

RELIGION

Now's time to check out Christian music scene

By Brent Castillo

KNIGHT RIDDER NEWSPAPERS

As you try to make yourself over into a better person in this new year, why not make over your music, too?

It's a good year to do it.

Don VanCleave, president of the Coalition of Independent Music Stores, was asked by the Wall Street Journal why sales were down in the music industry. He said the blame lies with "an absolute, gigantic cesspool of really bad bands."

Christian music didn't escape the slump and contributed its share to whatever cesspool, but this year Christian music really started to get pop music right — especially the female performers.

Check out this list of favorites from 2005 chosen by our team of reviewers. If you've never given Christian music a chance, this is an excellent time to give it a try.

► **David Crowder Band**, "A Collision or (3+4=7)"

Crowder turns the usual Christian music formulas inside out and upside down, providing a brilliantly imaginative sonic experience.

► **Ashley Cleveland**, "Men and Angels Say"

Here is the heart and soul of a woman passionate about Jesus Christ. Her amazingly expressive voice captures the

Seeking God in your wilderness

FROM THE PULPIT

By Brad Bryant

FOR THE PANTAGRAPH

January 2006! With the gifts unwrapped, paper in the trash, (thank-you notes written?), and the tree put away, we're not looking at the end of a holiday, but the opportunity for everyone to begin a new life.

The birth of Jesus (obviously) was not an end, but a "next step" in an eternal plan, a visible step designed to bring blessings to all who choose to believe and follow.

Scriptures offer lots of information about the birth of baby Jesus, the prophecies, some of the lives that were affected, and a glimpse into his life and three-year ministry.

Why just a glimpse? Because it is not possible to record three years of anything in detail. The Bible itself says we only have part of the story: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book" (John 20:30).

The "world itself" isn't even big enough to contain the record of those three years of Jesus' ministry, according to John 21:25! But what we do have is important.

Why do we need these Scriptures from 2,000 years ago? John answers that, too (John 20:31): "These are written, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."

Fast forwarding, Jesus grew up. Luke records a brief story of pre-teen Jesus, who wandered away from his traveling family and was found chatting with the teachers at the temple (Luke 2:46-47): "After three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them, and asking them questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers."

Beyond that reference, we have very little information about his growing up, except for this comment from Luke 2:52: "As Jesus grew older, he gained in both wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

So between ages 12-30, Jesus grew up physically, spiritually and mentally. Around age 30, Jesus felt the Spirit's call to begin his earthly ministry. Some of his first steps in responding to that call included:

► **Baptism** (both parts: in water by John the Baptist and by Spirit from God), and

► **Preparation** (being with God for 40 days in the wilderness).

Jesus followed the same steps that we are asked to follow when we first choose to follow God: Baptism in water, Baptism in the Spirit, and spiritual growth.

In the wilderness, Jesus encountered God, learned about His ministry, and dealt with personal temptations.

Either by choice, circumstance, or sometimes through the leading of the Holy Spirit, everyone ends up in the wilderness occasionally. This wilderness experience can be one you dread and fear, or one where you choose to focus on finding God and His plan for your life, and then responding to that plan and invitation.

There are many reasons for a wilderness experience. Sometimes it is for our own growth.

Sometimes it is for us to be there to help another person find a way out. Sometimes we're there because of our own choices and actions.

How you get into the wilderness is less important than how you choose to respond once you're there. If we focus on the wilderness as being a wake-up call, instead of a place of terror, then we can choose to begin a new life, make new choices and seek out the God that is there, waiting for us.

Through relationship with our living, loving God, we can begin the healing and refocusing of our priorities, and experience the blessings he desires.

If you are in a wilderness experience, realize your opportu-

nity. Don't focus on the wild animals and dangers, but seek out the God who wants you to find him. Find a trusted Christian friend and get the support and encouragement of a Jesus-centered church family that will help you along your spiritual journey and toward your heavenly parent.

May you each be blessed by the peace and hope that comes through relationship with Jesus Christ as we begin a new year with him.

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 Morning Worship.....9:00 a.m.
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 with Potluck Supper following service

New Covenant Community

 A progressive congregation for people who value spiritual searching over religious certainty.
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ReligionCalendar

Jan. 7, 8 — Sandv Elder of 11 a.m. at Second Presbyterian