

Last month, Bob Bennett sent a "Dear John" letter to his record company.

He's not exactly calling it quits; in fact, he's not even sure what he's calling it right now. "I'm telling my friends, 'Look, I'm not retiring from music, and I'm not retiring from being a Christian. But I am retiring from Christian music,' whatever that means."

This is coming from the guy who last year nabbed the best gig a developing Christian artist could ask for — opening for Amy Grant's *unguarded* tour. Bennett performed before a quarter of a million people in under three months. For most struggling musicians, you'd think life could only get better. In Bennett's case, it got a whole lot worse.

"I did 35 dates with Amy last year, and in the places we played, 90% of the people who showed up had never heard of me, period. In a hall of 10,000 people, maybe only 10% of them were locked into what I was doing, but they were spread out all over the place. Everybody else was just waiting for me to get off the stage so that Amy could get on. As the tour progressed, I had to learn not to take any of that stuff personally."

In an industry that thrives on creating, disposing and re-creating the personalities and images of its stars, taking things too personally can be the kiss of death. An artist doesn't last long if he or she has a delicate ego. Yet the same sensitivity (which inspires insightful music) is an indispensable tool for success in any songwriter's toolbox. The knife cuts both ways.

After seven years in Christian music (during which time he has released three records: *First Things First* [1979], *Matters of the Heart* [1982] and last year's *Non-Fiction*), Bennett's learned a few things about himself and about the business of making music. "When I first started out," he says, "I really thought all I had to do was produce good, quality music and that would be enough. I figured that my music would stand on its own merit and carry itself, but it didn't happen that way."

Such naivete from an artist should come as no surprise. After all, artists are usually as concerned about the marketing of their product as record company execs are concerned about the aesthetic quality of each release. What Bob discovered was that, like the rest of the entertainment industry, Christian music adopted certain principles which he found to be distasteful at best.

One is that an artist's image is quite often more important than the content of his work. This image is promoted in the media and in concert for maximum audience response. Another idea follows close behind: In order to succeed, an artist must cater to the public's expectations of what Christian music should be. In neither instance does Bob Bennett fit the mold.

His image is uniquely non-existent. The tour with Amy is a good example of Bob's predicament. "I look at it as temporary insanity on everyone's part," he laughs. "If you put on your record business hat, it didn't make much sense. It's as if Amy were saying, 'I'm at a



Photo by Dorothy Little

# FALLEN IMAGES AND EXPECTATIONS

BY DOUG LABUDDE

crucial stage in my career right now. A&M's picked up my record, and I'm getting some secular airplay. So I think I'd like to take out a bearded, rotund acoustic guitar player on tour with me to sing a bunch of sensitive songs.' At least you've got to give them credit for trying."

After three months on the road with Amy, Bennett had to deal with his own

expectations of what the tour would do for his career. "I thought that being on tour with Amy Grant would be a cure-all, that the days of low album sales and small concerts were over. But when the tour was done, I was in the same place — I was still the same person. And I spent the next three months in virtual unemployment."

Like a handful of other artists (such as

Pam Mark Hall and Mark Heard), Bob's music has been critically acclaimed but publicly ignored. "*Non-Fiction* was a very hard record for me to do. It was hard because I was writing bleak songs about people in bleak situations. I knew they were dark songs. They didn't make me feel good to write them or to record them, but it was something I had to do.

"It was also hard because I knew I was out there in left field, in terms of what Christians expect to hear. I don't think that there's much room for anguish in Christian music. There don't seem to be many people who are able to accept a Christian who talks about the whole of human experience and call it 'Christian music.' Most people see Christian music as being one thing: It communicates true concepts about salvation and faith and who God is. Those are certainly noble and proper components of Christian music, but it's by no means everything.

"I think some artists are wising up and realizing that if 'the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof,' and if they are writers (in a sense, being journalists of life), then it's open season. I can write about anything that's not inherently offensive or sinful."

This sounds all too familiar: Free artistic expression versus a narrowly defined image of the Christian performer as "music minister." Bob bristles at the term. It's not that he's against ministry through music. Rather, it's because he knows that music is often used by others in Christian circles as a propaganda tool, without allowing the music to stand or fall on its own.

"I guess the difference is that I would rather focus on making the best music I possibly can, and trust that ministry will be a by-product of my efforts. I can't allow my music to be a means to an end, no matter how worthy the cause."

But lately, the high ideals of the past seven years have knocked heads with some very down-to-earth concerns. "Making music and doing concerts is my job," Bob continues. "At this stage of the game, it's become real academic. It's not, 'Is God blessing me? Does this work? Do people like it?' I believe those questions have been answered in the affirmative.

"But now it's down to, 'Can I make a decent living? Can I be a faithful husband and father? Can I make my living by making records and singing in churches?' If I can make a proper living at it, then I'll keep doing it. If I can't, it would be irresponsible of me to continue under some notion of what faith is all about, when I have a wife and three kids to feed."

This is the practical and unglorified image of what the music business is like. Bennett believes that too few people understand how much pressure it can exert on a musician's life. Yet, with all the tensions and struggles that seem to be inherent with the performing arts, Bob still finds joy and purpose in what he does.

"If you take me away from all the posturing and politicking in the Christian music business, and put me in a church sanctuary with 250 people so I

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Photo by Cindy Loo

can sing my songs, that is something very special. People respond to my music, because it's personal and they can relate to it. I'll never be in front of 10,000 people and have them respond to me like they respond to Amy, but I'm realizing that that's OK.

"In some ways, it's a matter of protecting the interest and needs of the minority. There's a segment of people out there who are small in number, but whom I can serve. I have to be content with serving that small segment of people, and not trivialize the smallness of the endeavor. Those are human beings at stake."

Even so, it's evident that Bob Bennett is tired of having to play his own numbers game with seven years in the Christian music business under his belt. It goes a long way in explaining why he sent that letter.

After more than four weeks of waiting, Bob still isn't sure what to expect. As of this writing, the record company has yet to respond.