

Get Ready for the Hip-Hop Revolution

The music is loud, and the beats are strong. But Christian hip-hop artists say they're using this unorthodox sound to reach a generation for Christ.

It's almost 1 a.m., and the music has been pumping for nearly five hours. But the man with the mike has no plans to forfeit his song.

This is the last night of the Holy Hip-Hop Awards held this year in Atlanta. It's one of the rare opportunities Christian hip-hop "heads" have to showcase their talent, and Mr. Del, as the emcee is known, is the last artist to perform. The music begins, but Del suddenly cuts it off, asking everyone to come forward. He says he must follow the Holy Spirit's lead.

Lately, he says, he's been burdened about the state of Christian hip-hop; too many artists he's met are just trying to make money. Mr. Del (or Delmar Lawrence) experienced fortune and fame when he was a member of the explicit rap group Three 6 Mafia. Now a Christian, the 23-year-old rapper says believers in the music business should be winning souls.

He prays for the musicians—warning that Christian hip-hop will never reach its potential until they model the lifestyle they're rapping about. Then the bass kicks back in, and Mr. Del begins a chorus that seems to resonate with this crowd.

"I heard You were looking for some Holy Ghost soldiers!" he yells. The audience waves their hands in the air and bounces to the rhythm of the wild Southern beat.

"Here I go! Here I go! Here I go!" they respond, as the small army with Del on stage—members of his Holy South ministry—crisscross the platform waving shirts, towels and jerseys.

It's easy to see that these young people are fans of rap music and that fusing hip-hop with the gospel is no stretch for them. But what's not as apparent is that the fascination with hip-hop doesn't end with the song.

When Mr. Del returns to Memphis, Tennessee, he'll preach to his 50-member congregation with the same fervor he exhibited in Atlanta. And the worship at his church, City of Refuge, will have a hip-hop beat.

Though the conventional church is slow to embrace this style of ministry, Christians in these circles believe they're on the brink of something big. Shekinah, a 30-year-old female rapper from Burlington, New Jersey, says she knows she is part of something great. "When I was growing up I heard about the Civil Rights movement, and I feel like this is like that," she says. "God is going to use youth to impact the world."

She's not alone. The leaders of this underground community are looking to raise up an army of "Holy Ghost soldiers" who will incite a revolution of righteousness within hip-hop culture. They believe that, like its secular counterpart, it will eventually touch the globe.

The Gospel in Hip-Hop Terms

Five hundred miles north of here in Norfolk, Virginia, "Big Ed" and "Little B" are working feverishly on a CD project in a

studio housed in their neighborhood community center. As members of Youth Entertainment Studios (YES), the two 20-year-olds—also known as Edward Davis and Brian Toppins—have been learning music production for the last year from a group of Christians with a passion for inner-city youth.

“They tell you about Christianity, but they don’t shove it down your throat,” Big Ed says of YES. “They don’t try to force you to be anything that you’re not ready for.”

For YES founder Harry Young, taking a missionary approach has been key in reaching a generation reared on hip-hop. Staying true to hip-hop’s mantra of “keeping it real,” these youth are on a quest to find truth, Young says. But they don’t know where it will end.

When asked about their faith, Big Ed, Little B and YES member Samuel “Sam I Am” Painter, 19, acknowledge that they believe in God. But Big Ed is still searching, unwilling to describe himself as a Christian. Little B and his best friend got saved in a certification class, but he says his life hasn’t changed much. Sam says he’s starting to go back to church, but he doesn’t believe a person must attend services to hear God’s Word.

The struggle to choose what to believe is all part of the journey, Young says. “When the Lord shows up in their lives in a way that they can recognize, then all the blinders are going to come down, and you’re going to see these young people become revolutionaries,” he says. “And it won’t be a shallow thing. It will be a deep, abiding thing because of the journey they have taken.”

Most of the artists in the Christian hip-hop scene are much like the youth who participate in YES. Some were involved in gangs and crime. Many grew up in inner-city neighborhoods surrounded by the rapping, DJ-ing, break dancing and graffiti that define hip-hop.

Birthered as party music in the Bronx in the late 1970s, hip-hop has evolved into a culture complete with a unique verbal and nonverbal language, attitude, dress, and worldview. Many Christian rappers believe their call is to translate the gospel into the language of the street.

Minister Eddie Velez, outreach pastor at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, and president of the Fellowship of Holy Hip-Hop, says many urban youth need to hear the gospel in a cultural context. For example, his pastor, Bishop Eddie Long, preached a sermon recently based on Ezekiel 37.

“God is telling Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to speak life into a dead situation,” says Velez, 37. “Now, [the baby boomer generation] may be able to say, ‘There are dry bones on your are dry bones in your are dry bones in your church auxiliary.’

“But [the younger generation] is unfed because [they] need to hear: ‘Yo, there’s dry bones in the projects, in the hallways where you hang out, kid. There’s dry bones when y’all hanging in front of the liquor store, slinging crack cocaine. God is telling prophecy to them right in front of the liquor store. Speak to them that they might have life.’

“But [older church members] might not know about standing in

front of the liquor store anymore because they've been delivered from it," he adds.

For 16-year-old Brandon Robertson of Tampa, Florida, hearing the gospel in hip-hop terms made all the difference. The high-school junior was selling drugs by age 8. At 12, he "kind of" blew up his principal's car and was expelled from middle school, he says. With two offenses under his belt, Robertson was one strike away from spending the rest of his childhood in juvenile detention.

Then he attended a rap concert in his neighborhood hosted by Tommy Kyllonen, then youth pastor of Crossover Community Church. He began participating in the youth ministry Kyllonen led, and later accepted Christ. Though initially he says all hell broke loose, today his life has taken a 180-degree turn. His grades improved, and as he began playing bass in the symphonic band, his teachers discovered that the kid who almost grew up in jail is good enough to attend The Juilliard School in New York.

Top of the Charts

The notion of "translation" will mark the upcoming release from Dove Award-winning hip-hop duo GRITS, aptly titled The Art of Translation. Though GRITS has experienced some commercial success along with Gospel Gangstaz and Cross Movement, insiders say the Christian music industry has a long way to go before hip-hop takes its rightful place alongside other formats.

In 1998, hip-hop made national news when it outsold country music, making it the top-selling genre in the country. The

following year Time magazine ran a cover story noting that whites purchased 70 percent of rap music and that a diverse generation of youth had grown up immersed in hip-hop. Longtime Christian hip-hop advocates such as Toby McKeehan (Toby Mac) of dc Talk hoped Nashville, Tennessee's contemporary Christian music (CCM) scene would take note.

"I'm watching A&R people in this town take hip-hop more seriously, finally, and I have high hopes," McKeehan says.

His Gotee Records has been a leading producer of Christian hip-hop, with artists such as Out of Eden, John Reuben and DJ Maj on its roster. But McKeehan is hoping to get more competition. In August, Gotee will launch its Hip Hope campaign to challenge the industry to support and invest in Christian hip-hop.

The push will come as Squint Entertainment sets to release Souljahz, a hip-hop trio that is getting positive buzz from the CCM industry.

"I really do see [Souljahz] bridging the gap, and I do think that kids are buying [rap] music, and it is the mainstream," says Chris Rodriguez, vice president of A&R for Word Records and Souljahz's executive producer.

Rodriguez and McKeehan acknowledge that hip-hop artists must have pop influences in their music to make strides in CCM. But a true hip-hop fan would say that's not authentic. Ironically, the black gospel industry seems hard pressed to find Christian rappers who are authentic enough.

The leading gospel music labels, Verity and GospoCentric, have

had significant rap artists on their rosters—B.B. Jay and Gospel Gangstaz respectively. But currently neither label has a rap artist signed. Vickie Mack Lataillade of GospoCentric Records says her label is behind gospel rap “100 percent,” but “the problem they cannot compete with a Ja Rule, a Jay-Z, an Eminem in they’re not credible.”

The artists also must walk a fine line. Mainstream listeners often are attracted to the hard-core, thug image secular rappers project—a stereotype that doesn’t mesh well with Christianity. “You have to have lived a certain kind of life, or whatever it is you’re talking about has to be real,” Lataillade says. “You have to have a strong delivery, and I think it really needs to be able to be played on hip-hop stations. And the hip-hop stations do not care for most of the Christian music that’s out there, and that’s just the truth.”

The leaders in the Christian hip-hop movement say many Christian rappers lack spiritual depth, but critics say those who are more biblically astute tend to lace their lyrics with too much Scripture.

“Christian rappers kill the world too much,” says Frankie Cutlass, a former mainstream DJ famous for songs such as “Shake What Your Mama Gave Ya.” Now a believer and founder of God Squad Entertainment, Cutlass hopes to produce a sound the world wants coupled with the message they need. “The world knows they’re going to percent of ministry is love. Show them the love of God. The other 25 percent is the Word,” he says.

Because musical trends change quickly, Cutlass says it’s easy for gospel rap to sound outdated. Cutlass says he’s seen thousands saved at events where he has ministered, and he believes the future of Christian rap is in the streets, where

some of the most talented rappers are still waiting to hear the message of salvation.

Rappin' for God

With or without a record deal, many Christian rappers continue to pursue what they believe is their call, giving concerts in inner-city neighborhoods, prisons and some churches. New York rapper Corey Red says he has seen hardened criminals melt as he presented the gospel through his rhymes; some pastors have even changed their views on gospel rap.

"I felt the presence of God literally fall on me" during a Corey Red & Precise concert, Shekinah says. "I couldn't believe I felt God's presence like that through somebody rhyming."

A bold, prophetic voice, Corey Red preaches a sometimes-unpleasant evangelistic message, with lyrics that often speak of the end times and the reality of hell. "One thing about rap, whether it's secular or it's rapper always talks about those things in society that we want to make-believe don't exist," the 32-year-old says. "So the Christian rappers play both sides of the sword—God's love and His judgment, His forgiveness and His intolerance of sin."

Across the country, California-based rapper T-Bone, 28, has seen gang members intent on making a hit at one of his concerts give their lives to Christ instead. A former gang member himself, T-Bone has had knives, guns and Uzis pointed at his head by gangbangers aiming to assassinate him. He says he's had more attempts on his life since he became a Christian than he did while in a gang, but what bugs him more than

trigger-happy thugs are Christians who don't take evangelism seriously.

"I'm amazed how all these Christian artists go out and do concerts, and they don't even do altar calls," says T-Bone, who has been a Christian rapper for 13 years and was nominated for a Grammy for his album *The Last Street Preacha*. "[If] you have the answer and you don't share it, then basically what you're doing is saying: 'I don't care about any of you. You can all go to hell literally because I'm not going to give you the answer on how to get to heaven.' And to me that's the bottom line."

The hard-core gospel these rappers preach hasn't won them many friends, but confrontational lyrics have always marked hip-hop. In its early days, secular rappers often highlighted the inner city's ills, what some say was a cry for justice and social change.

"Even though you had great political [and]...Civil Rights leaders, after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. there was a chasm left," says 30-year-old Kendra King, Ph.D., a political science professor at the University of Georgia and a "closet performance poet" herself.

"No one responded to the poor and to the everyday man and woman like Dr. King. So these people began to respond for themselves because everybody couldn't get down with the Black Panther Party. But for the average man [and woman] who's working their children, they began to express themselves via these beats."

Although that cry has degenerated into a message of

materialism, violence and explicit sexuality—content that King says sells records—rap artists are still dominant public voices, becoming “black America’s CNN,” as secular rapper Chuck D once said.

That role used to be reserved for African American pastors, says Jamal-Harrison Bryant, 30-year-old pastor of 5,500-member The Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, the fastest growing congregation in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

“Historically, black preachers have been the barometer of what’s going on in the community and the voice,” says Bryant, who led the youth and college division of the NAACP for two years. “Where they have gone silent, now these rap artists are speaking truth to power and are serving as newscasters to talk about the injustice of police brutality, of racism, things that the church used to do. [Pastors] have now shifted their gaze and now want to talk about prosperity and not deal with the are still left in the ‘hood.”

Restoring “consciousness” and morality to hip-hop could become the Christian artist’s domain—but not without presenting the ultimate cure, gospel rappers say. “Although [secular rappers] have been a voice for the unheard, there’s not been any solution,” says Los Angeles-based rapper Jah Word (Paul Franklin), who wrote positive rap songs before becoming a Christian. “And that’s where holy hip-hop is going to fill, finally, that void. Not only are we giving you an avenue to say you’re hurting, but we’re trying to offer you the solution, the remedy to your hurting.”

A Universal Language?

Back in Atlanta, there's still talk of rap changing the world. For Danny Wilson, head of Holy Hip-Hop Holdings, that begins with changing the church. He says more parents need to realize there's a viable alternative to secular hip-hop.

Since 1997, the 37-year-old and a handful of his friends have been working to develop an infrastructure to raise the genre's visibility and sustain its growth. They've established a Web site ([www.holyhiphop.com](#)), a syndicated radio program and a TV show that airs on the Inspirational Network. Now they're working to increase the genre's distribution channels.

"It's not going to happen overnight," Wilson says. "[But] I hope I get to see it, when it's like Promise Keepers, filling up the Georgia Dome."

W.P. Middlebrooks, based in Los Angeles, has never met Wilson, but he has the same vision. He hopes his ministry, Youth United for the World, has a far-reaching, Promise Keepers-style impact, becoming "a mechanism that is very sensitive to the total challenge of youth ministry."

As a first step, he is planting a series of positive clubs called Swapmeet Live! for Christian young adults. Playing contemporary gospel music and holy hip-hop, the first club opened in Detroit and drew 200 college-age youth. More clubs are planned for Oakland, California; Columbus, Ohio; Norfolk; and San Diego. By the end of the year, Middlebrooks, a lay minister in the Church of God in Christ, expects to start a hip-hop-influenced church, which is a growing trend (see related article on page 48).

Similar ministries abound. In New York, Bert Bocachica hosts

RapFest (), a Christian street party that drew 3,000 youth last year and may exceed that figure at this year's event August 10. In Atlanta, Lawrence Stroman, or DJ Lace, edits an online newsletter and trains churches in hip-hop youth and street ministry.

In Ajax, Ontario, Sherice Sudds edits Feed, the only magazine exclusively covering Christian hip-hop. And in Tampa, Kyllonen will host his annual Fest conference () November 7-10 to train people in hip-hop and inner-city youth ministry. A second State of Holy Hip-Hop summit will be held at this year's event.

Amid a growing crescendo, hip-hop ministers are setting their sights on the globe. Gotee artist Knowdaverbs saw thousands saved when he ministered in Russia and Kosovo. Female rapper Elle ROC hopes to eventually follow suit, going into countries whose governments won't allow Christians to preach but will welcome a hip-hop artist.

The Christian hip-hop movement has the potential to tap within urban communities the same "Jesus Revolution" fervor exhibited at youth events such as The Call and OneDay, says hip-hop pastor Brendan Witton, 23, of Church Without Limits in Pickering, Ontario. And because hip-hop is the voice of the streets, it could shake America's inner cities. But why stop there? Hip-hop's popularity reaches as far as Europe, Africa and Asia.

"Holy hip-hop is in its toddler stage," Velez says, "but I believe revival will come to the planet through the holy hip-hop movement because rap is the universal language. There's going to be an explosion in the earth, [but] it's not going to look like what we've seen. It's not going to look like the

five-button suit [or] the typical televangelist. [God is raising up] the ones that they counted out. The ones that they didn't use [will usher in the new move]."

Hip-Hop Hallelujah

A growing number of hip-hop churches popping up in cities across North America may change the way 'church' is done.

As many churches wrestle with embracing hip-hop music, an increasing number of hip-hop congregations are emerging, a trend some say will transform the urban church.

"The walls that have defined the traditional church are going down," says W.P. Middlebrooks, 32, a lay minister in the Church of God in Christ who is planting a hip-hop-influenced church in Los Angeles. He envisions a day when pastors commonly will wear twists and dreadlocks in their hair, and sport hip-hop gear instead of suits. He says members will spend more time outside the church than in, reaching their communities.

"People can't buy into it because they've bought into the facade of what church is as an organization as opposed to what God is calling [it] to be as a body," he says.

Congregations across North America are already realizing Middlebrooks' dream. In January, what was thought to be the first hip-hop church was born when Tommy Kyllonen, 28, was promoted from youth pastor to senior pastor of Crossover Community Church, an Assemblies of God congregation in Tampa, Florida. Within weeks, two more churches were planted: Now Faith International Ministries in Atlanta and The Universal

Fat House in New Jersey, pastored by rapper B.B. Jay.

In the months that followed, Charisma discovered more ministries: Church Without Limits in Pickering, Ontario, which began in November 2000; and City of Refuge in Memphis, Tennessee, founded in October.

Brendan Witton, 23, pastor of 90-member Church Without Limits believes hip-hop churches reflect postmodern congregations within an urban context. "A lot of traditional black churches are resistant to hip-hop," says Witton, who is white. "For a lot of young people, it's been, choose God or choose hip-hop."

Most hip-hop churches are multicultural and attract 18- to 35-year-olds. Many include a DJ and turntables as part of the worship. Crossover's sanctuary is adorned with graffiti. Church Without Limits has had break dancing during praise and worship.

Delmar Lawrence, 23, pastor of 50-member City of Refuge in Memphis, Tennessee, makes evangelism an integral part of his ministry. Seven people made decisions for Christ at a nightclub where Lawrence and his team witnessed. He says he once gave a concert in a neighborhood where a young man had been shot and killed, and 23 people got saved.

"God knows good and well if the gospel is to be preached to all the earth, it has to be put through every avenue," Lawrence says.

At Crossover, Kyllonen hopes to reach hip-hop "heads" of all ages who don't connect with more traditional ministries. Crossover offers a variety of classes from DJ-ing to rapping

to break dancing to develop members' talents. Periodically the church hosts Poet Soul nights of spoken-word poetry, which Kyllonen says is also an outreach tool.

Now Faith pastor Bennie "Precha" Foster, 34, says he has seen youth saved, healed and delivered through hip-hop ministry, but he had to leave his former church because he received so much criticism. He challenges the conventional church to embrace hip-hop, yet acknowledges that many Christian rappers have given hip-hop ministry a black eye.

"[Gospel rappers are] trying to entertain each other," Foster says. "They should be trying to reach the unsaved. They've got to see disciples come from this."

Church Without Limits uses cell groups as a means of discipling new believers. Like Crossover, it also hosts town-meeting-style rap sessions that address hot topics such as racism. Emphasizing discipleship and Christian service, Kyllonen says many of the 300 members at Crossover want to go into ministry, with four attending a local Bible college.

Kyllonen says he frequently receives calls from people wanting to start similar ministries in their areas, and he believes more churches like Crossover will emerge in the future. Crossover member Craig "Nice" Fennen, 21, says he'd like to pastor one of them. "Other churches want to look at rap music and say it's not of God because it doesn't fit their lives," he says. "We're open. As long as it lines up with the Bible, we're open."

The Gospel in Laymen's Terms

Cross Movement's Scripture-heavy lyrics and infectious beats are winning the group fans across generational lines.

Christian rap music isn't new. Artists such as Michael Peace gave the genre limited visibility in the 1980s, and the underground has been bulging with good and not-so-good projects ever since. But amid a growing momentum, Christian hip-hop is being taken more seriously with the emergence of talented, biblically astute artists such as Philadelphia-based Cross Movement.

With their heady, theological lyrics, the Movement majors on evangelism and discipleship. Their music has brought them exposure on Black Entertainment Television and in Time magazine. And their commitment to teaching Christian doctrine through their songs has won them fans across generational lines, with grandmothers thanking them for providing an alternative to secular rap.

But it has also brought them criticism. Some argue that rap music wasn't meant to carry such weighty material. After all, it was born as party music; theological truths would likely send a crowd home. Many Christian artists seek to produce fun, uplifting music that could be played among secular crowds.

Yet in light of what he calls a "moral famine" in hip-hop culture, Cross Movement's The Ambassador (William Branch) says Christian artists have a responsibility to saturate their lyrics with the gospel in the same way secular artists load their rhymes with secularism.

Founding member Tonic (John Wells) agrees. "We think that anybody, learned or unlearned, who wants to use or is 'called'

to use hip-hop as the tool for ministry should make sure they're submitted to God and under His direction for how to pull this off," he says.

The Ambassador says many Christian rappers "with CDs out" have secular elements in their rhymes, which, Tonic adds, helps alienate a church that is already resistant to change. For Cross Movement, Scripture-heavy lyrics have helped them create a bridge between hip-hop culture and the church.

Some listeners have challenged the group to address more social and political issues in their rhymes, something Tonic says isn't completely out of the question. "Our specialty is, let's come with the cure. If you understand the sin issue as it relates to humanity, then you understand why there's domestic violence, why there's racism. That doesn't say we don't try to help, [but] we have an eternal perspective. We're not meant to stay here."

As unprecedented business opportunities open up, their commitment to put the gospel in laymen's terms is deepening. The group plans to establish a learning center offering Bible college-level training from an inner-city perspective. As preparation, The Ambassador is pursuing a master's degree in theology from Dallas Theological Seminary, and the other three plan to follow suit.

The Ambassador admits that many of their fans "love a concert but not a classroom," but he says the desire for discipleship will grow as youth see more young Christians modeling their faith in the inner city.

As they work with the American Bible Society to develop

discipleship and evangelism tools from a hip-hop perspective, the group is using their music as bait. "Right now it's a strategic move to let our albums be the menu of what's really out there," says Phanatik (Brady Goodwin). "Then when the [learning center] opens, people are already getting an appetite for the stuff that we'll be serving up."

Meanwhile, Tonic cautions Christian rappers to show the older generation they can be trusted with leadership.

Says Tonic: "We need to let the truth of the gospel reign so the church could see it and say: 'You know what? This is the same thing I preached on Sunday. They say it a little different; they use their lingo, but this is the Word of God, and I see God's hand on them.'"

21st Century Youth Ministry

Youth Entertainment Studios is taking ministry outside the box to reach urban teens.

Harry Young had an epiphany of sorts in 1991 when he attended a Bible study for inner-city youth. On one end of the room, a youth leader was preaching to some teens. Behind him a fight was raging.

He realized a traditional youth-group model wasn't working. So the Harvard graduate and one-time vice president of programming with The Family Channel went back to the drawing board, challenging the youth to develop a music video with a positive message.

The result was "Steppin' Into the Light," a video good enough to air on Black Entertainment Television and other networks. The youth group grew from 10 to 30 and evolved into Youth Entertainment Studios (YES).

Founded in 1993, YES initially worked with schools to attract inner-city youth to its program, which teaches character development while youth work on music and video projects. Young says he hoped churches would get involved to provide mentors, but most pastors didn't understand the outreach.

"We hope to encourage churches to reach out and be patient enough to take a missionary approach," Young says. "You learn the language of the culture before you get started, then you help them find truth."

For Refuge Church of God in Christ in Chesapeake, Virginia, learning the language meant opening its fellowship hall to house one of the YES studios. Pastor Joseph Williams says he was challenged by a passage in Acts 16 in which Paul was grieved by a fortuneteller, then cast a demon out of her. Williams says he realized he had two options: He could either be offended by the sin in hip-hop culture or grieved by it.

"It seemed to me the Lord was saying, 'You're not going to be able to cast the devil out until you're grieved by what you see'" Williams says.

He took a bold step and played two songs written by the youth for his congregation. Both talked about fatherlessness. One young man's father abandoned him when he was young; the other watched his father die in his arms.

"You could almost hear the tears in their voices," Williams says. "I shared with them that Jesus knew what it was like not to have a father. They had never thought of Jesus understanding where they're coming from. It was like a light went on."

The church holds hip-hop services occasionally, and they've seen youth give their lives to the Lord out of the blue. Though all the testimonies aren't dramatic, they are plentiful. YES alumnus Adam Ballard was profiled in CBS anchor Dan Rather's book *The American Dream*. His writing and directing talents were unearthed through a YES summer camp, and the California teen-ager landed internships at Nickelodeon and CBS' children's division.

Edward Davis and Brian Toppins, both 20, have been involved in YES for a year and want to continue working in the studio to help youth find the right path. "Most of the people who come in here are in the wrong direction, so they steer them in the right direction," Davis says. "As it turns out, most people there's something they're doing something they love."

Young is still hoping more churches will see the possibilities. He says reaching these teens involves getting out of one's comfort zone, listening and developing relationships. "We just know God is calling us to step outside the box to really reach young people."

For more information about Youth Entertainment Studios, write P.O. Box 5802, Chesapeake, VA 23324; call (757) 545-8766; or visit .

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Ministries Today magazines. She visited Atlanta; Tampa, Florida; and Norfolk, Virginia, to conduct interviews for this report.