees gathered at Encore-2, singing worship songs to the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar. Back at my campsite, these sounds are drowned out by the clanging of tequila bottles, laughter and spontaneous bouts of cursing. I pass out in my tent on top of the sleeping bag, too tired to change out of my clothes.

Conclusion

For Dick Hebdige’s punks (1979), style is an organizing principle around which youth culture differentiates itself both from its parents and its parent culture. However, a Christian rock aesthetic, insofar as it occurs at Cornerstone festival, includes both young and old sharing an experience of Christian faith in the context of making camp. These generations share in common an experience of marginalization within their chosen faith. The older members’ access to capital and influence, combined with younger members’ passion for typically marginalized forms of rock, access to social media sites, and prowess in digital production technologies, may be the start of something groundbreaking. Certainly, Cornerstone Festival represents the carving out of a more sustainable niche for Christian rock, one that does not need the support of the CCM industry or its evangelical customer base.

Processes of play and dialogue are coproduced forms of socialization. These processes need attendees’ willing participation as “crews” as well as JPUSA’s facilitation and maintenance of the scene. The “doing of acts in common,” crewing and camping at Cornerstone, are communicative acts that bring into being for the duration of the festival an alternative experience of Christian membership. Christian rock is an impious-piety
insofar as it grafts an otherwise antithetical form of expression, rock music, to a traditional form of Christian faith. Attendees navigate the oft ambiguous space between these forms, pulled at times in opposing directions: Rubin’s certainty and bombast “outside the gates” and the alluring liminality within. In point of fact, Rubin’s presence and the more traditional evangelical voice he embodies serves as a validating antagonist to Cornerstone’s strategy, which works counter-intuitively, though equally effective, to typical forms of socialization. One attendee who came out to the gates to confront Rubin wondered later why JPUSA did not directly engage Rubin or have Rubin and other preachers who also came to protest the festival removed from the grounds. John Herrin explained to me later that he in fact went the other direction in this case. He extended an invitation to Rubin to enter the festival and take in its scene first-hand – an invitation that Rubin refused. By not taking action against the protestors, by letting Rubin and others remain outside the gates to harass new arrivals, the “conflict” became a matter for each attendee or crew to consider for themselves; to engage in some form of action, be that ignoring or engaging Rubin, or to take up as a matter of discussion on their own terms and for themselves.

Indeed, action is reciprocal insofar as it facilitates internalization of the social order while contributing to its construction, or ongoing objectification of reality:

Religious legitimations arise from human activity, but once crystallized into complexes of meaning that become part of a religious tradition they can attain a measure of autonomy as against this activity. Indeed, they may then act back upon actions in everyday life, transforming the latter, sometimes radically.

(Berger, 1967, p. 41)
Religion is especially effective to redress those marginal moments when the reality of everyday life is brought into question by bringing these experiences into the realm of a “sacred reality” (Berger, p. 44). However, because music in general and rock music in particular includes aesthetic processes and forms of participation which are atypical to traditional orientations of evangelical faith, the otherwise mere marginal experience that attendees have at Cornerstone, combined with the uniquely communal experience and structure that JPUSA brings to the site, facilitates a sustainable subculture. The coproduced dynamic of Cornerstone Festival is buttressed by social networking sites and the recent trend among young evangelicals for social activism. Through this form of hyper-mediated coproduction, emergent cultures that spring-up at the festival are more easily transplanted to attendees’ hometown scenes.

In Hebdige’s study of the punks, style is a form of communication that cycles through a process of opposition to diffusion, from resistance to incorporation (1979, p. 100). However, for attendees, like those who challenged Rubin’s position relative to their alternative forms of Christian practice, the opposition and resistance they receive from the evangelical parent culture helps sustain rather than diffuse their subculture. Attendees’ performances of style are rhetorical insofar as they desire to be read, exchanging the church house for the camp ground in order to participate in an alternative form of Christian community: “The communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the ‘point’ behind the style of all spectacular subcultures” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 102). To-date, the coproduced aspect of the festival helps both attendees and JPUSA resist an insidious incorporation of their scene. Whether this resistance can hold indefinitely, however, remains to be proven.
Chapter Five:

Variations of Music Experiences and Christian Identity

In chapter four I examined the conspicuous fusion of Christian faith to rock music with an eye to the ongoing debate among evangelicals regarding this fusion’s spiritual efficacy. JPUSA frames Cornerstone as a space for Christian youth to celebrate a rock aesthetic. For attendees, Christian rock is a means of forming community and of forging identities alternative to the evangelical mainstream that sees the music as threatening. At Cornerstone, attendees explore an “other” of Christian experience that is threatening to a social order predicated upon dogmatic systems of belief. Andrew Beaujon (2006) explains that Cornerstone Festival champions the burgeoning Christian rock scene, noting that the festival’s “willingness to book bands that don’t necessarily fit in with the evangelical scene is a big draw” (p. 15). Therefore, in order to more fully understand the role of Christian rock, we must consider the relationships that are created by its performance as a scene.

Although rock music enjoys increasing value for those individuals who glean from it important identity markers, their parent culture considers even Christian rock a threatening form of music or practice that constructs adherents as “deviants” in lieu of sound Christian doctrine and attitudes. In other words, to the larger, more traditional evangelical community the modifier (Christian) does not compensate for the object (rock music). However, because Christian youth want their rock music, the parent culture
adapted by co-opting the genre into the fold through the evangelical-approved CCM industry and established its control over the distributive, performative, and thus participatory practices of its adherents. This accentuates Cornerstone’s importance as a marginal experience, insofar as the festival is not determined by industry standards or the evangelical processes of other Christian festivals.

Cornerstone Festival has shifted the culture of CCM by creating a niche within the evangelical community for alternative forms of Christian membership practices. Transformational CCM, for example, typically a marginalized form of the genre resonates strongly with attendees who identify with this form’s authentic ambiguity. However, artists who fall into the Separational and Integrational categories of Howard’s and Streck’s forms are also present at the festival. I account for this co-mingling of forms by recounting a series of live performances through the lens of what Christopher Small calls “musicking,” which articulates a holistic experience of music performance. Ethnographic interviews with The Robbins and with The Memphis Tent stage managers complement these performance criticisms by providing performers’ and producers’ perspectives of the scene. Also, I return to The Roundtable where a new member, Jordon, explains the unique relationship between Christian rock artists and their audiences. Finally, I recount a panel discussion entitled, “Cornerstone’s Place in the Scene,” headlined by festival director John Herrin, which envisions appropriating the generator stages as the foundation for new socialization processes.

Jesus People Music

During the evenings, I find a reason to stop by the Gallery Stage, which serves as a respite from my long stints along “Buzz-saw Alley,” the unofficial title of
Cornerstone’s Main Street where predominantly hardcore bands play nonstop, all day and well into the night at generator stages on either side of the gravelly street. The back of the venue has a coffee bar, card tables and is lighted well-enough for me to write fieldnotes into my dilapidated spiral notebook. Already, the cool breeze blowing through this giant, almost carnival-like open-air tent is bringing my core temperature down.

While finishing my coffee, I hear a funky jam emanating from next door, at the Grrr Records/Project 12 Stage. I pack up my gear and head for the funky rhythms emanating from the venue.

Standing at the entrance of the tent, I feel like Zacchaeus\(^2\) attending an old time revival meeting, peering down the center aisle. The singer is prophesying in time to the band’s groove: “You are beautiful enough. You are gifted enough. God loves you! Look deep down [inaudible].” I enter the aisle and walk to the front, hoping for a seat to present itself; otherwise, this could get awkward, and fast. Three rows from the stage, close enough to catch “the spirit” or a guitar pick, I settle into a space between standing attendees. “Who is this?” I ask, cupping my hand around the ear of the shorter of the two men. “It’s Scott’s new band. He used to have a band called ‘Seeds’. This is ‘Brother Red Squirrel’.”

On cue, Scott, a.k.a. “Brother Red Squirrel,” continues his prophesying: “Young men, who weren’t ‘good enough’ to be rabbis,” he says, being facetious, “carried the yoke of God. God wanted fishermen, tax collectors; people of skills.” The musicianship

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\(^2\) Zacchaeus climbed into a sycamore tree in Jericho to await Christ’s entry into the city, curious to see Jesus “and who he was.” Jesus stopped to gaze at the site of this “publican” and invited himself over to Zacchaeus’s house for dinner, much to the chagrin of Jesus’ apostles who considered Zacchaeus a “sinner” (KJV Luke 19:1-10).
is incredible; George Clinton could open for this band. Brother Red Squirrel has the audience in the palm of his hand when he cranks out a wild guitar jam. I see JPUSA community elder Glenn Kaiser and his Resurrection Band waiting off stage, equally engrossed in the performance which is the opening act to their set. “Jesus said, ‘Come with me, follow me.’ And they gave away everything that they had and they followed him. ‘Where are you stayin’ at, Rabbi?’ ‘I don’t have no place’,” continues Brother Red Squirrel’s imagined conversation, “‘but come, follow me’. But the religious, the political wanted to kill him.” Instead of entering another jam session, Brother Red Squirrel motions for the band to play more softly:

Jesus went into Jerusalem and he cried. Oh. Jerusalem so long as I’ve known you I’ve wanted to be with you. I’ve wanted to hold you like hens to their chicks. But you would not listen to the prophets that came from old, and you killed them and stoned them. And now you’re even crucifying them.

The band picks up the pace as an analogy is drawn between Christ’s entrance into Jerusalem and members of the crowd, “called,” in Brother Red Squirrel’s view, to enter their cities and communities and “drive out the devil” through their testimonies of salvation through Christ: “And he went to Golgotha. And he was nailed to a tree. He bled, for you and me. Crown of thorns; Spear plunged into his side. He was stripped [inaudible] scourged.” The band slows down again and Brother Red Squirrel speaks something inaudible in “tongues,” what evangelicals refer to as the language of God translated through a person of faith who is possessed of the Holy Spirit: “It is finished. I give you my Spirit. Dead, three days later! [Crowd applauds] Hallelujah! Three days later, he rose again! And he came to us, and he showed us his nail-scarred hands. And
he said, ‘I will [inaudible]. I will leave you with the word of God and you will no longer need to go to Mt. Sinai.’” Brother Red Squirrel achieves a crescendo and jams-out for another five minutes, bringing the house down and raising the crowd up in celebration of their shared commitment to this faith.

![Figure 5.1: Brother Red Squirrel](image)

I exit the venue after Brother Red Squirrel’s performance, but I hang out along the margins long enough to appreciate Resurrection Band’s first show in eight years, after officially retiring. On the one hand, REZ’s bluesy, hard rock sound and the talent with which it is delivered makes me miss my Led Zeppelin albums; it also, if just for a moment, makes wish I could still adhere to the faith that fuels their passion.

The Resurrection Band and Brother Red Squirrel’s performances recollect what Di Sabatino calls the “incipient period” of Jesus People Music during the 1960s and 1970s:

Evangelism was foremost on the Jesus musician’s mind since there was no commercial infrastructure to support their efforts. At the time, most artists felt the production of recorded music albums a secondary concern eclipsed by the primacy of personal intimacy developed with a live audience. [. . . .]. Most pioneers speak of this era as one of spontaneity unclouded by the materialism that
followed as Jesus Music made an awkward transition into a competitive industry.

(p. 136)

JPUSA appears to have maintained this “pioneering” spirit of early Jesus People music while competing quite successfully in the CCM industry with its Grrr Records label. Not only is JPUSA a multi-generational commune, the group facilitates a multi-generational passion and talent for the fusion of faith, evangelism and alternatively styled genres of music.

Brother Red Squirrel is one example of this multi-generational heritage. He and his band mates are JPUSA members. Scott’s personal testimony, both of coming to faith in Christ and becoming turned on to rock music, is located on the JPUSA web site. He writes, speaking for himself and the band “Seeds,” that their “roots are deepening,”

into the fertile grounds of brotherhood… down, interweaving with other plants, finding waters together, leaning on each other… We in Seeds all live together with our families and friends in an intentional community of people committed to living out the teachings of Jesus Christ; of loving God with our whole hearts and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves [. . .] we want to be transparent – we want help to grow into wholesome beings – transformed by God’s love, purified, and set free to be examples of holy living in this world where there is so much confusion…

Both Seeds and Resurrection Band are listed in the “ministry” section of the JPUSA web site, alongside other ministries that include a roofing business, homeless shelter and the “Friendly Towers” center for seniors. A link from their pages goes to Grrr Records,
JPUSA’s music label (not to be confused with a French independent record label of the same title).

Resurrection Band officially formed in 1972 and has performed at all manner of venues: from schools and prisons, bars and churches, to street corners and nursing homes. Initially, Christian music labels were reticent to release the band’s music because of its hard rock and heavy metal sound. However, a small label, Star Song Records, released the band’s first album. Subsequent albums, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s, addressed social issues including apartheid in South Africa, materialism, militarism, racism, homelessness, poverty, divorce, urban violence and drug and sex addiction.

When Capitol Records bought the band’s next label, Sparrow Records, REZ’s popularity greatly increased due to the band’s newfound access to a larger distributor. REZ enjoyed vastly increased exposure for its gospel message, including an MTV appearance; however, this also resulted in the band’s decision to no longer perform altar calls at the end of shows. REZ was now playing secular venues that disapproved of the practice. As artists such as Amy Grant, Michael W. Smith, Stryper, and Degarmo and Key began to dominate the burgeoning CCM industry, REZ withdrew from popular music markets in order to focus upon the development of Grrr Records and the cultivation of new generations of musicians.

For JPUSA, Christian rock is an artistic expression of faith wherein the “glory of God” is translated through an electric guitar for the purpose of evangelism to the “lost” and community-building. The Grrr Records web site lists thirteen current artists (including Maron and Seeds) and eight “alumni” artists (including Ballydowse and The Blamed). The music ranges in style from the hard rock and blues of REZ and the
bluegrass styled family-folk of Glen Clark and The Family, to the British-styled punk rock of Headnoise, who reside at JPUSA, and the “old school romantic death rock,” or simply Goth, of Leper. Fans can review news releases and purchase CDs, MP3s or download entire albums while following the artists’ tour schedules.

That JPUSA cites these bands under the “ministry” link on its web page suggests that the community’s goals for the music encompasses all aspects of evangelical ministry, including worship of God, the exultation of believers, and proselytization. Recalling Scott’s web post announcing the band Seeds, performing rock music, communal living and being a person of faith are profoundly interconnected for JPUSA members. My experience of Scott’s/Brother Red Squirrel’s performance is that it stands out from amongst the more mainstream industry emulations of Christian rock. The historical heritage, the musicianship, and the sheer passion of the performance add credibility to the professions of faith in Christ that accompany the show.

The version of Jesus People Music of which Di Sabatino writes is still very much alive for JPUSA bands. However, in order to maintain their presence in the Christian music scene and by virtue of their bands’ successes’ in the marketplace, JPUSA has added an industry-grade recording studio and developed sophisticated distribution processes (including digital distribution). My experiences of performances at Cornerstone are often tainted by an awareness of the business of Christian Music, an invisible but dominating structure. Christian music, holistic or conspicuous, communal or corporate, is after all irrevocably bound to an economic entity that is equally dependent upon an evangelical customer base.
The Roundtable, Part II

Last night’s sleep was troubled by the neighbor’s incessant bantering, drinking, swearing, and toking-up. I awake groggy and irritated. A thick layering of clouds hovers overhead, draping the cold rain-soaked festival grounds. I change clothes in the tent, putting on fresh socks and skivvies. A new shirt and yesterday’s cargo shorts complete the ensemble. Outside the tent I collapse into my camping chair and pillage the cooler for breakfast. The cream cheese is spent and I replace it with crunchy peanut butter spread. The granola bars have been a great idea, whether providing a temporary energy boost or breaking the waves of tedium that crash my spirit from time to time. I chug the last of this current jug of water, secure the campsite, and pack my gear. Final preparations include slipping into the markers and tools of my multiple Cornerstone identities: press and volunteer badges, small notepad, and the digital camera slung around my neck. Before I leave I notice one of the neighbors lying outside of a three-person tent adjacent to mine. I’m sure he drank until he passed out, but now the buzz has worn off and he is visibly shivering under a cheap blanket on top of the damp ground. I snag the sleeping bag from my tent and approach this abandoned soul, offering up my only source of warmth: “Hey, man, take my sleeping bag.” He pokes his head out from under the blanket and accepts the gift, with no questions asked. “Just put it back in my tent when you’re done, okay?”

When I arrive at the Gallery Stage, Todd and Dan are there to greet me. They wave me over to their table and introduce me to Keith, another of their companions. I say “hello” while dropping my pack off on a nearby seat, and fish out my Cornerstone coffee mug. I’m a virtual zombie in the coffee line. Out of the corner of my eye, I see a
pirate walking down a side path between tents. I do a double-take. Yes, he is a pirate.
He has all of the gear: pirate hat, pirate boots, pirate-styled mustache, everything, even an
eye patch. He is moving quickly, though I have no idea where a pirate at a Christian
festival in Bushnell, Illinois needs to be. He makes eye contact in passing and flashes me
a crazed smile. Dumbfounded, I wave.

When I return to the table, Christian activism is the topic of conversation.
Keith’s son, Jordon, asks what I know about the “To Write Love” movement. He
explains that Jamie Tworkowski’s story is about a friend of Jamie’s, Renee, who, while
suffering from depression and addiction, began cutting her arms and bleeding herself.
Renee carved “Fuck Up” onto her wrist and passed out in a bathroom. Renee was
repeatedly refused medical attention by a clinic in Orlando, Florida. On the “To Write
Love” website, Jamie writes that as no official treatment options were made available for
them, he and others “became her hospital and the possibility of healing fills our living
room with life. It is unspoken and there are only a few of us, but we will be her church,
the body of Christ coming alive to meet her needs, to write love on her arms.” The story
was passed around on-line and popularized through social networking sites such as
MySpace and Facebook.

The “To Write Love” mission is to make funding and support immediately
available not only for those like Renee, but also for those like Renee’s friends who, after
she was denied entry to treatment, had nowhere to turn for support to help their friend.
The movement boasts a membership of millions. Buzz in the form of bracelets, T-shirts,
and permanent tattoo etchings that feature the group’s slogan, “Love,” is complemented
by the cross-pollination of the sort that Dan mentioned yesterday morning. A day or so
before arriving at Cornerstone, Tworkowski was speaking at the Warp Tour in Dallas, TX. Jordon cites this as evidence that his generation’s sense of non-denominational activism is interconnected by virtue of their shared investment in social issues, such as suicide and cutting, with agnostic and atheist members of his generation.

Jordon impresses upon me that this movement was a grass-roots phenomenon, started by a small community of believers in Florida, whose cause was marketed through T-shirts and tattoos sported by Christian and later general market rock musicians. He emphasizes that it was neither institutionalized American religious groups nor its pastors that made this reconciliation between the diverse members of his generation possible; rather, it was a few marginalized Christian punk rockers and hardcore bands that brought these otherwise radically different rhetorical communities together. This marks a significant departure from the traditional evangelical trajectory.

The domestication of God by evangelicals, as a fatherly figure who provides everything a believer needs and acquiesces to believers supplications, is complemented by Separational and Integrational CCM forms that feature unthreatening lyrics penned to a range of easy-listening genres, including adult contemporary and pop rock. Evangelicals, who view themselves in perpetual conflict with a fallen and unredeemable world, encourage a withdrawal from social activist campaigns. However, as evidenced by the “To Write Love” movement and most notably in the newfound passion for social activism for youth such as Jordon, the Transformational movement in CCM is effecting a change in evangelicals’ worldview:

Indeed, despite critics on the right who disdain what they find to be banality and hedonism and critics on the left who lament the music’s commercialization by the
co-optive forces of corporate capitalism, for much of America’s youth rock music would seem to remain a source of faith, hope, and refuge, and it is the first and best medium for carrying creative and powerful stories about the things that count most in their daily lives. (Howard and Streck, 1999, p. 4)

Cornerstone Festival fills the experiential gap for these Christian youth, for most of whom rock music remains a taboo form of expression and social activism is considered one of the evil tenants of liberalism.

The Roundtable members gradually disperse, joining the throngs of other attendees already venue-hopping from concert to concert. Before he leaves, Todd, who has been relatively quiet this morning, tells me that while he was praying God gave him a message for me: “He believes in you; it’s okay if you can’t believe in him. He’ll do that work for you.” I smile, appreciating the gesture if not convinced of the message. I quickly review the day’s events in the program, noting the musicians playing throughout the day. I resolve, instead, to investigate more keenly the proliferation of generator stages at this year’s festival.

Generator Stages

Last night I was overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of bands performing from stages powered by generators along Buzz-Saw Alley. These venues are one of the most fascinating developments since the festival site was relocated to Cornerstone Farm. Equally impressive is that JPUSA, at least for now, has assumed a “hands off” stance toward these attendee-managed stages, intervening only to maintain festival safety and to enforce the same noise restrictions to which other festival venues must comply. At the
intersection of Main Street and Midway Road, I settle onto a giant log. From where I sit, I can watch three bands perform simultaneously.

Attendees bring a trailer’s worth of gear, which range in sophistication from elaborate stages with P.A. systems that rival an officially sanctioned Cornerstone venue, to a mere amplifier plugged into a small generator. Stage managers furnish their own electricity through generators and either pre-book groups hoping to make a splash at the festival or draw bands to their stage through impromptu, on-site marketing. These attendee-managed stages have traveled from all over the country to be here. Thus, for a festival that was already eclectic it now boasts an impressive milieu of music scenes. Whatever is “hot” in one city, or marginalized in another, shares a common space here, as well as a shared fan-base. Combined with the proliferation of social media sites and digital downloads, this scene within a scene does not have to compete with the official festival venues to be successful, and is ripe for the emergence of new sounds and forms of expression.

Figure 5.2: Generator Stage with Canopy

The generator stage phenomenon at Cornerstone is representative of what Raymond Williams (1980) calls “emergent culture.” JPUSA is a self-sustaining intentional community and Christian rock is marginalized or otherwise not taken seriously by traditional institutions of faith. Subsequently, Cornerstone Festival has
become a sort of second-tier “institution” where marginalization is celebrated and cooperative approaches to faith and living bring a sense of integrity or pride to the experience. Concomitant to Cornerstone’s sacred site for the marginalized are the emergent cultures that arise from its scene, including these generator stages, which are virtually un-censored. They are attendee organized and managed, and sustained by their ability to book cutting edge, if not always talented bands. These stages represent a form of folk art that is independent from the corporate industry. At Cornerstone, they signify a shift in the event’s structural hierarchy, supplanting the exhibition area venues as the alternative to mainstream CCM.

The style of audience participation is also different at these venues. A stage’s success depends directly upon passersby taking notice and getting involved in the show. Audience members can look the performers directly in the eye, and likewise. There is a sense of immediacy and desperation to this format: the performers know they are competing with hundreds of other bands playing at the same time at similar venues for the same people. Also, the cloak of lights and fog machines is stripped away, leaving the performer’s naked talent and sheer veracity the only means to attract, sustain, and effectively create an audience.

Figure 5.3: Generator Stage with Dancers
Hardcore bands dominate the generator stages at Cornerstone; their style of play sounds like amped buzz-saws chopping into the air. I can feel my body vibrate to the music, which elicits pagan-styled, free-spirited dancing in some instances and, in other cases, violent body slamming and elbow throwing. Indeed, part of the draw to hardcore music is the simulated violence that audience members partake in as a complement to the music performance. The “draw” is intensified in this setting by virtue of the venue. In those rare occasions when churches sponsor hardcore and other rock shows, their motivation is to frame the experience, both for the performers (as a variation of the traditional evangelist) and for the audience members (who are reminded that their dancing is a celebration of faith in Christ). Although the church building has been removed, I notice that some performers still attempt to frame, or justify, the performance as “righteous rock” insofar as they claim to be performing for Christ. They openly acknowledge that they have embraced a non-religious form and grafted it to their identification as Christians, but they don’t see this as a contradiction.

In the middle of these two hardcore shows is The Robbins, the band I spoke with just before the Cornerstone “Land Rush.” I wait until they’ve broken down the stage for the next act and packed their gear away into a small U-Haul trailer. They look grumpy, but it is not the 90-degree heat that has put them in a foul mood. Their set wasn’t very good, and they know it. “Yeah, I don’t want to talk about it,” says Robby, explaining that the rhythm guitarist was a stand-in: “Our regular guitar player couldn’t make the trip.” The stand-in is a friend who comes to their shows back home and knows the songs. The splash they were hoping to make at Cornerstone was thus a challenge from the beginning. “But his energy,” I start, when Robby interjects: “Yeah, we normally pride ourselves on
that, but…” Chase provides a more candid response: “I was mad the whole time because it was so hot, and the hardcore bands on either side… It’s fucking annoying: ‘This is different than every band that ever played’,” he adds, mocking the hardcore scene at Cornerstone: “But,” he continues, “it’s the same damn song.” I tell them it was a wild experience to watch, seeing three shows at the same time. “It’s not even about the music, it’s about being cool,” says Robby.

The Robbins derived their own brand of cool from not committing themselves entirely to the Cornerstone scene. There’s no bridge-building or exchanging of riffs, it seems, in their experience here. I ask them about their hometown scene, what kinds of venues they play there: “Churches, coffee shops. Churches have clubs that they own and manage and we play those a lot; a couple of bars, recently,” says Robby. I am a bit surprised that a Christian band enjoys a sustainable presence in a bar scene and I ask him to elaborate. “Well those guys really like us,” he says, meaning the owners, “our rock sound plays well in those scenes. They give us talks about how to behave, how not to behave. We’ve grown up in the bar scene in Charlotte.” I’m suspicious of this comment, and I ask him to explain: “Well, now we’re out of the church thing; we’re into the bar thing. We realize that we’re not just playing to our friends, anymore.”

“Tell me about your audiences,” I say, searching for a demographic breakdown. “Young teenage girls,” says Robby, and laughs. He’s agitated and not taking this seriously, but I’m not letting him off so easy and I push the issue. He says that they average thirty to eighty “kids” per show: “Quiet, artsy kids who aren’t hardcore artsy – gay, meth kids.” I ask him to explain the difference between the church scene and the bar scene, respectively:
Well, for us, or for me, it was hard knowing every single person who came up to you loved you; you know, “that was awesome, tell me how you feel,” but… And then the bar scene, they feel like it’s more legit when it’s at a bar. We had our CD release party at a bar called The Charlotte Underground, and we told them we were going to Cornerstone. They said “Ah, you guys are going to Christ Fest.”

He has a pained look on his face with this confession, adding “Yeah. We told you earlier we’re not really forthcoming with being Christians; we’re more a band that’s made up of Christians than we are a Christian band.” By flipping the equation from “a Christian band” (Christian-Band) to “Christians in a band” (Band-Christian), the Robbins place emphasis upon the music as the central, organizing force of their experience that is larger than the sum of its parts: their individual faith, evangelicalism, audiences, and performance spaces. This equation-flipping privileges the imaginative and creative possibilities drawn from ambiguity over the more comfortable, if not constrictive and controlled, dogmatism of evangelicalism.

I can tell that he is torn, and for a songwriter he’s not very forthcoming; but maybe he’s still working this out for himself, and maybe Cornerstone is more than just a space for trying to make a splash: “It’s your life; it’s part of your life. You can’t ignore that,” I say. “It’s our Christian life,” says Chase, explaining:

We work our asses off with our music, and now we’re trying to do more stuff like this [. . .] instead of just dreaming about it. Not so much going on tour, because that’s so expensive, but doing more out of town shows and getting to know other bands. Not being, we don’t want to be a local band anymore. It’s kind of boring playing the same five places every weekend.
They are trying to walk a line between their “Christian life” and what I suspect is a desire for a scene that is not so divided. It is possibly the case that the faith aspect is merely a sense of security for them. I ask for their impressions of Cornerstone:

They have good intentions, but… I just don’t know if they get it. You know, we came here and people were like, “You’re going to get signed,” but we’re here to have a good musical experience. But I think these kids are missing the point. They’re here for themselves; they’re here to dress cool and go with lots of friends and have them watch them play their music. It defeats the purpose of going, of traveling.

“You don’t have any fans here,” I add, which brings a round of laughter. “We don’t have friends, okay? That’s the problem,” says Robby, with a newly found sense of humor, which draws out his most thoughtful reflection: “And the point is to expand yourself and your faith. I think that’s the problem,” he says. Robby adds:

I think these kids are looking for a complement, and it’s not a complementary situation; it’s an incongruent situation; it’s one of them or the other. Performing is for God; it’s not for… I don’t know. I like being able to write about everything. I don’t know about my faith. I enjoy that God is in my life, and I enjoy being able to write about it.

The Robbins’ articulation of their musical-spiritual philosophy complements well Howard’s and Streck’s theoretical approach to understanding the varied types of CCM. However, while The Robbins’ views and experiences demonstrate a Transformational approach, their story shows that this marginalized form is potentially as alienating as it is liberating.
Cornerstone should be a source of encouragement for The Robbins, validating the liminal space they perpetually occupy between “band” and “Christian.” However, not only do they have to compete against alternative philosophies of CCM, they must also carve their own musical niche from within this already splintered scene. The Robbins are betwixt and between, struggling with what is for them two competing realities: music and faith. They profess to have come to Cornerstone to broaden their musical experiences. However, they are also searching for a community of artists and audiences that are not bound to the rigorously dogmatic convictions which they feel burdened by back home.

For these young Christian rock musicians, the dilemma is a matter of rejection by either their general market audiences in the bars, or by their Christian audiences in the churches or those churches’ “cool-fronts.” They have identified in Cornerstone a potential site where they can find or tap into an alternative audience which would allow them to occupy a marginal space, being neither fully in one or the other “market,” general or Christian. As such, Cornerstone is constructed by the Robbins as a site for “maintenance,” what Berger and Luckmann refer to as procedures for maintaining the essential credibility of a social order or institution (1966, p. 147). At Cornerstone they are seeking out audiences and fellow musicians (significant others) with whom they can form relationships that will reinforce their identification as marginal Christians. Cornerstone’s maintenance function, or procedure, is realized in the festival’s commitment to confirming this type of marginal identification. However, for their part, JPUSA merely provides the site for this type of identity-seeking pilgrimage. It is up to the attendees to activate the site, seek out and form the necessary relationships and conversations (or performances) that will quench their desire for alternative community.
Cart Security Duty: Thursday

The hours spent investigating the generator stage scene has left me spent. I return to my campsite for an extended rest, crashing in my small tent despite the heat of the day. When I arrive at the security office I feel refreshed and ready for four hours of cruising’ the festival grounds. I ask Ron how he’s doing and he launches into a story. The generator stages primarily host hardcore bands that crank out a constant wall of noise. These venues line the outskirts of gravely paths that host heavy foot traffic. Although no stages are in the eye-line of the security office, they are embedded in this immediate area. Tuesday, Ron’s wife was visiting him at the security office and he said to her, “Wow, that band has been playing all day. That is some stamina!” To which she replied, “That’s not the same band, that’s the same sound. It’s called ‘hardcore’, honey.” Ron looks out the office window, mimicking his response, “Oh.” What is for many in the evangelical fold a serious threat to the ongoing vitality of Christian faith, a form that corrupts the soul, for Ron is barely notable. Indeed, debates regarding the evangelical efficacy of rock music are really power negotiations. What Cornerstone accomplishes, in this regard, is the facilitation of a space where Christian musicians and audiences can construct self-legitimating frames for their experiences of faith and music. It is possible that this “space,” what Cornerstone represents rather than the festival itself, may yet evolve into a viable, alternative digital market to the current CCM industry frame.

There is a proliferation of people riding on the hoods of cars today. I use the quickness and mobility of my cart to pull up beside these vehicles and tell the “hoodies” to dismount. I am also on the look-out for a yellow motorbike from Macomb, a neighboring city to Bushnell. The rider of this transport skipped past security at the front
gate without paying for admission. He is now shamelessly tearing through the festival, kicking up dust in his wake. Along Main Street, I respond to a generator stage manager waving me over. The stage is named “The Memphis Tent” and the two managers are stymied by a parking kerfuffle of great proportion. The scene resembles a bad joke, where a Christian rock band, a giant banana, and a sewage truck are clogging the flow. Playing at being a traffic cop, I move the sewage truck through. Two bands, both of whom are performing at the Memphis Tent, have arrived simultaneously, but there’s only room for one trailer.

We let one of the groups unload, “Meanwhile,” I add, “let’s get this other trailer parked.” There is a small one-way path that might work, but we have to shuffle some vehicles first. I approach the man driving the trailer, and wait for him to finish his ear-piece phone call. “Sir, you’ll need to pull up into that small path there. We’ve cleared the way for you.” “No, you don’t understand,” he says, removing the ear piece, “We play next and we’re parking here to unload.” I lean on the truck, listening and nodding my understanding but reiterating the case: “There’s too much through-traffic at the moment. We’ve already got the next band setting up.” When he voices the slightest agreement, I tap twice on his cab and help him navigate the turn. As he is driving past, he stops to hand me something: “Hey, here’s a few fliers; these guys are hot and taking off. Pass them around.” Offended, but not letting it show, I ask this father-of-the-band, again, to pull around.

I approach one of the stage managers to thank him for his help. When I do, I catch myself engaging in an interpersonal behavior that I have witnessed the JPUSA security and stage managers perform: I rest my hand on his shoulder. Touch is important
in community, demonstrating solidarity but also vulnerability within the circumference of a shared experience if not a shared purpose. It also has a calming effect, eliciting a collaborative rather than a competitive attitude.

This stage’s co-managers, JT and Jon, are running what has become one of the more successful generator stages at this year’s festival, along the spine of the beast on Buzz-Saw Alley. “I was impressed with your professionalism and I appreciated your helping me with the traffic jam,” I say, adding: “You guys look spent.” All three of us laugh at this statement of the obvious. “The exhaustion, the energy,” says JT “is strangely encouraging.” Unlike other bands that have nothing to lose by making the trip to Cornerstone, for JT and Jon this was a substantial risk: “We have a good business and market in Memphis but coming here, for us, was about expanding that market. So we begged, we borrowed, and worked to be able to get here.” En route they had vehicle troubles, which almost sabotaged the venture: “On the way, on I-55, a tire flies off. Luckily the wheel was in tact. And we found the tire! – blessed. So it was a risk, some things nearly went very badly for us, but it’s been a positive experience.” I ask JT to explain what he means by “a positive experience,” and he compares Cornerstone to other festivals. “There is a different goal here,” he explains, adding that Cornerstone is “not as concerned with turning a profit.”

JT says that other Christian festivals want bands to sign contracts stating they haven’t committed certain sins in the past two years, and that they will not use foul language on stage. The cost of performing at these other festivals is as exorbitant as the application process is tedious. Also, there is no room for spontaneity as everything is tightly controlled. The generator stage phenomenon would never happen at a festival like
Creation, suggests JT. “You know, we didn’t come here to start a generator stage; it just happened.” They brought their own stage and sound system for their band, not others’. “But all these other bands were asking us if they could plug in, too.” They subsequently transformed their Cornerstone purpose from making a splash as musicians to facilitating other bands’ performances.

What JT and Jon see as “diversity” at Cornerstone is another draw. They cite the Goth community and the Cornerstone Dance Club as prime examples, but the nature of their interactions with these groups adds another layer to their understanding of the concept. Their first night at Cornerstone, they got into a dispute with the Asylum Tent, home to the Goth community at Cornerstone:

We were setting up. The Asylum is next to our stage. We shot off at 8pm and there was conflict. We worked it out instead of rebelling. That’s the sort of thing that just seems to happen here. And that made a space for a deeper understanding for us for where they are coming from. It opened my eyes.

I talk to them about the JPUSA, my observations of their conflict management style and wonder if the space itself is imbued with their communal vibe? “One thing we’ve been impressed with is the treatment that JPUSA affords us. We are just some guys from Memphis with a van and some gear, but they treat us with respect. We give the respect back. Around here you can approach stuff directly,” says JT. Jon says that he had not heard of Cornerstone before this year, but now he’s impressed: “This translates, for me, as humility and a clean slate.”
Evening Shows: Headnoise, Sixpence None the Richer, Aradhna

Today’s playbill at the Underground Stage includes “Wavorly vs. The Wedding,” “Fight to Die,” “The Filthy 42’s,” and “The Scurvies.” Robert, of the JPUSA punk band Headnoise, directs his ministry from this site in the mornings, teaching about community, faith, and what he sees as Christ’s call for believers to serve the poor. His residence is a trailer that is parked outside, nestled behind this venue and the Skate Board ramp. Robert also manages The Underground Stage, and tonight his band is one of the headlining acts.

The music is incredible and Robert’s skills on the bass would make the most proficient general market musicians envious. Robert, the early morning “preacher” is now the late evening “punker.” After the band’s furious foray of hard and fast songs, Robert addresses the gauntlet, a group of shirtless, sweaty, dirty, and partially bloodied audience members who form a violent circle in front of the stage: “Am I in tune? I have no idea, I just got here.” This is not contrived. He really did just show up and he is genuinely concerned that he may not be in tune. “I’m tone deaf,” he says. While the members of the gauntlet are in their late teens and early twenties, the rest of the crowd consists of both young and old punks, and plenty of “straights,” like me, on the margins with our cameras, water bottles, and ball-caps. Standing next to me is a giant, much older punk, tatted from neck to shin. One arm is bigger than my torso, and with each arm he balances a toddler on his massive shoulders. Robert kicks the band off into the next song. The energy is frenetic, and cues the gauntlet into chaotic, violent motion. He seems possessed by the performance. I’ve never heard a bass thump this fast before. It is “head-noise,” but the music is performed from a level of talent that no punk band I’ve heard can match. Some in the audience raise their hands, signifying a worshipful posture,
while others continue to slam dance to the furious rhythms; each accomplishes their purpose, whether it is purely for the experience of rock music or some fusion of the genre to their personal identity and sense of faith. Their multipurpose coproduce the scene and engender what feels like genuine community. This is neither cohesion nor contradiction – this is the Christian rock aesthetic.

I arrive at the Gallery Stage as Sixpence None the Richer concludes its last song for the band’s final set. The band’s popularity was derived from performances at Cornerstone in the mid 1990s, and the hit recording “Kiss Me” (1998) launched Sixpence into national spotlight. The band’s lyrics are spiritual, ambiguously Christian, and the music is considered either alternative rock or dream pop. The band members neither preach from stage nor see it as their responsibility to proselytize. In this sense, Sixpence follows the trajectory of a Transformational CCM artist insofar as their testimony of faith is believed to emanate from a holistic relationship between the music, the performance and what the audience members make of that experience for themselves. While on the one hand this seems like a clever “cop-out,” it has a strong Biblical foundation in the evangelical maxim that states “where two or more Christians are gathered together” Christ is there also.

Like Separational and Integrational artists, Transformational artists believe their musical talents are gifts from God (Howard and Streck, 1999). However, Transformational musicians differ in that they believe the mere performance of those gifts glorifies God, and their responsibility to “proclaim” the gospel stops there. As individuals, they may adhere to the tenets of an evangelical doctrine; however, they differ from their predecessors who believe such “gifts” are wasted without a more obvious
declaration of faith in the form of preaching and performing altar calls from stage. Howard and Streck (1999) argue that the Transformational form of CCM supplants a view that the world is “doomed” with one that sees it as redeemable in that talents, such as musical talents, are gifts from God: “Furthermore it is believed that God, who ruled in the past and will rule in the future, also rules in the present. So, while broken, corrupted and fallen, the world is neither wholly evil nor wholly good and thus should be neither completely abandoned nor uncritically embraced” (Howard and Streck, p. 117). Thus, from a Transformational movement within CCM springs forth a re-articulation of evangelical Christian faith.

The success of Sixpence, not only in the CCM industry as a breakthrough alternative rock and/or dream pop band, but also in the general market and on Steve Taylor’s independent label, Squint Records, builds cachet for Cornerstone’s scene and approach to cultivating Christian musicians. Because Sixpence has demonstrated that a Transformational approach can reap positive rewards and respect, audiences for this form of CCM are also validated. Cornerstone, therefore, provides the unique and rare space not only for these musicians who are typically marginalized, but also for their audiences. Furthermore, these rhetorical communities intermingle with other audiences – of both varied genres (hardcore rock, Goth) and varied audiences (Separational CCM) –, forming an alternative and viable community-wired listener-consumer base.

After the Sixpence None the Richer set, a band called Aradhna takes the stage. The band is dressed in Indian attire and packs the stage with a choir and a variety of strange and ancient looking instruments. The music is hypnotic, almost trance-like. The band is performing what is generally referred to as “Praise and Worship” music, but this
performance is atypical to the genre insofar as instrumental songs are included in the set and much of the performance is derived from Eastern rather than Western musical sensibilities. Between songs, Aradhna’s lead singer and songwriter shares his testimony of coming to Christ. Chris Hale was raised in Nepal where his parents were missionaries, and where he was first introduced to the sitar and Indian devotional music. He formed Aradhna in 1999 as a devotional fusion group. Chris is also a speaker at the festival, as part of the Cornerstone XChange series. His session is entitled, “Experiencing Christ through India’s Worship Songs,” and the description promises to teach attendees how India’s worship music came to be: “You will learn some bhajans (devotional songs) and be equipped to lead bhajans groups, and accompany the songs with guitar, harmonium, or tabla and dholak drums” (Cornerstone Program, 2008, p. 32).

Aradhna starts another song, seemingly transporting the venue into another world. It is stunning, meditative, and beautiful. Words become instruments in this music, performed by the choir, and take on the life of a wandering spirit, weaving in and out of notes; at times dominating the foreground, but always retreating to quieter spaces. I am impressed with both the musicians’ skills and their patience to produce this complicated and meditative sound.

The act of Christian worship is a communal experience, with resonance in both personal and public senses of identity. Christopher Small (1998) argues that music is a verb, in that to music, or musicking, brings into existence for the duration of the performance a set of relationships that is unique to that moment, not just for the purpose of playing or listening to music, but in order to share “a total social experience” (p. 45). These relationships are not merely linked with the sounds the musicians produce nor their
relationship with the audience, “but also with the participants’ relationships to the world outside the performance space, in a complex spiral of relationships, and it is those relationships, and the relationships between relationships, that are the meaning of the performance” (Small, p. 48). Aradhna’s performance of Christian praise and worship music is not limited to an elicitation of emotional responses, as it is typically regarded. The aesthetic experience of the band’s music is a spontaneous coproduction, in the moment, grafted from these participants’ desire for “ideal” Christian community. Participants are not left unchanged by this experience. Regardless of whether or not their “ideal” is achieved, the mere act of musicking constructs a communal, even if ephemeral, identity: “Who we are is how we relate, and the relationships articulated by a musical performance are not so much those that actually exist as they are the relationships that those taking part desire to exist” (Small, p. 135).

For Small, musicking and the experience that it elicits is not bound to any particular genre. Thus, we would expect similar experiences among audiences attending the Headnoise and Sixpence shows. In the context of festival, where many different genres are featured at an equally varied set of venues, audiences do not translate their “ideal” experience in terms of a singular musical genre, but understand the interconnectedness of that experience to other genres at other venues. Furthermore, because the festival includes an impressive variety of genres, attendees may see themselves in relation rather than opposition to other rhetorical communities of CCM listeners. Therefore, something potentially quite radical is achieved: an otherwise divisive issue among evangelicals regarding the means for accomplishing Christian faith is diffused, at least for the duration of the week-long event.
There is, however, a melancholy associated with musicking, “a sign perhaps of recognition that those relationships exist only in the virtual world of the performance and not in that everyday world to which we must return after the performance is over” (Small, p. 137). The variety of musicking at Cornerstone facilities many different experiences, from the gauntlet at the Underground Stage during a punk show, to the more reserved forms of worship during the Aradhna set; from the officially sponsored venues like the Gallery Stage to the generator stages’ emergent cultures. It is left to the attendees to do with these experiences what they will. Their per-liminal experience may or may not translate to their everyday lives back home, but it might also ensure a repeat attendance to Cornerstone Festival where they may once again glimpse an ideal, if ephemeral, vision of the kind of Christian community they would prefer to see in the world.

Roundtable, Part III

En route to the Gallery Stage for morning coffee, I stop at a gathering of young children in the Grrr Records/Project 12 tent. It is one of several morning devotional times set aside for the youngest members of the Cornerstone population. They are singing “Jesus Loves Me.” When the singing stops, Robert of Headnoise appears from amidst the throng. He is their teacher this morning, and he was singing right along with them before taking the small stage. He still looks every bit the punk rocker with spiked hair and tats. The joy he exudes in this small, humbling venue is as genuine as the blistering bass lines he cranked out last night. For JPUSA, there is no “splintered” Christian art world; its members move seamlessly between singing “Jesus Loves Me” with children and covering The Clash’s “Should I Stay, or Should I Go?” As a self-
sustaining intentional community, JPUSA can afford this otherwise contradictory tapestry without fear of rebuke from a dominating parent culture or institution.

When I arrive at the Roundtable, I set my backpack down in one of the few open seats next to Jordon. The table is actually no longer round, but rectangular. Our numbers have grown such that five additional card-tables have been pushed together. I greet Todd with a toast into the air with my coffee mug. Instead of opening up my notebook alongside the program, per my typical routine, I fetch my digital recorder and set it on the table. I’m a late arrival this morning, and the crew is already mid-conversation, discussing the evolution of Christian rock.

Terri, a newcomer to the roundtable, is engrossed in a conversation with Jordon about faith and politics. The 2008 presidential election season is gaining momentum and it is clear, by this point, that Obama and McCain will represent their respective parties in November. I ask Jordon if his faith will pre-suppose his vote in this election, which we both know is a loaded question. The evangelical community is notoriously “Republican” due almost exclusively to the abortion issue. “This is a new generation of Christian youth,” he says. “We don’t need dogma to find common ground.” Jordon explains that he and his friends are increasingly investing themselves in social causes, including poverty in Africa, suicide in America, and sustainable changes to current environmental policy, desiring increased oversight and stricter regulations as well as increased federal investment in the development of alternative sources of fuel.

Posing as the devil’s advocate, a precarious position at a Christian festival, I mention that by investing in these social issues and deviating from a shared anti-abortion stance, is the evangelical community not surrendering its exclusive moral “high ground”
and inviting suspect coalitions with non-Christian groups? “A higher power,” says Terri, “means better passion, whatever religion – How can that be a bad thing?” “It’s a generation of action,” adds Jordon, “not mere words.” For Terri and Jordon, belief in a higher power produces not hubris but humility, especially in regard to those who are different from them, including race, religion, and politics. I ask Terri and Jordon who they intend to vote for, and to what extent the abortion issue plays a role in their decision. Jordon is still undecided, but claims that he and his friends are leaning toward Obama. The abortion issue is important, but he considers it merely one issue among others that should not dominate the bigger picture. “It’s a pragmatic generation, too,” Terri adds, speaking in regard to Jordon’s generation of Christian youths.

Jordon’s acknowledgment of his interconnection to those others of his generation, whether Christians or members of another faith, or atheists, also resonates for him on a personal level and finds its expression at moments typically considered ephemeral, such as Skillet’s rock show here at Cornerstone. “I was at the Skillet show, last night,” says Jordon, “It went from crazy moshing to just us on our knees: Praise. People on the ground, praising.” He says that he too dropped to his knees during this point in the show, and that people gathered around and prayed over him. Jordon was not “broken” or appealing for help; in fact there was no verbal communication between him and those others, but there was touch: the laying on of hands and un-solicited support and encouragement. There is a new “bottom-line” between members of Jordon’s generation of evangelical Christians. It is a tolerance movement within an otherwise intolerant Christian culture. Cornerstone’s rock aesthetic is thus a rhetorical device as much as it is
a pilgrimage site, for the working out of an alternative Christian identity that is inseparable from and indeed animated by rock music.

Cornerstone’s Place in “The Scene”

After a long lunch back at the campsite, I re-gather my gear and make for the Press Tent where a panel called “Cornerstone’s Place in the Scene” is scheduled. Outside the tent, I dig into my cargo shorts for my Press Badge. I could just as easily enter the venue, sans the credentials, but I want to don the “official” identity at least once. I take a seat three rows back and prepare my spiral notebook for the forthcoming fieldnotes. The panel consists of a JPUSA moderator and panelists: John Herrin, Doug Van Pelt, John Thompson, and “the professor” (who started and manages the Cornerstone Imaginarium).

Van Pelt and Thompson represent CCM media outlets that serve as companions to Cornerstone’s marginalized place in the Christian Music Scene. Doug Van Pelt published the first Christian heavy metal newsletter in 1985, called Heaven’s Metal (HM). The publication was initially a fanzine for the popular Christian band, Stryper. His timing was perfect; as the sole publication covering the genre, Christian music labels advertised their bands in HM. In the 1990s, HM’s coverage of the Christian hardcore band P.O.D. bolstered the magazine’s prestige. Positive reviews of both P.O.D.’s music and the band’s crossover into the general market helped the band retain its Christian audiences. When Doug Pinnick of the Christian heavy metal band King’s X announced that he was a homosexual, and when Alice Cooper came out as a born again Christian, these artists selected HM as the site for their stories. John Thompson is the founder of True Tunes News, which started as a Christian record shop in Wheaton, Illinois. The shop exclusively sold Christian rock, hip hop, and other alternative genres rarely featured
in Christian bookstores. During the mid 1990s, True Tunes hosted a magazine, store, and live venue all at the same locale. At its peak, the magazine had a circulation of nearly fifty-thousand.

Three themes dominate the panel discussion, including increasing the “life-span” of the typical Cornerstone attendee, cultivating cross-cultural dialogue, and the generator stages. Stepping back from the dialogue provides a clear picture of these three themes as mutually formative in realizing the goals of each. However, the achievement of either of these goals is dependent upon JPUSA’s ability to recognize this interconnectedness.

The generator stages developed spontaneously, outside the circumference of the JPUSA’s planning of Cornerstone. For decades, individual artists and bands have simply showed up at the festival, plugged-in and played. You could walk around the festival grounds and stumble upon a folk singer strumming at her campsite, or a group of musicians jamming with the aid of a generator in a small nook of the festival. “We now have the alternative universe down Cornerstone main road – like buzz saws,” says Thompson. With the aid of computer technology and improvements in generator power sources, would-be stage managers show up and claim space along Cornerstone’s Main Street. They adhere to the general program rules for stages throughout the festival, however they are not part of the official festival; neither does the festival make any money from these stages. Herrin sees a connection between facilitating the generator stages and increasing the role of Cornerstone to attendees’ earlier and later “life-work,” and he has a plan for how to manage this connection:

The underground secret is out now: generator stages. At first I didn’t let them charge, but then I discovered that they were just breaking even. Not all of the
generator stages are the same. The land rush two days before the gates open is madness. They organized themselves, roped off sites. For next year, they get to the site, pull a piece of paper, and then register their site at the festival office. Also, it helps sell tickets. One side or the other: we don’t rent the spaces.

Van Pelt interjects that it’s “like club hopping,” where attendees can go from stage to stage en route to an officially sponsored venue, stopping off here and there for a song, or part of a song, then moving on. This adds both to the attendees’ appreciation for quality music, and challenges those bands playing at the official venues.

Herrin’s plan for integrating the generator stages into the festival includes maintaining their liminal appeal. However, by grafting these stages, even loosely, into the festival through ticket sales and special treatment, JPUSA will also be exerting control over their presence. Through this appropriation, the festival also achieves a broadened, multi-sited marketing campaign for each year’s festival that sustains a youth demographic of attendees who are also on the cutting edge of new music styles. Herrin envisions a virtual, attendee-driven marketing campaign:

They advertise their stages for Cornerstone in markets like myspace and facebook. They bring in their own fans to the festival and we get free advertising. We treat the stage managers like ticket affiliates. They get a certain number for free, the rest at a discounted price. They sell tickets cheaper to their bands that will be playing their stages. This also defers responsibility. They get a percentage of the sales.

This methodology complements Herrin’s goal for broadening the cultural exchange dynamic of the festival.
Cornerstone’s Imaginarium features film viewings, critiques and discussions about the role of popular film and personal faith. The professor explains that the Imaginarium “changed this from being a mere music festival” into a more holistic experience with and dialogue about popular culture. “It was a risk,” he adds, especially because the featured films are rarely Christian productions. One goal of the Imaginarium is to challenge evangelical thinking that “warns” parishioners of the evils of participating in secular popular culture: “Cornerstone provides the opportunity to explore the avenue that appeals to you. For example, a Christian approach to film criticism.” Thompson attended the first festival at Cornerstone farm and was inspired not only to return but to form a band: “I came in 1984. A week later I started a band so that I could come back to play the festival. JPUSA’s goal is dialogue – cross-cultural.”

It is this phenomenon, intimated by Thompson’s story, which JPUSA want to facilitate: a more holistic experience of faith and the arts, including but not limited to music. However, JPUSA also desires re-framing the arts from a secular to a Christian perspective. “What is the future of Cornerstone,” asks the moderator, adding, “Diversity of expression?”

Thompson’s response is that the festival should change nothing. Though a seemingly simple injunction, it is difficult, given spontaneous phenomena such as the generator stages, to not make changes. However, he follows this up with a more specific plan: “Increase the age of the average Cornerstone attendee, whose current ‘retirement' age is twenty-five.” In order to achieve this, he suggests JPUSA improve the infrastructure, citing the sleeping options; constructing youth hostels, for instance, on the grounds so that older attendees and young families are not relegated to sleeping in tents.
Thompson claims that this will increase the diversity. The generator stages and their groupies keep the younger demographic attending and bringing their new sounds and artistic forms with them; the older, thirty-something attendees have the financial and social means to mentor the standouts of that demographic.

Herrin’s response seems tangential at first, but in hindsight the plan that Thompson proposes carries two risks, the first being a pendulum swing in the Cornerstone demographic which might then drain the energy and spontaneity of the generator stages. It also poses a financial concern: “Currently,” says Herrin, “it costs approximately $300,000 to maintain this land, verses $20,000 for the Chicago fairground. This includes $50,000 on gravel, $60,000 for electrical, and $60,000 for insurance. So, for example, forty people pay 4,000 but it costs 8,000 to put them up.” Herrin adds that Cornerstone is a 50/3C non profit, and all of the money goes back into the festival. If it works, then the festival will enjoy a boon; however, if it does not work then the festival may go bankrupt. Currently, JPUSA controls the sponsorship, enjoying the luxury of selecting sponsors who proffer the highest quality, rather than the highest dollar. In this case, “quality” speaks primarily to JPUSA’s inclusion of organizations invested in programs to help the poor and the homeless, and magazines, such as HM, that remain true to their commitment to cover marginalized genres of music, bands, or artists within the Christian industry. Any risk, therefore, that fails is compensate for its financial and cultural investment may force JPUSA to invite more industry-friendly sponsors, which may in turn bring the festival’s integrity into question.

There is, additionally, a trajectory that is at stake: “Cornerstone is better known within Christian circles, but increasingly outside of it,” claims the professor. JPUSA not
only has a decision to make regarding the implications involved with increasing the average age of the attendee, but also the spiritual demographic. Increasingly, agnostics, atheists, and members of alternative spiritualities attend Cornerstone, following their favorite bands from festival to festival, from the Warp Tour to Cornerstone. Increasing the “dialogue, cross culturally,” says the professor, will change the Cornerstone scene. He adds that the importance of REZ band “paving the way” is that Glenn Kaiser’s band provided a common ground for multiple generations of attendees. In this way, he says, “Cornerstone is [. . .] a sort of memory, a commemoration.” However, this new wave of attendees has no memory of or connection to REZ band. Clearly, the generator stages are the crux of this conversation. JPUSA finds itself at the precipice of a decision which, while it may cultivate an influx of burgeoning music scenes from around the country, threatens to undermine the festival’s “hands-off” reputation and challenge the festival’s prized qualities of “tolerance” and “patience.”

Cart Security Duty: Friday

I don’t have much time between the conclusion of this panel and the start of my cart security shift. In the security office, I stuff my backpack under a chair and set my digital camera next to my Cornerstone coffee mug, per my usual routine before grabbing a vest and a walky-talky. “Cart number four, today,” says Ron, handing me the keys. I make what is now my typical set of rounds, starting with a hard left out of the Cornerstone office complex. Doubling back where Midway Road splits, I veer right, along a side path that leads toward the Front Gate. I drive slow, taking in the scene, which includes a pond to the left surrounded by attendees’ vehicles and tents.
I stop outside of the Underground Stage where Robert is concluding a presentation. Robert’s Underground Stage is like a festival within the festival. Not only does the stage enjoy a unique cachet for hosting some of the most talented, punk, metal, and Goth bands, but it also has its own lecture series, featuring discussions of alternative and intentional communities. He lives and breathes this space for nearly three weeks, including a week before and after the festival for set up and clean up, respectively. I remain seated in the cart during his presentation, leaning forward on the steering wheel to listen. He is talking about sustainability and simplicity as processes and attitudes; that we need to cultivate a more compassionate rather than a selfish sensibility, where faith is not an object to call “ours,” but a relationship to others in community. He claims that compassion reframes our cognitive perceptions. Emotion, he adds, is transient; to be a person of faith is to be someone who pays attention to the needs of others. In this sense, faith is an interdependent relationship between ourselves and the members of our community, and it thereby attunes us to those in need. This, I think to myself, despite the earlier panel’s focus upon grafting the generator stages more conspicuously into the festival experience, is where Cornerstone’s “place in the scene” resides.

Crossing Main Street, I circle around the back-roads, avoiding the chaotic arrival of thousands of more attendees who opt to arrive for the weekend shows. I remount Main Street where the “Early Curfew Camping” intersects with “Middle Earth,” a.k.a. “The Ghetto,” nodding in the direction of The Memphis Tent. A left turn takes me into the “Reserved Group Camping” area, en rout to Main Stage.

So far, my security experience has been void of any substantial observations of JPUSA managing conflict situations. However, toward the end of my shift one of the
JPUSA security members asks me to assist him with a situation. He hops in my cart and directs me to the site of the call. I speed through the maze of attendees en route to Main Stage for the evening’s opening act, secretly hoping that he approves of my driving skills. I hang a hard left up a steep hill that drops us off at a small nook that I’ve never noticed before. On the Grounds Map it is called, “Weathertop Camping.” There are a handful of tents set up along a hill that looks down on Main Stage to the left, through a crop of trees, and, to the right, Cornerstone Lake.

We pull up beside a young JPUSA member who doesn’t look a day over fifteen and is yet allowed to drive a cart. He has two companions riding with him, also JPUSA youth. For this interaction, I follow the JPUSA security member’s lead. I am taken aback by the lack of speaking. My companion merely looks at the young delinquent, waiting or maybe daring him to speak. It is a power play, through which he establishes his authority. He compels the young man to follow through with the bravado that got him in trouble by forcing him to also initiate this interaction. Neither of us leaves the cart. Leaning forward, he listens to the young man start his story, backtrack, and then come-clean. He’s been driving recklessly through the campground and has already been warned that his cart will be taken away. My companion’s active listening accomplishes what yelling or threats would exacerbate.

When this intervention concludes, the JPUSA member and I hang back. Sure enough, not two minutes later, we get a call that “he’s at it again.” We pull out, cruising down the path that brought us here and intercept him just before Main Street. This time, the JPUSA member gets out of the cart. *This isn’t going to go well for that kid,* I think to myself. The young man’s voice is rattled, this time, and defensive. My companion
remains silent. I pull my cart off to the side of the path to direct a traffic jam developing along Main Street. The “culprit” has retreated from his bravado and cannot maintain eye contact during the confrontation. While directing traffic, I notice the young JPUSA member and his companions walking back toward their campsite. My former companion has commandeered their cart. He drives up next to me and proffers genuine thanks for my support during the conflict and drives off into the festival milieu.

This experience recalls John Herrin’s observation about community: that successful community derives not from a common faith but commitment to relationships, even amidst conflict. Faith provides values, but, in the long term, people have to be committed to intentional living to make community work. Herrin believes that the festival provides other Christians with a unique opportunity to experience communally-styled Christian faith, if only for one week out of the year, and that their experiences here resonate in their relationships back home. For JPUSA, and indeed for all Cornerstone attendees, music is the foundation for these relationships. Rock music, which is typically a divisive medium in the general market and is traditionally viewed by the evangelical community as “the devil’s music,” is a unifying form at Cornerstone. For the uninitiated this may seem like stating the obvious – Cornerstone is, after all, primarily a music festival. However, it is no accident that “music” is left out of the festival’s name. Christopher Small’s conceptualization of the practice of making music as forming relationships, “musicking,” is dramatized at Cornerstone. This may be play, but it is not merely play: rock music as an indispensable complement to communal living is the JPUSA reality, and their mission here is to pass that heritage on to future generations.
“Boycott Hell”

Thursday evening I choose to attend a performance that stands out in the festival program, not because the band is especially cutting edge, innovative or at all controversial, but because of what I see as the band’s relative banality at Cornerstone Festival. Degarmo and Key (DK) has been a Christian pop rock band since the late nineteen-seventies. DK is the CCM exemplar of the evangelical tendency to provide “straightforward, propositional claims about God and humankind in their media products, including their music” (Howard and Streck, 1999, p. 130). But this is not to say that DK was ever un-popular. On the contrary, the band released seventeen LPs during their nearly twenty-year career, won seventeen Dove Awards and achieved seven Grammy nominations. Ironically, DK had a video pulled from MTV in the 1980s during the U.S. Senate hearings on sex and violence in music. DK’s video for their recording, “Six, Six, Six” (1984), featured aggressive lyrics about “the end times” and a violent representation of the “Anti-Christ” being set on fire. DK also had run-ins with then popular televangelist, Jimmy Swaggart who viewed the embracing of rock music by the Christian music industry as an invitation to temptation and secularization that threatened traditional Christian mores. Swaggart was right, insofar as institutionalized evangelical faith was forever altered by the integration of rock music into its fold; but that doesn’t make DK radical.

“Do you know where your children are tonight?” DK ask, in a knowingly cheeky reference to their well-aged audience that has packed out the Gallery Stage, buffering my sensibilities for the forthcoming onslaught of keyboard-driven melodies, studio-quality bass lines, and text-book song structures. DK preach between performances, often in
regard to “the last days” or end of times, fulfilling the traditional role that Jesus People musicians performed. However, DK are not lacking for substantial financial comforts, nor living gig-to-gig on mail-order record sales. Claiming that “second chance people” are their favorite people, DK launch into a crowd favorite, called “Boycott Hell,” which is apparently achievable by not committing any carnal sins. This kitsch, rudimentary logic does not “sell” to younger Cornerstone attendees, but this crowd sings along to the point of shaking the venue to the rafters. DK cites the nearly two hundred singer-songwriters that they have mentored while working at EMI. “Globally, but that’s not where it’s at,” says Key, adding that the only two genuine commandments are to “love your neighbor as yourself” and “love the Lord.”

While the lyrics of the bands I was turned onto at The Scroll bespoke the emotional drain that accompanies an ongoing struggle to ameliorate tensions between desire, doubt and faith, both spiritually and romantically, DK’s lyrics broach this dilemma differently, preferring instead to employ contrived theological aphorisms, such as “boycott hell,” and shaming listeners into “living right.” Comparatively, the lyrics of Transformational artists, typically, work from the inside out, from personal experience of doubt and failure to the sphere of public dialogue between musician and listener. This form signifies a profound if gradual shift within the evangelical community:

Believing God to be an incomprehensible mystery, transformational artists are nevertheless prepared to find Him in the widows and orphans, the strangers and forgotten. However, transformational artists frequently include themselves among this latter group. [. . .]. And if the exploration of themes of alienation are not limited to Transformational CCM [. . .], the emphasis on the nature of that
condition rather than the future reward it entails is. (Howard and Streck, 1999, p. 141).

DK represents an Integrational form of CCM that sought its legitimation by aligning with the general market, sacrificing their evangelical credibility without contributing to the artistic credibility of Christian rock. Conversely, Transformational CCM artists embody an approach to evangelical faith that presupposes ambiguity and demands a more authentic (comparatively less contrived) expression of its artistry.

Conclusion
For the evangelical community the line between the faithful and the deviant is clearly marked. Either one is of the world, or one is of Christ. Drinking, smoking, “fornication,” dancing, gambling, and swearing are carnal sins. Rock music, with a penchant for encouraging all of these, is a debauched medium. However, when the medium became too popular among young Christians to suppress, it was appropriated into the church setting as part of a virtual alternative universe to secular popular culture. Bands such as Degarmo and Key were safe to an industry predicated upon its appeal to an evangelical base and, for their part Degarmo and Key and other Christian musicians successfully negotiated the crossover from Separational to Integrational forms of Christian music. However, a new generation of Christian youth has entered into a reciprocal relationship with a burgeoning form (Transformational CCM) that sees ambiguity as a complement, rather than a detriment to Christian faith. Included in this “ambiguity” are alternative practices that seem antithetical to evangelicalism, from an emphasis upon social activism (as opposed to proselytization) to punk rock.
In this chapter, I observed variations of music forms as discourses at Cornerstone. Festival performances represent the merging of two social realities, evangelical faith and rock music. Through musicking and the doing of acts in common, becoming *deviants-together* while running the gauntlet at a hardcore show, attendees coproduce the festival as a site for the ritualized cultivation of alternative Christian identities. According to Small,

> It is very important to realize that in taking part in ritual we do not only see and hear, listen and watch, or even taste, smell, or touch, but we also act, and it is in the bodily experience of performing the actions in company with others that the meaning of taking part lies. The more actively we participate, the more each one of us is empowered to act, to create, to display, then the more satisfying we shall find the performance of the ritual. This is not surprising, since in acting, creating, and displaying we are bringing into existence for the duration of the ritual a society within which we ourselves are empowered to act, to create and to display. (Small, 1998, p. 105)

The Roundtable is an extension of the music performance, where participants use their shared experience as a foundation for community-building. This expanded view of the role of musicking applies as well to the festival organizers. JPUSA is predicated upon a sustainable translation of music performance and faith as action, as demonstrated by the juxtaposition of Robert of Headnoise as punk rocker one moment, and children’s Bible teacher the next. These are not dissimilar activities for Robert; in point of fact, their reciprocity is a necessary condition.
Attendees recognize Cornerstone as a site for cultivating relationships that complement their marginalization within the Christian fold. Jordon’s excitement about the “To Write Love” movement recounts how Christian youth are influencing the trajectory of Christian rock, which in turn contributes to these youths’ sense of validation. Currently, the two are interdependent as co-outsiders within their own faith. The generator stage phenomenon, as is, adds another layer of multiplicity to the festival’s already eclectic experience, where young bands such as The Robbins can engage in self-legitimating and maintenance practices.
Chapter Six:

Communitas and Structure

Figure 6.1: Memory Blanket

In Chapter Five I explored the connection between forms or variations of music experiences and the construction-maintenance of Christian identity. Rather than a point of conflict, these varied forms represent a coming together; music serves as an organizing experience around which attendees engage in processes of community-building that are accomplished, in part, through Christopher Small’s “musicking” (1988). Small argues that we bring into being for the duration of a musical performance an idealized set of relationships. In other words, Small considers the total musical experience – the musicians, the audience, the performance space, the complex of sounds as well as the complex of values and attitudes which resonate with those sounds – as an act, a verb rather than a noun. As seen in Chapter Five, one identifiable result of musicking at
Cornerstone is that otherwise oppositional rhetorical communities find common ground. For instance, those who attended Aradhna’s Praise and Worship set (meditating and raising their hands as part of their experience) and those who attended Headnoise’s punk rock show (participating in the gauntlet and pogo-jumping) clearly translated their experience of faith through very different aesthetic forms. Yet, through musicking, in combination with the processes of play and making camp at Cornerstone, attendees form a bond that transcends style or emulations of faith. In other words, while the form of the music matters to attendees, as persons of faith, the bigger picture here is an act which they share in common. In this chapter, I argue that instances of community proceed from this process, and I examine more closely attendees’ relationships to the scene as a communal space.

The kind of community building that happens at Cornerstone is a loose and layered one, yet it is inclusive as a performance of what is possible through a shared experience of making camp and the coproduction of an idealized vision of Christian community. However, Cornerstone Festival is also on the precipice of a conflicted trajectory. JPUSA desires on the one hand to maintain its hands-off approach to managing Cornerstone, yet they also see an opportunity for transforming the festival through changes to the grounds and exerting more control over the generator stages. This conflicted trajectory is evidence of a tension between “communitas” and structure.

Communitas refers to an intense experience of community wherein participants or members relate to one another sans the purview of a hierarchical structure. In his anthropological work, Victor Turner (1969) finds that communitas is interconnected to the liminality found in ritual experience, where new members are initiated into the fold or
into a new position within the group. As festival, Cornerstone accomplishes this or some variation of this form of communitas that Turner describes. Certainly there are similarities in that the festival provides a temporary, liminal experience for attendees who, through crews and musicking, engage in processes of community-building. However, attendees’ desire for spontaneous and exciting formations of relationships and explorations of self and other is counterbalanced by an urge to structure the experience—to forge commitment, membership, and conformity.

This tension is played out in various scenes during my narration of the festival’s last day. One result of JPUSA’s hands-off approach to managing the festival is that attendees who identify most intensely with the event take it upon themselves to “police” others’ experiences. This is seen in a random interaction I have with an attendee, my Cornerstone Walkabout with Todd, and in the Cornerstone Public Journal. I also return to The New Crew for a follow-up interview and, in the process, I am introduced to The Tea House. The Tea House is similar to the generator stages but unique as an attendee-centered rather than a music or musician-centered venue, and it is embedded within attendees’ campsites. On the one hand, these instances illustrate how experimentation and exploratory play become a source of revitalization and change for Cornerstone; however, other illustrations show how "structure" in the form of normative expectations asserts themselves with surprising efficiency.

Cornerstone Walkabout

I awake Saturday morning with loosely organized piles of gear and memorabilia sprawled throughout the interior of my tent. Last night’s sleep was as hard and cold as the rest, but I slept all the way through for the first time since arriving. Today is the last
day of fieldwork, and I celebrate the occasion by donning fresh skivvies, cargo shorts and socks. Outside the tent, I stretch and warm myself to the bone in the recently risen sun. By tomorrow morning I will have slept in my car or tent for seven nights. Eight days in the belly of this whale is losing its appeal. The bagels are gone, but by now they are not missed. For my final fieldwork breakfast I have saved a virtual feast consisting of an apple, un-touched and well preserved asiago-cheese bread with a packet of cream cheese, and seedless red grapes. I scheduled an interview for this morning with the neighbors’ “godfather,” the group’s dominant personality. Looking around, however, I notice they have all pulled up stakes and moved onto the next festival on their summer tour.

The Gallery Stage is packed this morning; not surprising considering the thousands of new attendees who arrived Friday. What is curious is the absence of The Roundtable, which included more than fifteen members by Friday. Fresh coffee in hand, I peruse the festival program one last time. The set list for the Gallery Stage is right up my memory lane tonight, featuring a band called The Lost Dogs whose members are an amalgam of alternative Christian Rock bands that I gravitated to in the early 1990s, including Adam Again, The 77s, Daniel Amos, and The Choir.

While I’m reviewing the play bills for other venues, a woman stops to inquire about my dilapidated and sun-worn University of South Florida visor. “I’m a PhD candidate in the communication department at USF,” I say. Anticipating her follow-up question I add that I’m here conducting research for my dissertation. Judy is in her late forties, early fifties. She has just come from a seminar on Deconstructive Film Criticism and wants to know what my angle is for the dissertation. She and her companion remain standing, which feels off-putting at a festival predicated upon community and embracing
diversity. “Well, I want to know what sense people make of this scene; in relation to their personal sense of faith.” Judy flashes me a suspicious glare, mid-sentence, but after seven days of nonstop fieldwork, sans showers and hot meals, and all of the ups and downs that accompany this transient fieldworker lifestyle, her apparent indignation just annoys me. “I’m curious about how the festival might be situated within or outside of mainstream religious institutions.” Judy is impatient because she wanted to hear something else; something more gregariously positive, perhaps. “Would you like to join me?” I ask. Neither she nor her companion responds to my invitation. Instead, Judy unflinchingly asks, “Are you a Christian?” I’ve been spoiled by The Roundtable, all of whom know my “de-conversion story,” yet accepted me as one of their own with no evangelical “strings” attached. Judy’s demeanor, however, is offensive. “I’m keeping that for myself,” I say. She hesitates for a moment, holding me in her critical glare, and then walks away.

This interaction with Judy testifies to my evolving understanding of the festival. Even though Judy is making the scene at Cornerstone, she feels authorized to “police” the boundaries by checking out my Christian legitimacy. Like Ricky, she has identified with the festival to the point that wants to protect the integrity of her identification. At a festival that promises to facilitate attendees’ explorations of their faith, she is protective of the type of experience she has had, and thus desires others to have. Processing this interaction necessitates a sophisticated understanding of “collaboration”: Cornerstone is a collaborative if not a cohesive event; its members are neither consistent nor unified in their appropriation of this scene as a site for constructing alternative Christian identities.
Ultimately, it is the attendees who take ownership of the festival and either translate this experience to their lives back home, or else abandon their Cornerstone experience as a transient rather than a formative marginal moment. For JPUSA’s part, the goal is not the cultivation of an ideological consensus of what counts as Christian identity, but rather a sensibility or experience of Christian community that is hard-won, that attendees must figure out and forge for themselves. As festival director John Herrin said in our conversation, conflict and mediation rather than consensus between persons of faith is the key to successful Christian community. Cornerstone is thus a peculiar cultural production: it is outside of the circumference of both traditional forms and institutional systems of Christian practice and membership, and yet it is coproduced by attendees, even those who are well-versed in more traditional Christian institutions’ socializing practices and roles.

This element of coproduction among diverse constituents at Cornerstone is a renewable ritual, with close ties to community-building. As discussed in prior chapters, Cornerstone Festival engages attendees in alternative forms of Christian practices by facilitating a space where Christian faith and rock music are mutually validating rather than contradictory experiences. These experiences are marginal insofar as they are departures from attendees’ typical social roles and routines.

The reality of everyday life “maintains itself by being embodied in routines, which is the essence of institutionalization. Beyond this,” write Berger and Luckmann, “the reality of everyday life is ongoingly reaffirmed in the individual’s interaction with others” (1967, p. 149). We need confirmation from others to maintain our identity. Conversely, it is through relationships with others and often in liminal spaces or marginal
moments that are atypical of our daily routines, that we glean alternative insights. As a touristic-pilgrimage site, Cornerstone Festival is coproduced as a liminal experience not only in relation to social roles and routines but also regarding the traditionally normalizing role of religious institutions as a container for marginal experience. At Cornerstone, instances of what Victor Turner (1969) calls “existential communitas” (p. 132) arise which create marginal moments outside the dominating institutional realities of attendees’ everyday lives. These moments facilitate alternative perspectives of faith and community that attendees’ normative structures do not allow for. The crew-based experience of Cornerstone is furthermore tied to rituals of initiation, where the initiate is removed from the tribal home and its accompanying structure and introduced to new conditions, migrating from one set of relationships to another. Cornerstone crews are legitimated by the collaborative effort of navigating to and within the festival. They share a common pre-festival history, yet they experience an estrangement of that history through processes of making camp: they are travelers-together.

Cornerstone, however, is on a conspicuous trajectory. The festival which was once a respite from a dominating evangelical parent culture has become a legitimating site, coproduced or otherwise, for alternative Christian identity. The immediacy of communitas at Cornerstone “gives way to the mediacy of structure” (Turner, 1969, p. 129). Indeed, communitas cannot be maintained indefinitely because “free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae” (Turner, p. 132). Far from an impasse, this relationship between structure and communitas within the Cornerstone scene exemplifies an intersection of cultural production and rhetorical practice.
Frentz’s and Rushing’s “integrated view of culture” (1999, p. 318) explains how the wax and wane over time of communitas and structure are mutually beneficial rather than necessarily contradictory processes. As structure and communitas become increasingly interdependent, community thrives. The converse perpetuates individualism and stasis. At Cornerstone this process is seen in the generator stages, impromptu stages that are attendee managed and driven yet dependent upon the ongoing vitality of the parent festival for their existence. Even as JPUSA is developing a plan to more directly manage these stages’ spontaneity, an imposition of structure, new venues are arising. In this chapter I include a visit to “The Tea House,” an attendee managed and driven venue that is bringing not new sounds but new spatial relationships to the festival. Thus, as one spontaneous attendee-driven venue wanes, another type arises, maintaining that element of interdependence that is essential to the festival’s survival. Indeed, ritualized communicative processes, including “crewing” and musicking, not only coproduce Cornerstone as cultural experience, but also renew its vitality. Furthermore, these processes are rhetorical insofar as rhetorical theory includes processes of identification and relationship (Cissna and Anderson, 2002, p. 19), and this coproduction accomplishes an alternative form of Christian community.

Todd arrives a few minutes after Judy and her friend depart. He asks if I’d like to join him for a walk. In the absence of the rest of the roundtable, Todd’s invitation is suspicious. I am uncomfortable with this invitation, but I acquiesce. Our relationship was the foundation for the formation of the Roundtable.

We make a right out of the Gallery Stage, toward the speaker tents and the Labyrinth. I let Todd do the talking. This is his idea and I’m tagging along as a way of
saying “thank you” for his companionship and for bringing others into The Roundtable conversations. I know where this is going, though, and I’m not sure how I’m going to respond. I feel embarrassed because I’ve been where he is standing before: “reaching out” to someone who is jaded to the faith.

We walk along a side path that takes us past the Imaginarium’s “Flickerings,” where attendees gather to watch and discuss films. I’ve mastered the art of getting other people to talk, but I can tell that Todd wants me to make a decision. He’s uncomfortable about my trajectory and feels placed in my spiritual path to provide prayerful guidance or mentorship. I purposefully avoid the sort of subject matter that he is pushing for. Instead of personalizing this interaction with confessions of my un-faith, I tell stories about my fieldwork experiences – tales of security cart duty and Goth bands in fishnet stockings. Todd smiles and nods, but I can tell that he’s waiting for an opportunity or maybe the courage to interject.

Todd takes back the conversation, confiding in me that he is struggling to ameliorate the conflict he feels between his desires for a job promotion and spending more time with his family. He is here to reconnect with his daughter, to share an experience or an adventure with her. He wants to make a change. I can’t decide if Todd is genuinely confiding in me or if he’s reeling me in to his personal testimony as a means to elicit the same. I hate being proselytized, and I’m beginning to feel awkward with this situation. We spend more time walking than talking, and my desire to flee dissipates.

We wind up on a small hill close to the bend at Main Street that leads off in one direction toward Main Stage and in the other toward Cornerstone Lake, where a few attendees who either recommitted their life to Christ or came to Christ for the first time
have been baptized. After a long silence, I give Todd what he wants to hear. It’s genuine, but I didn’t wake up this morning wanting to confide in anyone: “I wish I could believe in this stuff again, but I can’t. I still pray, occasionally. I don’t know what that means, but I do.” I’ve already told Todd about my disillusionment with the faith, beginning in the mid 1990s and that it was a gradual process from there. What I don’t tell him now is that I don’t regret that trajectory. Todd reiterates the message from God that he believes he received on my behalf earlier in the week. He turns to me, smiles and says: “God believes in you. And it’s okay if you don’t believe in Him. He’ll do that work for you.”

While I appreciate Todd’s genuine affection, the way this morning played out with no other Roundtable members showing up, only Todd, makes me question whether I was being set up all along. I viewed The Roundtable as research subjects, but I treated them as friends; now I suspect I was their conversion project. I thought I was navigating a liminal space between confederate and confidant, experiencing my own version of communitas at the festival, but maybe that was a mere fancy. What I thought was genuine has come to this: a normalizing outreach project to bring me back into “the fold.” What hurts the most is that of all the participants, these were the people that made me feel connected to the festival experience, accepted and validated though clearly an outsider.

In part, this interaction is typical of the kinds of relationships that we form in short-lived excursions into an alternative scene or landscape. I too am a traveler, and like a traveler self-removed from the familiar, I sought in The Roundtable comfort from the daunting fieldwork process. This type of festival environment, including the exhaustion and the intensity of the experience, creates a sense of urgency to bring relationships to
closure, to leave no ambiguity left unexplained. From an evangelical’s point of view, the
greatest compliment that he or she can pay another is to appeal to that person to commit
or recommit to Christ as savior; even if the resocialization does not, in this case, include
renewed membership in a traditional church setting. In addition, Todd and I genuinely
bonded as friends and saw in each other a reflection of our own spiritual journeys. Yet,
while this burden for the salvation of another’s soul is on the believer, and from a point of
compassion, the offense is taken, and it is impenetrable: it would invalidate my life
choices as somehow tragic. Indeed, part of the social role of a true believer is to
recognize and seize upon an opportunity to either convert or bring “the fallen” back into
the fold.

We say our goodbye, not sure if we’ll see one another again. He invites me to
swing by the campsite where he, Dan, and Keith are cooking burgers and hot dogs – a
veritable Cornerstone Feast. “Maybe,” I say, smiling. We both walk on toward the
exhibition area. I let Todd pull ahead by maintaining a slower pace, not wanting to
overtake him before the bend in the road. Todd keeps going straight and I veer left,
across a small footpath bridge and into the heart of The Ghetto.

The Tea House

I arrived at this path as a mindless distraction, but I quickly realize that I’m in The
New Crew’s territory. True to noon-time Cornerstone form they are passed out, shaded
in their space next to the tree line. Adjacent to their site is an awkward looking venue. It
is a tent, but it is much larger than its neighbors’ and the material seems structured to let
in the light rather than repel it. I slide the digital camera off my shoulder and snap a
couple of exterior photographs, beginning with the message board.
A disclaimer at the entrance announces the framer’s hippie-styled identity in relation to a litigious society, even at Cornerstone:

We hate making signs like this because they are kind of like a “buzz kill” but it has been brought to our attention that sometimes people like to sue. This tea house is our labor of love and community and we hope that you will find it a totally thrilling experience. In the event of a storm that could threaten the structural integrity of our tea house, we ask that you exit safely and orderly, assisting others if need be, without panic. Thanks very much, Chris and Miranda.

The tea house is not cited in the Cornerstone program. It is an example of an attendee managed and driven venue, similar in spirit to the generator stages.

The Tea House embraces and extends JPUSA’s passion for community; in this case, planned spontaneity turned communitas. While some of the message board fliers announce upcoming events, it is important to note that one group, the Goths, who rarely associate their “Asylum” tent with other festival venues, feel comfortable posting to The Tea House message board. Thus, two small communities within the larger scope of Cornerstone merge their common interests in “peace” and “meditation” through community, though outwardly neither group seems to share a common ground. Chris is
the lead singer and songwriter for the praise and worship band, Aradhna, and the Goths’ style of music includes Shock Rock, Horror Rock, and Industrial music. These two very differently styled groups, one that developed its aesthetic in India (The Tea House) and the other as a Chicago subculture (the Goths), are thus united in their desire to perform community building processes.

“Thank You” notes from neighbors speak to Chris’s and Miranda’s desire to integrate their Tea House into the campsites, rather than segregate their venue by situating it amidst the official festival sites, such as the Gallery Stage’s coffee house. The venue’s presence in this particular location accomplishes their claims of being a “labor of love and community.” However, the language of the disclaimer suggests that even community needs legal protection.

Initially, something about the interior design silences my desire to flash my electronic eye. I set my camera next to me in a booth on the right, toward the far back of the tent. Miranda, in Indian dress, is making free tea. There is a grandfather and grandson sitting on pillows across the tent, a young girl quietly and methodically writing in a notebook, and a pile of shoes left at the entrance-way, including mine. While working on a brew, Miranda tells us about the cultural history of tea making. In 1999
Miranda Stone was a popular folk singer, in a sun dress and combat boots, performing as an invited guest at Cornerstone and a general market festival called “Lilith Fair.” She is retired from the music scene now, residing in Canada with Chris. They learned how to construct this venue a few days before coming to Cornerstone. Miranda and Chris have replicated a traditional tea house, including the furniture and the non-spaces: the geometry of the empty space between its material structures. By the end of this fusion of tea making and storytelling, nearly thirty people have gathered inside.

I reintroduce myself to Miranda, and she pours me some tea, saying, “Welcome back.” Miranda encourages me to take some photographs of the space, letting me know that it won’t disrupt the ambiance. My gaze is drawn upward, into the vaulted ceiling of the tent, and to the space within and without. I identify with the suspended paper cylinders, free-floating signs interconnected to each other not by direct lines but open space.

**Figure 6.4 The Tea House Ceiling.**

This venue is similar to generator stages featuring hardcore music, insofar as it is an alternative, non-Christian form that these Christians have grafted into their identity and perform for others. Miranda’s and Chris’s Tea House is a multi-cultural integration of form and community.
In this space, attendees’ relationships reflect the cylinders hanging overhead, and are determined by the geometry of the space including the silence, cooperativeness and humility that it inspires. Conversely, The Roundtable was a linguistically-governed experience of community: taking place in a venue that is a hub for rock shows during the day and evening, fuelled by copious amounts of coffee, and serving as a ‘launch-pad’ for early risers preparing for a day’s worth of festival. Thus, differently-styled venues facilitate very different experiences of community; yet all of them share an element of play or coproduction, or both, on the part of attendees who appropriate festival spaces originally structured for one purpose (music or camping) for alternative uses, translating public spaces into personal sites. Thus, socialization occurs insofar as attendees engage in activities that more intimately connect them to their sense of faith through the performance of some suppressed or otherwise inaccessible aspect of their identity. But, this socialization is, at best, very loosely connected to JPUSA.

After having my tea and watching Miranda serve newcomers, I pack away my notes and put away the camera, slipping out the “backdoor” of the venue. It is half past noon, and I suspect The New Crew is beginning to rouse from their slumber. They were my first point of contact with Cornerstone’s scene for this study, and I have been anticipating this follow-up, group interview.

The New Crew, Revisited

This is our first reunion since the Sunday line-up. I help myself to a camping chair and start the consent form process, explaining the study again. I tell them the story of meeting the protestor outside the gate, speaking with John Herrin, and they tell me about some of the shows they’ve attended. They are definitely in the Cornerstone
groove: catching shows well into the early morning hour and sleeping until noon. One of their members is still crashed out in the cab of the pick up truck. The couch has been relocated to complete the circular campsite they’ve formed with the tents and truck, the latter of which is a virtual dumping ground of unused gear, clothes, and fliers. They let me take a photograph of a blanket that fills the inner circle. “This has traveled with us every year,” Amanda explains. It is a memory quilt with graffiti and inside jokes, signed by members of their crew and people they’ve befriended over the years at Cornerstone.

Their memory quilt recovers my sense of the obvious, and I pose my first question: “What brings you back if you’ve been before and what got you here if you haven’t been before?” This is Brian’s fourth attendance. He met Amanda and her friends his first time at Cornerstone:

They pulled up and said, “Hi, we’re so and so, we’re gonna camp with you.” And I’d never been to anything like this before. And so we just, by the end of the day, probably by the end of the first hour, we were friends… It’s kind of funny how you instantly gain a friendship and then I remember it became very intimate, very close, and we started sharing big life plans together, ya know? This serendipitous style of meeting is not uncommon. Attendees form small communities within the festival, and in this case it was a lasting bond. “That seems to happen easily around here,” I say, adding, “You’re forced to be nice and respectful to each other because you’re camping out with 20,000 other people.” Brian says that coming to Cornerstone means letting go of personal hang-ups, “and you learn to live with everybody and I think that’s the part that brings me back the most.”
Cornerstone is a liminal space for travelers who leave behind their concerns of navigating day-to-day life, while also providing a space for spontaneous community building. Part of The New Crew’s communitas includes framing an alternative approach to experiencing their faith, sans the pressures of their hometown church groups. Brian explains how this works for him:

I grew up in a church that […] didn’t even have drums in the choir. It was one of those. I went to this school that the church had too. So everything was very strict and there was no dancing and all of that. In fact we used to say “dancing is the devil.” We actually had a teacher who told us that the internet was the antichrist because “www” is the sixth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. They would tell us that […] women shouldn’t wear leopard prints because the leopard print looked like a kiss and Jesus was betrayed by a kiss.

For Brian, Cornerstone supplants the rigid control and fear-based authority of his hometown church. He explains that his home-town church considers rock music a sinful indulgence:

I used to get into arguments with people at the church and at the school. They’d say “You shouldn’t listen to Christian rock music.” And I’m like “but you listen to secular music, how is that different? How can you listen to something that talks about sex […] but I can’t listen to something about God […]?”

Cornerstone’s scene is thus a dramatic departure for Brian. Though not from the same town, Cornerstone fulfills a similar need for Amanda: “I think it’s really sad because […] Jesus was very accepting. Being Christian is not about being straight-laced and perfect. So that’s what I love about Cornerstone. All walks of life are here.”
Michael is a Cornerstone first-timer. He came this year because his lease was up in Indianapolis. He quit his job and Alicia convinced him to attend the festival, which started the next day: “So it’s like: ‘I got the money, I have the time, when do we go?’” Three hours into the festival, he was hooked, “There’s no way I can’t come back,” he says. Last year, Amanda “rescued” Tyler from their hometown scene and convinced him to come. “We all work at this grocery store back home,” he says, which elicits a round of laughter from everyone, explaining that it is one of those small town stores in Michigan where everyone works at some point.

I use this round of laughter as an opportunity to re-direct the conversation back to an earlier thread about personal identity and Cornerstone as a space for negotiating alternative ways of being Christian. Brian claims that freedom of expression at Cornerstone allows for experimentation, that there is “so much weird” here he feels comfortable to be himself:

I was exposed to some things my first year that I didn’t even really know existed in a Christian circle – the Mohawks and the Gothic kids. I was like, “Those kids aren’t Christians, right?” But it’s kind of funny that there is no [. . .] mold to fit into with Jesus. He just wants you to be there and want him. I think that’s what I’ve learned [. . .] from here. I met some people that, if I looked at them I would have said that person doesn’t care about God at all, and that would be my traditional Baptist thinking. But you get into talking to them and [. . .] this is somebody that’s real.

Alicia explains that the Cornerstone community, though transient, offers something that her hometown lacks:
Back home I had a really hard time finding a church. I’d been to a lot of them and just, I need that community but it’s so hard because there are so many problems with all the churches I’ve been to. Just not accepting in one way or another, and I just don’t feel comfortable there; which you shouldn’t feel uncomfortable at a church. So, coming here is, I can be myself, and I have that community that I’m looking for back home, which is cool.

For Tyler, the sense of community he experiences at Cornerstone is grafted from the music scene at the festival. Initially, he was “shell-shocked” by the “screaming” hardcore bands. Later, he discovered the band, Dead Poetic: “They have a song called ‘Glass in the Trees’ which I think goes along with what we’re talking about; about Christians accepting people who are different.” In the song, the protagonist neglects becoming close with a friend who is not a Christian, trying to follow his church’s instruction to refrain from close relationships with non-believers for fear of being wooed away from Christ. When the friend commits suicide, the protagonist regrets not forming a closer bond. Tyler identifies with this because he struggles with a similar conflict in his own life:

My dad is… he’s a really cool guy, a great guy. He’s very faithful, but he’s one of those people who kind of shuns people who don’t believe what he believes and he has an acronym for FAG, you know, the word, “fag”? He says “Freaks against God.” And he told me that one day, and I couldn’t understand it. I was just like, “How do you say that?” There’s nothing you can do short of shunning God that keeps you from Heaven. It’s the saying “No” to Jesus that keeps you from Heaven, not being gay. And when you come here, you don’t get that.
Someone makes a joke that what you do get here is a funky smell, citing the lack of bathing. A few minutes into bathroom humor, I turn off the recorder.

Later, playing back the audio from this interview at a relatively quiet and isolated festival locale, I am struck by the implications of what Cornerstone means for Tyler, for whom this is a visceral life-line. He is not here for mere freedom of expression. The festival provides him a respite from his family’s limiting scope of what it means to be a person of faith, while offering something to fill that void in his life. Coming to Cornerstone is how he balances out the “structure” of home, be that his family or his home church or both. He needs the communitas, annually, that Cornerstone and this crew provide. The festival is his surrogate mentor, and this crew is his spiritual family. Like The Robbins, he is betwixt and between two worlds, one (home) to which he cannot belong and the other (Cornerstone) which is ephemeral – a temporary resolution to a weighty dilemma. In the interim, the festival and its crew-based experience fulfill a maintenance function for Tyler, providing a temporary sense of place that he may yet keep as an objective marker that signifies a sense of things being in their “right” place. As such, Cornerstone is a therapeutic site for Tyler where he can seek out new relationships and new relations between self-social realities that make him feel secure in his personal sense of identity.

Cornerstone Public Journal

I stop by the Hippie Preacher’s coffee stand en route to my campsite. With a hot cup of coffee and a warm bagel, I sit at a wobbly table to review the day’s interviews. When I was here last, I noticed a notebook entitled “Public Journal” chained to a table. I slowly turn the journal’s pages to get a sense of the entries. Expecting it to read like a
high school year book (which many entries certainly do), I am surprised to find instances of ongoing dialogue and intimate “confessions” of personal, faith-based struggles.

The journal’s outside cover is well-worn and there are hundreds of entries. I snap photographs of nearly thirty of these, including the hand-decorated cover featuring three panels of a tree, cut and pasted from another medium. The gaze is from a tree perch looking out upon two figures in the distance. Markings on the cover include attendees’ graffiti: a heart with a pyramid extending from its lines, a music note, and either a badly drawn bird in flight or a well drawn ram’s head. The text is entitled, in small ink lettering at the top, “Public Journal” and dated “Cornerstone ’08.” Running along the side of the journal is the phrase: “The Lord Himself will provide…” I like the ellipsis tagged onto the end.

I elucidate four categories from the entries, including praise (of the festival), critique (of the festival), confession, and prank. The praise category includes positive reviews of the festival and the coffee shop. One entry equates the festival smell with Jesus: “Everyone who was working behind the scene here, coffee shops, merch tents all smile and smell like Jesus.” (In an alternative ink, a prankster has penned, “It’s because they haven’t showered in over a week,” exemplifying the “prank” category.) The author of this praise entry cites a verse of scripture. In the New International version, Galatians 2:20 reads: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Another entry in this category is written late in the festival, Friday evening, and laments that Saturday (today) is the final day of the festival. This attendee begins by saying, “I got caught in some mosh pits and was bleeding but it was worth it.”
The entry is playful. The attendee claims to be from Neptune and views the diary as a close, personal friend. An entry entitled “1st Cornerstone” cites the “diverse people” as the most unique element of the festival. The Galatians citation finds resonance in a more thoughtfully articulated entry, called “Why I Love Cornerstone”:

The bare and dusty emptiness of life w/o God is refreshed by a flood of worship and praise of voices and instruments around me. A breath of fresh air it is, seeing peoples’ faces light up while they talk animatedly and humbly of Jesus’ love. This is my third year and each Saturday evening is harder to bear. Hope and love is renewed here; peoples’ lives change here, whether by salvation, making friends, or discovering a God-loving band. This week will go down in my life as one of the brightest, loudest, and smelliest! Keep doing what you do, C-Stone.

What this attendee finds annually at Cornerstone has not been replicated for him or her elsewhere. There is, therefore, a sadness embedded in the entry: though meant to praise the love and kindness experienced at Cornerstone, as well as the sense of community, the author laments these being absent upon the return journey to his or her home church.

The majority of attendee critiques challenge the generator stages’ presence, claiming that these bands’ styles amount to little more than poor musicianship and gratuitous amounts of screaming. One entry by an attendee claiming to be from Nashville, Tennessee, where the “good music” apparently comes from, scoffs at the generator stage acts: “The stupid side bands suck and they should be kicked out! Do they really think they are going to make it?” This attendee turned 21 today, but aside from being old enough to drive a golf cart, finds little of interest at the festival: “This is my 19th Cornerstone, and to me it’s not that great.” Another entry challenges the hardcore
style of screaming, claiming that the genre itself is an improper form of Christian practice, “it just doesn’t seem like a joyful noise,” this attendee explains.

The “confession” entry provides the most poignant commentary regarding attendees’ perceived experiences insofar as it reveals the ongoing inner-work they are navigating at the festival, between traditional faith and the sort of alternative Christian identity that is coproduced at Cornerstone. One attendee claims that she “does not necessarily consider” herself a Christian, yet at Cornerstone she has “never felt more welcome in such a large group of strangers.” Part of JPUSA’s approach to framing this festival is to allow attendees as much freedom as possible. This includes, most notably, not forcing or shaming attendees into a commitment of faith (Though, other attendees may take it upon themselves to engage in this form of proselytizing). In traditional church settings and at other Christian festivals, this is referred to as an “altar call,” where attendees are either appealed to from the pulpit or (at a festival) from a stage, including the exit gate. This phenomenon of arriving at Cornerstone in a liminal or marginalized state is the predominant theme. One entry, in particular, catches my attention and I photograph the multiple pages that it occupies in the journal:

My first Cornerstone was 3 years ago. [I didn’t want to be here.] It was hot, humid, and {Cristian!} I’d been following Jesus since I was 15… off & on, really. I just had a lot I was angry at God for, and His people were Rarely very helpful in years past. I crawled into a corner of the Asylum and spoke very little the first day or two. I had only come to Cornerstone because my mentor/youth pastor […] had said I’d enjoy it – and that there was a goth tent along with many other sub-cultures. (People are so beautiful.) Long story short, I made some of
now closest friends here and my first Cornerstone ended with a prayer by the lake in the early morning.

I stop to notice the emboldened marks, clearly made after the entry because the ink is in black rather than blue. I finish photographing the entry, which includes the attendee’s amelioration of a tension between personal identity and Christian faith:

“Jesus, if we’re going to do this again [. . .] if I’m going to follow you, does it mean I have to be an asshole?!” (Since most people I’d known claimed to follow Jesus were terrible to me and this is not something I wanted to be part of.) God’s whispered response? “Come, follow me. Love me, love my people.” And that was an answer I was happy with.

This attendee’s conceptualization of faith is tied to a view that faith is a purely observable phenomenon; s/he is genuinely anxious of being transformed from a kind person into an “asshole” if s/he commits, or re-commits to the faith. Next, the author cites two passages of scripture: “It all comes down to this, fear God & obey Him because everything else is meaningless, like chasing the wind,” and “Love the Lord your God with All you ARE – and love others as you love yourself.”

This attendee re-interprets maltreatment from other Christians from a perceived personal attack (an identity critique) into a validation of his or her faith in God. The second verse cited supports this resolution. The first part of the second cited verse is written by the author for the author; however, the latter part of the second verse cited is an appeal to those offending Christians. Of note is that this attendee is sharing these revelations not with another person, but to an anonymous and collective other. In a very real sense, therefore, the author is communing with the scene. Through this communion
the attendee is constructing an alternative identity, and thereby appropriates the scene (Cornerstone) as a medium for identity-work.

Before moving on to another set of entries, I notice that at the bottom of this “confession” is an additional comment that simply does not fit. It is written in black ink and the lettering is mostly in all-caps: “Some Choose to live within the sound of a chapel bell. I choose to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell!’.” The “prank” entry at times fulfills a triangulated rhetorical inter-play, where the “confession” entry elicits feedback from other attendees. One such entry begins with an attendee asking what others think about premarital sex. Another attendee responds: “It makes me sad. Ever glue 2 pieces of cardboard together, then – after it’s dry – try to take them back apart? That’s what it feels like to break up with someone you’ve had sex with. Some part of you will be trashed,” signed, “Been in both boats.” The same prankster who commented on the earlier entries writes: “Use a condom.” Another prankster adds: “Don’t be a fool cover your tool.” Another example of the “confessional” entry seeking advice includes a young man whose affections for a member of his traveling companions have not been reciprocated, though he’s been pining after her for three years. The respondent appeals to him, exemplifying the talk-back category, to move on: “Just run, forget it, LIVE, be yourself, you don’t need her to be complete.”

I desired a means for investigating how attendees relate their Cornerstone experience to their faith, including how they make sense of their experiences at Cornerstone in relation their personal relationships. Combined with photos of the physical sites, this public journal provides a glimpse into this process. The journal is a reflective, though public, space between the physical and the spiritual where attendees
commune with “the grounds.” They are not speaking to flesh and blood others, but rather with anonymous others or to the festival itself. This journal is a link, chained to a table that is tied and locked to the ground, between attendees’ perceptions of their personal sense of faith and their experiences at Cornerstone. It represents a virtual scene within the physical site; a dialogue wherein both genuine confessions and playful pranks interact, the latter generally, and predictably, enjoying the last word. The dialogue in this journal is a form of communication-as-play, virtual exchanges at the “intersection” of dogmatism and doubt.

Cart Security Duty: Saturday

When I clock in for my final cart security shift, the festival is in high gear. Inside the office the atmosphere is light and buzzing with energy. I snag a walky-talky and settle into a chair to hang out. I talk to Ron about my experience with The Neighbors, asking him if that is typical here. He says that you have to take each case on its own terms. “They are a community, too,” he says. Andy is also in the office today, and he is much more relaxed than the first time we met. This morning, while scrolling through my digital camera, I found a series of photographs that I did not take which were set in the security office. Andy was the only one not in a comically posed picture, which makes him the culprit. “You’re a prankster, Andy. You play it professional, but you have the heart of a prankster, and I love it,” I joke. He asks if I liked the photos and I shake my head, smiling.

I take my time today, parking outside of venues to watch bands perform. I let out the cart’s throttle on Main Street when there’s a break in the otherwise constant traffic, kicking up dust and spinning out tiny rocks. I ease my pace when I re-enter the grassy
paths that constitute the Cornerstone back-roads, on the edge of the exhibition area and against a thick tree line. A group of four youths are playing Frisbee and they part to let me pass. Without slowing down I clap my hands together, signaling for the Frisbee while steering with my left knee. On cue, the attendee to my left delivers a perfect toss. I catch the Frisbee and, switching it to my throwing hand and toss it to the attendee on my right. *Right on,* I think to myself, as they flash me a collective “thumbs up.” In this setting, play is essential as a form of communication that develops and maintains relationships. For me, this playful act with the Frisbee alleviates my anxiety as researcher, breaks down an arbitrary barrier between myself and the scene, and serves as one avenue for cultivating a more intimate relationship to the festival.

I fulfill the usual responsibilities, including car jumps and traffic jams, but I also make time to visit venues that I have thus far overlooked. The Wycliffe Maloca tent features members of cultures who have translated the Bible into their native language. Inside the small venue is a panel consisting of Native Americans. Three of the four panelists are dressed in traditional clothing. I park along the outskirts. I cannot make out the question just asked, but the answer is clear: “The rocks cry out. For the brown person, God is in the rocks.” The speaker cites Old Testament passages where God speaks to a prophet through a burning bush, wind, and rocks. He buttresses these examples with a reframing of evangelical interpretations of God granting humanity “dominion” over the earth: it is not an excuse for exploiting natural resources, but rather a call to responsible stewardship and a realization of the interconnectedness of earth, animal, and tribe.
As a Bible translation facilitator, Wycliffe believes that translation should be collaborative and grounded in storytelling, music, and metaphor rather than mere verbiage. Its members adhere to the philosophy that understanding language is a holistic process rather than an itemized vocabulary. Wycliffe fieldworkers participate in tribal rituals and daily living, serving as facilitators while a tribe translates the Bible utilizing their own metaphors and storytelling structures. There are some translations that exist only in musical arrangements and rhythms. I pull out from my cargo shorts the small, spiral notepad that serves as my backup and jot down some notes:

Applying the Wycliffe understanding of “translation” as a holistic process of cultural exchange is one way for understanding Cornerstone as a socializing agent. JPUSA isn’t necessarily in the business of resocialization or alternation, or even conversion per se. They prefer attendees to translate the gospel in their own terms, in the “language” of their personal style, unique experiences, and their own cultures – whether peculiar or mundane. For the Goth community their all-black, studded clothing is one example of style not as mere projection but playful identity-work, of an aesthetic that is inseparable from their personal and cultural identity. The idea, then, is not for members of the Goth community to change-out their “clothes,” but to undergo a transubstantiation of their style, of their identity in relation to the gospel. The symbol is imbued with new meaning, but this is an exchange insofar as the signifier is not left unchanged. The alternative perspective proffered by the Native American panel, that God’s presence is in the rocks and wind, that everything and everyone is interconnected to the earth, is
part of a feedback loop where the “gospel” is also transformed by virtue of the translation.

Indeed, personal relationships and social environments are paths to an alternatively constructed sense of self (Gergen, 1999, p. 138).

A community of otherness rather than sameness, argues Cissna and Anderson (2002), “begins in a common situation” and “involves real caring for one another despite differences, and is manifest in genuine dialogue” (p. 26). At Cornerstone, Christian faith is not dogmatically determined: it is a rhetorical negotiation. From this standpoint, the festival maintains evangelical doctrine but broadens its ethical sphere by reversing the operative order of typical evangelism. Members are encouraged to translate the gospel into their sphere of experience rather than negate or redefine their personal biographies. This process, in turn, expands the range of acts, the possibilities for variations of community building and maintenance available to attendees by empowering them to take ownership of both their faith and their support structures.

Back on Main Street, I respond to a call to locate the parents of a girl who has just been taken to the medical trailer. I spend the last hour of my final shift informing venues’ stage managers of the situation, and they interrupt their shows to make the announcement. Between venues I hear another call go out asking us to be on the look out for a stolen cart that belongs to “Demon Hunter,” one of tonight’s headlining acts at Main Stage. Really, I think to myself. A band called “Demon Hunter” lost its golf cart. Where am I? Andy, as if suddenly seeing the big picture in this case, adds: “We’re in the middle of Illinois farm country. Where are they going to go?” Someone astutely adds:
“They won’t get far. It’ll be sort of obvious.” Indeed, golf carts don’t often cruise the Bushnell town square.

Inside the office, I hand over my vest and walky-talky. I thank Andy profusely for not only letting me volunteer, but also for trusting me to serve solo. They never asked if I was a Christian, something that any other Christian Festival would have made sure of from the start, likely having me sign a contract as well. Andy smiles and returns the gratitude, inviting me to volunteer again next year. He fishes around in a desk drawer and hands me an envelope. Enclosed is $60 in cash, a refund toward my cost of attendance for volunteering. “Do you accept donations,” I ask while handing him the envelope. This donation will go toward JPUSA helping attendees who’ve made this pilgrimage with no way home, cover the cost of an emergency tank of gas, or help an attendee pay a tow truck to haul their broken down vehicle to a local mechanic’s shop.

Altar Call

At camp, I swig copious amounts of water from my last gallon jug, clean up the site, and throw my backpack and camera into the tent, which I zip securely and adamantly. *This is finished*, I think to myself. I walk the festival with new eyes, feeling freed from the burdens of fieldwork and being “on” all the time. I wander the festival grounds, taking in as many shows as possible, not noticing when the sun goes down. At a hardcore show, I enter my own marginal experience. I feel the music vibrate in my chest. The recent release I’ve felt from completing the fieldwork merges with the singer’s throated, primal screams. I am pushed from behind, sweat on sweat. I let myself be swept into the gauntlet, where I thrust my fists into the air along with those around me, taking an elbow to the cheek. We push and we shove until we all reach a collective
exhaustion, shoulder to shoulder. The band slows the pace, and we sway in place. I raise my hands to catch hold of an ankle, passing the scantily-clad body-surfer along the throng of audience members. The music kicks back in, hard and fast, and we all pogo-jump to the furious rhythm.

At the Gallery Stage, I flip on my red headlamp as the house lights turn off. I have little interest in tonight’s opening act. I’m here for The Lost Dogs, who will be closing down this venue. I pass the time reading through the festival program, dripping with sweat from the hardcore show. What was once daunting is now so simple: this festival is an extension of the communal processes JPUSA live on a daily basis, including the mundane (washing dishes) and the surreal (Goth glam-rock shows).

A roar of cheers crashes like a wave, from the front of the stage to the back of the open air venue as Steve Hindalong (drums, percussion) and Mike Roe³ (guitars, vocals) launch the “Dogs” into their opening song. Derri Daugherty⁴ (guitars, bass, and vocals) and Terry Scott Taylor⁵ (guitar, vocals) join the jam. This “Lost Dogs” crowd has found its home in the band’s humorous sardonic banter, Americana-styled songwriting, and catchy musical hooks that carry their harmonizing into the Cornerstone night. After the

³ Mike Roe founded The 77s in the early 1980s and the band enjoyed considerable success, including a positive review in Rolling Stone magazine. Among the band’s most popular LPs is The Seventy Sevens (1992), which was originally entitled Pray Naked before Christian book stores censored the album’s title.

⁴ Daugherty and Hindalong are members of The Choir, an alternative Christian rock band that formed in the early 1980s. The Choir’s music is a virtual landscape of melodic effects and haunting psychedelics.

⁵ Terri Scott Taylor is an original member of Daniel Amos, which experimented with rock opera and country rock before settling into alternative rock. One of the band’s tours featured multimedia video screens synched to the music, mannequins, 3D slide shows, and stage actors. Daniel Amos has performed in every conceivable venue, from arenas, prisons and barbeques, to Madame Wong’s.

⁶ Missing from this current group is Gene Eugene, an original member of The Lost Dogs and founding member of Adam Again who died of a brain aneurysm.
first song, Roe pulls a giant, inflated cow with bursting udders onto stage and tries to auction it off for a mere $10,000. With no takers, the band starts jamming again, this time to the bluesy sound of “Bullet Train” (1992), an ode to JFK, MLK and Christ that laments the cost of love and social activism. I shed the pretense of being an ethnographer and let myself trip down memory lane, reminiscing the confidence that accompanied a simpler understanding of faith and reveling in the radicalism that listening to the Lost Dogs back then meant for my maturation.

Todd arrives and asks to sit. I smile and offer him a chair. He’s never heard of The Lost Dogs and I oblige his curiosity. The band has released approximately nine LPs and are currently compiling a new release based upon a three week long travel down what is left of old route 66. Their first release was in a similar vein, called Scenic Routes (1992). I close my eyes and let the music wash over me, unmindful of Todd’s presence. There is no altar call at The Lost Dogs show. However, their evangelical commitments are clearly noted and passionately intoned with anthems such as “Pray Where You Are” (Little Red Riding Hood, 1993) and “That’s Where Jesus Is” (The Lost Cabin and the Mystery Trees, 2006).

As soon as the band exits the stage and the house lights come back on. JPUSA members and festival volunteers begin tearing down the stage. Todd and I stay at our table and talk, while the venue is dismantled around us. This is it, I think to myself, The Roundtable discussions, the relationships that were formed here and the music that was performed. By midnight, all of Cornerstone will have been folded up and packed away. Todd and I speak about The Roundtable sessions, the seeming serendipity of that many strangers developing an ongoing dialogue throughout the festival. But our conversation
remains oddly impersonal, and neither of us breeches the topic of our conversation during the walkabout from this morning. Before we part ways he tells me that he spoke to Dan and Keith about our conversation, and that he would like for me to come by their campsite tomorrow morning, before they leave for their respective homes. “We would like to pray over you,” he says.

Back at the campsite, my exhaustion has turned to restlessness. I’m curled up in a comfortable pallet of pillow and sleeping bag, enjoying the warmth and silence. I am still amped-up from the day’s events. I try to stave off my desire to pack up the tent and start the drive home by jotting down a few loosely developed ruminations about the meaning and variations of community at Cornerstone, but it’s all coming out as dribble. I wad up the paper and toss it against the tent wall. I pull on my cargo shorts for last romp through the grounds, though there cannot possibly be any bands still playing. One last time with the routine: I gather my credentials; zip up the tent and stretch. The ground beneath my feet is trembling, and I can hear a muffled, rolling roar emanating from the direction of the Underground Stage.

A dull haze of light spills out of the open air venue; as I approach the rumbling gives way to screaming guitars and ferociously paced drums. My heart feels as though it may explode from the sheer volume of the music. Grave Robber is based out of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Jeff, the volunteer working the north gate, and Tyler of The New Crew, told me about this band. I had no interest, even per their recommendations, of being here. I noticed this afternoon, during my cart security farewell tour, that Jeff had painted his nails black. I did not peg him for this conspicuous scene, but I see him at the front of the stage amidst a congregation of fans. Grave Robber’s genre is called Horror Rock. It
combines elements of performance, spectacle, and theater. I think about the name for a minute before I get the entendre. Skeptics of Christian theology claim that at best Jesus’ tomb was raided by his apostles and “the Lord’s” ascension was subsequently staged; in another sense, if the story is true, then it follows that those who are faithful are “stolen” from the grave and resurrected during the rapture, an eschatological belief that says Christ will return and all of his followers will be reunited with their bodies as well as their savior.

Part of me feels like I’m still in my tent, asleep, and this is the nightmare I am having. The band members are draped in brown outfits that are splattered in red paint; I imagine this is meant to replicate blood. They wear skull masks that hang loosely, as if their faces are melting, or molting. The brown garb could be symbolic of the muck and the mire of a life of sin, and the red paint symbolizing, in turn, the blood of Christ as their redemption. I’m not sure about the masks. Their molting effect might suggest transubstantiation. The band members’ names are a smorgasbord of classic, evangelical self-deprecation: Wretched, Maggot, Nameless, and Dr. Cadaver. Why is there an audience member wielding a shovel? Eerie keyboards, thundering drums, a wall of sound guitar chopping away at certainty, and a lead singer that might double as a sadomasochist, are playing to an equally strange crowd. The stage is something out of a horror film, complete with what I think is a throne surrounded by drapes, rope, chains, and webbing.

I am leaning against a tent pole, midway back and stage right. Except for the throng of attendees at the front of the stage, the crowd is sparse. I arrive in time for what I suspect is the band’s closing song. All of the other venues at Cornerstone have been
cleared out; Robert’s Underground Stage is breaking the festival-wide curfew. I stand out like a chicken at a turkey shoot, sporting a ball cap, backpack, cargo shorts, hiking boots, and a digital camera slung around my neck. I suspect that sucking on sunflower seeds during the band’s altar call bolsters my inability to “blend in.”

The singer is treating those congregated at the front of the stage as vermin, demanding that they hear him and commanding them, alternately, to search for and purge their hearts and minds of sin. I get it. This is just a re-tooled version of the classic evangelical altar call, where the traveling pastor leading the “revival” guilt-trips audience members into seeing themselves as un-worthy, and therefore in need of a re-commitment; or tormenting their otherwise secure sense of faith to the point that they doubt their own prior conversions, and thus convert all over again. This is certainly a marginalized form of Christian Rock, but this is not Transformational CCM. It is a version of Separational CCM, with a demented sense of “exhortation,” a confusing approach to “worship,” and definite conversion mission.

I may be skeptical, but for several of the youth up front this is a profound moment, as they are gathered around by their peers and re-commit their lives to Christ. Ah, but Wretched is not yet satisfied. Through his mask he’s spotted me in the back, and he calls me out. “There is a un-believer in our midst,” he growls, the music still playing in support, but more quietly. “Ye-e-e-s,” he says, affirming his claim, while I remain with hands in pocket whilst leaning against a tent pole. Looking straight at me, he asks that all those who have given their lives to the “Re-animator,” his term for God, bow their heads in due obedience of that faith, affirming their commitment. I hold firm in my stare, popping another sunflower seed; even if I was a believer, I don’t play these bully tactics.
He rants some more, affirming his “shout-out.” He growls. He stares. I flinch and bow my head. *Damn it.*

My flinch only fueled his evangelical fire, and I think I may be responsible, given that flinch, for the longest set played past the Cornerstone curfew during the last evening of shows. With my head bowed, even I have now become submissive to Wretched. Not wanting to flip-flop, I keep my head down as he calls me out for my “lukewarm” indecision. When the show finally ends, some of those congregated at the front of the stage meet with the band backstage, per the band’s request for anyone who recommits their life to Christ, confesses sin, or wants to make a commitment of faith – they want to follow-up. I employ my Southern Baptist back pew skills and sneak out the back, not a little shaken.

This performance points to the multifaceted aspect of the festival. Most of those in attendance dressed in accordance to the Glam-Goth style of the musicians, including one attendee who had the foresight, I suppose, to bring his own shovel (i.e. “Grave Digger”) to the show. I attended dozens of performances throughout the festival, not including the generator stages, and at no point did I hear a single altar call; yet at the one show that stands out as the most outrageous, most seemingly non-Christian I find the most obvious caricature of Christian Rock. Notably, the language of faith in this performance is co-constructed: if the attendees did not get something out of this sort of demeaning treatment by Wretched, they certainly would not stick around for it. However strange or contrived, it is nonetheless a form of community grounded in what is for its members a copasetic fusion of faith and style. These members’ ongoing commitment to Horror Rock, if not this band in particular, maintains the existence of the scene. When
the curtain is pulled and they return to their parents’ home or to their roommates at college, this scene and their experience of it here, even if only ephemerally, ensures its reality and therefore the reality of their perception as members.

There is, therefore, a conversion function embedded in this otherwise alternative scene at Cornerstone, but there is no guarantee that one will come face-to-mask with it during the festival. What the performers choose to do or not to do is their own business, and JPUSA accepts no responsibility for their actions. Given the crew-based dynamic of the festival, it is less likely the case that dialogue is facilitated between individual attendees, older “straights” and younger “radicals,” and more a case of small communities of believers and non-believers within the festival appropriating its scene for the purpose of ritual and visibility, the accomplishment of objective markers of identity-work and community-building membership practices.

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Tucked safely away into the warmth of my sleeping bag, my glasses resting atop yet another pile of memorabilia in the corner of the tent, I rest in the liminality between sleeping and waking. I have a decision to make tomorrow morning. Todd wants me to come over to the campsite so that he, Dan, and Keith can pray over me. I didn’t commit to his invitation, so if I don’t go there’s no offense taken. But part of me desires that fellowship. It would be so easy. All I have to do is show up. They’ll speak the words I’ve sworn I’d never speak again. They will be my voice and breathe the sentiment I can no longer feel. I would participate in a right of passage for a Cornerstone pilgrimage: spontaneous community-building, translated into friendship, and sealed with a prayer and the laying on of hands. But I would be a heretic to my conscience.
I am serenaded to sleep by the muted sounds of acoustic guitars accompanied by the melodic voices of attendees singing praise and worship songs. These sounds drift up into the Cornerstone night, into oblivion.
Chapter Seven:
Cornerstone Festival as Rhetorical Site

Sun comes up, it’s Sunday morning. I sleep in, cuddled-up to my sleeping bag. The “womb” is warm and I find peace in its simple, enclosed space. Everything is a blur until I find my glasses. Before leaving the tent I read through last night’s fieldnotes, struggling to make sense of the frenetic scratch that was my handwriting. I set the notebook down and search through the stacks of memorabilia, pulling out music CDs that I purchased and flipping through the liner notes.

I change clothes in the tent and dangle my feet outside, precariously close to the damp grass, to put on my hiking boots. The sun may have risen, but the sky is still grey.

Cornerstone is a virtual ghost town this morning. Mine is among the sole remaining tents in what used to be a vast sea of them. Almost all of the nearly 20,000 attendees left in the night. Still drowsy, I roll up the sleeping bag and clean the camp site. Everything is ready to go. I could tear down this tent and be out the front gate in ten minutes.

Unburdened, and leaving everything behind, I walk in the direction of where Todd, Dan, and Keith have been camped for the past few days. The lines anchoring Encore venues 1 and 2 seem longer and more intricate now, and I traverse these thick ropes and their giant pegs with care. I cross over Main Street and past the big log where I first marveled upon Buzz-Saw Alley. The Cornerstone store is closed and the volunteer
tent is abandoned. No sign of life at the security office. Continuing my trek toward the Speaker’s area, I turn around quickly when I hear a golf cart zooming down Main Street, kicking up gratuitous amounts of dust. I see that the Merchants Tent has been rolled up as I make my last turn off this side-path.

My feet and legs are taking me where my heart doesn’t want to tread. Part of me hopes I’m too late; that they’ve already left.

I’m greeted by smiles, in lieu of words. Dan is surprised to see me, and he wastes no time fetching Todd from inside the trailer. Keith rises from his chair, and I see his son Jordon walking over. Dan asks me “What’s next?” for the project, and how long the writing process will take. “I don’t know,” I say, explaining that first I need time to step away from it all. Todd, Keith, and Jordon have arrived, quietly. We stand together in a tight circle.

One by one, they each lay a hand on my shoulder or back. I close my eyes, but I don’t bow my head. Todd speaks to “God,” offering supplication on my behalf that the project “finds completion” and that I find peace. I hear Keith, or maybe it was Jordon, verbalize an “Amen” when Todd, in the same simple and matter-of-fact voice he spoke from during all of our conversations, gives thanks for our meeting and time together at the festival.

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In this study I have examined Jesus People USA’s annual Cornerstone Festival as a site for the construction of alternative Christian identities. These “alternative” identities are oriented around a conspicuous, and sometimes vehemently contested, merger of Christian faith and rock music. What I found is that Cornerstone Festival is a coproduced
event that mediates an alternative experience of Christian identity – a discursive symbol that occupies a liminal space. Attendees appropriate the Cornerstone scene as a vision of Christian community that is outside of the circumference of the everyday reality of institutionalized faith. The festival is therefore an amalgam of ideal Christian community and transient touristic experience; surrogate mentor to marginalized Christian youth, genuine weird and Christian kitsch. Part mythic and gloriously un-cool, it is the sacred site for what Powell (2002) calls the ultimate square pegs of rock music. The festival encompasses historical, cultural, political, and spiritual social realities, where the “groovy gospel” eclipses dogmatic approaches to Christian faith.

JPUSA appropriates the festival format for the purpose of privileging non-traditional methods of religious expression, namely rock music, and including members of the faith who are otherwise marginalized in traditionally organized Christian groups. Additionally, JPUSA sees Cornerstone as fostering interaction between these less-enfranchised members and more traditionally minded and socialized Christian practitioners. However, this “interaction” is not without its bias. Though festival seminars speak from the margins of Christian faith and practice, and although Cornerstone Festival perpetuates and certainly impresses an air of tolerance, its evangelical alignments, marginal or otherwise, include stances opposed to pre-marital sex, drug use, and homosexuality. Festival seminars are therefore a conspicuous amalgam of both conservative and progressive approaches to Christian practice.

The festival operates at one level to commemorate the existence, survival, and good works of the JPUSA community, publicizing and perpetuating their role in the scene. Concomitantly, for some attendees it is a chance to either “make” this scene or to
explore Christian identity through processes of play, making camp, and community-building. Cornerstone is thus coproduced insofar as attendees’ annual pilgrimage confers upon the festival its ongoing credibility as a site for alternative experiences of Christian faith. Cornerstone “crews” are in turn legitimated by the collaborative effort of navigating to and within the festival; they share a common pre-festival history, yet they experience an estrangement of that history as travelers-together.

“Musicking” (Small, 1998) is integral to community-building at Cornerstone. It is the foundational ritual experience that brings into existence, even if only for a moment, relations which theretofore had not existed. In a very loose sense this accounts for the co-existence of very differently styled forms of music at Cornerstone, insofar as attendees are encamped in a shared space for the doing of acts in common. The festival experience that JPUSA facilitates not only offers a respite from the day-to-day membership practices of orthodox forms and practices of Christian faith, it also provides a model, and an experience of that model, for supplanting those practices. Having exchanged the church-house for the camp ground, Cornerstone attendees appropriate the festival space as a site for ameliorating these seemingly conflicted ideologies of Christian faith and rock music. Additionally, attendees’ identification with Transformational CCM artists combined with a burgeoning digital production and distribution market contributes to an increasingly potent Christian rock scene seeded between the margins of institutional faith and spontaneous communitas. Rock music is an alternative “language” for Christian youth who appropriate the genre as an initiation ritual for community-building and visibility. Indeed, the festival provides attendees with the “objective” markers of identity which they so desire, yet cannot otherwise achieve, at least not so completely, since even
Christian rock remains a marginalized form of Christian practice in the larger evangelical community.

Misaligned individuals, or those who see themselves as marginal members of the institutional order, are subject to resocialization activities that seek to stabilize (integrate) their symbolic identity and status. These processes are therefore inherently rhetorical and represent an important pretext of public and private discourse. Peter Berger (1967), writing on the cusp of the Jesus People Movement, intuits that the world’s religious legitimations had lost their plausibility, “not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals but for broad masses of entire societies,” adding that a problem of “meaninglessness” has arisen “not only for such institutions as the state or the economy but for the ordinary routines of everyday life” (p. 125). Yet Cornerstone promises a different experience.

Individuals who see themselves as “different,” or as marginal members of the evangelical community, appropriate Cornerstone’s festival scene as a redemptive space insofar as it is a validating experience. One result of this process is that they exchange an individualized form of Christian faith for a communal one. Just as shared ways of doing and being maintain the social order, attendees generate new meanings through alternative representational forms that “simultaneously challenge existing traditions of understanding, and offer new possibilities for action” (Gergen, 1999, p. 49).

Cornerstone Festival promises an alternative, faith-based experience. In one sense the festival is an affirmation of marginalized Christian community – an exploration into new frames of Christian experience and a collaborative, self and other validating act, valued as much because it is a shared experience. This kind of act at Cornerstone brings
ritual through festival into a new role: not merely to learn about faith and community, but to *produce* a new orientation. Attendees’ per-liminal participation in this scene releases them, if only temporarily, from their signifying institutional roles “back home.”

However, as a site for the construction or maintenance of alternative Christian identities, Cornerstone Festival engenders a conflicted trajectory. Although JPUSA members and festival attendees have forged a sustainable marginal space beyond the parameters of the dominant evangelical parent culture, the festival has necessarily become a legitimating system in its own right, coproduced or otherwise. When examples of communitas such as the generator stages arise, JPUSA attempts to incorporate these marginal moments into a normative framework for the festival by including them in the Cornerstone narrative or “promise” of alternative experience. JPUSA recognizes the tenuous line it occupies, and indeed decisions regarding these generator stages may irrevocably alter the festival’s reputation as a “hands-off” event. However, even as some long-standing examples of communitas are being more officially grafted into the festival production, new variations such as The Tea House are arising. These new sites are embedded within the campsites, amidst the heart of the festival experience where crews and families camp.

JPUSA envisions Cornerstone Festival as a site for the comingling of both marginalized and more traditionally minded Christian practitioners and their forms of expression, including variations of music experiences. JPUSA wants the festival to foster dialogue between the rhetorical communities that identify with these variations; if not for the sake of cohesion, then for cultivating collaboration as the organizing principle of Christian faith and community. Indeed, the very idea of communication comprises
contemporary society’s struggles with its collective identity, hopes and fears: “An apparent answer to the painful divisions between self and other, private and public, and inner thought and outer word, the notion illustrates our strange lives at this point in history” (Peters, p. 2). Communication develops an intimate relation to social institutions of meaning, burgeoning democratic communities and participation in a collaboratively constructed world wherein we desire to mean: “We are bound together in existential and lived ways before we even open our mouths to speak. Communication here does not involve transmitting information about one’s intentionality; rather, it entails bearing oneself in such a way that one is open to hearing the other’s otherness” (Peters, p. 16). The essential meaning of other-engagement is the cultivation of respect, if not communion: we come to share a mutual ground of significance, “or our always-becoming selves [. . .] not by our actions alone, but because of our interaction” (Shepherd, p. 24-25).

Social life “is more than power and trade (and it is more than therapy as well),” as it also includes “the sharing of aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values and sentiments, and intellectual notions – a ritual order” (Carey, 1988, p. 34). For many attendees, Cornerstone is more than a mere vacation experience; it is a sacred pilgrimage site because as they cannot accomplish these forms of “sharing” in their hometown scenes. Furthermore, attendees’ interactions are framed by a crew-based process of sharing, rather than an individualized experience. This alternative orientation, not only to faith but to daily life, is likely the most significant facet of the festival. How we think about (theorize) communication affects how we communicate with each other; how we see ourselves, and how we value our relationships with others. Berger’s and Luckmann’s
social constructionism is centered in social relationships as the crux for the construction and maintenance of social reality. For JPUSA, an ongoing collaborative commitment to community is the ground from which Christian faith is constructed and maintained. It is a choice, and while JPUSA contends it is not for everyone certainly the festival is a celebration of their commitment and an invitation to others to experience, if only fleetingly or superficially, this alternative form of Christian community.

Ethnographic Approaches to Studying Rhetoric

In this study I have argued that part of Cornerstone’s multiplicity is its function as a rhetorical site. The festival engenders variations of Christian identity, relationships, and community that are atypical to most attendees’ daily lives. Indeed, communication theory “has expanded to include rhetoric’s status as a constitutive force, a phenomenon of identification and relationship” (Cissna & Anderson, 2002, p. 19). In order to better understand how Cornerstone functions as a rhetorical site, and the implications of its variations of Christian identity, I embedded myself in the festival. Payne (2006) has proposed that theories of rhetoric and claims about texts must “come to be experienced in the life-world and become part of the materials out of which we forge and manage self and relationship to the world, and that experiential data should inform our understanding of the layering of text and context and the ambiguities of interpretation and influence.” By applying an ethnographic method of studying Cornerstone as a rhetorical site, I experienced first-hand the allure of collaborative Christian community fuelled by rock music and formed genuine relationships with others which brought to the fore and challenged my own spiritual choices. New approaches to rhetorical theory, writes Frentz and Rushing (1999), “must reconceptualize audiences in more complex and ephemeral
terms than they have done in the past. In this light, cultural studies multidimensional understandings of how viewer-listeners respond to mediated messages could enrich rhetoric’s notions of how audiences are formed” (p. 331). I found Cornerstone to be a site where very different genres of music and their accompanying audiences come together within and coproduce a scene; that processes of musicking translate into everyday conversations and structure relationships. Through a deep immersion in the Cornerstone scene, I internalized its rhetorical practices and related personally to observations and experiences in the field. The method of study furthermore directed me toward my own ambiguity as not-quite as former a believer as I thought myself to be. I discovered that “belief” is a desire for community as much as it is a commitment to faith. Thus, when I look back upon my prior attendances of Cornerstone, I can value the experience of friendship and community-building even though I no longer share the same commitment to Christian faith.

Ethnographic fieldwork is a process of coming to terms with both a culture (Van Maanen, 1988) and oneself (Ellis, 1995): “What the fieldworker learns is how to appreciate the world in a different key” (Van Maanen, p. 118). Ethnographers enter the field already in a double-bind. They “must be faithful to the members of the society that is being studied, and on the other hand they must conform to the criteria of the scientific community of which” they are a member (Karp & Kendall, p. 269). Mere reflection in the reporting of data does not ameliorate this dilemma; “good field work,” argues Karp and Kendall draw knowledge claims not only from the people being studied, but also speaks back to the ethnographer’s community. Notably, the value of collaboration that JPUSA engenders at Cornerstone Festival found its way into this fieldwork experience. I
asked for permission to observe how JPUSA members handle conflict situations during the festival, and I was entrusted as a member of cart security. I wanted to know what sense attendees made of their experience of Cornerstone Festival, what the festival means to or accomplishes for them, and often-times this inspired their first genuine consideration of the connection between faith, music, and Christian identity.

Festival ethnography is exhausting, as one might expect, but it is also surprisingly alienating and often lonely. Ethnographic fieldnotes, the other side of the participant hyphen, are an ever-present mooring to a “researcher” identity that often obfuscates the relationships formed in the field. The more intensely I identified with attendees, the ‘heavier’ the researcher role became. This is especially complicated as festival demands that participants shed their socialized, professional identities and commune with their “lower” or “suppressed” selves. Throughout the fieldwork process, I progressed from the exhilaration of entering the scene, to the intimidation of its commanding immensity; from the swagger of accomplishment, to the sheer exhaustion of maintaining multiple identities and their subsequent responsibilities – researcher, participant, volunteer, confidant and confederate. Ultimately, however, these eight days conferred meaning upon my prior experiences here, insofar as “here” is where I intersected the former true believer, the one-time seeker, and the contented agnostic.

The testimony of my coming into un-faith, from committed Southern Baptist to contented agnostic was subject, for years, to sporadic bouts of self-hatred and guilt. Choosing Cornerstone as the subject of my doctoral dissertation was in part an attempt to attain a sense of closure for my personal relationship to the larger system of faith that the festival represents, if only marginally. In a darker sense, I desired to “kill” whatever
remnant of my identity was still moored to this subject; to put this part of my life to rest and set it aside as an objectified marker of a “former” time. However, the relationships I formed at Cornerstone during this fieldwork experience seeded a later revelation: that the peace I was seeking could not come from merely putting this part of my self “to rest,” but integrating it into the person I am becoming. It was Janice Rushing who once told me that while our experiences with music or art can indeed be profound and enlightening, they are only transformative insofar as we form positive relationships from those experiences.

In my first meeting with Todd, he elicited from me a de-conversion story, a testimony of my un-faith. But it was nearly three years before this moment crystallized; before I realized its therapeutic potency. Through my fieldwork at Cornerstone and the process of writing-up notes and interviews into a set of findings, a story, I came into a long-sought after contentment wherein I am no longer embarrassed about that “true believer.” I recognize “him” as a part of me – then, now, and for the rest of my life. I no longer hate myself on some insidious level, nor do I feel embarrassed because I "used to be an evangelical Christian." I accept that "young man” as "me"; I'm not beating him up anymore as if he represents something shameful.

For my part, I still listen to at least one Christian musician, a Transformational artist: Jason Martin’s Starflyer 59. My draw to Martin’s music, however, is not for religious purposes: its just damn good music. Yet, it is also a point of identification, albeit a tenuous one, to Christian rock that transcends my ambivalence to Christian faith. At Cornerstone, and indeed for years following my Cornerstone fieldwork, I felt pulled to re-encounter, to reflect and re-sort my beliefs. In this sense, then, Cornerstone Festival
accomplished its strategy of drawing marginal Christians into encounters and identifications with their faith or un-faith.

However, the festival’s openness to hosting marginalized styles of Christian rock (alternative rock, Goth, punk rock, hardcore rock, metal, etcetera), invites criticism. Rubin and the conservative form of evangelicalism that he represents are the most visible incarnations of this opposition. Rubin was joined by pastors from the neighboring city of Macomb and local pastors from Bushnell. By allowing these protestors to voice their opposition to the festival, including its rock music culture, JPUSA draws out Rubin and these pastors as conservative and their brand of conservatism becomes, for passersby, a spectacle of radical evangelical conservatism. En route to the festival, attendees representing new generations of Christian youth must pass through this ring of pastors-protestors; passing through the front gates is thus akin to announcing their alignment with a more tolerant form of evangelical faith and Christian membership.

The most alluring aspect of the festival’s more progressive incarnations of evangelicalism is the featuring of Transformational CCM artists. The rhetorical dynamic of these artists’ lyrics deviate from the typical lyrical style of their counterparts insofar as their lyrics are grafted from ambiguity rather than dogmatism. The impact of this turn, evidenced in my conversations with attendees, has even larger implications for American politics (voting for Obama in lieu of the abortion issue) and cultural life (renewed commitment to social activism). Increasingly, the Transformational turn in CCM is translating into virtual communities that represent a new generation of believers who are more pragmatic and collaborative than their evangelical predecessors. Instead of
isolation or separation from their non-Christian counterparts, they desire a copasetic integration, an exchange of views as well as music.

For JPUSA, “making music” is a form of commemoration – it recalls the formation of their community and reaffirms their experience of faith. Perhaps this is why Cornerstone’s rock aesthetic represents more than a contemporized or “cool” version of traditional faith or a mere imitation of the general market music scene. Many of the festival’s attendees and their crews that return here annually, or otherwise retain a nostalgic connection to the event, do so because a special relationship has been forged between their personal identity as believers and the festival itself. So long as Cornerstone retains its vitality, as a festival where rock music is not only an acceptable form of Christian practice but a requisite, it will retain its credibility among those in the margins of Christian faith.
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About the Author

Brian Johnston received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Arkansas. His academic interests include rhetoric, cultural studies, and qualitative research methods featuring ethnography and rhetorical criticism. His Masters Thesis, entitled "Waking Up Narcissus: U2 Transcend Postmodernism with Zoo TV," co-directed by Thomas S. Frentz and Janice Hocker Rushing, was a rhetorical criticism that sought to demonstrate how a rock music concert tour series re-articulated the postmodern condition within a spiritual-mythic frame. Additional interests include interpersonal communication, film studies, public speaking as community activism, rhetoric of social movements, popular forms of public communication, and documentary production. Brian is a member of the National Communication Association and maintains a close relationship with the annual Buster Keaton Celebration.