

Christian Band Reaches Punk Subculture With Gospel Message

The members of Flatfoot 56 are at home sharing their faith in secular clubs and in their Chicago-area church

The members of a Celtic punk band are as comfortable singing about Christ in nightclubs as in their Chicago Pentecostal church.

Brothers Kyle, 17; Justin, 20; and Tobin Bawinkel, 22, spend most Sunday mornings leading worship at Risen Savior Assembly of God, where their father, Dan Bawinkel, 52, is pastor. But on Saturday nights, the Bawinkel brothers and longtime friend Josh Robieson, 20, share the gospel with a very different crowd—scores of teens packed like a box of spikes into a local coffeehouse for a night of punk and hard-core music.

Their band, Flatfoot 56, plays a high-energy mix of accessible Celtic punk, with Robieson's bagpipe and mandolin adding a muscular Irish accent to Flatfoot 56's good-natured but uncompromising set.

A punk show and a worship service may seem like two different worlds, but Tobin Bawinkel says they have more in common than one might think. "Our main purpose on this earth is to worship Christ," he said. "Punk is a different way of expressing our love to Him, and gives us another way to tell others about what He's done in our lives."

The band is committed to living an authentic faith before their audience, a subculture known for having little tolerance

for hypocrisy. Lyrics such as, “The faith that lies within our hearts doesn’t come from the halls of a church / It’s not about religion, its about a Friend, and it’s Him that gave us worth” leave no doubt about the band’s spiritual heartbeat.

When his sons started playing punk music in 2001 in the empty church sanctuary, pastor Dan Bawinkel didn’t pay much attention. “I knew from past experience that sometimes boys go through phases, and I thought that punk was one of those phases,” he said. “But when they incorporated Josh, their buddy from a nearby fellowship, into the band, I took notice. They started sounding pretty good.”

Others started to notice too, and soon the band with the funny name—a combination of a family joke and an old-school name for a police officer—began getting invitations to play around the Chicago area and beyond. Flatfoot 56 has since opened for nationally known Christian bands such as The O.C. Supertones, Superchick, Five Iron Frenzy, Bleach and The Insyderz. They also play regularly in skate parks, secular clubs and concert venues.

“We have found that in the kind of places we usually minister, the best way to reach people is to show them what Christ has done in our lives,” Tobin Bawinkel said. “We have had many people ask us why we are so different from everyone else in this scene. We are not ashamed to tell people that we are Christians and there are definite references to Christ in our lyrics. There are times when we are playing at a secular venue where people are not interested in our beliefs. When this happens, we show the love of Christ by living it in front of them.”

One way they do this is by traveling as a family. Robieson’s

sister, Lynn, and the Bawinkel sisters, Cori and Emma, often work the merchandise table at shows. Mom, Dena Bawinkel, handles shipping duties for the CDs and T-shirts that the band's growing legion of fans orders from their Web site ().

In addition to his full-time ministry at the church, Dan Bawinkel is the band's manager. "I started to see both saved and unsaved young people showing up to listen to the guys play. I thought, Could this be a way to reach teens and young adults for Christ?"

Dan Bawinkel said that at first, some members of his congregation weren't too sure about the wisdom of the worship team members stage-diving into the punk world. "After much prayer, the Lord told me to get involved with the band and share the band's ministry with the church," Dan Bawinkel said. "Our people realized that there was a place for outreach through music that may not have been the style taste of many in the congregation."

The church also has learned to welcome the sometimes-intimidating-looking Sunday morning visitors who respond to invitations from one of the guys at a punk show the night before. "Our church supports the band big time," Tobin Bawinkel said. "They allow us to use the church van for our travels, and the congregation prays for us when we're on the road."

These non-churchy church boys bring a little dose of Sunday morning into each Saturday night performance, no matter where they play. They end each show by inviting the crowd to sing along to their bagpipe-led, punk version of "Amazing Grace."

Michelle Van Loon in Chicago