

Rapper's Nomination Stirs Controversy For Gospel Music Awards Show

Nominated for his song 'Jesus Walks,' Kanye West eventually was pulled from the rap/hip-hop category of the Stellar Awards. Ever since Thomas Dorsey, the author of "Precious Lord" and the founder of gospel music, began writing sacred music against a blues backdrop, the genre he created has faced criticism that it is becoming too worldly. That debate heated up again last fall when the Stellar Gospel Music Awards nominated rapper Kanye West in its rap/hip-hop category for his mainstream hit "Jesus Walks."

The song, edited because of some profanity, has been played generously in Christian circles and speaks mostly of West's search for peace: "(Jesus walks.) God show me the way 'cause the devil trying to break me down. (Jesus walks with me.) The only thing that I pray is that my feet don't fail me now. (Jesus walks.) And I don't think there is nothing I can do to right my wrongs. (Jesus walks with me.) I want to talk to God but I'm afraid because we ain't spoke in so long."

But the CD on which the song appears, *The College Dropout*, carries a parental advisory for explicit lyrics and has been criticized by Christians for promoting violence and fornication. Though West's promoter Neily Dickerson, president of ND Co. and Church House Music, said only the single was nominated, dozens of letters poured into the offices of Central City Productions, headquarters for the Stellar Awards, demanding that West's name be immediately removed from the ballot.

Among those protesting the song was Bobby Herring, also known as Tre9, founder and president of the Houston Holy Hip-Hop Alliance. "The leaders of Holy Hip-Hop were outraged," Herring said. "I gave them 30 days to respond [to my letter], and then I would go further with the protest."

Through his organization, the 29-year-old has strong relationships with retailers, pastors, media, artists and vendors in Houston. "I was going to get the whole city to protest," he said.

But in September, the Stellar Awards, being held this month in Houston, announced the removal of West's nomination and apologized, saying it "did not intend to offend the gospel music community with this glaring oversight. We have implemented corrective action to make sure that such an error never happens again."

Gerard Henry, host of the popular gospel video show Lift Every Voice on Black Entertainment Television, said the Stellar Awards may not have realized the full scope of West's CD. "I have mixed feelings about the song," said Henry, who is also college ministries leader at Hope Christian Church in College Park, Md., pastored by Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr.

"I think it sounds great. I like the name of Jesus being put into the mainstream. It creates discussion. But I think that instead of attacking him, we should reach out to him and disciple him. He needs to be fathered and to know that there is a difference between just knowing that Jesus walks and walking with Jesus."

But others say Jesus can use anyone, not just mature

Christians. "The Bible says, 'Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord,'" said Gerard Bonner, senior writer for . "Based on that, [West and other secular artists who have performed religious singles] are qualified to testify, to share the gospel.

"We have to remember that this gospel is not ours but belongs to the Father. Therefore, God can use whoever He'd like. He shared a message through a donkey."

Dickerson agreed. "I think the Lord is showing that you'll be shocked at who [He will] use. He said He would use a rock to cry out. Kanye is that rock. We have to get to a worldview of who Jesus is—outside of the Baptist or Pentecostal churches. There are young people who would have never been exposed to Jesus if it were not for this song."

That proved true in Fort Washington, Md., recently when Ebenezer AME Church hosted West in concert. West performed "Jesus Walks" and "All Falls Down," which talks about materialism, and fielded youth ministers' questions about "Jesus Walks." Ebenezer youth pastor Tony Lee told the Washington Post the event drew 3,000 youth, and that more than 300 responded to the altar call.

Even though West won't receive a Stellar Award this year, Henry said he has been an example for Christians. Said Henry: "If believers who actually have a good knowledge of who Christ is stood up the way Kanye did—with courage and sincerity—we would have a revolution."

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