

Flyleaf struggles with 'Christian rock' tag

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Pat Seals sounds uncomfortable.

The friendly, soft-spoken bassist for the alt-metal act Flyleaf is supposed to be enjoying a few days off in his Texas home before joining his bandmates in Calgary for the Rock the River West tour this Saturday. Instead, he's being forced to choose his words carefully after being asked about the strange world of Christian entertainment.

To be fair, it has always seemed a sticky topic for the Texas five-piece act. While never reluctant to label themselves Christians, the band has been leery in the past about lumping themselves in with the billion-dollar industry known generically as "Christian rock."

But the chart-topping band's decision last year to align itself with evangelist Franklin Graham's Rock the River tour as it rolled across the

United States seems to make Seals and bandmates Lacey Mosley, Sameer Bhattacharya, Jared Hartmann and James Culpepper as good a source as any to talk about the subculture's booming fortunes.

In the past 20 years, it's gone from a small world defined by spandexed, hair-metal bands and numbingly wholesome AOR singers to a parallel universe that covers all genres and generates millions of dollars. Was it divine intervention or more earthbound motivations that led to its rise?

"I think there are a lot of business people out there who can see how to make money very easily," says Seals. "As much as the Christian industry has helped us, as well as the secular industry, it smacks of 'We can sell this product to a lot of people.' I think that's how it arose. I guess the U.S. -- particularly in the Midwest and the South -- is so predominantly Christian that there is a ton of people there.

"I don't know," Seals adds sheepishly. "I feel like I'm digging myself in a big hole here."

Seals stresses he does not include the controversial Graham -- who made headlines earlier this year after being banned from a Pentagon prayer meeting because of past anti-Muslim remarks which he recently reiterated -- as being among the more mercenary power brokers of Christian rock. After all, the Rock the River festival, which mixes youthful but safe music with Graham's sermonizing, often offered free admission for shows in America. At Calgary's Canada Olympic Park today, the festival's ticket prices are set at only \$10.

Flyleaf's apparent discomfort with the term Christian rock seems to stem from a desire not to limit itself to faith-based fans. This often finds the band falling into a blurry netherworld between secular and Christian music alongside other Christian-but-not-really-Christian-rock acts such as Paramore and Creed. While the subculture certainly offers a ready supply of youth and their money, being thought of as God-centred tends to alienate kids who would prefer their alt-metal and pop-punk not come with overt Jesus-boosting.

"We are Christians and we are a band," Seals said. "But what we were leery of was the connotative sense of being a Christian band -- a band that only Christians would listen to. We like to think our music is for everybody and our message is for everybody to hear. But we really love what Franklin Graham is doing. The Rock the River shows last year were really special and seemed to resonate with the crowd. It seemed to not be about, 'Hey, let's make some money,'"

Flyleaf has certainly made waves, and more than a little money, in the secular world. Its sophomore album, *Memento Mori*, came out in 2009 and entered the Billboard charts at No. 8, offering an expert blend of muscular metal, vague Christian imagery and Mosley's impassioned vocals. In 2006, Flyleaf joined the long-standing Family Values tour, an event that appears on the surface to be the polar opposite of Rock the River.

Founded by rap-metal act Korn in the 1990s, the tour's ironic name seemed a cheeky lift of the middle finger to America's evangelical leaders who were using the term to boost socially conservative values.

But Flyleaf, armed with its thundering self-titled debut, were a hit. The exposure no doubt helped the band eventually sell more than a million copies of its first album.

"As different as the ideologies seem on paper, a lot of it is the same," Seals says about playing the raucous Family Values tour. "People want to come and have a sense of communion with the band and with each other."

That said, Seals admits that frontwoman Mosley is more likely to openly pontificate about her faith at events such as Rock the River. But he says the band's "message" doesn't change, whether it's being delivered directly or in a more abstract way.

"Our band's message, in my opinion, is the message of Christ and how he's affected our lives," Seals says.

"It's not a sales pitch. It's that truth as filtered through our experiences. We try not to deny that life is difficult, or hard or ugly. We try to make an attempt to be honest about ourselves and not present it as just a product."

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