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Mark Mohr, in center with dreadlocks, and wife Vanessa, right, pose with members of Christafari.

Reggae music for the soul

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Mark Mohr would have reformed sooner if it weren't for the "Kool-Aid People." At age 17, he was tiring of his sex, drugs and Rastafarian lifestyle. Brought up in a Christian family, he had become a black sheep. He wanted to return to his old values, but there was a problem.

"The reason I did not come to God earlier was that I hated the shirt and tie thing," says the founder and lead singer of Christafari and The Soul Fire Crew, who these days sports dreadlocks and earrings. The band is in town for a concert at the Ruben Rodriguez Coliseum in Bayamón tonight. "I hated everything normal. I mean, my brother is a missionary in Alaska and I respect that very much. That's great. But I couldn't stand the Christians. They were always so happy, so chipper. They scared me. They were like Kool-Aid people."

Then he met someone who had a similar background in marijuana use - including convictions - and a similar love for music. This man had accepted Christ, given up drugs and incorporated the Lord into his music. He was not a Kool-Aid person. And he inspired Mohr to go back to Jesus.

That was in the late '80s. Mohr went on to study at a Christian college, become a minister and to found Christafari, which today not only has followers in the

Christian music audience, but has attracted mainstream listeners too. The band's most recent album, "The Valley of Decision," debuted at No. 7 on the Billboard Reggae Sound Scan Chart.

The album has sold more than 70,000 copies, despite poor distribution. That's one of the difficulties of being a band with a Christian conscience, Mohr says.

"There are two aspects of the Christian music business: the business side and the ministry side," he said. "There are people out there doing it just for the money and people who have the right heart. Some have a good business sense and a good ministry sense. It's not about selling as many albums as possible; it's about reaching as many people as possible."

Just because they're Christians, however, doesn't mean that some financial success isn't welcome.

"Jesus had a treasurer," said drummer Kevin Kelleher. "It happened to be Judas, but he did have a treasurer."

So the Tennessee-based band is looking for a new distributor to meet its goals.

They may be Christians, but Mohr's band is certainly not Kool-Aid people. Over breakfast at the Ambassador Hotel on Wednesday, they joked and teased each other about groupies - two former members of the band married women they met on tour - about dating; about which parts of the Bible's Song of Songs are too graphic to include in Christian songs; about Kelleher's fruit and rice breakfast - Mohr eats a burger with a fried

egg on top; about sax player Max E. Fulwider's "shine pants" with the patent leather sheen; about how bald keyboardist Othniel "Otty" Lewis and guitarist Patrick Tennyson Kitson are; about finding bassist Anthony Case via the Internet.

They have long hair or dreadlocks, and Vanessa Mohr has a tattoo on her arm. No ties here.

They are full of questions. They are wowed by the screaming girls that greeted them at Luis Muñoz Marín Airport; they want to know where to find live salsa and merengue; and they want to know how to sing a few lines in Spanish.

They are having good, clean fun and want everyone to join in.

"We get a chance to talk to a lot of people," says Mohr's wife and backup vocalist Vanessa Mohr. "We don't want to come across as showing something down somebody's throat. Jesus Christ died for all of us and the gift of salvation is free and for everyone. We're vehicles to share that message. We're promoting Christ's love and truth."

Or as Mark Mohr says, quoting someone, but he doesn't know who. "I'm just a beggar showing another beggar where to get some food."

Christafari and the Soul Fire Crew plays at the Ruben Rodriguez Coliseum tonight at 8 p.m. Opening acts are Gabriel Paredes, Michael Rodriguez, Real for Christ and comedian J.R. Tickets are available at the Coliseum. For more information call 798-3225.