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Talk This Way: A Look at the Historical Conversation Between Hip-Hop and Christianity

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of History
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in History

by
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Dr. Elwood Watson, Chair
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Dr. Jennifer Adler

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ABSTRACT

Talk This Way: A Look at the Historical Conversation Between Hip-Hop and Christianity

by

Joshua Swanson

Christianity and Hip-Hop culture are often said to be at odds with one another. One is said to promote a lifestyle of righteousness and love, while the other is said to promote drugs, violence, and pride. As a result, the public has portrayed these two institutions as conflicting with no willingness to resolve their perceived differences. This paper will argue that there has always been a healthy conversation between Hip-Hop and Christianity since Hip-Hop's inception. Using sources like Hip-Hop lyrics, theologians, historians, autobiographies, sermons, and articles that range from Ma\$e to Tipper Gore, this paper will look at the conversation between Hip-Hop and Christianity that has been ongoing for decades. This thesis will show why that conversation is essential for the church and necessary for Hip-Hop artists to express themselves fully. This paper will show rap and Hip-Hop culture to be a complex institution with its own theology, history, and prophets – that uses its own voice to express how urban youth view not only their lives but also how God and the church are present in their lives.

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DEDICATION

This piece of work is dedicated to everyone that was ever considered to be on the outside. It is also dedicated to my grandparents, parents (biological), my nieces and nephews, sisters, brothers, and my spiritual parents (the many I have).

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First and foremost, I would like to thank my wife, Antenia LaShay Swanson, parents, family, friends, and God. Those who encouraged me to finish this thesis when I was mentally through with it. Those who pushed me to finish this program when I had mentally checked out. I would also like to thank my thesis committee for helping me throughout my degree. More than just helping me on this thesis they guided me through this academic process.

To Kieffer, Keri, Seth, Ryan, Jared, Dakota, Emily, Cameron, Jesse, Luke, Cavender, Erika, Haley, James, Kristen, Jordan, John, Samaria, Pastor Pete, Ketron Memorial, Ian, Lihle, Martin, Primo, Sunshine, my Ace, my Deuce, Hannah, Kristin, Dr. Dukes, Dr. T. Collin Cornel, and the many more who helped me through this I truly appreciate it. If you know me then you know this is turned in near the last minute, so if I didn't name you charge it to my head not my heart. I love each of you. I don't know if this is professional or not, but I did it anyway. A special thank you to Dr. Erika Gault for helping me in ways she did not have to. Lastly, I want to take the time to acknowledge Kool Herc and the fathers/mothers of Hip-Hop and those whose work I have built on.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Hip-Hop was first given birth to in the party scene of the Bronx. After its inception, the streets of New York City grew and molded Hip-Hop. There were many different periods and stages of Hip-Hop. Still, through each period, certain stereotypes remained fluid and ever-present in the eyes of mainstream American culture. These stereotypes made many see Hip-Hop as misogynistic, hyper-masculine, violent, drug-filled, and controversial. Critics of Rap often portray the genre in a negative light; therefore, Hip-Hop, as a whole, was hardly seen as compatible with Christianity. However, there are many examples of Christian influence on Hip-Hop and Hip-Hop artists that Christians often overlook. While negative stereotypes of the genre are not entirely unfounded, conversations between Hip-Hop and Christianity has led to great strides in the formation of the way people who identify with Hip-Hop culture view God, the church, and themselves.

People must place these conversations must within the proper historical context. The public mostly misunderstood the art form, as the music genre continued to grow. The youth created Hip-Hop as an outlet. It helped them understand their place in the world, but also it helped them understand each other. Therefore, older members of communities where Hip-Hop was popular did not understand or respect the art form. This misunderstanding caused clashes between the dominant cultural expression in these communities, the church, and a new counterculture, which would be named Hip-Hop. These clashes would lead to misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the new art form by those who refused to take the art form seriously. Therefore, in chapter one explores the history and formation of Hip-Hop as a culture and art form.

As Hip-Hop grew in popularity, it gathered more attention from people far removed from the culture. As a result of this new popularity, Hip-Hop found itself becoming America's scapegoat for what they saw as unruly behavior by followers of the culture. This demonization of the culture would further fuel the separation between mainstream culture and urban culture. Thus, it would also impact how the masses received Hip-Hop. Chapter 2 primarily focuses on framing this narrative.

Demonizing Hip-Hop forced the outside world to see the culture as something in need of being saved or discarded. Many politicians, church leaders, and activists took strong stances against the emerging art form. Some believed that it could be saved and reformed through censorship; however, others believed that Hip-Hop was a culture sent from the devil to corrupt the minds of black youth. In demonizing the art form, the detractors also remove the agency of the art form. Detractors take this sophisticated culture and reduce it into loud, vulgar, and profane noise with little to no redeeming qualities.

These attempts to silence Hip-Hop through court cases, protests, articles, and censorship provide ample evidence of the result of the demonization of Hip-Hop by outside forces. In placing the less desirable aspects of the culture at the forefront of their complaints, critics of the genre trap the music and culture in a never-ending battle to either prove it is different from stereotypes or to embrace these stereotypes. There are negative stereotypes about the culture that are true; nevertheless, commentators shining a spotlight solely on those perceived negative aspects of the culture removes exposure to positive aspects of the same culture.

Many of these positive facets of Hip-Hop art consistently overlooked by mainstream America because it does not fit into the narrative they created about the genre and culture. Chapter 3 addresses these complaints. As Hip-Hop is being labeled as demonic and devil's culture by pastors, we find a theology formed from Hip-Hop culture. We hear songs that question traditional interpretation of scripture, church policy, and religious institutions.

Hip-Hop has always had positive and negative aspects; however, the public did not explore them in the same way. The public would show negative facets of Hip-Hop in various forms of media, politicians and activists would discuss the culture's legitimacy, people would attempt to regulate the way the culture expressed itself, and dominant cultures in the United States would condemn it. On the other hand, portions of Hip-Hop that counteracted the narratives shown by opponents of Hip-Hop are primarily ignored, directly resulting in the muzzling of these positive aspects people wanted.

These positive portions of Hip-Hop culture have found their way into many churches. Pastors and worship leaders have begun to incorporate the culture into their services by changing worship songs, worship services, and scripture readings to reflect Hip-Hop culture. In doing this, these churches have found new ways to reach and speak to the youth. These churches have begun to use Christian Hip-Hop in a similar way to how other churches use Christian rock music. However, since these churches tend to be located in and focus primarily on urban environments, they believe their target audience would respond better to Hip-Hop rather than rock music.

In representing Hip-Hop culture in the church, many of these churches and church leaders hope to reach people they have never reached before. In reaching these

people and changing their lives, the church can spread the message of Jesus Christ and change lives in the process. Many of these churches have accomplished this goal. This goal is the focus of chapter four. Ma\$e, formally known as Murda Ma\$e, and Malice, now known as No-Malice, were some of the more prominent Hip-Hop artists of their respective eras. Hip-Hop fans see each as a representation of a decade in the music genre. Fans see them as representations because both of these artists have at least one album that reached the top five on the top Billboard charts in the decades in which they were first active.

Another aspect that they both have in common is that they both had a dramatic conversion to Christianity that impacted their careers as a Hip-Hop artist at one point in their life. While they both had a conversion, the outcome of their conversions to Christianity was, in many ways, different. Their conversion stories make these artists, exceptional cases in the history of Hip-Hop and thus subject to a closer look. In following their respective stories, the reader will see how Hip-Hop receives Christians.

In the final chapter, the concept of a “Christian Rapper” appears. This term may appear to be self-explanatory, but it is not—many rappers whom the world considers Christian rappers do not like this term. Rap artists like Lecrae and NF believe that Christianity is a part of who they are, but the term does not define their genre of music. These artists and similar artists challenge the notion of what the public considers Christian music. These are artists who make music that a large portion of their fanbase would consider Christian music; however, the artists themselves see it as a different genre.

On the other hand, some artists make music that most of the world would consider secular or even profane. Nevertheless, they make music that has heavy Christian or religious themes in their music. These artists have redefined the concept of the sacred, profane, and gospel. By these musicians crossing genres that have historically been at odds, they remove the stigma of this concept. Some artists have gone far enough into the gospel music genre that they have begun changing the landscape of the gospel genre. The conversation between Hip-Hop in Christianity has a long and complicated history. It was born as Hip-Hop was born and has continued as the culture has grown and matured. This is a portion of that conversation.

CHAPTER 2. A LOOK AT HIP-HOP HISTORY

What is Hip-Hop? Clive Campbell, also known as DJ Kool Herc, the founder of Hip-Hop, stated, “People talk about the four Hip-Hop elements: DJing, B-Boying, MCing, and Graffiti. I think that there are far more than those: the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you look, the way you communicate.”¹ Could there possibly be a better way of defining Hip-Hop than by getting a quote directly from the man who started it all? The words “Hip-Hop” and “Rap” are not synonymous, as Rap is just one aspect of Hip-Hop; however, in this paper, we will use Hip-Hop to refer to the music and the culture as a whole. Hip-Hop culture divides itself into DJing, B-Boying (dancing), MCing (rapping), and Graffiti (physical art); however, many see it as an entire culture, just as DJ Kool Herc described. This culture took off and became a worldwide sensation, but it did not start there.

Historians trace Hip-Hop’s origins to a party thrown by Cindy Campbell, sister of Clive Campbell, in the West Bronx during the summer of 1973. Cindy wanted to throw a party to make extra money to buy back-to-school clothes. So, she enlisted her brother, who was known as a local DJ, to help her throw the party. Clive had an impressive set up on his speakers to make the speakers extremely loud. He knew the party-goers with love that. Their love increased with the combination of the atmosphere of the party, songs that he played, the loudspeakers, and Clive’s voice booming over the speakers. They were an instant success.²

¹ Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), XI.

² *Ibid.*, 67-70.

Clive attributed much of his success to the different songs that he would find and play at parties. Part of his strategy was not to share his records with anyone else. As a result of this, the only way a person would be able to hear these songs was to come to a party that he was DJing. This strategy would help fuel demand for his parties. Herc explained this mindset in an interview he did with Terry Gross on Fresh Air radio on NPR.

You don't want everybody to go down the block. You want them to come to you. There's no choice. You got to come to you to hear it. That's why they call it exclusive. So, you can't tell everybody the record because if everybody got the record they won't come to see you or hear you. Why go there when you can hear it down here? If I get a new record right now and it's the bomb nobody going to get the name until I rep it. Until my name is attached to it. So, if any DJ play it everybody will say, "We heard Herc play that first." I'm going to dog it until I get my name attached to it.³

This approach became a common marketing strategy amongst DJs at that time. Each DJ had their specialized record that partygoers could only hear at their party. Kool Herc's signature song was Apache by The Incredible Bongo Band.⁴

This strategy paid off for Herc as he would remain the undisputed king of the genre for years. Herc had mastered the art of throwing a party, but he also had mastered the demand for parties. Herc stated that he would not throw a party until enough people asked him to. It was not until the masses desired a party that it was worth throwing. He did this because Herc was not interested in the money or notoriety

³ Terry Gross, Kool Herc: A Founding Father of Hip Hop.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4567450>

⁴ Ibid

that could be gained by DJing. He simply wanted to provide a good time for people and make sure his parties were fun and worth attending.⁵

Campbell, not being a fan of fame and not being money-hungry, led to him living in a bit of obscurity. Most historians and Hip-Hop pioneers will acknowledge that Kool Herc is the originator of Hip-Hop culture; however, he is not the most famous DJ of that time. Many would give that title to either Grandmaster Flash or Afrika Bambaataa. This lack of notoriety is partly because these two DJs went beyond DJing and eventually made rap records. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five would go on to create *The Message*, one of the most influential and important songs in rap history. Afrika Bambaataa would record *Planet Rock*, which would peak at 48 on the billboard top 100.⁶

Instead of recording Herc would continue to DJ all over the world. Herc touring the world would lead him to believe that he is far more prevalent in Europe than he is in America. However, he does not seem to be discouraged by this idea. He takes solace in being the originator of the culture. "I don't have to make a record to be known," the DJ said when asked about his legacy being impacted by not making a record, "My record is Hip-Hop."⁷ Campbell continued to inform us that he has attributed more to the world than a single record. He brought forth the culture of Hip-Hop. "When they record finish playing, it's forgotten about, but when they check the record of who started the culture,

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Billboard. Planet Rock: Afrika Bambaataa & the Soul Sonic Force. Accessed March 9, 2020. <https://www.billboard.com/music/afrika-bambaataa/chart-history/HSI/song/580532>

⁷ Terry Gross, Kool Herc: A Founding Father of Hip Hop. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4567450>

only one name going to come to it... Nobody can take that from me.”⁸ Herc emphatically states that he does not regret not making a record; however, record making is where Hip-Hop would focus on next.

Hip-Hop took off from this point and continually gained the support of the masses. The Sugar Hill Gang scored the first successful Hip-Hop song with *Rapper's Delight* in 1979, 6 years after the legendary party that started Hip-Hop. The culture would make a tremendous jump in the 1980s from relatively unknown underground culture stuck in poor neighborhoods in New York City to spread throughout the country vastly. In the 1970s, many of the biggest names in rap music were still relatively local; however, with the success of artists like the Run-DMC, Beastie Boys, Tone-Loc, and NWA, the music genre and culture would leave the sidelines and be recognized by the outside world.

Kurtis Walker, better known by his stage name Kurtis Blow, would lead Hip-Hop into the 1980s as one of the art form's most successful artists. He would push the art form to be more than what it had been. This push caused the art form to evolve not just artistically, but the way it was produced and consumed. Kurtis Blow would step on the scene with the song, The Breaks. This song would be a monumental success. It would make Blow the first rapper to sign to a major label, receive a gold record for rap, tour the United States and Europe, create a rap music video, and most shockingly make him the

⁸ ibid

first rap millionaire.⁹ Blow's success showed that rap music had the opportunity to be a lasting and highly profitable genre of music.

Two young men from New York would see the opportunity for Hip-Hop to become more than it is and form the first major record label that focused predominantly on Hip-Hop music. These two young men, Russel Simmons and Rick Rubin, would form the record label, Def Jam, in Rick's dorm room. Def Jam would rule the early 1980s Hip-Hop scene and beyond. Before the founding of the label, Simmons was already a party promoter in New York and a music manager of acts such as Run DMC, Whodini, and Kurtis Blow. Rubin, a young music producer, was already part of a new band called the Beastie Boys. He was also, already in talks with rapper, LL Cool J.¹⁰ Def Jam would dominate the charts for decades to come and set the groundwork for what it means to be a music label that would focus on Hip-Hop culture and music.

Def Jam continues to spread its' influence while the genre continues to grow. Even with the newfound popularity of rap music, it would take until 1987 for the first Hip-Hop album to reach number one on the Billboard charts. Def Jam's group, The Beastie Boys', *Licensed to Ill*, would be the ones to claim this prize. *Licensed to Ill* would prove to be a monumental success. Following their tour with Madonna, the Beastie Boys' *Licensed to Ill* would eventually go on to sell 10 million albums in 2015. Run-DMC would be the next Def Jam artist to reach a milestone by having the first Hip-Hop song to reach top 5 on the Billboard chart with *Walk this Way*, a collaboration with Aerosmith.

⁹Uitti, Jacob. "Hip-Hop Legend Kurtis Blow: The Interview." PopMatters, Nov 11, 2019, <https://login.iris.etsu.edu:3443/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2314517953?accountid=10771>.

¹⁰ NPR Staff. Interview with Rick Rubbin and Russell Simmons. Weekend Edition Sunday. NPR, October 9, 2011.

The Hip-Hop mega-group partnered with Aerosmith to produce one of the biggest rap songs of all time. This song would launch the historic group into unprecedented space for a rap act. They became the undisputed Kings of Rap for several years and defined much of the look and sound of the culture moving forward. To close out the decade, Tone Loc became the first solo rapper to chart number one on the Billboard Top albums with *Loc-ed After Dark* in 1989.¹¹

The success of rappers continued to climb in the early 1990s as MC Hammer released his third studio album *Please Hammer Don't Hurt Em*. This album would stay number one on the charts for a record of twenty-one weeks. This run is more than any Hip-Hop album even to this day. Only eight albums have been at number one longer than *Please Hammer Don't Hurt Em*. It would also be the first Hip-Hop album ever to go diamond.¹² 1990 also saw the release of Vanilla Ice's "Ice Ice Baby," which became the first-ever Hip-Hop song to become number one on Billboards Top 100.

Vanilla Ice and MC Hammer were proof that Hip-Hop could cross over to mainstream America. There were instances of artists or songs crossing over before; however, these two acts were purely mainstream American culture. It was common for fans to see MC Hammer on advertisements, television, or at sporting events. MC Hammer was so successful in crossing over that at one point; he had his own Saturday morning cartoon, Hammerman.

¹¹ Danish Z, "20 Years of #1 Rap Albums: A Retrospective: Every Rap Album That Went #1 on the Billboard 200 (1987-2016)," Festival Peak, December 20, 2016, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://festivalpeak.com/30-years-of-1-rap-albums-a-retrospective-ac150be99ea4>

¹² To sell at least 10,000,000 albums

Hip-Hop had officially gone from 'a nice little hood thing' to a chance for corporations to make money and acknowledge what was built by these artists.¹³ This change would come about primarily because of a move by Russell Simmons. In 1986, Run-DMC's song, "My Adidas," became a smash hit. Russell Simmons noticed that many of the group's fans had begun copying the group's signature style, which meant more profits for Adidas; however, the rap group nor the label would share in any of this profit. Simmons saw an opportunity to partner with the brand, so he met with executives from the fashion brand and asked for them to sponsor Run-DMC. The Adidas executives were unsure about partnering with the group because they thought rap music was a fad and a bad look for their brand. In response to this, Simmons invited these German executives to attend a Run-DMC concert.¹⁴ At one point during the concert, a member of Run-DMC instructed the audience, "Okay, everybody in the house, rock your Adidas!" At that moment, fans lifted 3,000 pairs of Adidas into the air. When the executives saw the power of rap music to sell their brand, they immediately reached for the checkbooks to sign the group.¹⁵

Corporations would tag many rap artists to be ambassadors for different brands throughout the 1990s. It would be common for a person to turn on their television and see KRS-One and MC Shan on a Sprite commercial, MC Hammer in a Pepsi

¹³ A reference to Andre 3000's commentary on black culture, rather it be jazz, Hip-Hop, or anything else, starting off as something no one wants only to be stolen by Hollywood elites when it becomes popular. Andre claims that is when it becomes uncool. The irony in this quote is that Hip-Hop reached Hollywood decades ago and is not over yet.

¹⁴ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies* ((New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 74.

¹⁵ Christopher Vaughn, "Simmons' Rush for Profits," *Black Enterprise*, December 1992, 69-70.

commercial, or Kid N Play in a Sprite commercial.¹⁶ Even further in 1992, Barbie released Rappin' Rockin' Barbie, complete with a commercial full of young girls rapping and dancing while trying to sell the doll. Long gone were the days that companies shied away from being associated with Hip-Hop culture. This openness is partly due to the new marketing flavor of the 1990s. Brands began to understand that one of the most significant factors in whether their brand would sell is the brand's cool factor, and at this point, companies mined urban culture for its cool factor.¹⁷

Some companies even had a name for mining, urban culture for the next fad. Nike called this action "bro-ing." To gauge how new Nike apparel would be received, Nike employees would go to inner-city neighborhoods and would show their new items. After seeing the reaction of the people of the community, the Nike marketing team would decide if they would release the items. The term "bro-ing" came from the strategy of the marketing team. They would go to predominantly black neighborhoods in large cities and say, "Hey, bro, check out the shoes."¹⁸ They understood that brands meant a lot to many of the people in the community.

Searching in black communities to see what styles and trends were coming up would be called "cool hunting." Naomi Klein argues that "cool hunting" is simply a term that means "black culture hunting." She states, "The truth is that the 'got to be cool' rhetoric of the global brands is, more often than not, an indirect way of saying 'got to be

¹⁶ Sharee Hereford, "The Best Hip-Hop and R&B Soda Commercials of the 90s," The Boombox, January 24, 2018, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://theboombox.com/hip-hop-soda-commercials-1990s-tyrese-coca-cola/>

¹⁷ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, 75.

¹⁸ *ibid*

black.”¹⁹ To help their brands become more cool many designers began to stop persecuting people from bootlegging their clothes. Stussy, Hilfiger, Polo, DKNY, Nike, and others saw this as a marketing technique. The idea behind this was that if more people saw the company’s logo, more people would desire it and wear it. Brands primarily saw these knock off designer outfits in African American neighborhoods, so to allow them to continue would bump the cool factor of the brand. Brands went as far as to allow people to shoplift in hopes of raising the profile of their brand. These tactics launched Tommy Hilfiger from white-preppy wear to a brand that black culture integrated with Hip-Hop culture and cool culture in the 1990s.

Hip-Hop had become a valuable and acceptable art form by mainstream culture in the 1990s. This profit and acceptance would be no different in the 2000s. The crossover appeal of the genre began to be even more noticeable to the outside world, especially with the emergence of a young MC from Detroit, Michigan that went by the name Eminem. Marshall Mathers, better known by Eminem or Slim Shady, became the first rapper to have back-to-back albums that went diamond.²⁰ Eminem would go on to become one of the highest-selling artists of all time selling over 220 million records globally. He is also the only artist to have eight albums consecutively debut at number one on the Billboard 200.²¹ Mathers' ability to crossover and make Hip-Hop a permanent sound in suburban households across the country was unprecedented. He

¹⁹ Ibid, 74

²⁰ These would be the Marshall Mathers LP released in 2000 and the Eminem Show released in 2002.

²¹ Mustafa Marie, “Again, Eminem a Hit Maker,” Egypt Today, September 06, 2018, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/4/57214/Again-Eminem-a-Hit-Maker>.

would dominate the decade as the highest-selling artist across all genres, just edging out the Beatles.²²

Rap music would continue to rise throughout the decade. Acts like 50 Cent, Ja Rule, Nelly, Lil Jon, T.I, Kanye West, Soulja Boy, and Ludacris would lead the genre to places it had never been. The public would push Rap artists and Hip-Hop culture into the forefront of American culture. Sean “P. Diddy” Combs became the face of a voter campaign urging the youth to vote in both the 2004 and 2008 elections. Kanye West informed the world that George Bush did not care about black people. 3-6 Mafia surprised the world, winning an Oscar for “It’s Hard Out Here for a Pimp.” The 2000s was the largest and most visible decade for Hip-Hop thus far.

There was no turning back now. Hip-Hop had become a staple in American culture and had found its way into international popularity. Hip-Hop was here to stay. However, Hip-Hop did not remain as it was. It continued to grow and has now become the top-selling genre of music in the world today. In 2017, for the first time, Hip-Hop surpassed Rock-and-Roll as the most consumed genre of music. “Consumed genre of music” accounts for the number of albums sold and “album equivalent streaming figures.” Eight out of ten of the most popular artists in 2017 were a part of the Hip-Hop/RnB genre of music with two rappers, Drake and Kendrick Lamar, taking the top two spots, respectively. During 2017, there was a 72% increase in on-demand audio

²² Daniel Kreps, “Eminem and The Beatles: The Top-Selling Artists of the 2000s,” Rolling Stone, December 9, 2009, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/eminem-and-the-beatles-the-top-selling-artists-of-the-2000s-249639/>.

streaming for the Hip-Hop genre.²³ The genre has come a long way from a party in the Bronx to a world-wide phenomenon. This rise to the top of the charts, however, was not done without controversy. As much as one side of American culture loved Hip-Hop, there was another side that fought it at every turn.

²³ John Lynch, "For the first time in history, hip-hop has surpassed rock to become the most popular music genre, according to Nielsen," Business Insider, January 4, 2018, accessed November 8, 2018, <https://www.businessinsider.com/hip-hop-passes-rock-most-popular-music-genre-nielsen-2018-1>.

CHAPTER 3. CRITICIZED AND DEMONIZED

“We’re not against rap, we’re not against rappers, but we are against those thugs.” Many raps fans know these words to be the intro to Bone Thugs-N-Harmony’s 1994 song Thuggish Ruggish Bone where Pastor Calvin O. Butts directed statements against gangsta rappers. This quote may be the most famous sound bite of anti-rap rhetoric amongst fans of the genre; however, many have not heard the full statement. “Who disgrace our community, our women, who disgrace our culture, and who have absolutely nothing of redemptive value to offer. Except, the legacy of violence, sexual assault, and foul language.”²⁴

In this statement, Pastor Butts expresses the thoughts of many people across the United States. Even in his denial that he was not against rap or rappers, he launched an attack on both by claiming to be against the image that was critics portrayed those of Hip-Hop culture to have during that period. Many did not see the side of Hip-Hop that championed self-love, black love, or consciousness; however, detractors were well versed with the section of rap that they saw as promoting violence, hypersexuality, sexual assault, and foul language. This chapter will focus on examples of the demonization of Hip-Hop in these specific areas.

The culture was able to be demonized because while Hip-Hop was gaining popularity in mainstream America, people saw Hip-Hop as still being seen as a part of the counterculture to many people. We now see and understand Hip-Hop as a culture within itself, but people did not always view Hip-Hop in that light. Hip-Hop began as an

²⁴ Joey Perez, Thuggish Ruggish Bone calvin o. butts intro + more.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzZyaYBI-w8>.

emerging culture situated in urban ghettos and defined by young black youth. These young people were often used to being criticized and marginalized by not only society as a whole, but also the older generations who did not seem to understand this new Hip-Hop generation. This rift led to how mainstream America would view Hip-Hop culture and music.

Younger people largely spearheaded hip-Hop. It began as a scene for young kids to party at and grew mostly because young people gravitated towards it. Young people being the leading voices in the culture led to a bit of rawness that was not present in other forms of music at that time.²⁵ Bakari Kitwana reasons that what we view as Hip-Hop culture was formed primarily due to six critical catalysts for change that took place within the 1980s and 1990s. First, black youth were more likely to be seen as part of popular culture. Secondly, outsiders globalized the culture for profit. Thirdly, the persistent segregation in an America that preaches inclusivity. Fourth, public policies that impact the criminal justice system, especially drug laws. The fifth is the media representation of young African-Americans. Lastly, would be the overall shift in the quality of life for young African-Americans.²⁶

These fundamental issues would lead to a shift in thought and action in young African-Americans of that time. Many were feeling unheard and unseen in a culture that pretended to acknowledge them and their way of life while continually stabbing them in the back. As Hip-Hop culture grew and expanded, so did its influence. However, instead

²⁵ Rawness denotes that the music and culture was aggressive, uncensored, and intense. This “rawness” comes as a direct reflection of the communities and situations the culture was birthed from.

²⁶Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture*. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002), 9-20

of America embracing inner-city culture, Hip-Hop culture was often demonized while being consumed by the very people who were demonizing it. As droves of people were buying Rap music, the country, communities, and schools were also passing laws and ordinances to ban clothes, hairstyles, and fashion primarily worn by those who are a part of Hip-Hop culture.

This love-hate relationship with urban culture became an ever-growing problem as the demonization of Hip-Hop culture grew to the point of detractors blaming high-profile crimes on Hip-Hop music. On April 19, 1989, a white woman was raped and almost beaten to death in New York City's Central Park. The police rounded up five young black men and accused them of the rape and attempted murder of the young woman. Police officers claimed that the young men were "wilding," which was a reference to Tone Loc's hit song "Wild Thing." The officers believed that this act of violence was a part of the culture that Hip-Hop had created, and these young men were a part of that culture, so they must have participated in it. These young men, known as the central park five.²⁷

This case became a prevalent case in New York City. Chief of Detectives Robert Colangelo spoke about the incident the day after the attack. He stated that he did not believe that any of the children went to the park intending to rape anyone that night; however, in his statement, Colangelo would say a phrase that would frame much of the case. Colangelo would release to the press that the boys had intended to go "wilding" without understanding the term. The Chief of Detectives would say, "They just said, 'We

²⁷ Patrick B Hill, "Deconstructing the Hip-Hop Hype: A Critical Analysis of the New York Times' Coverage of African-American Youth Culture." In *Bleep! Censoring Rock and Rap Music*, edited by Betty Winfield and Sandra Davidson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 104

were going wilding.’ In my mind at this point, it implies that they were going to go raise hell.” While leaning on an implication, Colangelo would admit, “it’s not a term that we in the police had heard before.” However, this would still lead to the New York Times to associate the term with crime and criminal activity. David E. Pitt would write at the beginning of the article, “the 20 youths brought in for questioning had told investigators that the crime spree was the product of a pastime called ‘wilding.’”²⁸

This phrasing would link the “wilding” to crime in much of America’s mind. These articles and fearmongering would lead to fear in the eyes of much of White America, over the possibility of black children wilding. White America’s fears multiplied when reports came out that the suspects continued to sing Tone Loc’s *Wild Thing* while they were in prison. The media had begun a campaign to paint the young boys as monsters and less than human. Pete Hamill of the New York Post painted a vivid picture:

These kids came into Central Park from the north on Wednesday evening and according to the cops, they had a loose plan of battle to go “wilding” against the rich. The details didn’t matter because there was no script. But they were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference, and ignorance. They were coming from a land with no fathers. They were coming from schools where cops must guard the doors. They were coming from the anarchic province of the poor. And driven by a collective fury, brimming with the rippling energies of youth, their minds teeming with the violent images of the streets and the movies. They had only one goal: to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rap. The enemies were rich. The enemies were white. The enemies own things. The enemies were other people.²⁹

Hamill, like much of the media, was in a rush to paint this case as wild young black men attempting to cause as much trouble as they possibly could at the expense of

²⁸ David E. Pitt, “Jogger’s Attackers Terrorized at Least 9 in 2 Hours,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1989, Accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1989/04/22/nyregion/jogger-s-attackers-terrorized-at-least-9-in-2-hours.html>.

²⁹ Pete Hamill, “A Savage Disease Called New York,” *New York Post*, April 23, 1989

a young white woman. Much of Hamill's accusations were completely unfounded, yet that did not stop the media from portraying the boys in such a light. Other reporters described the boys as "bloodthirsty," "animals," "savages," and "human mutations."³⁰ The result of these children wilding had turned them into less than human.

These accusations and the increased media spotlight on the vulgarity of Hip-Hop led to Tipper Gore, wife of former Vice-President Al Gore, to write an article for the *Washington Post* entitled *Hate, Rape, and Rap*. In the article, she accuses rap of promoting sexism, racism, and anti-Semitism. Gore quotes an Ice-T verse from his song *The Iceberg* to show the vulgarity of Hip-Hop. The lines in question are about Ice-T's DJ Evil E. "Evil E was out coolin' with a freak one night/ Fucked a bitch with a flashlight/ Pulled it out and left the batteries in/ So he could get a charge when he begin/ Used his dick, the shit was tight/ Bitch's titties start blinkin' like tail lights."³¹ The line's humor fell short to Gore, who saw this as an example of the degradation of our society.

She references Ice-T's appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* as an example of the terrible influence that Hip-Hop is having on the youth. Gore saw Ice-T's attempt to justify his lyrics as futile and harmful. She claimed that even if 'we' did not get the joke, did we want our children to get the joke or understand it.³² In her eyes, Ice-T's song was harmful because of the impact that it could have on the youth of this country. She quotes a woman from the audience informed told Ice-T that his song "was about as

³⁰ Julia Dahl, "We Were the Wolf Pack: How New York City Tabloid Media Misjudged the Central Park Jogger Case." Poynter, June 16, 2011, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2011/we-were-the-wolf-pack-how-new-york-city-tabloid-media-mangled-the-central-park-jogger-case/>.

³¹ Ice-T, *The Iceberg*, 1989

³² The we she is referring to essentially everyone in American society. She contrast the readers of her article with those who agree with and/or understand Ice-T's position, art, and comedy.

funny as a song about lynching black men.”³³ She does not accuse Ice-T of promoting rape; however, she does claim that his music and music genre are desensitizing the youth to rape, violence, racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism.

Tipper continues her article by discussing the anti-Semitism in the Hip-Hop community. She cites an instance where Professor Griff of Public Enemy had an interview with the Washington Times, where he stated that “Jews are wicked.” Even though Professor Griff is not a rapper, Gore makes a point to point out that he is associated with the popular rap group. She points to this as an example of Hip-Hop culture allowing anti-Semitism with no repercussion even though Professor Griff was fired for his remarks soon after he made them.³⁴ Chuck D, the leader of Public Enemy, also came out to say that Griff’s words do not represent the beliefs of the group.

The real enemy is a system, not a people... We aren’t anti-Jewish, we aren’t anti-anybody. We’re pro-black, pro-black culture, and pro-human race... Professor Griff’s responsibility as Minister of Information was to faithfully transmit those values to everybody. In practice, he sabotaged those values.³⁵

The controversial group would continue to spread their message and remain popular to this day.

Tipper Gore states that she is in favor of the first amendment; however, she seems to be calling for censorship in music because of the suggestive lyrics. As teens and young people gravitate towards Hip-Hop, many older adults began to become

³³Tipper Gore, “Hate, Rape, and Rap,” *Washington Post*, January 8, 1990, Accessed November 9, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1990/01/08/hate-rape-and-rap/b4c16c35-4e96-4dec-8866-68ff6c1350f4/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.49063e6bd65d.

³⁴ He was reinstated later, but was largely kept from communicating on behalf of the group.

³⁵ Richard Harrington, “Public Enemy’s Rap Record Stirs Jewish Protests,” *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1989, Accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/12/29/public-enemys-rap-record-stirs-jewish-protests/3ac1c658-1746-4ec6-be7c-4a9d52bcd070/>.

worried about the impact of this musical genre on children. Betty Winfield states that many believed that listening to such music could lead to children “modeling of bizarre behavior, as well as imitating alien sounds, speaking taboo words, emulating violent lyrics, fulfilling sexual desires, copying the performers’ outlandish antics and being overwhelmed by extreme audience reactions.”³⁶ Gore and many others would rally behind the cry “what about the children” when it came to the vulgarity of rap lyrics.

These cries became the least worries of the Hip-Hop community as forces began to attempt to censor the art form through more than parental advisory stickers or protest. Instead, they organized to involve the United States government to put an end to the genre. This censorship was attempted through two separate court cases that tried to force rap artists to clean up their songs and lyrics. These cases would be Skyywalker Records v. Navarro (1990) and Davidson v. Time Warner (1997). Both cases focused on if rap music was considered obscene because of “vulgar” lyrics about violence and sexuality. In these cases, the people wanted rap artists to be held accountable for the subjects they discussed in their art form.

Skyywalker Records v. Navarro was the first of these cases. Luther Campbell, also known as Uncle Luke, was the lead band member and producer of the rap group 2 Live Crew. The group was known for its sexually explicit lyrics, which did not sit well with many people. In 1989 they released their second studio album *As Nasty as They Wanna Be* under Campbell’s Skyywalker Records. The album would go on to be a huge success becoming the first southern rap album to go platinum. However, it is far more

³⁶ Betty Houchin Winfield, “Because of the Children: Decades of Attempted Controls of Rock ‘n’ Rap Music,” in *Bleep! Censoring Rock and Rap Music*, edited by Betty Houchin Winfield and Sandra Davidson (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 10-11.

known for being the first album to be declared legally obscene by a court on June 6, 1990. Federal judge Jose Gonzalez stated that “[*As Nasty as They Wanna Be*] is an appeal to dirty thoughts and the loins, not to the intellect and the mind.”³⁷

The album had sold over 1.2 million copies before any courts had begun to look at it as obscene until an evangelical Christian lawyer from Miami, Jack Thompson, began to campaign against the album. He started sending copies of the lyrics to then Florida governor Bob Martinez and the sheriffs of 65 counties in the state. After his campaign album sales began to pick up again, causing the album to sell over 800,000 more copies. Bruce Rogow, 2 Live Crew’s lead lawyer, credits Jack Thompson with the influx of sales and interest in the album. He claimed, “This record would have gone away if Jack Thompson had not brought it back. This is the history of censorship. People will fall over cut glass to get what you tell them they can’t have.”³⁸

Thompson’s appeal to government officials found a home with both Governor Martinez and sheriff of Broward County, Nick Navarro. Both men found the album to be obscene and fought to make sure others saw it that way as well. After Judge Gonzales found the album to be obscene, Navarro went on the offensive arresting Charles Freeman, a record shop owner in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for selling the album to an

³⁷ Billy Johnson Jr., “7 Ways the World Went Crazy With ‘As Nasty as They Wanna Be,’” *Rolling Stone*, February 7, 2014, accessed March 11, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/7-ways-the-world-went-crazy-with-as-nasty-as-they-wanna-be-87.013/>

³⁸ Sarah Rimer, “Oscenity or Art? Trial on Rap Lyrics Opens,” *New York Times*, October 17, 1990, Accessed March 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/17/us/obscenity-or-art-trial-on-rap-lyrics-opens.html>

undercover officer. Officials also fined 2 Live Crew for performing songs off the album in a club in Florida.³⁹

Campbell would fight back against the decision of the court and the arrest by appealing the decision. It held that the court would task Navarro with proving to the court that *As Freaky as They Wanna Be* was an obscene album. The courts would use a definition provided by Miller v. California, which held that obscene materials did not enjoy protection by the First Amendment. The case provided a test to determine whether something could be considered obscene:

[t]he basic guidelines for the trier of fact must be: (a) whether 'the average person, applying contemporary community standards' would find that the work, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest. . . (b) whether the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by the applicable state law; and (c) whether the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.⁴⁰

The appeals court found that the album had artistic value; therefore, the album was not considered obscene. The bulk of the ruling fell on the fact that 2 Live Crew and Skywalker Records argued that although the lyrics were graphic, the songs also provided artistic value. The state did not offer a counter-argument. The state's failure to provide a counter-argument led to a straightforward acquittal and a monumental victory for musicians across the board. However, this would not be the last time rap artists would be in court defending their art form.⁴¹

³⁹ David L. Hudson Jr. "Rap Music and the First Amendment," Middle Tennessee State University, Accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1582/rap-music-and-the-first-amendment>.

⁴⁰ "Miller v. California." Oyez. Accessed March 11, 2020. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1971/70-73>.

⁴¹ Paul Fischer, "2 Live Crew", Middle Tennessee State University, Accessed March 11, 2020, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1447/2-live-crew>

The second case involves violence and Hip-Hop. On April 11, 1992 state trooper, Bill Davidson, pulled over 19-year-old Ronald Ray Howard. Howard was stopped about 100 miles outside of Houston, Texas, in a stolen car. According to many accounts, Howard was listening to Tupac Shakur's solo debut album, *2pacalypse Now*.⁴² Howard claimed that listening to this album would significantly affect his mental state and cause him not to think clearly. "The music was up as loud as it could go with gunshots and siren noises on it, and my heart was pounding hard," recalled Howard, "I watched him get out of his car in my side view mirror, and I was so hyped up, I just snapped. I jacked a bullet in the chamber and when was close enough, I turned around and bam! I shot him."⁴³

Howard would immediately flee the scene of the shooting. A witness to the shooting would immediately call the police who would pursue Howard. Shortly after authorities caught Howard, he would admit to shooting Davidson. State trooper Davidson would pass away three days later as a result of the gunshot wound. This trial would become a national sensation because of the nature of the murder.⁴⁴

During the impending trial, Howard's attorney, Allen Tanner, would introduce Gangster Rap music, namely *2pacalypse Now*, into the defense strategy. Howard's attorney would argue that the album he was listening to, along with other Gangster Rap,

⁴² Chuck Phillips, "Music To Kill Cops by? Rap Song Blamed in Texas Trooper's Death," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1992/09/20/music-to-kill-cops-by-rap-song-blamed-in-texas-troopers-death/20b49755-7835-4cb0-a53a-d78ccf65f9a7/>.

⁴³ Chuck Phillips, "Rap Music Doesn't Stop Death Penalty: 'The Music Affected Me,' Says Ronald Ray Howard. 'That's How It Was That Night I Shot The Trooper,'" *Los Angeles Times*, July 15, 1993. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-07-15-ca-13309-story.html>.

⁴⁴ Chuck Phillips, "Music to Kill Cops by? Rap Song Blamed in Texas Trooper's Death," *The Washington Post*.

would influence his mindset and lead to him becoming a murderer. They pointed out that half a dozen songs on Shakur's album had content that portraying the killing of police officers. The popularity of the case would also be compounded by the widow of Trooper Davidson filing a civil lawsuit against Tupac Shakur and Interscope Records.

These cases would put rap music in the spotlight of popular media as pundits debated about the culpability of rap music in inciting violence in inner cities. These criticisms led to commentators discussing this topic beyond Tupac and Ronald Ray Howard. Critics would focus on other songs that mentioned violence against police. The nature of his songs caused Ice-T to find himself in the middle of controversy again because of his song, Cop Killer. Critics would use this song as another example of the violent nature of rap music.⁴⁵ In this song, released by the band Body Count, Ice-T sings about murdering corrupt police.

Even though Ice-T would state that the song is about a fictional character snapping and killing cops rather than being killed, there was still national outrage. In his mind, Ice-T paints the character as someone defending themselves from being killed. When discussing the mindset of the character, Ice-T would state, "You know, better you than me, I'm not gonna let you kill me."⁴⁶ To further his point, Ice-T would proclaim that Cop Killer is not necessarily about police. "At the end of the day, Cop Killer was basically authority killer. People don't like authority, that's really what it is."⁴⁷ The public would not accept Ice-T's explanation of the song they believed would eventually lead to violence

⁴⁵ It has been used as an example of Hip-Hop's violent nature even though this is a rock song because Ice-T, the band's lead singer, became famous as a rap artist.

⁴⁶ Mörat, "Body Count: The Story Behind Cop Killer," *Kerrang!*, February 28, 2020, Accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.kerrang.com/features/body-count-the-story-behind-cop-killer/>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

against police officers. To many people, this fear was realized in the murder of state trooper Davidson six months after the record label pulled *Cop Kille* from the market.

2pacalypse Now is an album that explores the realities and fantasies of being a young black male living in the late 20th century United States. Critics claimed that Tupac filled this album with violent imagery. On the surface, these lyrics seemed to be advocating violence against police and civilians. However, most of the violence in this album fictionally perpetrated by Tupac was in self-defense. In many of these songs, Tupac committed a violent act to save himself from the violence of someone else. In the song *Soulja's Story*, Tupac stated, "Keep my shit cocked, cause the cops got a Glock too/ What the fuck would you do? / Drop them or let 'em drop you? / I chose droppin' the cop." These sentiments are close to the lyrics of *Cop Killer*. In both songs, the artists speak of killing cops instead of being murdered themselves.

This defense does not stop Howard's attorney from still claiming that these lyrics were responsible for this crime. Allen Tanner, Howard's trial attorney, claimed, "[Howard] grew up in the ghetto and disliked police, and these were his heroes, these rappers...telling him you're pulled over, just blast away." Reminiscing on his defense strategy, Tanner declared, "[These songs] affected him. That was a totally valid serious defense."⁴⁸

At this point, there were attacks against the genre of music coming from almost everywhere. The continual attacks against Hip-Hop forced the artists and adherents of the culture to have to fight harder not to have others lump them in with the negative

⁴⁸ "Ronald Ray Howard," *Clark Prosecutor*, 2005, Accessed May 20, 2020, <http://www.clarkprosecutor.org/html/death/US/howard986.htm>

stereotypes that encompassed Hip-Hop. The artists wanted others to see them as more than merely thugs and gangsters. They wanted the public to see them as artists showing a reflection of their lives that they lived and their communities.

One writer exclaims:

A wave of vulgar, filthy, and suggestive music has inundated the land... with its obscene posturing, its lewd gestures. Our children, our young men and women are continually exposed... to the monotonous attrition of their vulgarizing music. It is artistically and morally depressing and should be suppressed by press and the pulpit.⁴⁹

This quote encapsulates views of commentators, as mentioned above, had about Rap music, except that the author wrote this quote in 1899 about a newly emerging form of music called Jazz. Maureen Anderson asserts that many critics were actually, “Motivated by political and racial concerns, many jazz critics during the Harlem Renaissance publicized their dislike of jazz music in order to express their dislike of African Americans.”⁵⁰ There are certainly similarities that people can see when they compare the criticisms of Jazz and Hip-Hop. These comparisons also served as a driving force to motivated younger generations that their music would eventually be accepted. Jazz went from being called “the music of contemporary savages” to America’s classical music.⁵¹ The rhetoric surrounding both music genres hurt the

⁴⁹ Hill, *Deconstructing the Hip-Hop Hype: A Critical Analysis of the New York Times’ Coverage of African-American Youth Culture*, 104

⁵⁰ Maureen Anderson, “The White Reception of Jazz Music in America,” *African American Review* 38, no 1 (Spring 2004): 135, accessed on November 8, 2018, https://etsu-edu-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=TN_mla2004531030&context=PC&vid=01ETSU&search_scope=Everything&tab=default_tab&lang=en_US

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 136

relationship the musicians had with the church; however, Jazz eventually overcame that stereotype. If Jazz could do this, then so could Hip-Hop.

CHAPTER 4. A SHIFT BEGINS: A SEARCH FOR CHRISTIANITY IN HIP-HOP

That hope was something beautiful to look forward to in the future; however, at that present time, all the negative press that surrounded Hip-Hop caused the public to view the art form as something to be avoided and something not of God. The focus of mainstream media was on the section of Hip-Hop that seemed to promote behavior that many did not consider to be Christian. Actions, such as violence, drug use, hyper-sexuality, or any number of acts that did not float well with churches, were considered the norm for Hip-Hop, yet this is not entirely true.

In 1982, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released a song entitled “The Message.” The song gained wide popularity and is considered the first rap song to have commercial success that had a social message in it. In *The Message*, Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five rapped about the social ills of their neighbor. The chorus emphasizes the stress of living in extreme poverty and how that life puts them on edge every day. In 2004, *Rolling Stone Magazine* ranked it as the highest song from the 1980s on their top 500 songs list.⁵² In 2012, the song was voted by *Rolling Stone Magazine* as the greatest Hip-Hop song in history.⁵³ *The Message* was also the first Rap song to be preserved by the Library of Congress.⁵⁴ With this and many more

⁵² Rolling Stone, “500 Greatest Songs of All Time,” Rolling Stone, April 7, 2011, accessed November 7, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/500-greatest-songs-of-all-time-151127/>.

⁵³ Rolling Stone, “The 50 Greatest Hip-Hop Songs of All Time,” Rolling Stone, December 5, 2012, accessed November 7, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/the-50-greatest-hip-hop-songs-of-all-time-150547/outkast-b-o-b-2-92809/>.

⁵⁴ Henry Adaso, “6 Hip-Hop Records Preserved at Library of Congress,” Thought Co, March 18, 2017, accessed November 7, 2018, <https://www.thoughtco.com/hip-hop-records-preserved-at-library-of-congress-2857352>.

accolades, it is safe to say that “The Message” is one of the most important songs in Hip-Hop history.

Along with this social commentary, Melle Mel also wrote about God in the last verse of the song, which many consider one of the most important verses in all of Hip-Hop history. The verse begins, “A child is born with no state of mind, blind to the ways of mankind. God is smiling on you, but he’s frowning too because only God knows what you’ll go through.” This line was a nugget overlooked by many Christian circles. As much as there had been lyrics that promoted lifestyles that they would not agree with, there were also references to God and the way he interacts with us in early popular Hip-Hop songs. This quote is not to attempt to convince anyone that “The Message” was a Christian rap song, but to show that Christian or religious themes in Hip-Hop have been there since the earliest days of Hip-Hop.

“Christian rap” has been around since at least 1982. There have always been songs that may have mentioned God or Jesus Christ; however, we are defining Christian rap as “songs with overt and explicit Christian language.” This definition means that the main focus of the piece is to spread the message of Christianity. We first encounter Christian Rap with a little-known rapper by the name of MC Sweet and his record “Jesus Christ (The Gospel Beat).” In a track that lasts over 10 minutes, MC Sweet raps about Jesus Christ entering into his life with a chorus of Hallelujahs playing in the background of the song.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ MC Sweet, *Jesus Christ (The Gospel)*, 1982

This song shows us that while the masses usually ignore this genre, Christian Rap is among the earliest of categories of rap with examples of it less than ten years after the creation of the art form. Many other Christian Raps took place in the 1980s, including a record by Mr. T about The Ten Commandments. The problem was that a majority of the songs were considered gimmicky, childish, and preachy. The styles of these songs made them unpopular even with their intended demographic; therefore, the sub-genre was mostly unexplored and unsuccessful until later in history. The rejection of Christian Rap led the church to believe that there was no place for the church and Hip-Hop to live in harmony.

This sentiment of believing that the church was not a place for Hip-Hop culture was carried heavily by Reverend G. Craig Lewis starting around the year 2005. In his sermon series entitled “The Truth Behind Hip-Hop,” Lewis claims that the Holy Spirit told him that Rap music was a tool of the devil to get black youth to worship the devil since black children do not listen to heavy metal.⁵⁶ He asserts that Rap music is evil, and there is no redeeming quality in it so that the idea of “Holy Hip-Hop” is oxymoronic. Lewis posted an excerpt from his series on YouTube, which has over one million views and three-thousand likes.⁵⁷ In his eyes, those who are giving into rap culture by adjusting their service to fit the new culture are playing right into the devil’s hands. He states:

When I was not in Christ, I was a thief and a crook. Now that I am saved, am I a Holy Crook? I guess next the gothic culture is going to have a bootleg, Holy version of the real thing eventually (as crazy as it seems

⁵⁶ He implies that heavy metal is the Devil’s tool to get white youth to worship him through symbolism, biting off bat’s heads, and other unruly behavior.

⁵⁷ Ex Ministries, *G Craig Lewis “The Truth Behind Hip-Hop” Recorded in 1999*. May 25, 2008. Accessed November 9, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bMGhLjlzI58>.

someone may already be doing this). Can't you just see the kids in your youth group wearing black, black nail polish, tattoos and piercings everywhere, and looking like walking dead people? Then the Holy Gothic recording artist/minister comes in and validates them. He will look like Marilyn Manson, sounds like Marilyn Manson and dresses like Marilyn Manson, but he will sing about Christ.⁵⁸

To him, there can be no redeeming quality to Hip-Hop, and to bend to the will of the culture is inexcusable.

Lewis' belief is laughable to many who are already using Hip-Hop as a tool to convert young people to Christianity. "When the Bible says 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel,'" states Hip-Hop legend Kurtis Blow, "that means the world of hip-hop as well." Kurtis Blow is one of the pioneers of rap, breaking into the rap industry in the late 70s. Kurtis Blow, real name Kurtis Walker, was one of Hip-Hop's first millionaires and one of Hip-Hop's early success stories. Now, Kurtis has given his life to Christ and heads a Hip-Hop Church. At Greater Hood Memorial AME Zion Church in New York, Walker holds weekly services that are Hip-Hop themed.

He uses Hip-Hop in his church, similar to the way that other contemporary services use Christian Rock. They have an orthodox service, but they replace the traditional hymns and church songs with gospel rap. Walker describes the church by saying, "It's like a traditional church service; we have a processional, we have scripture readings, responsive reading, sermons, altar calls, offerings, benediction... and a whole lot of gospel rap."⁵⁹ It is not Walker's intention to rework the church, but he simply wants

⁵⁸ G. Craig Lewis, "The truth Behind Hip Hop," The Ex Times, June 06, 2010, accessed November 9, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100606005351/http://exministries.com/whyhhh.html>.

⁵⁹ Soctty, Ballard, and Javonne Stewart. 2006. "The Ministry Of Hip Hop." Jet 30-33.

to add Hip-Hop to the tradition of the church in hopes of speaking to younger audiences that he does not believe he would reach otherwise.

Walker's church is not the only church that has embraced the idea of Hip-Hop in the church. All over the United States, different churches are finding other ways to increase the presence of the popular style of music within the walls of the church. Pastor Christian L. Hines believes that Hip-Hop services are bringing more young people to the Christian faith at his church, Way of the Cross Church, in Norfolk, Virginia. "Tha House" is a church on the west side of Chicago led by Pastor Phil Jackson. Tha House is filling their seats with a more non-traditional Hip-Hop service. At Tha House, congregants can expect poetry, fast raps, and sermons that speak the language of Hip-Hop, slang. Pastor Jackson believes that this is another way of embracing all that is Hip-Hop to reach out to the younger generation.

At The Sanctuary Covenant Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota senior pastor, Rev. Efrem Smith, makes it a priority to involve different aspects of Hip-Hop culture into their worship service. Hip-Hop played a vital role in the formation of the person that Rev. Smith became, so he saw it as essential to connect with those whom he was attempting to reach.⁶⁰ Smith even incorporates Hip-Hop as a way to retell the scriptures. He includes Hip-Hop language to change the way the members of his church read scriptures. "In the beginning was the Word, the manifest logic of heard—unblurred shining from the inner sanctum of the Third. Unbroken catastrophic spoken from the essence of eternity's original notion."⁶¹ This quote is a reworking of the first chapter of

⁶⁰ Rodney Alex Mason, Jr. "The Rationale for and Guide to Using Hip-Hop Music as A Vehicle to Spiritual Formation for Black Male Youth"(doctor of ministry thesis, Duke University, 2017), 63

⁶¹ Smith and Jackson, *Hip-Hop Church*, 131.

the Gospel of John. By stressing the poetic nature of the retelling of the scripture, the church hopes to catch the ear of those who would typically be lost in an expected reading of the verses.

Lewis continues to argue that even though people are mixing the Hip-Hop and Christianity that they are doing it in vain because Hip-Hop is a religion, and its tenants go against Christian values. He believes that rappers have created this religion that focuses on getting back at “the white man” and self-praise. Lewis claims that “Hip-Hop targeted rap music and used music to preach a message that empowered the black race as ‘true god’s’ and made Jesus Christ the ‘white man’s religion.’”⁶² This thesis is a shallow and misconstrued imagining of the theology of Hip-Hop.⁶³

In pigeonholing the theology of rap into merely that of seeing the black race as gods and Jesus Christ as the white man’s religion, Lewis ignores a large complex Christian theology that Hip-Hop has formulated over the years. The history of the relationship between the church and Hip-Hop is a subject that scholars have not heavily studied; however, the theology of Hip-Hop is one that has been a significant focus of academics over the past few years. When one looks into these varying ways of interpreting the way that rappers view God, it pokes holes in the idea that Hip-Hop and Christianity cannot exist in the same lane. It shows that one can choose both secular

⁶² G. Craige Lewis, “The truth Behind Hip Hop,” The Ex Times, June 06, 2010, accessed November 9, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100606005351/http://exministries.com/whyhhh.html>.

⁶³ Much of what Lewis sees as the doctrine of the religion of Hip-Hop seems to come from the teachings of the Nation of God’s and Earths, also known as the 5 percenters. Many early rappers were a part of this religion; however, that does not justify the idea that Hip-Hop, in itself, believes or promotes the 5 percenters ideology as one with all of Hip-Hop or even a majority of it. To claim so would be disingenuous. Lewis seems to purposely leave out the Christian theology present in Hip-Hop.

Hip-Hop and God. Plus, it also indicates that the Christian voice in mainstream Hip-Hop is not new and is a very well thought out and established concept.

Robert Tinajero outlines the common Christian elements that take place within 'gangsta rap' in his work *Hip Hop and Religion: Gangsta Rap's Christian Rhetoric*. He states that three common elements are used in gangsta rap when speaking about religion—first, strong solidarity with Jesus Christ. Second, a deep mistrust in organized religion. Lastly, the belief that good and evil exist simultaneously within individuals. Tinajero does not claim that this is an all-inclusive or exhaustive list of beliefs held by gangsta rappers, but common themes that reoccur throughout the genre.⁶⁴

Many gangsta rappers see the personhood of Jesus Christ as a figure that connects with their struggle as inner-city minorities. They see Jesus Christ as a figure that unjust people persecuted while merely trying to do as good as he could, given the circumstances that life handed him. These believers see Jesus Christ as a person who understands the struggle and is there to walk with them through their own struggle. Many see Christ as a figure unjustly murdered, similarly to neighborhood heroes like Tupac and Christopher Wallace. Many musicians display these theologies in different songs.

In DMX's "*Lord Give Me A Sign*," DMX prays, "I know you're here with us now Jesus. I know you're still with us now. Keep it real with us now. I wanna feel, show me how. Let me take your hand, guide me. I'll walk slow, but stay right beside me. Devil's

⁶⁴ Tinajero, Robert. "Hip Hop and Religion: Gangsta Rap's Christian Rhetoric." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 25, no 3 (2013): 315 Accessed October 9, 2018.
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=tel_a_etsul&id=GALE|A374100809&v=2.1&it=r&sid=AONE&asid=1706378d.

trying to find me. Hide me—hold up, I take that back. Protect me and give me the strength to fight back.”⁶⁵ Here DMX emphasizes how he knows Jesus is there with him and will protect him while he is going through his struggles. Still, even more importantly, he is giving DMX the power to fight back against the evil that exists in himself personified by the devil.

The Game expresses a similar theology in his 2008 song “My Life.” “[I am] from a block close to where Biggie was crucified. That was Brooklyn’s Jesus shot for no fuckin’ reason and you wonder why Kanye wears Jesus pieces? ‘cause that Jesus people and Game he’s the equal. Hated on so much Passion of Christ needs a sequel.” In this song, the Game associates the rapper Notorious B.I.G with Christ in the way his murderer murdered him senselessly. He continues to express that Kanye West wears Jesus pieces, an outward sign of his inward faith, as a result of the pain and violence that resulted in the Notorious B.I.G’s death. He ends the line in the song by expressing that people hated on him so much that people want to kill him like Christ and Biggie, which is a continuation and cycle of the senseless violence aforementioned.⁶⁶

Some churches chose to ignore the complex and deep theology that is present in many gangsta rap songs because of the harsh nature of the songs. Nevertheless, many writers acknowledge this harshness and believe it is necessary. They see this harshness as a reflection of their lives and reality. Thus, the truth of their lives leads to a need for a harsh and gritty theology. Rappers like the Game and DMX chose to speak their reality in ways that their audience can grasp. They take elaborate theologies and

⁶⁵ From “Lord Give Me a Sign off of his 2006 album *Year of the Dog...Again*

⁶⁶ From the song “My Life” off of the Game’s 2008 album *LAX*

make them into songs that are just as complex. They reject popular theological beliefs like black liberation theologies or theologies taught in the church in favor of views that speak to the realities they live.

While some older Christian rap records were moderately successful, we do not see substantial growth in the presence of conversation about Hip-Hop and Christianity until the early 1990s. Many artists were very vocal about their Christian beliefs, but MC Hammer was the first famous artist to express that continually.⁶⁷ At the height of his popularity, one year after releasing *Please Hammer Don't Hurt Em*, one of the most successful albums in Hip-Hop history; famed gospel singers BeBe and CeCe Winans featured MC Hammer on a song.⁶⁸ MC Hammer is an important figure in discussion Christianity and Hip-Hop; however, for this portion of the paper, he will not be the focus.⁶⁹

In this section, we will first look at Ma\$e and his retirement from Hip-Hop and subsequent return. Next, we will take a look at No-Malice, and his shift from drug-fueled music to Christian rap. These examples that fans look at as some of the most dramatic changes in Hip-Hop history. Lastly, we will look at how their careers are examples of

⁶⁷ MC Hammer was born into a Pentecostal family and always had strong ties to the church. At one point in his life he did put his Christian faith to the side as he pursued his music career. Even during those times MC Hammer would take the time to make Christian songs with other artists. He would also make sure to put at least one Christian song on each of his albums.

⁶⁸ Michelle J Mills, "Hammer-ing a New Message," Da Belly, 2000, accessed November 9, 2018, <http://www.dabelly.com/features/feature02.htm>

⁶⁹ This section of the paper will deal primarily with Ma\$e and No-Malice and the way in which they embodied their change after becoming increasingly serious about their faith journey MC Hammer was always up front about his religion unlike the rappers we will discuss. At one point, Ma\$e and No-Malice did not expressly talk about their faith, but MC Hammer always did because of this MC Hammer, while being a good example of someone who shows his faith through this art form, he does not fit in this section of the paper and will be discussed later.

how Christianity has responded to Hip-Hop, both positive and negative. We will explore the impact of these changes on how people view Christianity and Hip-Hop.

CHAPTER 5. HIP-HOP AS A TOOL FOR CHANGE

Bad Boy Records was known in the early to mid-1990s as having some of the most famous artists in the rap industry. Founded by Sean ‘Diddy’ Combs, the label was full of top tier talent, including the late Notorious B.I.G, Faith Evans, 112, the Lox, Craig Mac, and many others. At the height of the Bad Boy’s popularity, many of the best-selling Rap and RnB artists were signed to Bad Boy. From the founding of the label, in 1994, to 2001, Bad Boy had twenty-two consecutive albums that went either platinum or gold. These consecutive albums include a string of eight successive platinum-selling albums, followed by nine more consecutive platinum-selling albums.⁷⁰

One of the most successful artists on Bad Boy Records at that time was Ma\$. Ma\$, born Mason Betha, is credited as being the first rapper from Harlem to become commercially successful. Fans credit Ma\$ as one of the most influential rappers of his time. His first album, *Harlem World*, would go on to sell over 4 million records.⁷¹ Ma\$ would continue his run at success and popularity for the next few years by scoring three top ten songs from *Harlem World* and being featured on ten separate top fifty songs all within two years of the release of his first album.

Ma\$ and Bad Boy Records were both at the top of the Hip-Hop industry. Everything seemed all right until April 20, 1999, when Ma\$ called up to famed New York Hip-Hop radio station, Hot 97, to announce to the world that he was retiring. The radio host, Funkmaster Flex, told the audience that he got a fax from Magic Johnson

⁷⁰ This includes Notorious B.I.G’s *Life After Death* which is one of Hip-Hops highest selling albums at over 10 million records sold.

⁷¹ According to RIAA it was certified 4x platinum on October 19, 1999 a little under 2 years after the release of the album.

Music that said that effective today Ma\$e was retiring from “the rap game.” Ma\$e’s response was, “I got to do what makes me happy. You know a lot of people gone say ‘I’m crazy’ or ‘I’m leaving money behind’ and a lot of things but its just... You know... How I feel in my heart. Once God puts something in your heart... you know God talks to everybody different.”⁷²

With that being said, Ma\$e was now in retirement to follow what God put in his heart. It is essential to look at the context in which Ma\$e decided to leave Hip-Hop. This period in Hip-Hop was primarily defined by the recent deaths of two Hip-Hop giants, Tupac Shakur and Christopher “Notorious B.I.G” Wallace. These deaths were high profile murders because these were some of Hip-Hop’s most prominent stars even to this day. However, a death that fans have sometimes forgotten during this period is the murder of fellow Harlem rapper Big L in 1999. Big L was an underground rapper and considered one of the best lyricists of his time. He also grew up knowing Ma\$e.⁷³ Ma\$e admits that these deaths played a significant role in his decision about Hip-Hop.

After Ma\$e explained his retirement decision to Funkmaster Flex, Flex responded by saying, “I don’t think people want that Ma\$e. You might be outvoted what you gone do.” Flex was attempting to explain to Ma\$e that he is a popular figure that people would want to continue rapping. “If I’m outvoted, then I’m just outvoted. You know what I’m saying,” Ma\$e laughed, “Like I feel as though... Like you know... Like the late great Tupac and people like Biggie, they got the same messages they just didn’t act

⁷²1newyorkbadboy. 2009. *Mase Retirement Announcement on Funkmaster Flex Show (1999)*. August 30. Accessed November 09, 2018.

⁷³ When Ma\$e and his friends were just getting into rap it was a hobby to everyone except Big L.

on it.”⁷⁴ Ma\$e recalls in his autobiography that a man approached him as he left Faithful Central Church in Los Angeles, after announcing that he would give up rap, and said, “Yo, I hope what you said you’re doing, you’re serious about. A couple of days before Tupac got killed he was in this church talking about doing the same thing.”

Ma\$e explains to Flex and the audience that his decision to leave Hip-Hop was not a choice that he took lightly. This decision was a complicated theological position that came from him feeling like it was a calling from God to leave Hip-Hop to do and become a minister. This calling is not something that Ma\$e felt that he could do while still attempting to be a Hip-Hop artist. “I don’t want to make no records. I don’t want to rap on no records and I don’t want to run no record company.” Anyone listening could hear the determination and conviction in Ma\$e’s voice.⁷⁵

Ma\$e also followed the theme of death, changing him in his autobiography. Ma\$e opens up the book with a telling of the death of Ma\$e. “On April 9, 1999, at approximately 8:05 P.M., Ma\$e, noted rapper who sold more than three million copies of his first album Harlem World, was pronounced dead.” He goes on to give a rundown of all the material possessions he left behind including four cars, \$200,000 worth of jewelry, a multimillion dollar recording deal, dozens of women, and fans. His cause of death? Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

Ma\$e becomes a compelling case in Hip-Hop conversion stories because he was extremely adamant about getting rid of everything that reminded him of his old life as a

⁷⁴ 1newyorkbadboy, Mase Retirement Announcement on Funkmaster Flex Show (1999), 2009

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Mason Betha and Karen Hunter, *Revelations: There’s a Light After the Lime*. (New York: Atria Books, 2001), xi

Hip-Hop star. He speaks about giving away his cars and jewelry because God told him. He did not want to give away one of his SUVs, and it ended up getting stolen. Ma\$e attributed all of this to the power of God. He had to get rid of the old material things to embrace his new lifestyle, not as Ma\$e, but as Mason. He considered his former life evil, one of the devil, and a life he must rid leave altogether. He continued to get rid of everything that reminded him of Ma\$e until it was all gone. It was then that he said he could finally breathe.⁷⁷

Mason felt that he had at last done what God wanted him to do. By leaving Hip-Hop and the music industry, he would draw closer to God by becoming closer to the church. "Being a prophet is not much different than being a rapper. They're just serving a different master. In rap, you serve the devil and the money, and things are your God. Today I am serving God Almighty and my only destination is heaven for myself and everyone else I can reach. Rap is Running Away from Preaching."⁷⁸ Throughout his autobiography, he continues to spread much of the same rhetoric as many critics of Hip-Hop espoused earlier that decade. He continued, "rappers are prophets who are used by the devil and most of them don't realize it. Either that or they don't want to come to grips with the trip."⁷⁹

Throughout his autobiography, Mason continually rails against the music industry as he embraces the church. There is a section in which he claims that record executives were attempting to keep him away from other prominent Hip-Hop artists because of the impact he could have in their lives. To give proof, Betha claims that if he would be able

⁷⁷ Ibid, 88

⁷⁸ Ibid, 103

⁷⁹ Ibid, 104

to convert these artists that it would cost record labels millions or billions of dollars. He invites us to imagine the church that he would head with these other artists as part of the clergy team. Jay-Z would be his associate pastor, Diddy would be his minister of music, DMX the minister to those in prison, and Lil Kim would be head of the singles ministry.⁸⁰

Mason adopted the same rhetoric and claims that plagued Ma\$e in the not so distant past. He would continue to promote the rhetoric that ultimately leads to the downfall of early Christian rap and what has divided the Hip-Hop generation from older generations who still live their lives in the church. Mason went from a symbol of success by many people who identified with Hip-Hop culture to one of its biggest detractors.

However, even with his new life and new dreams, Mason would not wholly give up on Hip-Hop. DMX, the same person whom Mason saw as leading his jail ministry, once contemplated leaving Hip-Hop to become a minister similarly to how Mason did. However, it was Mason who convinced DMX to stay in the rap industry. DMX told MTV, "I talked to Mase. I said, 'Dog I'm fed up with this rap shit. I know the Lord. I know my true calling is to preach the Word, where do I go from here?' He was like, 'As long as the Lord gives you the talent to do what you do, do it. He'll call you when he's ready. He'll call you when he's ready.'"⁸¹

This change in thought may be attributed to the fact that Ma\$e was planning a comeback to Rap. DMX first spoke about retirement and becoming a preacher in 2003

⁸⁰ Ibid, 104-106

⁸¹ Shaheem Reid, "Mase Advises DMX To Rap Again, Wait For The Lord's Call After talking with Mase, X puts preaching on pause for a return to rap," MTV News, 2005, accessed October 9, 2018, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1502925/mase-advises-dmx-to-rap-again-wait-for-the-lords-call/>.

when he announced that his fifth album, *It's Not a Game*, would be his last album.⁸² The following year Ma\$e made his return to the rap industry with an album and single entitled *Welcome Back*. There was a massive change in his lyrical content. He went from sexual content to music, advising girls to keep their clothes on.⁸³ He stopped cursing, but he continued to rap about worldly things.

This statement seemed to contradict many of the ideas he gave in his autobiography. He no longer saw rappers as “prophets who are used by the devil.” In his mind, Hip-Hop and the church could be reconciled. In the Hip-Hop world, the response to his return was less than receptive. Lord Jamar, Nick Cannon, his childhood friend Cam’ron, Charlamagne, and others saw him as being a hypocrite coming back to Rap after being a preacher. They saw Ma\$e as being a hustler and hustling church people out of their money. Lord Jamar, who does not claim to be a Christian, claims that he would not have been bothered by Ma\$e’s decision if he would have stayed a pastor, but he does not feel like his heart is pure returning to Hip-Hop.⁸⁴ The consensus was that Mason went too far with the type of Christianity that he promoted to come back to rap music.

This initial reaction is a stark difference between Ma\$e and other rappers who have continued to have a strong relationship with the Hip-Hop community while embracing their Christianity. One of the best examples would be No-Malice, formally

⁸²Corey Moss, “DMX Retiring From Hip Hop, Plans to Read His Bible. X Promises It’s Not a Game, Due by Summer, Will Be His Last Album,” MTV News, October 07, 2005, accessed October 9, 2018 <http://www.mtv.com/news/1470421/dmx-retiring-from-hip-hop-plans-to-read-his-bible/>.

⁸³ Referring to his song entitled Keep it On

⁸⁴ DJ Vlad, Lord Jamar Interview, Lord Jamar: Mase Returning to Rap Feels Disingenuous interview vladv. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1sb1p-gU2Ik>

Malice, of the Hip-Hop duo The Clipse. No-Malice burst into the national spotlight when he and his brother Terrence ‘Pusha T’ Thornton released their hit single ‘Grindin.’ In this ode to selling dope, Gene, then Malice, and Terrence rapped about the glory of selling cocaine. There was even some biblical wordplay when Gene rapped, “My grind’s ‘bout family, never been about fame. From the days I wasn’t able [Abel], there was always ‘caine [Cain].” No-Malice tells us that he sold drugs to make money for his family and that when he was not able to provide for his family, there was always cocaine he could sell.⁸⁵

Clipse was known for its rhymes about selling large amounts of drugs. However, No-Malice states that even while they were rapping about these topics, was already going through a transformation. In early 2010, Thornton’s friend and manager Anthony “Geezy” Gonzales was sentenced to 32 years in prison for his role in leading a \$20 million drug ring.⁸⁶ Thornton recounts the ordeal in an interview with DJ Vlad, claiming that he knew the indictment was coming and told everyone that it was, but no one would listen. In addressing the rumor that this incident scared him straight, he claimed that he had already been on the route towards what “God in the name of Jesus” wanted him to do.

Thornton does not deny that he once sold drugs; however, his rap career has gone from rapping about narcotics in a positive way to being remorseful and attempting

⁸⁵ Also, a reference to Abel the “good” son of Adam and Eve and Cain the bad son.

⁸⁶Time McGlone, “Former Clipse manager gets 32 years for leading drug ring ” *The Virginian - Pilot*. January 12. Accessed November 9, 2018. https://pilotonline.com/news/local/crime/article_41d18ef7-c7c0-58c3-84f5-453135c52858.html.

to pull others out of that life with his music. Thornton clarifies in an interview with Complex magazine.

I do believe that we can speak death upon ourselves, the same way we can speak life upon ourselves," No Malice said. "If you look at the things that I have said in the past, can you imagine how many people went to jail listening to the things that I said? Think about how many times people got pulled over, went to jail...my record playing in the car. Think about how many times somebody's head was blown out and the theme music still playing, or whatever."⁸⁷

Thornton is admitting to contributing to the bad reputation that Hip-Hop has received throughout the years. Ironically, Thornton is attempting to take some responsibility for the possibility of a crime like Ronald Ray Howard's murder charge 26 years after the music industry defended Tupac for this same charge. Although no one is suing Thornton and there is no evidence that this crime happened as a result of his music, Thornton feels that it is his Christian duty to make amends for his past sins through music. However, unlike Betha, Thornton chose not to vilify those who were still doing what he had stopped. He instead used his influence to speak about his change and the fact that others could change as well. Instead of demonizing those who are a part of Hip-Hop culture, No-Malice reached out to them by becoming a Christian rapper.

At the time of his conversion, Betha could not see a way in which Hip-Hop and his new calling to the church could coexist. He attempted to force the two to work together but was unsuccessful when he said God wanted him to give up Hip-Hop. In his autobiography, he prayed many times about doing Christian rap; however, he believed

⁸⁷ Jose Martinez, "No Malice on Clipse: 'Can You Imagine How Many People Went to Jail Listening to the Things That I Said?'" Complex. September 6. Accessed November 09, 2018. <https://www.complex.com/music/2017/09/no-malice-opens-up-about-quitting-the-clipse>.

that God answered him by saying he should not do it. Thornton gets his message across in his rhymes by advising against topics that were instrumental in getting him into the spotlight of rap. In his song “Smoke and Mirrors” off of his album *Hear Ye Him* Thornton speaks about attempting to atone for the acts he regrets now. Thornton begins the song by quoting 1 Corinthians 13:11 to explain that he has grown from his previous topics.

One of the more exciting aspects of No-Malice’s conversion is that he does not spend too much time attempting to change the perception of himself. He continues to rap with the same flow and aggression as before; however, he has changed his message to speak directly to those in places he used to be. Thornton is doing his best to bring the church straight to those involved with Hip-Hop culture, including drug dealers, and thugs. The people that Thornton reached out to are the same people that Mason and early Hip-Hop critics rejected. Thornton instead seeks to meet fans in their element of Hip-Hop instead of forcing them to find their way to the church. In a sense, he is going to the world of Hip-Hop, as Kurtis Blow suggested. Also, unlike early Christian rap, his lyrics were not classified as campy. He speaks raw and real on a level in which the listener does not feel babied but can understand his message. He explains his conversion:

Now pray father God, you allow me to repent of it and any crime scene that bear Malice’s fingerprint. I pitched those keys like a tent, without thinkin. Even served our own mommas, without blink’. Walking dead, clueless, no inkling. Within a twinkiling, seeing what I was made of while y’all speculate Clipse break up. Well think its not strange if I’m Abel to his Cain. Hell, even Esau had a Jacob – I ain’t trippin’ and what’s with all this swag I ain’t feelin. Gotta get that money, huh, nah, I’m chillin’ and I ain’t selling my soul for no million. Cause that dead-end rap can’t crack its glass ceiling. Why such blasphemy and anger toward a God which none

hath seen. Hmm, leads me to believe that there's a wee bit more to this Jesus thing.⁸⁸

In a few bars, No-Malice has told the story of the drugs he sold, asked for forgiveness from God, explained how he views the Hip-Hop industry, and suggested Christ to his listeners.

After his conversion and continual push of “this Jesus thing,” we do not see any backlash from the Hip-Hop community. It seems that they have accepted No-Malice’s conversion without any hesitation. A part of this could be that they view him as authentic, unlike Mason, who they feel jumps back and forth because of money. No-Malice stays true to exactly who he is and embraces his flaws in his music while not championing them. He remains the same Malice, but with No-Malice in his heart, this seemed to speak to his audience and fans. These two rappers become examples of two general responses to Hip-Hop. Mason represents the rejection of Hip-Hop that appears based on the fear of Hip-Hop being a tool that can only be used by the devil. However, No-Malice becomes the embodiment of the acceptance and Christianizing Hip-Hop and the desire to go out and reach the people that the church cannot usually influence.

The market for Christian Rap is unique because the genre seems only to be accepted by a small group of people who are in the goldilocks zone between Christianity and Hip-Hop culture.⁸⁹ Some truly and earnestly believe, like Mason and

⁸⁸ Smoke and Mirrors off *Hear Ye Him*

⁸⁹ Goldilock zone is a term in astronomy that refers to when a planet is in the habitable zone to where it can support life. The zone is not too close to the star to where it is too hot, but also not far away enough from the star where it would be too cold. We use it in this instance to refer to a person that is not too conservative Christian to the point of not accepting Hip-Hop, but not too far into Hip-Hop where they do not believe Christian Hip-Hop is a legitimate form of Hip-Hop.

Lewis, that people cannot use Hip-Hop in righteousness because of what they associate with real Hip-Hop. These subjects would be lyrics about murder, drug use, drug selling, sex, misogyny, and violence. On the other hand, there are some Hip-Hop purest who see any attempt to make authentic Christian Rap to be corny and lame. To them, it comes off as Christians trying too hard to be cool or invade their territory.

CHAPTER 6. THE GOSPEL BEAT

Even though Christian rap may be considered by some to be an unsatisfactory genre of Hip-Hop, it is one of the oldest subgenres of rap, and many people enjoy it. Narrowing down what constitutes Christian rap and who is a Christian rapper is very difficult. There are rappers like Kanye West, MC Hammer, and Chance the Rapper who have all had songs and albums that speak explicitly about Christianity and a Christian message; however, a large portion of their content is secular, and their Christian message is mainly about their faith journey rather than converting others to Christianity.⁹⁰ Also, artists like Lecrae and NF, who primarily release music geared towards Christians and are on Christian labels; however, they have both publicly stated they do not want to be labeled “Christian Rappers.” Lastly, rappers like FLAME who openly accept the title of Christian Rapper.

This divide adds complexity into a conversation beyond Hip-Hop; it extends into gospel music as a whole. Respecting these artists wish to identify or not identify with a particular genre of music allows us to broaden our definition of what is gospel music. Some of these artists do not want to be pigeonholed into “Christian rap” because they feel that their art is more than that. Artists like Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, Chance the Rapper, and MC Hammer have challenged standard definitions of what people categorize as gospel music. All these artists have moved beyond redefining Hip-Hop and have started a larger conversation on changing what Christian music is, how it is listened to, and how it is made.

⁹⁰ Recently Kanye West has leaped across this boundary and has begun having Christian services and has been extremely vocal about his faith.

Categorizing rappers in these terms is essential because of the social impact these rappers have based on how they categorize themselves or how others categorize them. Kanye West, Chance the Rapper, and MC Hammer were able to get a Christian message into secular society because these labels were not placed on them regardless of their musical content. On the other hand, for artists that identify as Christian rappers, it is virtually impossible to get similar messages to a similar audience without being rejected. The question becomes, how does one define who is a Christian rapper? Defining Christian rapper proves to be much more complicated than discussing if a song is a Christian song or not. This difficulty arises from essentially attempting to define who a person is.

When MC Sweet released *Jesus Christ (The Gospel Beat)*, the genre had not gotten to a point where there needed to be a separate term for Christian-centric rap music. The label does not appear until Stephen Wiley released *Bible Break* in 1985. *Bible Break* is the first commercially distributed Christian centered rap album.⁹¹ The song *Bible Break* would peak at number 14 on the gospel charts. After the success of the song, the world would see the first instance of dividing secular Hip-Hop and religious Hip-Hop. Rap critics created this division with the invention of the term “Christian Rap.” The first recorded use of the term “Christian Rap” is in reference to the *Bible Break* album.⁹²

Wiley became known as a pioneer in the Christian Rap scene. *Spin Magazine* began to refer to Wiley as the “Grandmaster of God.” This title is ironic because, at the

⁹¹ Ericka Gault & Travis Harris, *Beyond Christian Hip-Hop: A Move Towards Christians and Hip-Hop*. (New York City: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2020), 3.

⁹² *ibid*

same time, Wiley was getting pushback from many in the Christian community. Wiley would tell Rapzilla that he could write a book about “the adversity he faced when trying to minister to young people with hip-hop.”⁹³ While some churches were attempting to ban Wiley and his music, other churches would openly welcome him. In some cases, the members of churches would be split down the middle. In one instance, Wiley recalls a fistfight that broke out between members of a church that were divided on him performing at their church.⁹⁴

Still, the Grandmaster of God would continue to spread his message through music. Spin magazine recalls a concert the gospel rapper did at Mumford High School. Bill Francis recalls hundreds of boys and girls rushing the stage at the end of the concert; however, unlike other concerts, they were rushing the stage to get help changing their lives. Wiley’s message resonated with the young crowd and showed them a Christian message in ways they had not heard before.⁹⁵ In response to the success of Wiley’s ministry, other artists began to take notice and move to begin similar ministries.

There began to be many new artists who wanted to spread the gospel in similar ways to Wiley, and he was welcoming to the idea. Wiley began to mentor other gospel rap artists, Wiley 30 years old, and the other acts were around 19 or 20, so this

⁹³ Justin Sarachik, “Church Brawls, Upsets, & ‘Devil’s Music’ – Stephen Wiley and Christian Rap,” Rapzilla, November 25, 2016, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://rapzilla.com/2016-11-church-brawls-upsets-devil-s-music-stephen-wiley-and-christian-rap/>

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Bill Francis, “Rappin’ For Jesus Steven Wiley, Grandmaster of God,” *Spin Magazine* 4, no. 8 (1998): 22.

mentorship became natural.⁹⁶ The Christian rap scene was small at this time; as a result, many of the artists in this genre knew each other. Wiley would recount,

In the late 80s, there was no category for rap music because it was in its infancy. There was PID, ONE Way Up, Michael Peace, DC Talk..we all knew each other because we checked the charts and the magazines. We all would meet and talk about what the future of Christian rap music would be.⁹⁷

Many of these artists would go on to play a massive role in the future of the musical aspect of Christian rap and the ministerial aspect of Christian rap.

Preacher's in Disguise, better known as PID, is a Hip-Hop band considered by fans to be one of the "founding father[s] of the holy hip hop scene in the United States." The group was comprised of three founding members Barry Hogan, Fred Lynch, and DJ Selecta. Later in their career, Barry Hogan, also known as Barry G, would leave the group, and Lynch's brother, K-mack the Knife, would join in his place.⁹⁸ P.I.D differentiated themselves from Stephen Wiley by speaking about current issues as well as scripture.

In an interview with Les Carlsen, Fred Lynch would state that his great uncle told him to "have a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other so you can know how to reconcile the two."⁹⁹ This life lesson took the group to make songs that went beyond retelling Bible stories or scriptures. The group began making songs about sexually transmitted diseases, racism, and being a young black male trying to be successful in

⁹⁶ Justin Sarachik, "Church Brawls, Upsets, & 'Devil's Music' – Stephen Wiley and Christian Rap," Rapzilla.

⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ "P.I.D.," *Frontline Records*, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://frontlinerecords.us/artists/?10>

⁹⁹ Frontline Records. *Frontline Rewind 66: P.I.D. Pt. 1 – Full Episode*. December 13, 2017. Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoF3We4NnMw>.

life. Lynch would explain that the purpose of this is “so you could take the scripture and talk to culture where culture’s at.”¹⁰⁰

End Time Warriors (ETW) music evolved into a similar path in the way they spread their message. ETW is a Christian rap group whose career began with lyrics and songs with overt Christian messages. They entered the Christian Rap genre with songs like “Satan, You’re Cancelled” and “We Are Warriors,” a song about being a warrior for God. As their career progressed, their lyrics became primarily based around inner-city life and how they see it. In one song entitled, Momma’s Prayer, the rap trio speaks against gang life and gang violence. They tell the story of a young man whose life is spared largely because his mother is consistently praying for him to make it home safely. The group went from a trio that chanted that they “were warriors breaking down the wall of Satan” to more hardcore songs titled “40 & A Blunt.”

Erika Gault and Travis Harris discuss these philosophical differences in their book *Beyond Christian Hip Hop: A Move Toward Christians and Hip Hop*. They divide these ministerial approaches into two separate groups named for Christian Rap artists, Tunnel Rats, and Cross Movement. Tunnel Rats are known for not repeatedly proclaiming the name of Jesus in their songs; however, those more similar to the Cross Movement do consistently use the name Jesus in their songs. Ironically, even though they both have Christian messages and share them in different ways, neither of the artists like term Christian rapper. So, even with this divided approach, there is still ambiguity in the title “Christian rapper.”

¹⁰⁰ ibid

Members of Cross Movement assert that they began as regular rappers, not Christian rappers, but that title was placed on them by labels. In an interview, Brady “Phanatik” Goodwin of The Cross Movement said the group accepted the title because “it’s going to come anyway and because it’s going to come, let’s go in the door with it. Let’s not try to sneak around it.”¹⁰¹ William “The Ambassador” Branch, continues with this discourse by emphasizing that the labels forced the group to adopt the title of Christian Rappers. “It was their refusal to accept us when they heard how much we were dedicated to the person and work of Christ being forefront,” Branch exclaims that record label executives forced this category on the group. He continues his speech by complaining that rappers can rap about anything and not be labeled unless they rap about Christ, then it disqualifies them from being considered a ‘regular rapper.’¹⁰²

The labeling of the Cross Movement as a Christian Rap group brings up a great question. Should that title be placed on groups that do not identify as such? In *Beyond Christian Hip Hop*, the authors bring this conversation to the forefront. The writers argue

that [Christian Hip-Hop] and all other titles that have been put forth thus far (Holy Hip Hop, Christian rap, etc.) do not adequately account for the complexities when considering Hip Hop and Christians together. Therefore, the most accurate description to identify the phenomenon is Christians and Hip Hop. This identity addresses the aforementioned shortcomings and places two monumental entities side by side: Christians and Hip Hop.¹⁰³

This assertion gains even more traction as more artists begin to put their faith at the forefront of their music. One example of this is the artist MC Hammer. MC Hammer,

¹⁰¹ Reoccur Buzz. *Cross Movement Why We Embraced the Christian*. April 26, 2016. Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NWLQPDuSbOM>.

¹⁰² *ibid*

¹⁰³ Erika Gault and Travis Harris, *Beyond Christian Hip Hop: A Move Toward Christians and Hip Hop* (New York: Routledge, Taylor, and Francis Group, 2020), 3

born Stanley Kirk Burrell, is one of the most popular Hip-Hop artists in history. Burrell has always been upfront about his belief in God and has made a point to make at least one Christian record on each of his music projects.

Even with Hammer's goal of making Christian music on every one of his albums, fans primarily know him for his secular music. However, many people would be surprised to know that his biggest hit was not "You Can't Touch This" or "2 Legit 2 Quit" his most successful song was entitled "Pray" off of his *Please Hammer Don't Hurt 'Em* album. At its height, this song would reach number two on the US Billboard top 100. Despite this fact, fans primarily know Hammer for his other songs.¹⁰⁴

Burrell also does not consider himself a Christian artist even though he makes a point to put his faith in his songs. Burrell brings up a similar issue that many artists who reject the Christian title bring up. He worries that being labeled as a Christian artist would narrow his audience. "If kids say I'm just a Gospel rapper, I won't be able to get int heir cars," Hammer stated in a 1998 interview.¹⁰⁵ Hammer displays a fear of being othered by the Hip Hop community and thus losing his ability to relate to his intended audience.

This aversion to the label "Christian Rapper" has continued to make itself relevant in more recent conversations about the genre. Lecrae Devaughn Moore, known mononymously as Lecrae, is one of the most popular Hip-Hop artists that centers his work on a Christian message. Lecrae prides himself on delivering "Christ-centric rhymes

¹⁰⁴ Billboard. Chart History M.C. Hammer. Accessed June 23, 2020. <https://www.billboard.com/music/m-c-hammer/chart-history>.

¹⁰⁵ Daina Doucet, "Rap Artist MC Hammer Returns to Faith in God," Christianity.ca. January 1998, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.christianity.ca/page.aspx?pid=10356>.

with secular flair.”¹⁰⁶ The Houston born rapper, gave his life to God at the age of 19, following this momentous moment in his life he would begin his ministry. However, his ministry would not begin as a music ministry. Moore would begin to spread his faith through Bible studies, being president of ReachLife Ministries, and many other projects.

He would go on to co-found Reach Records with Ben Washer. Two years later, Lecrae would release his critically acclaimed album *After the Music Stops*. This album would propel Lecrae into the Christian spotlight by debuting number one on the Christian Music Trade Association’s R&B/Hip-Hop chart. It would continue to impress by peaking at number five on Billboard’s Gospel Albums chart. His success continued the more he released music.

Lecrae’s musical style would follow similarly to ETW’s path. In his earlier years, his music would be overtly Christ-centric; however, as the years have gone by, he has become more open to making different types of music.¹⁰⁷ As a result, of this change in his musical style, many have questioned his title as a “Christian Rapper.” Lecrae rejects this title. “I don’t call myself that,” Lecrae stated in an interview with Power 106 Los Angeles, “I don’t go by any of those genres or titles.”¹⁰⁸ Lecrae considers himself an artist that surpasses genres, and just because he gives a certain message should not limit himself to any particular category. So, his rejection of terms like “Christian rapper” or “Holy Hip Hopper” has more to do with his artistic views than religious views.

¹⁰⁶ Cyril Cordor, “Lecrae,” All music. Accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/lecrae-mn0000403784/biography>

¹⁰⁷ This is not to say that Lecrae does not make Christian themed or centric music anymore. It just means that he is more likely to make songs outside of a purely Christian theme.

¹⁰⁸ Power 106 Los Angeles. *Lecrae Doesn’t Want To Be Labeled A Christian Rapper*. June 27, 2017. Accessed June 23, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJvbV4-pD6Q>.

As Lecrae struggles not to be placed into a box as a Christian rapper Nathan “NF” Feuerstein faces similar struggles. Feuerstein has a large but quiet following in the Hip-Hop world. NF first caught the eyes on many in the music world in 2016 with the release of his second album *Therapy Session*. He would release this album the day after the death of the legendary musician Prince and the day before Beyoncé released her *Lemonade* album. Despite these adversaries, NF would still reach the top of the iTunes hip-hop chart and would reach the overall top 10 on the music platform. These sales would be considered a considerable release for any artist; however, it was especially strong for an artist that did not have a single radio single.¹⁰⁹

As a result of Capitol Christian Music Group, the Christian side of Capitol, signing Feuerstein, fans often label him as a Christian rapper. He has even won Christian music awards; however, his songs are not explicitly Christian.¹¹⁰ When asked if he labeled himself a “Christian rapper,” Feuerstein denied it. “Not at all. I mean, I’m a Christian, but I’m just an artist. I’m a musician... To me, it’s like if you’re a Christian and you’re a plumber, are you a Christian plumber?”¹¹¹ To NF, being a Christian is a part of who he is, but his faith does not necessarily define his artistry.

Feuerstein lets his audience know that music is therapeutic to him, which is part of the reason he titled his album *Therapy Session*. “Music is just therapy for me,” the rapper claims.¹¹² He elaborates on this topic in his 2016 song “Real.” In the song, he

¹⁰⁹ Mike Wass, *NF On Breakthrough LP ‘Therapy Session’ & Not Being Pigeonholed: Interview*, Idolator, May 3, 2016. Accessed June 23, 2020. <https://www.idolator.com/7632096/nf-interview-nate-feuerstein-therapy-session?chrome=1&edge=1>.

¹¹⁰ NF is not an artist that speaks about the personhood of Jesus Christ in his lyrics. He speaks about his faith and other topics; however, it is rare that he makes music with the Christian message as the focal point of the song.

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Ibid

says, “I’ve been through Hell all my life though, but I know what Heaven is/ Father, forgive me, for I am sinner, but You gave me music as medicine.”¹¹³ To him, music is a gift from God that he uses to help himself get through life and that he uses as a job. Therefore, he does not believe he should be labeled by his religious affiliation professional any more than anyone else should.

One artist who has been very vocal in accepting the term Christian rapper is Marcus Tyrone Gray, who goes by the name Flame. Gray was one of the first rappers signed to the Cross Movement Records and has been a mainstay in Christian Hip Hop circles. The St. Louis native prides himself on being unapologetically Christian; however, he does understand that some artists want to downplay their faith, but he does not feel that it is necessary for him. Flame told St. Louis Today, “People are trying to get away from the misconceptions that come with being a Christian rapper. Personally, I don’t feel the need to shy away from it.”¹¹⁴

When speaking on other rappers and their aversion to the term “Christian Rapper” Flame stated, “You have a contingent of artists who have chosen to just really enjoy the artistic expression of rap, but they just happen to be Christians. So, that’s how I understand that category.”¹¹⁵ He continues by stating that the people who fall into this category enjoy the artistic nature of rap, but they also do not want to do anything that

¹¹³ Nathan Feuerstein, Real. *Therapy Session* (Nashville: Capitol CMG Records, 2016)

¹¹⁴ Kevin C. Johnson, *Rapper Flame Shines Light on his Past and More With New Album*, St. Louis Post-Dispatch. March 22, 2018. Accessed June 23, 2020. https://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/music/kevin-johnson/rapper-flame-shines-light-on-his-past-and-more-with-new-album/article_172c96be-0bf3-51e3-8f62-062663e4ba3b.html.

¹¹⁵ Rapzilla.com, *Flame Talks, ‘Christian Rap or Artstic Rappers Who are Christian?’*, March 31, 2016. Accessed June 23, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZN7z1nL1Ems>.

would offend God while they express themselves through rap music.¹¹⁶ These artists not wanting fans to label them as “Christian Rappers” is not a bad thing to Flame. He believes that dividing and defining the genre would help people be able to find exactly what they are looking for in music. So, he believes that we should honor rappers who do not want to be referred to as Christian Rappers by not referring to them as Christian Rappers.

Flame points out that there are many high-profile artists in Hip-Hop circles that put their religion in their music, and they do not get the same stigma as artists people want to label as “Christian Rappers.” “[Rappers are] being upfront about their religious affiliations, and it doesn’t prove to be a hindrance,” Flame argues. “They’re articulating it, putting it in their songs. We live in a hip-hop culture now where being yourself unapologetically is a trend. This is a part of me, a part of my childhood. I want to talk about all of who I am.”¹¹⁷ Flame expresses that he should be able to speak about his religion as a part of him in the same way other artists can.

Recently, many famous mainstream rappers have made a point to focus on their religious beliefs in their music; for example, Chance the Rapper released his third mixtape, *Coloring Book*, in April 2016. This album was received with much critical and commercial success. In *Coloring Book*, Chance would rely heavily on Christian themes, Christian sounds, and Christian artists to compose the sound that he desired. Chance

¹¹⁶ He lists things that would offend God as foul language, disrespecting authority, and disrespecting women.

¹¹⁷ Kevin C. Johnson, *Rapper Flame Shines Light on his Past and More With New Album*, St. Louis Post-Dispatch. March 22, 2018. Accessed June 23, 2020. https://www.stltoday.com/entertainment/music/kevin-johnson/rapper-flame-shines-light-on-his-past-and-more-with-new-album/article_172c96be-0bf3-51e3-8f62-062663e4ba3b.html.

told Zane Lowe on Beats 1 Radio that this album was “like putting God back in our hands in everyday life.”¹¹⁸

To Chance, this album was a chance to place gospel music back in the hand of everyday people. It is reminiscent of Kurtis Blow’s call to take the gospel into all of the world including the world of Hip-Hop.¹¹⁹ This strategy paid off for Chance as *Coloring Book* would go on to be a significant success. The album was so successful that it became the first streaming-only album to be awarded a Grammy.¹²⁰ *Coloring Book* shows that religious-themed music can survive in mainstream music realms in modern times.

Kendrick Lamar also received similar welcomes with his 2017 album *DAMN*. Kendrick Lamar would use his 2017 album, *DAMN*, as a chance to discuss many of his religious beliefs and ideals. During the song “Yah,” the Compton rapper takes a moment to declare that he is not religious anymore; however, he is an Israelite and no longer considers himself black anymore. These lyrics are Kendrick Lamar declaring that he is a part of a sect that believes that Black Americans and others are the true Tribes of Israel.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Justin Sarachik, *Chance the Rapper Losing God Helped Him Create Music as ‘Christian Man’*, Rapzilla. May 26, 2016, Accessed June 23, 2020. <https://rapzilla.com/2016-05-chance-the-rapper-losing-god-helped-him-create-music-as-christian-man/>

¹¹⁹ Soctty, Ballard, and Javonne Stewart. 2006. “The Ministry Of Hip Hop.” Jet 30-33.

¹²⁰ Lyndsey Havens, *Chance the Rapper’s ‘Coloring Book’ Is First Streaming-Only Album to Win a Grammy*, Billboard. February 13, 2017. Accessed June 23, 2020. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/grammys/7686341/chance-the-rapper-coloring-book-first-streaming-only-album-grammy>

¹²¹ Although, Israelites do not consider themselves Christian in the classical theological sense, many do follow and believe in Jesus Christ. Their theological beliefs are wide and varied; however, many have espoused that they are “true Christians.” As a result of this, we will write about it from the perspective of it being a religion or a sect of Christianity.

In *DAMN*, Kendrick sprinkles religious ideals, Christian imagery, and theological ideas, including a call from his cousin discussing the book of Deuteronomy at the closing of a song. Lamar felt these concepts were essential for him to discuss because he believes himself to be a vessel for God to use. “I always felt like God used me as a vessel, whether to share my flaws, my intellect, my pain,” the emcee says when discussing his calling to be used for a more meaningful message. This album with heavy religious themes would go on to chart number one on the Billboard top 100 and would end in the 10th place on the billboard all-decade albums.¹²²

As many new artists begin to express their religious beliefs in their music, one artist took it a step further and began to have church services to go along with his music. Kanye West is one of the most polarizing figures in Hip-Hop history. He has been at the forefront of many controversial moments from telling the world that George Bush does not like black people to telling interrupting Taylor swift at the Video Music Awards. Nevertheless, Kanye has found a new way to become the talk of the nation by going public with his religious beliefs. Kanye would do this by releasing two Gospel albums months apart and going on a nation-wide tour with his choir to deliver the message of Jesus Christ.

Nevertheless, critics met Kanye with a different response than both Kendrick and Chance. Commentators met Chance the Rapper and Kendrick Lamar with curious conversations about their decision to open up about their faith in song; however, Kanye West was met with suspicion and ridicule. NBC News would publish an article entitled

¹²² Billboard, *Decade-End Charts Billboard 200 2010s*, Accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.billboard.com/charts/decade-end/billboard-200>.

“Kanye West’s Christian conversion is less about Jesus than it is about Kanye.” In this article, Michael Arceneaux would challenge the authenticity of Kanye’s conversion and present a picture of West as using Gospel music to further personal causes.¹²³

Arceneaux was certainly not alone in his opinion. Many people took to social media to express their uneasiness about Kanye’s conversion. Nevertheless, many others also supported West’s ability to challenge gospel music. Dr. Ricky Dillard, a Grammy-nominated gospel singer, told Time Magazine that Kanye’s music was “rejuvenal, inspiring, [and] uplifting.” He continued by expressing that, “Kanye is a part of the contemporary movement which has revolutionized music.” Dillard also praised Kanye for his use of choirs. Dillard informed Time that musicians had not used choirs much in recent years, so Kanye’s use of choirs was a bit refreshing.¹²⁴

Kanye’s music, while divisive, has also be heralded as revolutionary in the genre of gospel music. He has transcended the conversation of “Christian rapper vs. rapper who is Christian” to one of the leaders in changing the sound of gospel music. Many Christians are still hesitant to accept West’s transition to gospel music. When discussing the controversy surrounding Kanye West’s music, Richard Smallwood, gospel singer, and songwriter, informed Time Magazine, “The traditional Christian church has always frowned upon anything that is new and innovative.”¹²⁵

¹²³ Michael Arceneaux, *Kanye West’s Sunday Service Isn’t His Redemption. It’s Just Another Act of Egotism*, NBC news. April 24, 2019. Accessed June 24, 2020.
<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/kanye-west-s-sunday-service-isn-t-his-redemption-it-ncna998061>

¹²⁴ Andrew R. Chow, *How Kanye West’s Controversial ‘Jesus Is King’ Is Dividing the Christian Community*, Time Magazine. November 6, 2019. Accessed June 24, 2020.
<https://time.com/5716576/kanye-west-jesus-is-king-gospel-reaction/>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Smallwood continues by discussing the importance of Kanye attracting the youth to the gospel message. “[Kanye’s music] has to be contemporary because it has to reach the young people,” Smallwood claims. Alisha Lola Jones, Professor of ethnomusicology at Indiana University Bloomington, informs readers that the controversy surrounding the songs and lyrics speak to youth who grew up in both secular and religious households.¹²⁶ A Hip-Hop artist speaking to young people should not be surprising because that is the demographic that created and formed Hip-Hop. Now the genre has crossed over, in many ways, to become a significant influence in gospel music.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Slowly, churches are beginning to change to adopt a style of worship that incorporates Hip-Hop culture. The culture has gone from one that youth created to counter-act mainstream culture to one that has become mainstream culture. In less than fifty years, Hip-Hop has gone from a small party idea to the most consumed form of music in the world. As beliefs and perceptions of Hip-Hop have changed, Christianity is attempting to adapt to it. There does not have to be a war between the two because they have always been linked.

The youth started, designed, understood, and spoken by the youth. This relationship with young people led to a generational divide that is slowly coming to an end. Reynard N. Blake expressed this generational gap by saying:

To Black baby boomers, rap music may sound like incoherent, nonsensical noise with strong, overbearing beats packaged on television videos with scantily clad, gyrating women and men with gaudy jewelry (otherwise known as the “bling”) and sagging pants. However, to Black youth, rap music is the medium where their hopes, aspirations, fears, and anger are expressed. Moreover, rap music represents to Black youth a form of individual self-expression where there are no rules and where their culture is defined and celebrated. In short, rap serves as the “noise” of Black youth and reminds America that they have their own leadership, their own views, and are a socioeconomic and political force.¹²⁷

In the same way that Hip-Hop has redefined how the outside world sees black culture, it has the opportunity also to redefine how we look at Christianity and Christian music. The conversation between Hip-Hop and Christianity does not have to be one that is at odds. It can be one that continually gives and takes, as it has been doing since the inception of the art form.

¹²⁷ Blake, Reynard N. 2003. "Bring Tha' Noise: Hip-Hop, Black Families, and the Black Church." Michigan Family Review.

Religious conversations within Hip-Hop songs have been present since the beginning of the genre. The art form has a history of rich theology doing well; for example, Kanye West's *Jesus walks*, Chance the Rapper's *Coloring Book*, and MC Hammer's *Pray* have all done well commercially. Regardless, those who do not understand or do not wish to understand the culture have demonized it to the point where its shortcomings are consistently on display. This demonization includes cases of murder, rape, and indecency being blamed on the musical genre.

These consistent attempts to censor rap from the highest levels of government, including the wife of the Vice-President of the United States, have all failed, and the art form continues to grow and remain relevant in modern times. Not only has the consumption of Hip-Hop not slowed down, but consumers are consuming it at higher rates than ever. This hike in sales is not only the case for secular rap, but Christian centered rap as well. Artists like Lecrae and NF sales continue to soar as they continue with their careers. This is a fact that must be taken to account by detractors like Rev. G Craig Lewis must even wonder about. Hip-Hop has continued to soar to heights that were once thought impossible.

Hip-Hop culture has become more open to religious expression in recent years. Joseph "Run" Simmons, one of the members of legendary Hip-Hop group Run-DMC, has become noticeable for becoming a Reverend and is being referred to as Rev. Run. DMX, once known for his dark lyrics, began hosting Bible Studies on Instagram during the coronavirus quarantine. Kanye West began to tour the country with his gospel choir, the Samples. Many other artists have been open with the public about their religious beliefs. The conversation between Hip-Hop and Christianity is becoming more about the

positive impact they have on each other. The two cultures have gone from competing to influencing each other.

Fred Lynch, one of the founding members of Preachers In Disguise, best describes the reason why embodying both cultures is essential. “You connect with that culture by embodying them. To me, it is the whole concept of incarnation. ‘And the Word became Flesh, and it dwelt among us,’” Lynch tells Les Carlsen, lead vocalist for the controversial Christian rock band, Blood Good.¹²⁸ “I love how it says in The Message,” Lynch continues, “‘The Word put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood, and it was just like everyone else in the neighborhood.’”¹²⁹ He continued:

That’s the beauty, to me, of the whole Gospel is that whatever culture you’re from the gospel can embody that culture and show the goodness of that culture and bring it out whether it’s Bloodgood, whether it’s PID, whether it’s trap music, whether it’s rockabilly. Whatever the case is, it’s just saying ‘look this is culture, and God so loves this culture that he will embody himself in the face of that culture just to connect with that culture.’¹³⁰

To Lynch, it is a part of the Gospel to not only go into the world of Hip-Hop, as stated by Kurtis Blow but to embody that culture to reach the people of that culture.

¹²⁸ This is a reference to John 1:14

¹²⁹ John 1:14 from the Message reads: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.”

¹³⁰ Frontline Records. *Frontline Rewind 66: P.I.D. Pt. 1 – Full Episode*. December 13, 2017. Accessed June 22, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoF3We4NnMw>.

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