

Review: Gentle stab at religiosity is seriously funny

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Religion is one of those things that polite people aren't supposed to talk about. Polite people are certainly not supposed to make fun of it. Jason Page and Carrie Boberg are not polite people. "And on the Seventh Day, God Rocked" is a hilarious satire of the religious impulse.

An independent feature produced by 4 Track Films, a new film production company based in Duluth, "And on the Seventh Day ... God Rocked" premieres Friday and Saturday in the Teatro Zuccone. It's a music mockumentary in the vein of "Spinal Tap" (arena rock) or "A Mighty Wind" (folk), but this time the subject of satire is the Christian rock industry.

Boberg and Page are, however, good Minnesotans. So they manage not to get mean-spirited; in fact, they don't make fun of religious people at all. They make fun of religiosity. It's funny. It's even really funny — but it's surprisingly tender, too. You expect boffo, given the soft target — Christian rock music as a moneymaking scheme — but the movie's mockery is often gentle. The characters are limned carefully, stroke by stroke, in all their quirky, desirous, hoping moments. You come to care for them.

The mockumentary format does have room for broad yucks (think "Spinal Tap," the grandfather of the satirical form), and there is some of that here, but there's also smiling comedy, that rueful stuff that was such a trademark of "Waiting for Guffman," another classic of the genre.

Some of the performances are gleefully over the top — that would be Julie Ahasay, playing Pat Radke, the monstrous promoter who is married to the checkbook driving it all (Sam Radke, played very dryly by Alan Zeppa, a funder of the film). Some excel in their subtlety — like Greg Moore's "Mr. Matthews," who almost disappears in the role of the odd man out of the loving antics of the folksy band Glory Authority. All that mutual affection provides a twist near the end that carries the movie beyond the Battle of the Bands that is the main plot motor.

John Agurkis as Karl Olafsson, the long-suffering assistant and foil to Pat, produces a nuanced and completely convincing performance that makes Pat both credible and bearable on screen.

So what happens? Pat Radke (Ahasay), the newish wife of wealthy man Sam Radke (Zeppa), has heard about this "Christian rock thing" that's becoming popular — and profitable. Her religion is as thin as her skin is thick, but Pat sets her promotion company going with a will. She's going to produce a Battle of the Christian Bands that's a commercial success and a platform for the sale of a product line that is only exceeded in tackiness by reality. Guitar picks imprinted with the slogan "Pick Jesus" are just one of the panoply of items.

A range of bands in all sorts of styles enroll in the competition, and each has its own take on the Good News: the hip-hopping Sons of Abraham like vengeance; Glory Authority believes in love, love and love; Savior, whose brothers Lars (Jody Kujawa) and Liam (Jeremy Ehlert) play out a familiar familial struggle. They draw the lines of dogma sharply: If someone is right, then

someone else has to be wrong. The Angie Hynes Band is driven by Angie's (Carolyn Gleason) raw ambition: a wild transcendent force. Her solo in the climactic battle is both hilarious satire and weirdly touching.

How the bands work toward the climactic battle, and the ensuing consequences, are honed and whittled out of the footage by some really fine editing. Jason Page, who directs, drew useful performances from just about everybody, as well as providing one himself (he's Tom, the wild card in Glory Authority).

You'll have a good time whether your personal church is built on stone or in ruins. You might get a little upset if it's built on sand, however.