

Alternative Christian Music Festival Ends After Nearly 30 Years

Alternative Christian music is mainstream now, but it wasn't always that way. In fact, the Cornerstone Festival has helped create a place for these bands to find their place and thrive. In an unexpected announcement on Tuesday, the popular Christian music event declared this summer will be its last. Cornerstone Festival started at a small fairgrounds outside Chicago in 1984, where it drew 5,000 people. Although recent years' have seen numbers drop in the face of a struggling economy, its peak years in the 1990s saw tens of thousands celebrating music, art and God in the Midwestern countryside.

Its website says, "At its heart, Cornerstone is an outreach, which strives to provide a place for Christians and non-Christians alike to come together and enjoy good music, extensive arts programming, profound spiritual teaching and fellowship together."

Although the festival focuses on showcasing a multitude of non-mainstream acts, several popular artists have been on the lineup over the years, including David Crowder Band, Skillet, Switchfoot, Sixpence None the Richer and Jeremy Camp.

Cornerstone—which its website adamantly states is more than just a festival—has set out to be different since its beginning. The goal was to "provide a festival for Christians that showcased quality alternative Christian music that wasn't getting recognition at the other mainstream Christian festivals of the time and celebrate our wonderful diversity in Christ."

Now, 28 years later, Cornerstone will be celebrating its last festival July 2-7.

"Based on a range of factors—including changes in the market and a difficult economy—the timing seems right," staff wrote in an email announcement. "This was obviously a hard decision, wrestled with over years and particularly over recent months. But with the decision made, we have the opportunity to come together one last time and bring to a happy, grateful—if tearful—close to this chapter of our lives."

Cornerstone veteran Jeff Elbel feels terrible about the festival's ending. The organizers "worked very hard to keep the festival gates open, but economic circumstances have forced them to finally accept that it can't continue," he explains.

Elbel has played at the festival with multiple bands 17 times, and has only missed one since 1992. This year he will help manage the Gallery stage and will perform on it with his band Ping, which is working on a new album named after the stage. The band has played the festival every year since 2000 and is looking forward to coming together one last time in July.

"The festival has been like a family reunion for the group, which now lives scattered around the country," Elbel says. "I adore these people, and it'll be a bittersweet experience to gather them for one last rock and roll fling. We'll do our best to let people know we love them, and go out with a bang.

"If I have a life story to tell in the end, Cornerstone will be elemental to telling it," he continues. "Even though it has only been one week a year, it has been a very intense week and a great source of community. Lasting friendships have been forged there, and now I'll have to accept that I probably won't see many of those people ever again."

Robin Pond, who has attended Cornerstone in Bushnell, Ill., three times, always enjoyed camping and worshipping with friends and strangers alike.

"We met a lot of different people, and they were all from

different walks of life,” Pond comments. “It felt really safe there and people didn’t discriminate.” Pond also notes the uniqueness of Cornerstone.

“Cornerstone was very different from other concerts/festivals,” she says. “The genre of Christian music is so broad, and it allowed me to learn about new music that was different from the mainstream Christian music you hear on the radio.”

Katilin Tris has been to Cornerstone four times and was shocked to learn it is ending. Although she hasn’t been in several years, Tris says she will always look back on memories of the festival with fondness.

“The festival was my favorite part of the summer for many years and the memories I made with people I loved will never be forgotten,” she recalls. “Any time Cornerstone gets mentioned, I cannot help but to smile and remember all the bests of Cornerstone: the crowd surfing, mud, newly made friends, in-depth conversations, the night sky and the bright sunshine.”

The festival is a nonprofit organization staffed year-round by members of Jesus People USA Covenant Church, who volunteer their time.