

JESUS AND HIP HOP CULTURE (YOUNG ADULT SUNDAY)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Historical and Cultural Background

“What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that had muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises?”¹

Today’s African American young adults grew up in what is termed hip hop culture. In the commentary for this Sunday, Luke Powery sums up much of what we want to share with readers on this Sunday when he says:

“Hip Hop is not just hype but holds together real hurt and hope at the same time. It has to when black-on-black crime persists on the streets. It has to when schools still don’t have adequate educational resources. It has to when “Brenda’s Got a Baby” (Tupac’s song about teenage pregnancy). It has to when police profiling persists, “getting choked by the detectives.” It has to because that’s keepin’ it real. This is the way the Christian life is—pain and praise together. There is hurt and yes there is hope. Hip hop may have its problems like misogyny and economic gain off the reality of the poor, but it can also help the Church keep it real by its yearning for something different and something better from God. “God show me the way.”

In the late 1970s, the South Bronx became the center of a new cultural movement that in time would alter definitions of race, sexuality, and the American experience. This cultural movement would eventually be called hip hop and be defined most by mainstream audiences of young men, and occasionally young women, rapping in rhymed couplets about their experiences. In its early stages (70s and early 80s), hip hop music was more than just stories about one’s “hood,” “stackin’ paper” (getting money) or “ridin’ dirty” (riding with drugs in your car or in a car that was equipped with elaborate rims). It was represented through visual arts (graffiti), dance (b-boying) and Djing (the production of beats and samples that are rapped over). Purveyors of these “pillars” of hip hop sought to bring awareness of their experiences as young, poor and disenfranchised. It was a means, much like the blues, spirituals, and other forms of African American music, of documenting the experience.

But the commodification of hip hop culture in the mid-80s and its widespread popularity brought significant changes to the images and messages that were being conveyed. Because it could be more easily commodified, rapping became the widespread representation of hip hop culture. The genre evolved from a party style of rap that emphasized having a good time and being socially conscious into stories of drive-bys, drug deals, and “bit----- and h---.” As the language and images became settled on this gangsta aesthetic, and videos glamorized and popularized even further violence, promiscuity and misogyny, profits soared. Despite efforts of resistance, first raised by [C. Delores Tucker](#) in the early 1990s, and later by [Al Sharpton](#), and others, the negative image of hip hop remains an important part of generational identity, and now defines a global segment of popular culture.

The Church, although reluctant initially to acknowledge any worth in hip hop culture (defining it only by the negative music that was produced by hip hoppers), has not escaped hip hop’s influence. Many are now integrating the culture of hip hop into youth and young adult ministries as a means of attracting young people back to the church. This integration has led to the rapid growth and popularity of what is now being called the [holy hip hop movement](#). As a genre of music, holy hip hop adopts similar performance practices as mainstream secular hip hop, but centers its lyrics on a gospel message. Mcs (rappers) in this genre in some cases, even go as far as actually quoting scriptures or borrowing from traditional hymns, such as “Amazing Grace.” Much like its secular counterpart, holy hip hop is represented by a number of sub-styles. They include [crunk](#), [holy south](#) (comparable to [dirty south](#)), [west coast](#), [east coast](#), [R&P](#) (rhythm and praise: the equivalent to the secular neo-soul). In addition to rapping, the holy hip hop movement has also come to encompass the other “pillars” of hip hop, with b-boying or hip hop dance groups ministering alongside traditional liturgical dance ministries, and the publication of magazines and clothing lines that feature graffiti styles.

Called “Bible Thumping with a beat,” or “hymns for the homies,” the holy hip hop movement emerged from grassroots beginnings in the late 1980s. What was thought of as a novelty in the early 1980s, in time matured and evolved in the Christian underground of sidewalk revivals, after-school programs and youth ministries. The first effort in marrying rap music with scripture came in 1985 with the release of Stephen Wiley’s “[Bible Break](#).” The tune was written as an effort to help kids memorize the books of the Bible. Wiley, along with [P.I.D.](#) (Preachers in Disguise) and [E.T.W.](#) (End Time Warriors) remained popular throughout the 1980s, but it was not until the emergence of [DC Talk](#) on the Contemporary Christian music scene in 1989 that the genre received serious attention. DC Talk, which stands for “Descent Christian Talk” consisted of [Toby McKeehan](#), [Kevin Smith](#) and [Michael Tait](#), all students at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. The core of their sound was rock and rap and in the early 1990s, they became one of the hottest Christian acts. The [End Time Warriors](#), which consisted of [Mike Hill](#) (Big Free), [Elroy Forbes](#) (MCEL), and [Johnnie Williams](#) (Johnnie Jam), moved the Christian hip hop sound from the early pop sound of DC Talk to a harder, more urban variety. Unlike the members of DC Talk, the members of ETW had grown up in urban environments and used these experiences as the basis of their music.

The mid to late 1990s saw the elevation of the status of Christian hip hop with the emergence of influential groups and solo artists. The appearance of groups like the Gospel Gangstaz, Prime Minister, and Cross Movement moved Christian hip hop to a higher level of musicianship. Cross Movement emerged on the scene in 1994, ministering up and down the east coast. In 1997 the group formed Cross Movement Records, which produced four albums including “Heaven’s Mentality” (1997), and “House of Representatives” (1999). Unlike their predecessors, Cross Movement brought much of the language and culture of the inner city to their music and began the transition of Christian hip hop solely from the contemporary Christian music scene to the urban gospel scene of the time. However, it was the Gospel Gangstaz who would be most instrumental in introducing this facet of hip hop culture to mainstream black gospel circles. Comprised of former Bloods and Crips, this group (Mr. Solo, Chille Baby, Tic Tokk) was the first Christian hip hop group to sign to an urban gospel label. The group became the gospel equivalent of West Coast Mcs like Snoop Dogg, E-40, and Dj Quik. In 2003, much like their secular counterparts, the Gospel Gangstaz parlayed their success into their own label Camp 8 Records. Although the early holy hip hop scene was shaped and dominated by male performers, female Mcs, Djs and b-girls have also become significant purveyors of the culture. Some of more popular female Mcs are MOC also known as the Jersey Chica, Mahogany Jones, and W.O.G. (Women of God), and much like their counterparts they draw from their experiences as the basis of their music.

In 2004, EMI Gospel one of the leading gospel labels formed an alliance with [Holy Hip Hop Music](#) to distribute the latter’s releases, and in 2005 American Business Radio announced and launched a youth-oriented gospel internet station at Bishop T.D. Jakes’ [Megafest](#) in Atlanta, GA. The holy hip hop movement has also launched its own summit and awards show that centers on celebrating the achievements of its purveyors. Most of all, holy hip hop is being actively used in the worship life of many churches globally with Youth Sundays and outreach ministries using the music and culture to attract younger parishioners.

II. Testimonies From Christian Hip Hoppers:

The first testimony comes from Lady Boo, who was formerly known as Gangsta Boo, and was a member of Three 6 Mafia. She explains her conversion and the mission of her music. She was known for penning and reciting sexually explicit lyrics during her stint with Three 6 Mafia.

I just woke up one morning and changed. It happened overnight literally. I don’t want to be put into that category [gospel rap]. I’m not a Gospel rapper, just a rapper who has found God. I’m cleaning up my lyrics. I don’t want girls thinking they gotta ask men for money. I’m not changing my style—just different lyrics; same flow and everything. I’m just rapping about reality now. All those lyrics I used to do—that’s not like a lady. I don’t want kids to make the same mistakes I made.”²

A. Nuwine

The next testimony is from an interview with holy hip hop artist Nuwine. In this account he references how he transitioned from a life of crime to the ministry of music.

“My mama said when I was six months, I was kicked out of a day care. My whole life pretty much, I have just been real bad. Three-years-old fighting kids in grocery stores, all of that. My father was there, but he wasn’t there. He was an alcoholic. He would take out all of his frustrations on us, pulling guns on the family. Imagine being like 5 years old and your dad is shooting his gun in the house.” By the age of 14 he entered a life of crime. “It was time to make that paper. I got into auto theft. By the time I turned 15, I ran one of the biggest auto thefts rings in Houston, Texas. In between that period of getting in trouble and going in and out of jail, by the time I turned 18, millions of dollars had already rolled through my hands. I remember at one point, I had like seven cars in one year. I didn’t even get my driver’s license until I was 17.

I ended up getting shot in my face with a 9 mm. I was looking for a girl and couldn’t find her. After the club everybody would go to this convenience store. There was a crowd to the left and a crowd to the right. When we pulled up, there were these gang members. I knew one of them so I shook the dude’s hand. [Members of the other gang] thought I was a part of [my friend’s] gang. [The two gangs were about to] get into it, we just pulled up right in the middle of it. A couple of minutes went by and I turned to my left and there was a brother running with a chrome pistol. The gang member fired the gun point blank at my face. It tore the top part of my face out. It was serious. When that happened, I staggered to the Stop-N-Go and I remember grabbing the door with my left hand. I couldn’t see out of my left eye. I got on my knees and for the first time in my life I prayed and asked God to spare my life, this time. Before that I had two hits out for my life. I had one dude put a Tech 9 to my head and the trigger jammed. I have been shot at, bullets flying all around my head, all of that. I get chills telling my story because in a natural form, I shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t be alive and I shouldn’t be free, based on what I have done and what has happened in my life.” The shooting changed his life and he finally agreed to accompany his mother to church. My mama asked me to go to church with her. I went, but I sat in the back because I didn’t like going to church. This is where my conversion started. The preacher was preaching and he saw that big bandage on my head and said, ‘Son there is a reason why God spared your life. God loves you and there is something God wants you to do.’ I was like God can’t love me. I did too many band things, even if there is a God. So I left out of the church and told my mama that I wasn’t going back. I ended up getting into more trouble. I had to hideout for about a year and a half under an alias name.”

But the police soon caught up with Nuwine and surrounded his apartment. He was immediately taken to jail and was denied bond. Realizing that he was going to be facing nearly 15 years in prison, Nuwine had lots of time to reflect on his life. While waiting to go before the judge, Nuwine said he and several other

prisoners were in the courtroom jail cell talking and bragging about what they were going to do when they got out of the jail. However, one white guy sat quietly in the corner, staring directly at Nuwine. Committing what is considered to be a grave sign of disrespect inside the prison system, the white prisoner walked over to Nuwine and interrupted his conversation and said: “Man God loves you. God forgives you and there is something that God wants you to do.”

“[What he said] freaked me out. I started crying.” Once he returned to jail. Nuwine said he asked someone for a Bible and “started reading about all of the positive things about Jesus and how I don’t see that in so-called Christians. So I started writing. My music ain’t gospel music. It ain’t Christian music. It’s real music. It’s street music. It’s positive. No profanity. But it’s hardcore, it’s reality and it helps you.”³

B. The Gospel Gangstaz

The Gospel Gangstaz consists of former members of the gangs the Bloods and the Crips. All three members, Solo, Chille’ Baby, and Tic Toc, grew up in South Central Los Angeles. The poverty, violent crime and drug culture of the neighborhood attract the three with Solo and Chille’ Baby becoming committed members to the Crips, and Tic Toc—the Bloods. Their transition into holy hip hop came in 1990 when Solo was shot.

“When I first felt the shot. I was running, praying. ‘God don’t let me die—just let me get to my Mom, so she can pray for me.’ ” Bleeding profusely, he made it to his mother’s home. I remember praying that if He let me survive the gunshot, I would serve Him. But I’d been hustling and going my own way for so long, I didn’t know anything else. Then, one night, I started to cry and repent. I went to funerals all the time—they are routine in my neighborhood. But I could never cry. This time, though, God brought everything back to me—all the people I’d lost, all my rebellion, all my crimes. Four a.m. that morning, I told my Mom I was sick of it and that I wanted to go to church on Sunday.”

Solo’s conversion was a shock to Chille’ Baby. “I felt betrayed when he changed,” Chille’ Baby confirms. “I got jumped one day and Solo wouldn’t ride with me. That’s when I knew full well I’d end up in the pen or getting killed if I kept on the path I was one.” Chille’ Baby agreed to go to church with Solo. “There was a word just for me and I gave my life to Christ that day.” Shortly thereafter, the two befriended Tic Toc, a former Blood. He too decided to give his life to Christ after accepting the invitation to attend church. Soon other former gang members began praying and studying the Bible together. The Gospel Gangstaz were a by-product and reflected a reconciliation between their love for hip hop culture and their faith.

“I’d rapped for a long time,” says Solo. “But I stopped when I found God. I thought it was wicked. Then my brother-in-law a very wise man told me, ‘God gave you this gift—use it for Him.’ That was about six months after I’d first seen

the light and I immediately started rappin' again. The Lord began showing us why he gave us the gift. Instead of rappin' about shooting your enemies and abusing women, tell the people about My grace, My deliverance. The gift of poetry was there, and I began to write from The Word." In time the group was throwing rap parties for the kids at their church, taking their rhymes to prisons, going wherever people would have them. "The gang bangers they're still our homies. We don't consider ourselves above them. But God has given us the insight to see the truth. We understand their pain, and they know we know. We gotta make music for the homiest. We believe in bringing the church to the people, not just bringing the people to the church."⁴

III. Contemporary Hip Hop Gospel Songs

Testimony

I wouldn't let God in
I chose the life of sin
Thinkin' the friends that I had
Would stick through the good and the bad
But my birthday came and I got real drunk homie
I had a scrap and everybody jumped on me
I passed out, I don't know how I got home
But when I woke up, my high was gone
They stole everything from my money to that thing that beep
It makes me think it doesn't matter if you 6 feet deep
Jesus is lord and I'm convinced
Since he came into my life, I haven't drunk or sold dope since
Since he came into my life, I don't need no homies
And that was my testimony.⁵

Oh Wretched Man

We stopped at the top ten; looked how we propped sin
The case was closed when the videos were dropped in
From naked females to dirty sex in emails
It affects from retail down to the street sales—every detail
You can leave the heart unsupervised
Watch the heart ask for sin and ask the cashier to please super-size
Read Romans and peep your corners for bonus
We're gonna be wrong as long as we're breathing—we need a Jonah⁶

IV. Let's Keep Keeping It Real

Today's young adults should, of course, not be totally defined by their music. However, in understanding the music, one begins to gain a semblance of their pain, hopes and fears. John Michael Spencer writes that within the best of rap music there is a "specific mood of

attitude.” Spencer says, “What threatens is the cultural and attitudinal blackness of the music, the verbal brashness of its performers, their irruption of speech, their “insurrection of subjugated knowledges....Rap, as resentment listening music, collectively comprises the power of emancipated knowledges, the determination to change established society and the anticipation of liberation.”⁷

I opened this cultural resource unit with a quote from Jean-Paul Sartre’s Black Orpheus to make the point that the church has spent the last twenty-five years being surprised by what African American young adults say through their music, especially hard-core rap. What Spencer called resentment, and what I term righteous indignation, can clearly be seen in hip hop music and even gospel hip hop as it uplifts Christ. But remembering the homies and keepin’ it real are elements that the modern church must grasp as it seeks to minister to today’s young adults. If the Church cannot get real about the world-view of so many young adults, a world-view that has been shaped by a culture that has forfeited the souls of young black folk for profit and worse, then it stands to lose a generation that could do so much good for the Kingdom of God and its earthly citizens.

Notes

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, in the opening of Black Orpheus, cited in Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, New York: Grove Press, 1967. p. 29.
2. North, Stan. “Interview with Lady Boo: Transformed by God.” November 2001; Online location: www.gospelflava.com accessed 23 January 2008
3. Burns, Nikki. “Hip Hop Artist Went From Stealing Cars to Rapping About God.” Mississippi Link 10.10 (Mar. 2002): p. 1.
4. “The Gospel Gangstaz. . . Taking God’s message to the Streets.” New Pittsburgh Courier. 91.25 (March 25, 2000) p. 85.
5. Verse 3: sung by Chille’ Baby: From Gospel Gangstaz. “Testimony.” Gang Affiliated. Santa Ana, CA: MYX Records, 1994.
6. Ambassador. “Oh Wretched Man.” The Thesis. Deptford, NJ: Cross Movement records, 2005.
7. Spencer, Jon Michael. “Rhapsody in Black: Utopian Aspirations.” Theology Today. 48 (January 1992) pp. 441-51.