

The History of Gospel Hip-Hop

Written by Nicole Smith ID2795
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HISTORY of GOSPEL HIP HOP - A Tale of Two Siblings by Nicole Smith

There's no denying that they're related, brothers even. They have the same birthplace, (Queens or The Bronx, depending on who you ask), and are the offspring of the same intersection of elements (blight, hopelessness, and need meet artistry and youthful energy). Yet, at some point, baptized with Living Water and rose with a specific mission...a calling.

This issue we address the history of Gospel Hip-Hop from all sides - giving you insight into a genre that has lately been surrounded with as much controversy as support. Read on to get the facts...

The History of Gospel Hip-Hop

Gospel Hip-Hop was born in the early 1980s, just a few years after its older sibling, Hip-Hop, began to gain some notoriety . . .or infamy. At this point in music history, Hip-Hop had moved out West, mixed in with the Crips and Bloods and created the newest evolution of this genre, "Gangsta Rap." With "Gangsta Rap" came the glorification of gang life on the West Coast and lyrics filled with murder, mayhem, and misogyny. This particular change in Hip-Hop, coupled with the overall move of music into the MTV-era, was unsettling and many were galvanized to bring a new perspective with the Gospel.

From the beginning, Gospel Hip-Hop had a clear mission: To evangelize. Christians that were a part of the Hip-Hop movement recognized the opportunity to use this musical style to present the Gospel to those that were outside of the church. According to Floyd Cray, who has seen the development of this genre over a period of more than 15 years as a Gospel Hip-Hop DJ, "all came to evangelize, not entertain. There was strong accountability and the people wanted to make sure Jesus was mentioned in every verse...every hook...every 16 to 18 bars."

While there was no confusion about Gospel Hip-Hop's purpose, the method would take some time to develop. Rappers, or MCs, entered the genre with a great deal of passion. But many were lacking the lyrical skill and artistry to present a rhyme at the same quality level as their sibling. This lack of talent, combined with the unwise use of instrumental tracks from well-known

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mainstream Hip-Hop songs, produced an end product that was comical and unrespectable. Cray agrees and chuckles as he states, "In the beginning it was awful. You knew the cats heart [but] it sounded cheesy. People were laughing." This first impression of the music would truly be a lasting one as it would be years before Gospel Hip-Hop could begin to overcome these humble (and sometimes whack) beginnings.

Nonetheless, there are some notable developments during this early stage in the Gospel Hip-Hop movement. There were a few skilled MCs with the talent or means to create original tracks, which allowed them to stand out among the cliched and stand up against their counterparts in the mainstream world. These individuals can be credited as the early pioneers that pushed the Gospel Hip-Hop movement forward. They include Michael Peace and Stephen Wiley who were so impressive that they caught the attention of record companies. This lead to the first commercial release of Gospel Hip-Hop music with Wiley's "Bible Break" album in 1985. Wiley, along with Peace and a few other MCs, also went on to have the first Gospel Hip-Hop music video in 1991 for a song called "Rap on the Road."

With the involvement of the record labels with national distribution channels, such as Brainstorm and Star Song, came an opportunity to push Gospel Hip-Hop beyond its confines to particular geographic locations. Plus, the record labels themselves were driven to tap into the urban Christian market, which they thought would be as fruitful as the CCM and Christian Rock categories. It was during this time that the Dove Awards introduced a "Rap / Hip-Hop" category and DC Talk walked away with the first award in 1990 for Album of the Year.

However, by the mid-1990s, the record companies' interest had waned when executives found that the urban audience was not connecting to Gospel Hip-Hop the way that CCM and Christian Rock audiences had. Furthermore, its mainstream sibling was gaining such commercial success that those looking to connect with the urban market were driving more and more monetary resources there. This redirection of resources caused Gospel Hip-Hop music to quickly fall silent as labels dropped artists and walked away from the market. Yet, this silence was only at the commercial level. For those artists and supporters that were committed, the movement simply went underground.

During this time underground Gospel Hip-Hop was nourished - and when it rose again, the fruit that bloomed was spectacular. In the late 1990s, wonderfully talented MCs and Christian producers began to surface, as well as Gospel Hip-Hop music labels, including the well-known Cross Movement Records that was founded in 1997. With the independent labels came the ability to control the product and present the proper image to appeal to the target audience. It was then that Gospel Hip-Hop began on its journey to overcome the remnants of whackness of

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the early days. This new crop of talent could easily go rhyme-for-rhyme and beat-for-beat with any mainstream Hip-Hop artist. And yet the evangelical message was stronger and more powerful than ever.

So, where was the urban Christian church during the growth and development of Gospel Hip-Hop? The church largely shied away from the music because of the negative images and lyrics of commercial Hip-Hop. There was no interest in bringing this “worldly music” into the church. If MCs were invited to a church, according to Cray, “they were placed at the end of the program and were considered ‘something for the youth.’ But, the intent of the music was not for the church [but] to reach the crackhead, the folks wilding out...[they] need to know the love and compassion of Jesus.”

Today we find that Gospel Hip-Hop has continued to struggle to establish itself in the midst of the amazing success of its older brother. Nonetheless, the key is that the movement continues to move. There are now at least three yearly Gospel Hip-Hop events occurring around the country. In addition, churches seem to be opening up to the music’s ability to reach today’s youth as so-called “Hip-Hop Churches” are springing up around the country. Furthermore, various Hip-Hop legends are supporting and even “going gospel” including Kurtis Blow, Salt of Salt n’ Pepa and Play of Kid n’ Play.

This is truly an exciting time for Gospel Hip-Hop as it seems to be on the verge of going further than ever. No one but God truly knows what the future holds. But, the hope is that Gospel Hip-Hop will fulfill its mission - and maybe even have his older brother desiring to be born again!

The Truth About the Origin of Hip-Hop

Words by Nicole Smith

Because of claims that it was created by a sinister force and represents an anti-Christian religion, the controversy surrounding mainstream Hip-Hop's beginnings is affecting Gospel Hip-Hop - as some encourage young people to rid themselves of any type of Hip-Hop music. This is an interesting idea that has surface level appeal, but truly lacks real depth for those that know and have been a part of Hip-Hop's origin.

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In New York in the 1970s, Hip-Hop became the newest musical evolution. The UGA New York Chapter Director, Gail Windley, aka DJ Flame, observed Hip-Hop's development first hand alongside the early pioneers such as Grand Master Flash and Kool Herc. Flame went on to make her own mark as DJ LaSpank in the Mercedes Ladies, the first all female group in this genre. Flame, who was living in the Gun Hill Projects in the northeast Bronx at that time, recalls that the Bronx was an "explosive environment... a time of government program cut backs...police corruption was rampant, gang violence at an all time high.... [the South Bronx] looked like a Warsaw ghetto." Hip-Hop music provided an outlet for this "ghetto" as the youth came together and used their artistic talent to escape their desperate situation...if only temporarily.

One of the earliest organized collectives in Hip-Hop was the Zulu Nation, which was formed by Afrika Bambaataa in 1973. Bambaataa recognized Hip-Hop's potential to unite the youth despite their gang affiliation and move his generation in a more positive direction. However, as of late, Bambaataa is one of the main personalities involved in Hip-Hop's origin who is facing criticism, especially as the Zulu Nation has grown and restructured. Nonetheless, Flame asserts that, in the beginning, "Bam", as she affectionately calls him, was "motivated to create an environment where people can feel like they belong...a sense of family [with] the music [as] the uniting factor...He wanted people to feel like they had a place to exhibit their talent and stay out of trouble. Bam was...getting them off the street. He did not want them dealing drugs..."

As the Hip-Hop movement grew other collectives, or crews, were formed, though they did not all necessarily have the same motivation as Bambaataa. Yet, though all represented Hip-Hop collectively, there was no single individual or crew that could be called out as the pure definition of Hip-Hop. And such is the depth of this genre. As Flame puts it, each artist "represents only one experience in Hip-Hop."

And there in lies the problem in attempting to ascribe a negative connotation to all involved in such a complex musical movement as Hip-Hop. While it is true that mainstream Hip-Hop gets the most attention and is far from G-rated, there are still those out there that bring a youthful spirit and a pure desire to express their God-given talent.