

Dinner With the Granddaddy of Christian Rock

After spending some time last week with Bob Hartman, founder of Petra, my hat is off to a true musical pioneer.

Last week while I was preaching at Cumberland Worship Center, a charismatic congregation in Crossville, Tenn., the pastor invited a musician to the stage to play during the offering. I didn't think anything about this performance at first, until a friend reminded me that the unassuming guy with the gray beard was Bob Hartman, founder of the Christian rock group Petra.

There's a rock star in the house!

"One guy even wrote a book saying that we were of the devil. But the fruit of the ministry eventually overcame all the negativity." –Bob Hartman of Petra

If it had been 1989, hundreds of screaming fans, or "Petheads" as they are called, would have rushed the stage. But Petra retired as a band in 2005 after 33 years of recording (and 7 million albums sold), and Hartman, who is 60, is spending more

time on his favorite hobby—collecting and selling guitars. But he feels confident that God has more work for him to do—including (loud drum roll, please ...) a Petra reunion album as well as a tour that begins in September.

That evening after church a few of us went to a Cracker Barrel restaurant, and I decided to send out a Tweet explaining that I was sitting next to the granddaddy of Christian rock music. By the time I got Hartman's autograph on a napkin, several people had already responded to my message—including a friend from Illinois who begged for another autograph. I grabbed a greeting card from the Cracker Barrel store and Hartman signed it.

Then I shared with him what some of my friends were saying on Twitter about Petra. Tim, from North Carolina, quoted the entire chorus of one of Petra's most famous early songs, "More Power to Ya," which was written by Hartman and recorded in 1982. Steve from Oklahoma gushed, "One of the first concerts I ever went to was Petra! I love them to this day!" James from Alabama wrote: "I remember the controversy groups like Petra made. ... But I also know they broke open the gates and made the way for the musical freedom we have now."

Brett from Michigan said "More Power to Ya" was the first Christian cassette he bought after coming to faith in Christ in high school.

Leilani from Missouri said Petra was her favorite music group

when she first became a Christian in the 1980s. And my friend Binsu from India said his pastor actually named his church after the group.

But what really impressed me was a Facebook message I received the next day from Beth Taylor, a friend from south Georgia. Beth told me that she found Christ at a Petra concert in Macon, Ga., in 1983. She was 15 and living in a broken home in Waycross.

"That was the most important night of my life," Beth told me. "I ran to the altar and [Petra lead singer] Greg Volz prayed with me. I was absolutely overcome by the fact that I could go to heaven and have eternal life." Today, Beth still has the ticket stub from that concert, and she owns most of Petra's music, either on old cassettes or on her iPod.

Hartman, who was raised in Ohio, was a product of the Jesus Movement. He was enrolled at Kent State University in 1970 when national guardsmen shot and killed four students during a Vietnam War protest. The uncertainties of that era led him to ask deep questions, and he found Christ later that year.

Soon he and his counter-cultural friends started a revolutionary concept in Christian music when they decided to preach the gospel with electric guitars, drums, amplifiers and scriptural lyrics. They named their band Petra after the Greek word for rock. And many traditional Christians

criticized them
for bringing “the devil’s music” into the church.

“One guy even wrote a book saying that we were agents of the devil,” Hartman says. “But the fruit of the ministry eventually overcame all the negativity.” Hartman has no idea how many people actually came to Christ at Petra concerts, but his conservative estimate is between 10,000 and 12,000.

Beth Taylor remembers reading an article in the 1980s that criticized Christian rock. She contacted the conservative minister who wrote it and shared her testimony. She still defends Petra to this day, and she asked me to pass this message on to Hartman: “Thank you. Thank you. That music changed my life forever.”

J. Lee Grady served as editor of *Charisma* for 11 years and is now contributing editor. You can click [here](#) to listen to Petra’s classic 1982 hit, “More Power to Ya,” a song about Pentecost. Beth Taylor’s favorite hit is “The Coloring Song.” Listen to it [here](#). To learn more about Petra’s upcoming reunion tour (which will feature the early band members) go to [.](#)