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

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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.

Scholar Commons Citation
The story of Jesus People USA (JPUSA) is both fascinating on its own terms and illuminating because it unsettles these assumptions. JPUSA emerged when two veterans of the West Coast Jesus People scene formed a Milwaukee commune with a touring music ministry. JPUSA’s Rez Band became the Led Zeppelin of early CCM—its hard rock innovator. Today JPUSA’s future is in flux. Its Cornerstone festival dropped 50 percent in attendance during its final decade and folded in 2012. Meanwhile its core membership has slipped as children of first-generation members move away when they come of age. What is JPUSA? Jesus People USA is a Christian community of about 450 people, located in a poor neighborhood in Chicago called Uptown. JPUSA is a fully communal ministry. Its members share a common purse, receiving much of their income from businesses owned and operated by the community. Some links to JPUSA-owned and operated sites. Jesus People USA - the community I served with for 24 years. Met my wife there, raised our kids there, and had a tremendous opportunity to witness, to serve Jesus Christ and grow closer to the Lord. Cornerstone Festival - meet 20,000 radical Christians, hear great music and speakers for four days each 4th of July holiday. Cornerstone Press Chicago - the book-publishing division of Jesus People USA.