Piracy no stranger to Christian tunes

01:00 PM CDT on Saturday, April 17, 2004

By SUSAN HOGAN/ALBACH / The Dallas Morning News

Christian teens are stealing Jesus music.

They're doing it through Internet downloads and CD burnings at nearly the same rate as secular music is being pirated by non-Christians, according to a new study done for the Gospel Music Association.

The findings were a jolt to many in the evangelical music industry, who expected churchgoing teens to be mindful of the Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal."

"I'm surprised and disappointed that the behavior isn't that ardently different between Christians and non-Christians," said John Styll, president of the Gospel Music Association, the leading trade group for evangelical music.

But not everybody thinks the pirating is a bad thing. After all, some church leaders say, isn't getting the Gospel out more important than getting paid? How can it be wrong if it saves souls?

"That's convoluted logic," said Barry Landis, president of Word Records, a major Christian label. "You would never steal Bibles to give them away. You shouldn't steal Christian music to give away either."

Christian music is in the spotlight next week as artists, fans and vendors converge in Nashville, Tenn., for Gospel Music Week. The festivities are a backdrop to the April 28 Dove Awards, the industry's equivalent of the Grammys.

Last year, sales of Christian albums fell by 5.2 percent, to just over 47 million. The major labels cut their workforce by 10 percent, Mr. Styll said. He blames the economy, downloads and CD burnings.

Even with the dip in sales, Christian music is big business. Last year, its artists sold 68 CDs for every 100 in country music. The $800 million in sales topped that of classical music and jazz combined – and at least as much money was generated in merchandise and concert tickets, Mr. Styll said.

Musicians say the piracy issue is particularly thorny for them to broach. Many fear being seen as greedy, the backlash faced by the heavy metal band Metallica when it sued Napster, once the most popular file-sharing software system.

"We can't be like Christina Aguilera and get all attitudy," said Jaci Velasquez, a platinum-selling singer originally from Texas. "We're supposed to be like Christ and turn the other cheek."

Panheads, the name given to fans of the Christian band, Skillet, routinely ask for autographs of the group's CDs. After one concert, a fan raved about how he had all of Skillet's music and that it had changed his life.

"Then he asked me to sign the CDs and they were all burned from a computer," said band member John Cooper. "I always sign because I don't want to be rude. But sometimes I'm tempted to say, 'Man, you've got to buy it.' " 
Like their secular counterparts, Christian music executives say digital music theft is hurting sales. But they've kept a low profile in the war being waged by the Recording Industry Association of America against piracy – a battle that includes more than 1,000 suits against illegaldownloaders. (The music industry said sales have improved in the first quarter of this year, in part because of its suits.)

Mainstream music sees piracy as purely as a legal issue, Mr. Styll said. The Christian industry frames the issue differently, even though its major labels are owned by mainstream companies.

"We take it further and say it's a moral issue," he said. "But we're not going to sue people. It just doesn't seem right. And nobody really has the will to do it."

The industry is grappling with how to discourage piracy.

"It's going to take an enormous educational effort," said Mr. Landis of Word Records. "Maybe we've missed this generation. We all know they shouldn't take the music. We all know they do. How do you put toothpaste back in the tube?"

Warning labels about copyright laws – part of a "do unto others" strategy – have begun appearing on some Christian CDs. But research shows the task of changing minds, much less hearts, is Herculean.

Many Christian teens simply don't think they're stealing.

Scott Ferguson, a junior at Fort Worth Christian Academy, said he has never burned a CD but has received them as birthday gifts. He considers burning CDs morally wrong, but he said many of his buddies don't.

"If a CD comes out and you like a couple of songs, they'll burn it for you," he said. "It's what friends kind of do for one another. It doesn't take long and it's easy. That's how they look at it."

Others say they do it for religious reasons.

"A lot of students think it's, like, a cheap way to witness to the Gospel," said Scott Flagg, 22, who belongs to the Christian fraternity Beta Upsilon Chi at the University of North Texas. "They go out and buy a CD, then burn several copies to give away."

Youth minister Scott Burks said he regularly confronts youths at Pantego Bible Church in Fort Worth about the issue. But they have a hard time understanding how they could be stealing when the music is readily available on the Internet.

"They'll literally say, 'Really? Come on.' " he said. "They're surprised. But when I'm able to help them understand the truth behind it, a student is typically remorseful."

Robert Noland, an executive with Student Discipleship Ministries in Burleson, said the message must first reach Mom and Dad.

"Usually the parents don't know its wrong and think it's just something all kids do," he said. "Or they do know and they think, 'What's the harm? '

Christian pollster George Barna recently completed a study on teens and piracy for the Gospel Music Association. The study hasn't been made public, but key findings were shared by Mr. Styll with The Dallas Morning News.

He said the most alarming results showed that only 10 percent of Christian teens considered music piracy to be morally wrong. Of those, 64 percent have engaged in downloading or CD burning anyway – virtually the same percentage as non-Christians.
"A lot of these people don't see it as any more wrong than speeding," he said. "I would say to you that speeding is wrong. But I would also admit that I have probably violated that law today."

E-mail shogan@dallasnews.com

Online at: