

Rock Opera Aims to Take the Gospel To Contemporary Audiences

Written and produced by Eddie DeGarmo, !HERO is a modern gospel adaptation that will tour 19 cities this fall

An African American Jesus who sports dreadlocks and was born in Bethlehem, Pa., will be touring 19 cities beginning this month as part of a rock opera that portrays a modern-day Christ who lives out the gospel in New York City, confronting terrorists and raising gunshot victims from the dead.

!HERO, written and produced by Christian music veteran Eddie DeGarmo, stars dc Talk's Michael Tait as Hero (Jesus), Rebecca St. James as Maggie (Mary Magdalene) and Mark Stuart of Audio Adrenaline as Petrov (Peter).

Ten years in the making, the theatrical production is part of a larger project that includes a 33-song, double-disc CD as well as a comic book series and novel titled City of Dreams, which was written by Stephen Lawhead, an internationally acclaimed fantasy writer and former DeGarmo & Key manager. Dramatic audio books also are in the works along with a sequel to the novel, Rogue Nation, which is set to hit bookstores in April.

Meanwhile, the whirlwind musical tour was to begin Nov. 1 in High Point, N.C., and is set to hit 19 cities in 23 days. DeGarmo declined to tell Charisma how much the production cost, but described it as "expensive" and "exciting."

The show features performances by some of contemporary

Christian music's top talent, including rapper T-Bone, John Cooper of Skillet and Matt Hammitt of Sanctus Real. Participants at the Christian Booksellers' Association convention in July were given a sneak peak at Universal Studio's Hard Rock Café in Orlando, Fla., and for three hours, there was standing room only.

The vision for the project emerged in 1994 after DeGarmo had a talk with his oldest daughter, then a Nashville, Tenn., student teacher who had given her seventh-graders an informal survey about the significance of Easter.

"Only one in 10 could connect the dots between Jesus and the resurrection," he told Charisma. "They knew the secular stuff. ... !HERO was born out of a passion for what I could do to connect the gospel in different ways to a new generation of folks who really didn't understand what the gospel is about."

This isn't the first time DeGarmo has gone out on a creative limb. More than two decades ago he and fellow musician Dana Key became the first Christian artists to successfully get a hit single ("666") into frequent rotation on what was then a new, all-video network known as MTV. DeGarmo later teamed up with Dan Brock to launch Forefront Records, home of dc Talk, Rebecca St. James, Audio Adrenaline and Big Tent Revival. DeGarmo now heads up EMI's Music Publishing Group.

DeGarmo hopes !HERO will get people, especially youth, talking. "What would it be like if Jesus were here, today?" he asked. "We all think about these things. My vision was ... maybe the audience would connect with dirty cops, power politics and street gangs better than Roman magistrates, centurions and zealots."

DeGarmo admits his story sometimes gets “a little topsy-turvy.” He cites a scene in which a young girl in Harlem is raised from the dead after catching a bullet in a drive-by shooting. Tait and T-Bone perform a song titled “Raised in Harlem,” which DeGarmo said is one of the highlights of the show. “!HERO is an aggressive story with very modern music,” DeGarmo said. “I’m not trying to rewrite the Bible. I’m just trying to get people talking.”

Though the opera already is being compared to Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar, DeGarmo insists there is a difference. “!HERO is a story the church can embrace. It is the first adaptation of the gospel that takes into account that the world has had 2,000 years to become a very strange place! We have terrorist groups vs. the zealots, and these groups create a tension that was lost in Godspell and the other adaptations.”

DeGarmo hopes the opera will have mass appeal—edifying those who know the gospel and evangelizing those who don’t. But ultimately, he wants the production to do one thing: get people talking.

Cindi Courbat