

'Baby' Talk: Grant Her Play Or Not?

Christian PDs Give 'Word' On Amy Hit

■ BY SEAN ROSS

NEW YORK—Amy Grant says this is nothing compared to the controversy that ensued over her first secular crossover five years ago, but her top 40 breakthrough hit "Baby Baby" has reopened a longstanding point of contention for PDs at Christian AC and top 40 radio stations: Can those stations play songs that are not specifically religious in content?

"Baby Baby," which is No. 1 this week on Billboard's Hot 100 and No. 2 on the Hot Adult Contemporary chart, sounds like a straightforward love song, although Grant says she actually wrote it about her daughter Millie.

Most Christian stations are playing another Grant song, "That's What Love Is For," which her Christian marketplace label, Word, is promoting as a separate single. And the Christian radio PDs who have decided to play "Baby" have had to grapple with listener questions about whether the song fits their format.

The irony is that "That's What Love Is For" is also a love song, and although its lyrics are more philosophical, it is *not* specifically doctrinal. That "Love" works for Christian radio, where "Baby" is touchier, says a lot about the line that its PDs walk.

'BABY' NAMES

One major issue, for many Christian broadcasters, is the title itself. "Baby Baby," they say, just doesn't sound like something you expect from a Christian radio station. As consultant Brad Burkhart puts it, "Most of my clients feel that it would be out of character for a DJ to come out of a song on their station and say 'Baby Baby,' and then play 'Praise The Lord' by the Impe-

rials."

Of Burkhart's 12 clients, only two are playing both "Baby" and "Love." The remainder are playing "Love" only. And he acknowledges that the latter "is a love song as well, so it's not like the Christian stations are playing a blatantly religious song. It's more the awkwardness of playing 'Baby Baby.'"

"There really was a feeling on the part of Word that a romantic song titled 'Baby Baby' is just the type of song that gospel radio has never dealt with," says Dan Harrell, a partner in the Harrell/Blanton firm that manages Grant.

Texture is also a consideration. "Baby" fits well within the bounds of what most secular ACs can play, but most Christian/AC outlets are closer to soft AC in tempo. The handful of Christian/top 40s that exist are more comparable to secular hot AC. WABS Washington, D.C., PD Dawn Dicker is one of several AC PDs who note, "Even though 'That's What Love Is For' is about romantic love, it's a softer approach to it, so it's more appropriate to what we're doing."

And as in most other formats, what product is promoted to Christian PDs has a lot to do with what they play. Jon Lord, PD of the Santa Rosa, Calif.-based K-Love Radio Network is, in principle, in favor of playing "Baby Baby." He says, "I happen to think there's a lot more to Christian music than singing about God. As Amy has tried to do with this album, we need to present the positive side of issues that are crucial to people in their lives," such as relationships.

But Lord isn't playing "Baby Baby" because it wasn't worked to him as a single, a factor that several PDs cite. Christian ACs and top 40s rarely venture beyond the material promoted by Christian-market la-

bels. So while Van Morrison did have a hit on Mercury with "Whenever God Shines His Light," other Christian rock artists on secular labels, such as U2 or the Call, do not have Christian radio hits.

For something from outside the Christian marketplace to be played at Christian radio, it would have to conform to very strict standards. WRJX Chattanooga, Tenn., PD Rod Hampton, who *is* playing "Baby Baby," says his Christian/top 40 outlet would be willing to play something by a secular artist *if* it fits the station's "positive hits" image *and* is by an artist with an acknowledged Christian lifestyle. So

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while "Pray" by M.C. Hammer might fit from a message standpoint, Hampton won't play it because the backing track for the song is taken from Prince's "When Doves Cry" and Prince is too controversial for his audience.

THE AUDIENCE

If that seems overly touchy, be assured that Christian stations' audiences are equally sensitive. Jim Governale, PD of top 40 KYMS Anaheim, Calif., says there was audience resistance to Dolly Parton's cover of the gospel hit "He's Alive." "When we first started playing it, we had people sending us articles from People about Dolly doing this or that."

KYMS has played "Baby Baby" virtually without incident, largely because the station has made a point of explaining that it was written about Grant's daughter. But at KLT Dallas, regarded by many as Christian AC's flagship station, "Baby" has been both a top request and the most controversial song on the station.

KLT VP/program management Jon Rivers says he wanted to play "Baby Baby" because his secular competition does, "so why let other stations steal our thunder"—a consideration that WRJX's Hampton also cites. And he says that in his research, "People know it isn't a song about Jesus but a fun love song, and they totally accept it."

But KLT has also received angry phone calls and about 20-30 written complaints about "Baby." Some are crank calls, like the one from a woman who claimed that Grant was the Antichrist. But others are "from sincere, articulate people who say things like, 'I don't have a problem with Amy singing a secular song, but when a station that [calls] itself Christian radio plays a song that is purely, entirely, wholly, and totally secular, I think there's a problem.'"

"My question is what is purely, entirely, wholly, and totally secular, and what is purely, entirely, wholly, and totally Christian? If you're a painter, must you put a crucifix at the bottom for it to be OK? I don't think so."

Rivers also gets calls from people who say the song "reminds me too much of the old life that I came out of." I think they're projecting very negative experiences they've had in their life onto this, and even though it's wholesome, making it seem ungodly to say 'Baby Baby' to someone, which, my goodness, most of us have done, Christian or not."

'BABY' PICTURES

Part of the "Baby Baby" issue, PDs say, is that the song's video avoids Grant's interpretation of the song entirely, instead focusing on a "young couple in love" scenario. And the male lead in the video is an actor, not her husband, songwriter Gary Chapman, himself a prominent figure in Christian music cir-

cles.

Originally, Grant herself thought the "Baby" video should be about infants. "I wanted a lot of babies with cloth diapers dancing," she says. "I bounced it off one of my nephews who said, 'What a stupid idea,' before approving one of the scripts submitted by a video production firm."

As for using an actor instead of Chapman, "It was definitely something that Gary and I had to work through. Life is so high pressure. Sometimes it's easier to be in a situation where you are strictly a performer . . . The idea of a producer I didn't know very well instructing me on

how to be romantic with my husband kind of put me in a weird situation. I didn't want my real-life romantic relationship critiqued by the masses."

Grant and manager Harrell say the decision to go with two separate singles was made separately by Word and A&M and was not one that she had a lot of input into. The next single, "Every Heartbeat"—also a love song—will be worked simultaneously to both formats.

Grant says she's happy for the Christian outlets that *have* been able to play "Baby Baby." Those stations, she says, "have taken what was perceived as a narrow format and realized that people who listen to gospel music still want to hear songs that celebrate life."

In any event, Grant says, there was a much worse backlash in 1985 when A&M began promoting her to the secular audience. That year, Grant had a top 30 hit with "Find A Way," which did have specific religious content. But her subsequent appearance on Peter Cetera's "The Next Time I Fall," did not. "I couldn't believe the letters I was getting in 1985," she says.

HOMETOWN HERO

Now, Grant says, "I don't think I've gotten one negative letter." Instead, she and Harrell say that members of the Christian music community are happy that Grant has been able to open the door for Christian artists at secular radio. "It's like when a kid from a small town makes it big," Grant says.

Indeed, WLIX Long Island, N.Y., VP/GM Lloyd Parker says that the grumbling about Grant's crossover dreams in 1985 "was a lot stronger than it is now." And Christian programmers on both side of the "Baby Baby" issue are careful to separate Grant from the question of whether they can play the song itself.

And WRJX's Hampton says he has been able to reason with most of his complaint callers. "I tell them that we'd rather play a song by Amy Grant, whether it's about a moral issue or a family thing, rather than something derogatory. And I explain the familiarity factor—that it might bring [listeners from other formats] to the station. When we say that, it seems to be OK."

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