

The Evangelical Hustle

Selling Music, Saving Souls

“I must be about my Father’s business.”

—PASTOR OF REDEMPTION (HIP HOP PASTOR)

As gospel rappers crisscrossed the varied landscapes of the Southland, converting urban spaces into airborne churches, they endeavored to spread the Gospel to the far reaches of the city. They ran their evangelical game in devout street teams—the G-Boy Union, Hip Hoppoite, Hood Ministries, ADK (Any Demon Killa), The Nameless Fellowship, Freedom of Soul, Tunnel Rats, Preachers in Disguise, Gospel Gangstaz, and the list goes on. Wielding both hip hop technologies and biblical mythologies, they enacted their business mission of simultaneously *selling* music and *saving* souls—a mission that took into account their immediate spiritual and economic needs as well as the temporal horizon of the Promised Land.

In this chapter, I examine how gospel rappers’ religious beliefs interacted with their everyday struggles to balance the need for a paycheck with winning the big payback of life everlasting. Drawing from the title of Canton Jones’s well-known Christian rap trilogy, I argue that holy hip hoppers engaged in a kind of *Kingdom Business*—ultimately working for the glorification of God.¹ Following the three releases of *Kingdom Business*, Canton Jones then released *Dominionaire*, which also played on themes of money, power, and authority. Writer Kellus Hill comments, “just as a millionaire or billionaire is rich due to their money, a *Dominionaire* is rich due to the Lord’s position of authority that will never run dry or lose value.”² In holy hip hop’s spiritual economy, Jesus functioned as the kingpin, CEO, or “Lord of the Underground.” Gospel rappers referred to themselves as His foot soldiers, street disciples, and indigenous missionaries. They pushed holy hip hop CDs in His name and hustled to get the Word out, all the while steadily “bangin’ for Christ.”

Automatically dismissed by mainstream rap labels or relegated to a niche category within a major gospel division, gospel hip hop has never been considered

big business. Prominent holy hip hop artists struggled to find performance venues both in and out of the church. Christian music labels were often hesitant to sign gospel rap acts due to the profane associations of hip hop. In the absence of mainstream distribution and marketing, L.A. gospel rappers often produced and promoted their albums independently and locally.³ While many of these MCs would have welcomed economic success (especially if it meant exposure for the glory of God), monetary gain was certainly not the primary focus. Gospel rappers engaged in the twin projects of musical missionizing and marketing often negotiated an embattled nexus of religious morals, sentiments, and affiliations that complicated purely economic notions of success and visibility. How did holy hip hop function as a spiritual, social, and economic resource in the lives of gospel rap artists?⁴ How did gospel MCs earn authenticity and credibility as they managed the seemingly incommensurable logics of capitalism, Christianity, and hip hop?⁵ Gospel rap presented new challenges, complexities, and confines in hip hop's ongoing call to "re-ality." Competing cults of authenticity (i.e., race, class, gender, and now religion) shaped how holy hip hoppers walked, talked, and made music, but also how they evangelized, sold, and consumed cultural practices.⁶

The larger economic cosmos of holy hip hop can be conceived of as a relational dynamic between overlapping spheres of activity on different scales: the national networks of the gospel music industry, independent labels, the institutional level of Christian churches and organizations, and the street-level interactions of gospel hip hoppers. This chapter focuses mainly on the everyday, small-scale, street-level business practices involved in the cultural production of gospel rap across the fractured, postindustrial cityscape of Los Angeles—a constantly shifting terrain of encounter marked not only by the circulation of money but also by networks of social exchange. Taking into account the political economies inherently embedded within their daily practices as a point of entry, I analyze the ways in which gospel rappers assembled relations of reciprocity and set their financial exchanges to a sacred pitch through strategic performance, musical and linguistic play, differential pricing, biblical metaphor, and audacious acts of faith.

The indeterminate and intertextual practices of gospel rappers—both visionary and pragmatic—enabled the performative transposition between the realms of hip hop, evangelism, and the economic market, which these MCs experienced as deeply enmeshed in their daily lives. Ultimately what emerged was an unforeseen transposability of techniques, ethics, and modes of capital between overlapping social terrains, as well as the unlikely uses and outcomes of turning expressive culture into things it may not have been initially intended for. Managing these fields amid continued economic restructuring, massive unemployment, and draconian policing tactics, Los Angeles-based holy hip hoppers provided an example of what people do when neither secure wage labor nor the illicit economy is readily available or acceptable.

Gospel hip hop in L.A. existed in a multidimensional configuration of social space, where the everyday activities of art, commerce, and spirituality often overlapped, opening up possibilities for the *creation* and *conversion* of new kinds of subjects.⁷ Here, the hegemony and pervasiveness of the commodity form in late capitalism did not necessarily produce sameness or absolute social reproduction; instead, it allowed for a heterogeneity of outcomes and contradictions, and perhaps, a more realistic understanding of the global economy on the ground—the ways it moved (and was moved by) people in particular places at specific times. Gospel rappers' everyday practices demonstrated the costs and benefits of bringing religious expressions into certain cultural markets and, at the same time, unveiled the ways the market has always already been a part of Christianity.

A significant portion of the literature that addresses the relationship between religion, media, and the marketplace examines how Christian booksellers juggle the institutional logics of religion and the capitalist market through three main strategies: (1) “resistance” to the modern secular world; (2) “accommodation” to the modern secular world; and (3) “sacralization,” a fusion between Christianity and capitalism.⁸ Holy hip hop presented a significant variation from these booksellers in that these artist-missionaries were not just selling the Word, they were also selling their artistic and musical gifts. Gospel hip hop artists battled the dichotomy of selling something that is supposedly free—salvation, where the grace of God has no cost—and selling something that we generally expect to pay for—skilled artistic expression. As creative agents, gospel MCs were not only reconciling money and faith, but were also juggling the added layers of artistic creativity and critiques of racial and spiritual authenticity in relation to their marketing and missionizing methods. Therefore, sacralization is not an adequate concept to encapsulate the multiple, performative, and flexible negotiations of gospel hip hop artists. Gospel hip hop artists were instead involved in an *evangelical hustle*—a practice that accounted for the creativity of artists as well as other nonfinancial and nonspiritual rewards and resources that gospel hip hop practice yielded and generated. It was this dance between various fields that allowed artists to manage the polyvalent power relations, moral codes, and structures of legitimacy with which they were faced.

HOLY HUSTLING

Former secular rappers turned born-again Christians, many (but not all) of whom were previously employed in illicit economies, occupied a particular “guru position” in holy hip hop circles because they were seen as authentic street soldiers who had paid their dues in the secular world—a rite of passage—before (re)turning to Christ. These streetwise Christian gurus commanded the respect and attention of their younger street disciples, owing to their intimate knowledge and lived

experiences in the 'hood, and, more importantly, their hands-on experience with hip hop music.⁹ For instance, Kurtis Blow, old school hip hop's King of Rap *gone gospel*, exercised a certain spiritual authority by virtue of both the material and symbolic capital he accumulated in mainstream hip hop, as well as on "the street."

For many gangsta rappers turned gospel rappers, their previous lines of work included pushing various forms of "product"—that is, gangbanging, pimping, prostitution, and, more generally, *hustling* to make ends meet. After dedicating their lives to Christ, many of them described the challenges of shifting into more formalized work that did not compromise their religious beliefs. And, most took pay cuts at the expense of worshipping at the altar of Jesus instead of the almighty dollar.¹⁰ Christian hip hop leaders, while streetwise, were also well versed in biblical scripture and the ritual prescriptions of black Christianity, modeling ways to behave appropriately with youth and "old heads" alike, while skillfully navigating multiple community and corporate spaces. In the masculinized world of gospel rap, holy hip hoppers walked tightly scripted, heavily policed lines between expectations of hardness, realness, and righteousness among hip hop music markets, audiences, and congregations. As Richard A. Peterson states, "authenticity is a claim that is made by or for someone, thing, or performance and either accepted or rejected by relevant others."¹¹ Indeed, holy hip hoppers carefully managed their own daily performances in relation to how "relevant others" would perceive them. Authenticity became a cultural, ethical, and even disciplinary technology within these sacred and secular borderlands, and was often a precondition for the twin goals of *selling* music and *saving* souls.¹²

In interviews, gospel hip hop artists often spoke of their musical ministry as a hustle, recontextualizing language from their previous informal business practices into a spiritual realm. They "grind for Christ," "roll with Christ," "get their evangelic game tight for Christ," "get their hustle on for Christ," "get their Christian lean back on," "ride or die for Christ," and "bang for Christ." These phrases refer to a transposition of the hustler's *ambition* and *creativity* into the overlapping terrains of hip hop and evangelism. As one female gospel MC explained, "I was tired of doing me, so now I do everything in His name."

Cue, as previous chapters have elaborated, was a former member of the secular rap group the College Boyz and founder of the monthly Christian-oriented, hip hop open mic, Klub Zion. Klub Zion was housed at KAOS Network, also home to the infamous weekly underground hip hop open mic, Project Blowed.¹³ Cue sacrificed the coherence and success the night would achieve if it were billed as either Christian or secular in favor of a diverse, mixed crowd with a range of religious orientations. In an interview in 2008, Cue explained his evangelical practices as a hustle:

First of all, I don't care who you are. You got to get your *hustle*. I don't care if you're a believer or not. And Jesus tells you, if you don't get your hustle on, you shouldn't eat.

He tells you that in Thessalonians, when Paul talks about, “Hey if the guy is lazy, why should he eat?” So we have to work it. Paul was a tent maker; he was a hustler. So, it depends on how you translating hustle.¹⁴

Cue was not alone in repurposing his hustle to do God’s work. A look into the etymological underpinnings of the word hustle reveals the different ways that this word has been employed. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “hustle” derives from the Dutch *husselen/hutselen*, “to shake, to toss,” from the Middle Dutch *hutselen*, meaning “to shake the money in the game of hustle-cap” (“hustle-cap” explained later in this chapter). This early definition has clear connections to the metaphor and the practice of *earthquake music*. By the eighteenth century it meant “to push or knock a person about roughly or unceremoniously,” and by 1821 “to move hastily, to hurry, to bustle; to work busily.” In the mid-nineteenth century, especially in the United States, it was “to obtain, produce or serve by hustle or pushing activity.” More recently, hustle has also become a popular term in American sports vernacular referring to athletes who play with scrappiness and urgency.

In much of the sociological literature on urban black neighborhoods, the hustle or hustling is generally viewed as strictly illicit or informal activities occurring in the street (not generally associated with the sacred), something one is forced into, and linked to a “culture of poverty.”¹⁵ But gospel rappers had a very different vision of the hustle. Soup the Chemist explained:

In some way, we are all hustlers, when it comes to getting that money, and the church is no exception. They tell you to give money to meet their needs, or wants, and you will be blessed. Therefore, I do not hate the hustle, but I do hate it when the hustlers, record companies, radio stations and rappers label the positive, conscious legit hustle, as something or someone who is “weak.” When in actuality the weak one takes the quick route; hiding behind his gun, his negative mind state, and his dirty money.¹⁶

For gospel rappers, the hustle did not always refer to “getting that money.” Transposed into the realm of holy hip hop, the hustle was the deployment and practice of certain embodied capacities (i.e., lyricism, fast moves, improvisation, rhetorical abilities, scriptural knowledge, a flair for both marketing and missionizing), motivations (i.e., artistic, evangelical, financial), and sacred and profane literacies (i.e., hip hop, street-life, the Bible).

When I asked Cue what everyday activities and practices constituted his evangelical hustle, he answered:

Well, one of them would be music, right? The other one would be networking. Really and truly, almost anything is a hustle. Jesus was hustling for his Father. Doing the work of my Father is my food. That’s my hustle. That’s how I get paid. That’s how I get fed. That’s how I get nourished. Hustle can be good and it can be bad. Reading my word, studying about God. I want to know him. I want to be more intimate with God. That’s part of what I do.¹⁷

From these statements and the meanings at play around the word hustle, the term *evangelical hustle* was ultimately a kind of musical bootstrap evangelism that was close to the streets, compelled by both a hustler's *ambition* and a missionary's *zeal*, done in the name of Christ as opposed to in the service of cash.

MONEY, MORALITY, AND MUSIC

Gospel rappers negotiated money, morality, and music in myriad ways. Grassroots gospel rappers in Los Angeles believed that holy hip hop was a sacred calling in their lives. Though they were not against making money through their musical ministries, touching people's lives by delivering the Gospel was their primary goal. As the gospel MC Street Pastor rapped at a Hip Hop Church L.A. service, "I ain't trying to sell records. I am trying to kill sin." In particular, holy hip hoppers were deeply skeptical of those who earned exceptionally large profits from gospel rap, and often articulated and performed a forceful disavowal of commercial intention in their recordings and live performances. The romance of both Christianity and underground, grassroots hip hop as commercial-free zones produced a double disavowal of commercialism in gospel rap culture, which was in part due to a generalized disgust toward the excesses and hypermaterialism venerated in mainstream hip hop, as well as the controversial financial gains of those churches and pastors subscribing to Prosperity Theology.¹⁸ As Erin Aubry Kaplan warned in an *LA Weekly* article about Los Angeles's Crenshaw district, "Churches have always been the most consistently prosperous of black businesses, though their prosperity has little trickle-down in the aging neighborhoods where they tend to be located."¹⁹

The growing presence of Prosperity Theology among rap stars is what historian Joseph Sorett has referred to as hip hop's "gospel of Bling." He argues that "the version of Christianity most frequently visualised is an idiom largely made accessible over the airwaves by televangelists and marketed by megachurch pastors. It often also includes the celebration of a gospel of 'Bling' evidenced in the affinity of many rappers for prosperity preachers."²⁰ Pastor Creflo Dollar, perhaps the most popular black prosperity preacher, has made cameo appearances in rap music videos and is even mentioned in verses by rappers Mase and 50 Cent. Sorett continues, "Pastor Dollar, for whom wealth is indeed a core spiritual value, seems to embody for many rappers the essence of *hip hop's hustle doused in holy water*."²¹ His World Changers Church has offices in South Africa, Australia, Nigeria, the United Kingdom and New York, while his Atlanta megachurch, the World Dome, houses 8,500 congregants. Usually clad in flashy pinstriped suits and alligator shoes, Dollar preaches religious devotion as a way to get out of debt—as a route toward financial prosperity. Moreover, he promises his followers that if they give an offering to the church, they can expect a bountiful return on

their investment. This is spiritually sound business, Pastor Dollar often reassures his audiences, because he works for the King of Kings.

In particular, Southland gospel rappers were highly critical of celebrity preachers like Creflo Dollar and others. Cue recalled, “When I came into the church, I looked at the pastor and I thought, yeah, these cats are pimps. They wanna blow up. They got the whole star mentality. The same mentality I have. I can’t say they worse than me. We’re all dirty, but I recognize it.” Beyond money and material possessions, Los Angeles gospel MCs also explicitly questioned the concepts of stardom and celebrity in both their lyrics and performance practices as they were cognizant of the continued pairing of religion and power in both the church and popular culture. MC TripLL-H, who called his Los Angeles–based Christian rap crew the G-Boy Union a “Holy cartel, banging for Christ,” rapped one night at Klub Zyon about being in the “holy trenches,” exclaiming, “No limelight, just make sure my walk’s right.”²² Well-known Christian rapper Trip Lee put these concerns to rhyme on the track “Cash or Christ,” erecting a fierce opposition between two arenas that commercial hip hop tends to blur together. He raps:

Forget the cash and chains, that stuff will pass away
And you can’t take it with you to your after days

The stigmatization of money and materialism in holy hip hop extended to how people acquired and spent money, making it either benevolent capital or dirty money.²³ For instance, storefront preachers, who have historically committed themselves to working with those at the margins, have been critiqued for taking donations from gang members and securing resources for their outreach through informal or underground economies. Based on the multiple levels of stigmatization, how did gospel rappers contend with the tensions that emerge in the conflicting desires for ministry, business, and music making? What were the costs and benefits of selling the sacred?

BIG MONEY JESUS

Nothing seemed to epitomize how Los Angeles gospel rappers felt about the ostentatious displays of wealth by commercial hip hop artists more than the name of the gospel rap group Hip Hopposite. As their moniker suggests, these rappers, beat makers, and DJs saw themselves in direct opposition to the hip hop industry’s celebration of hypercommercialism and bling. The five core members—Celah (say-lah), DJ Heat, B-Love, Sound Doctrine, and Crossfire—were all doing their own thing in rap music in the 1990s—an era that witnessed the catastrophic effects of natural disaster, gang violence, police brutality, riots, and mass incarceration—before coming together officially as a collective in early 2000s. Sound Doctrine, a Compton native who was raised in the church but drawn to the sounds of commercial hip hop he heard on the local radio station KDAY, formed a Christian rap



FIGURE 13. Gospel rap group Hip Hoppo, c. 2007. Left to right: Sound Doctrine, DJ Heat, Celah, B-Love, and Crossfire. Photo courtesy of Eric Drake.

group called The Fishermen. Celah and Crossfire, who actually attended the same high school together and later crossed paths again while rapping on the gospel hip hop circuit, asked Sound Doctrine to “give them some beats.” They then brought in DJ Heat and female MC B-Love to round out their sound. Their vision was for a collective of highly talented artists who each was capable of releasing their own solo project—something along the lines of the Wu-Tang Clan. They gathered weekly at Sound Doctrine’s Compton home to fellowship, share music, and record tracks. The home studio was humble, equipped with a computer, small mixing board, and turntables. They recorded their vocal tracks in a small closet with a desk lamp on the floor for light.

I met Celah, the lead MC of the collective, along with Slack of I.D.O.L. King, at Westside Bible Church in South Los Angeles. Celah is a Hebrew word commonly found in the book of Psalms that the Bible translates as “pause, and think of that,” or as Celah explained, “a stop in the music.” It gives the listener an opportunity to digest and reflect on what has just been said. Celah believed that “holy hip hop MCs shouldn’t strive to be marketable, but should rather strive to leave their mark.” His online presence was almost nonexistent and his marketing tactics were always very grassroots. He once dialed Verizon 411 to ask for the telephone number for Pizza Hut and, upon hearing a song by Christian rapper Lecrae in the

background, exchanged emails with the Verizon operator. Celah sent the operator some of the free online Hip Hopposite mixtapes, who in turn ended up attending several of their live shows. Musical marketing for Celah was a product of happenstance and spontaneous connection. He developed his networks and notoriety through building relationships with people.

While Celah despised the materialism and bling of the commercial hip hop industry, he had an equally harsh critique of “big money” churches and pastors. Hip Hopposite’s *Big Money Jesus* mixtape (2005) was in many ways a response to the rise of Prosperity Theology in Los Angeles and many other megachurches across the country. “The Prosperity Gospel thing on the West Coast was out of control,” Celah lamented. “Prosperity Gospel teachings are just scriptures out of context.”²⁴ On “Church Spirit,” a track from the 2005 *Big Money Jesus* mixtape that features a sped-up sample of Aretha Franklin’s hit “Spirit in the Dark,” Celah critiqued this exact church practice:

I’m through with playing church
 I’m about my Father’s business
 These fake churches, man, I hate it there, I hate it there
 Just to get a blessing gotta pay a fare, pay a fare

The mixtape also features game show skits between each musical track that satirize the celebration of financial wealth and fame in Christianity.

Game Show Host: We’re back with our second round. Here’s the question. According to Deuteronomy 8, God gives us the power to?

Ziomarah: Get wealth, you know a little bling . . . a nice spot in Beverly Hills.

Ka-ching!

Game Show Host: Oh, Durante sounds the buzzer for the challenge.

Diante: It’s pronounced Diante. Deuteronomy 8 is talking about something altogether different—talking about the Israelites and how they was obedient to God and his mercy and his goodness toward them. Why you guys always gotta focus on power and wealth? What’s going on?

Game Show Host: Well, let’s see what the panel says. Judges?

Judges: Wrong!

Game Show Host: I’m sorry, Dante, it looks like your challenge has been rejected.

In a subsequent skit, Curtis, another contestant, answers the following question after winning the *Big Money Jesus* game show:

Game Show Host: According to Romans 4:17, who can call those things which do not exist as though they do?

Curtis: That's anybody that got enough fame.

Game Show Host: Curtis, You're our winner! You're going to get a chance to open the windows of heaven!

The host then explains to Curtis that he has won an all-expenses paid trip to the Word of Prosperity Harvest Conference held at an arena in Boca Raton, FL. If Curtis is able to answer one more question, he can win a grand prize. In this game show scenario, opening the windows of heaven entails riding home in a Cadillac Escalade and a chance to win \$100,000. With *The Price Is Right* music cheerfully chirping in the background and the audience applauding feverishly, the host tells the winner that they want to send him home in style: "Remember, Curtis, you're the head and not the tail." But as Celah once reminded me, in Matthew 19, Jesus says that it is more difficult for a rich man to enter the gates of heaven than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Creflo Dollar would vehemently disagree.

"DON'T PROSTITUTE YOUR GIFT"

One way that gospel rappers avoided navigating the boundaries between missionizing and marketing was by the separation of their musical ministry from their material livelihood. Most of them had "day jobs" as youth counselors, secretaries, teachers, bankers, and electricians, as their holy hip hop practice generally did not provide enough to live on. "I don't really do this for money anyway," Sound Doctrine once remarked to me. "If I did, I would be broke." Earning income from other kinds of work in the formal sector liberated them from the moral and financial challenges of making their musical ministry their main source of income. Instead, the evangelical business of gospel hip hop was something they hustled to do in their free time.

In order to maintain the moral and artistic integrity of their music and keep their hip hop "opposite" from the commercial hip hop world, each Hip Hopposite member worked another "day job" in addition to their involvement in gospel rap. When he wasn't making gospel hip hop beats, Sound Doctrine worked for Los Angeles Water and Power as a meter reader. DJ Heat did part-time grocery delivery in addition to his paid DJ gig for Klub Zyon. Celah was a customer relations specialist and B-Love was a secretary at a high school in Santa Monica. Both were in business school as well. Crossfire worked at a nonprofit where he taught at-risk youth job training skills. Their jobs allowed them to make music without the burden of financial gain, but more importantly, it allowed them to put their religious messages front and center. As Celah used to caution his fellow gospel rappers, "you should get a job so you don't prostitute your gift."

Even if gospel rappers relied on jobs outside of holy hip hop for their daily livelihood, money, however minimal, still came into play in their everyday

interactions around rapping the Gospel: audiences and congregations still expected to pay for holy hip hop CDs; artists received donations and offerings for their performances; portions of the offerings collected on hip hop ministry nights were sometimes disbursed back to gospel rappers who performed on those nights; and events like Klub Zion often suggested (though did not demand) a cover donation at the door. Crossfire explained how he and Celah approached the issue of selling Hip Hopposite CDs:

The business side was something that me and him [Celah] had to tackle when we were getting into this. We were just thinking, we'll just go and do this John the Baptist style—just talk and rap and do what we love and just let it be what it is. Or, we can really try and get it to a lot more people. And that's when we were like, we gotta tackle this whole business thing 'cause we felt like, the music is free. The doctrine is free. But that CD that it takes to get to you is not free. And we felt like there was a lot more ministry going on while listening to people's CDs as opposed to seeing them at different concerts. Concerts are wonderful but I wasn't expecting everyone in the crowd to run up and get saved. So I felt myself growing as I was listening to gospel hip hop music. You know, listening to Ambassador or Lecrae—this is really where I'm getting fed when I get to repetitively listen. So the CD! CDs really cost money. The rapping didn't cost and the gospel didn't cost, but to get that CD to you, that costs. That's why it's a business, because we want to get this to everybody the same way Public Enemy did it, the same way Pac and them did.²⁵

But Hip Hopposite didn't always charge the same amount for their CDs. Differential pricing tactics and sliding scales were common in gospel hip hop exchanges. Sound Doctrine described his practice around charging people for his beats:

See, people like to come over here and record and make beats stuff . . . and what I'll do is I base it on the relationship that I have . . . if I know you really well and I see you around, you know, I won't give you no out there price. I'll give you a price, and you say, oh man, I really can't do that, c'mon. I'll try to work with that. If you say, I'll give it to you in six weeks, then I say okay, give it to me in six weeks. I have a set price but I just kind of feel off the person.²⁶

A lot of these interactions were “off the books” and yet still had to be in accordance with the teachings of the good Book. Within these moments of exchange, when did holy hip hoppers bracket off their morality or religious beliefs in order to reach certain people? When did they completely invest in their faith at the expense of financial gain? How did music complicate and/or enable these negotiations?

GAMES OF CHANCE AND LEAPS OF FAITH

Hustle's original association with the game of “hustle-cap” provides a symbolic link to the ways in which contemporary gospel rappers approach their musical ministry. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hustle-cap as “a form of pitch-and-toss,



FIGURE 14. Khanchuz during the filming of his music video, “What the Bible Say,” in 2016 in the Western Mojave Desert. Photo courtesy of Prophet X and Prophecy Records.

in which the coins were ‘hustled’ or shaken together in a cap before being tossed.” Pitch-and-toss is a general term for games of chance, in which bets are placed in relation to the ways coins will fall (heads or tails) after being tossed into a designated area. (Shooting dice could be considered a modern-day correlate.) Similarly, gospel rappers engaged in games of chance concerning their finances in order to adhere to their religious beliefs, sometimes even displaying a resistance to rational, profit-driven business practices.

Khanchuz, who resided in Inglewood, entered into what could be deemed financial games of chance when he hustled to book and perform church gigs. In the years I was hanging out with Khanchuz, he rapped for Christ at every opportunity, in between working his two jobs: one as a youth counselor for a group home near the Crenshaw Mall and the other as a drug test administrant in Long Beach. He would often don two silver chains—one with a medallion of Jesus and the other a faux-diamond encrusted microphone. The image of these two symbols clinking together across his chest gives an inkling of the unpredictable, contradictory, and mystifying ways that money, hip hop, and religion operated within his evangelical hustle. Eventually, he switched to two silver chains with crosses.

Church gigs generally gave rap artists a modest “love offering,” but according to many gospel rappers, churches were also notorious for expecting them to perform for free because they were seen as Christians doing good works for Christ. DJ Heat recounted one such instance:

There were five of us in the group at this particular time and we were invited out to a big conference in Ontario—some big Southern California Gospel getdown where

they had everybody from Bishop Tutu to Kirk Franklin. Of course they had a budget. That's what they always say, "we have a budget." They already knew that certain artists were gonna get paid and certain artists weren't. So we fell into the category of those that weren't. So they wanted us to jump off from Los Angeles, all five of us, and go down to Ontario. And I'm thinking, well at least can they just give us some gas money. And these people, they can't even afford that. We already know the game, we know what's going on. If you're taking money for tickets, there's going to be some overhead. You're going to be able to pay people. We said OK, that's fine, we're probably not going to make it to Ontario.²⁷

Khanchuz was invited to perform one song for "no pay" at a church service twenty miles away from his home in Inglewood. His bank account was at zero, his gas tank was half-full, and it would be a week until his next paycheck. His twelve-year-old daughter, Jaysha, had asked to stay with him that weekend, but he told her he did not have the financial means to take care of her. Missing her father, she decided to come stay with him anyway. Khanchuz, despite the unfeasibility of this evangelical endeavor, chose to perform for the service in the hopes that serving God might reap unknown and spiritual rewards. One might consider driving miles and miles to perform for free in churches, especially in light of Khanchuz's tenuous financial situation and increasing fuel prices, an *unsound* business practice.

Called by God to minister through his music, Khanchuz fervently believed that the reward for this musical service, whether financial or spiritual, was hidden and yet waiting to be revealed. When he arrived, one of the other artists scheduled to perform that day cancelled and Khanchuz got to perform a few more songs in his place. When the pastor approached him at the end of the service, Khanchuz thought he was going to get chewed out for looking "too thug" or "too gangster". Instead, the pastor told him he wanted to support his future work with a small donation and slid a check into his hand. Khanchuz just folded it, and, without looking at it, slipped it in his pocket. Later, while he was driving home he unfolded the check and saw that it was for two hundred dollars. He and Jaysha were able to eat heartily for the rest of the week. Khanchuz felt he had not only earned a little bread, but also helped bolster the spiritual worth of gospel hip hop among a new congregation.

Other gospel hip hop artists and groups gave up potential celebrity and economic success in favor of maintaining and honoring their Christian commitments. L.A. Symphony, a less explicitly Christian rap group, turned down a record deal with a secular label because they felt they would be pressured to water down the religious nature of their message. This decision led to financial struggle for the group. To compensate, they ramped up their hustle to book church gigs as one of their main sources of livelihood. Khanchuz and groups like L.A. Symphony often exhibited a kind of "God's Got My Back" strategy in their financial practices around gospel rap (giving away many copies of their own CDs, performing for

free, making substantial offerings to churches, etc.), trusting that if they kept serving God's will, they would be blessed in return. These were two examples among many in which gospel rappers defied financial logic in favor of a faith-based conviction in the (re)circulation of money, gifts, and blessings. Sometimes financial rewards were reaped, other times gospel rappers came away empty handed. This was not a clear-cut system of exchange. What was critical here was that benevolent and fortuitous events were then interpreted as rewards for doing God's work and continuing to be in His service. As Slack of I.D.O.L. King told the members of Hip Hopposite one night in Compton at Sound Doctrine's house:

What are you really in it for? You gotta be willing to do it even if you don't get anything. There will be times when you get a lot and there will be times when you get very little. There will be times when you say, I just wanna come and you just sense it. I need to be there. I'm gonna come if I gotta pay myself, and then all of a sudden somebody will call you while you there or down the street and you get two thousand dollars and good lord, where did that come from? It's cause that's what God had in store for you.²⁸

MILK BEFORE MEAT

Constitutive of each gospel rappers' holy hustle was a dance between their creative agency, Christian morals, and the market. Certain gospel rappers found loopholes in morality in order to achieve greater circulation potential for their music, and therefore, the Gospel. Circulating the Good News was a core concern for many of them, and each gospel rapper deployed a different evangelical method for achieving it. Gospel MCs marketed their music in order to missionize—they leveraged hip hop to win souls for the Kingdom. Many of them evoked the metaphor of fishing to refer to their musical evangelism—fishing for lost souls with all the appropriate *bait* and *hooks*. This practice was not necessarily dissimilar to the commercial hip hop tactic of using catchy and often sung *hooks* or choruses to capture listeners.

Wary of scaring potential listeners and believers away with dogmatic scripture and explicit religious titles, artists often eschewed the name Christian rap in favor of other more ambiguous, less overtly religious monikers for their music. In an interview, Cue stated, “In black music, we have never been scared to talk about God, but as soon as you put the Christian cloak on it, it becomes something else. You don't want people to be blinded by the Christian cloak.” Therefore, when selling and giving away CDs, it was common to hear a gospel rapper explain their music as truth music, *earthquake music*, *worsh-hop*, *hip-hope*, just plain ol' good music, or simply hip hop.²⁹ This (mis)labeling practice was challenged by a common axiom flowing through gospel hip hop communities in L.A.: “Christians need to come out of the closet”—a phrase I often heard throughout my fieldwork. But gospel rappers'



FIGURE 15. Cue Jn-Marie’s “secular” hip hop group, Slum Peasants, c. 2008. Left to right: Elden, Mercy, and Cue. Photo courtesy of Phat Efx.

desire to reach people—to get even just one hook in—often trumped this moral imperative to disrobe and make one’s religious standing public.

Cue’s evangelical outreach involved a two-pronged approach to fishing for souls. He led and rapped in two different hip hop groups: one named *Asylumz*, a group he marketed as explicitly Christian rap dealing with overt Christian themes; and



FIGURE 16. Cue Jn-Marie's gospel hip hop group, Asylumz, also featuring Mercy.

Slum Peasants, one he marketed as a secular rap group. While they occasionally made lyrical references to God, Slum Peasants presented other social and political issues in their music and even used profanity on a very selective and strategic basis. Winning souls was a byproduct, not a strategic intention, of this particular project. Interestingly, both groups were mostly composed of the same members, all of whom were Christian men. Cue explained, “For Asylumz, if you’ve been so extreme in the depths of evil, you need a refuge. That refuge is only for believers. For Slum Peasants, the brush with the devil is still really close so you can’t hide behind the religion.” He saw these two groups as speaking to two different kinds of audiences. Asylumz was edification for believers. Slum Peasants was for the unsaved streets.

The music videos of Slum Peasants and Asylumz exposed the divergent ways the two groups highlighted and prioritized different agendas. In the Slum Peasants video, “All the Love Is Gone,” Cue and Mercy ride solemnly in a blue convertible through the streets of Los Angeles—down deserted alleyways, through the slums of skid row, under freeway overpasses—offering a reportage of L.A.’s urban underbelly. Mercy sings the chorus with a rich velvety vibrato over a slow syncopated hip hop groove. The only references to religion are the crosses hanging around their necks. This grim urban reality reveals truth, but lacks love. As Cue would say, “Truth without love is like doing surgery on someone without numbing the pain. The goal is crazy love.” Asylumz’s video for “Crazy Prayze” provides the antidote to the hauntingly despondent scene depicted by Slum Peasants. Footage of people passionately praising the Lord with frenzied histrionics and spontaneously catching the Holy Ghost in various religious contexts (church services, baptisms,

wedding ceremonies, etc.) is juxtaposed with live footage of Asylumz giving a hyperkinetic, raucous performance at Klub Zion in Leimert Park. The MCs of Asylumz rap with ferocious speed, conveying a sense of spiritual urgency and frenzy. And yet, there is a satirical tone permeating the video; the outrageousness of some of these outbursts of crazy praise is really a call for that crazy love that Cue was speaking about—a love that says “I’m ready to die for my faith.”

The juxtaposition of the two groups’ musical styles, lyrics, and performance practices raised questions around the evangelical currency and efficacy of the groups. Cue’s greater evangelical philosophy behind this was epitomized by the biblical expression “milk before meat,” a metaphor for an individual’s process of spiritual maturation.³⁰ He explained:

You gotta give them milk before meat. You gotta give ‘em something they like to give ‘em something they need. For me, in order for gospel hip hop to engage the world on a more significant level we have to be able to feed them milk. Most gospel hip hop, it’s not meat that I would call it, but it’s meat for the world. They’re not there yet. Slum Peasants is going right into where we are. We’re not coming and trying to make anybody be anything. We’re just saying, hey, this who we are and if you wanna roll, then let’s roll.³¹

Cue elaborated on this philosophy in an anecdote about a young gospel MC that he mentored. When Cue first met this MC, he was “rhyming with the Word.” Cue asked him what he wanted to be and the young MC retorted, “Well, I want to reach the world for Jesus.” Cue assured him that he wasn’t going to reach the world just putting scripture into rhyme, and told him, “That’s too religious.” The tension between blinding potential converts with the Christian cloak or hiding Christianity behind the cloak of hip hop was at work in Cue’s evangelical hustle to gain credibility as both an authentic hip hop artist and sincere disciple of Jesus. This latter credibility—being seen and heard as a true and sincere Christian—was critical as many of Cue’s musical projects were in part funded by his church home, the New Song Church.

Similarly, Majesty, a female gospel rapper from Inglewood, warned, “We got kids on the street prostituting. Hit ‘em where they at! You can’t hit ‘em with the word. Hit ‘em where they at and then reel them in like you going fishing. You fishing! Throw your hook in. Go to them where they at. And then you reel them in slowly.”³² She explained her plans to drop an underground album for the streets called *Heaven and Hell* before dropping one for the believers, explaining, “I’m feeling to hit with some secular before I hit ‘em with some Christian rap. It’s gotta all be mixed in but we gotta get out there secular. They [Christian rappers] don’t want me to say that. They don’t want me to do that. Still, God is still with me throughout the whole thing but I went through something and I can’t ignore that.” She viewed dropping a secular album not only as a smart mission strategy, but also as a necessary, inseparable, and authentic part of her life journey, her

conversion story, and, therefore, her musical expression. Her strategies to gain access and credibility coincided with her artistic self-fashioning. Her creative agency allowed her to hold the secular/sacred tension of her marketing and missionizing strategy, and to express what many see as a contradiction as an integrated wholeness.

Compton Virtue, a Christian rapper and spoken word poet from Compton, talked about her use of secular hip hop beats:

I realized that if you're going to be a fisher, you gotta have some bait. So, I would take urban hip hop beats that are popular on the radio that young people are listening to, because that is what is infectious . . . People that are not Christians don't listen to holy hip hop. People that are already Christian listen to it. How are we gonna get these people that need the message to hear it? Spit the gospel of Jesus Christ on beats they know.³³

Both Majesty and Compton Virtue invoked the metaphor of fishing for souls—a biblical idea that comes from Mark 1:17, where Jesus tells his disciples, “Come ye after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”

Hip Hopposite sometimes employed the strategy of spitting the gospel over well-known commercial hip hop beats. They revamped Erykah Badu's 2008 hip hop hit, “The Healer,” in which she demands that hip hop, as an expression of many gods and religions, is the ultimate healer. In an act of *flippin' the script(ure)*, Hip Hopposite changed Badu's lyric of “It's bigger than religion—Hip Hop” to “It's bigger than your hip hop—Jesus Christ.” While they added in a B-Love gospel rap verse “for believers,” they kept Madlib's catchy and haunting hip hop beat intact. Descending bell hits and an ominous chorus of high-pitched voices pulsating in the background create a sense of spiritual immediacy. This gospel reversion makes the case for both hip hop and Jesus as transformative healers.

Despite having different methods, most gospel rappers were careful not to cross moral thresholds. For both Cue and Majesty, the logics of evangelism, marketing, and hip hop coincided and cohered under the shared imperative of circulation and affective contact with listeners; this imperative satisfied and integrated their desires to sell music, deliver a relevant message in the hopes of saving souls, and earn credibility on multiple levels. These artists sanctified the hustle of pushing and promoting their music in unique, nontraditional ways. At the same time, the act of selling underground hip hop mixtapes, drawing on relevant secular issues and locations, and deploying street slang authenticated what might otherwise be looked at as trite and disingenuous proselytizing.

REAPING WHAT YOU SOW

The payments, paybacks, and rewards of practicing gospel hip hop were not necessarily financial, nor were they necessarily spiritual. How did holy hip hoppers put

gospel rap to work as a resource in various urban spaces? What kinds of social currency and extra-institutional spiritual capital did gospel rappers reap through their daily sowing?³⁴

Soup the Chemist, one of the first gospel rappers in Los Angeles back in the 1980s, along with several other gospel hip hop artists, delivered an impromptu performance at one of the most notorious housing projects in Newark, New Jersey—"The Prince Street Projects"—known for both its drug trafficking and the high percentage of residents with AIDS due to shared syringe use. Soup and his crew set up a portable stage and sound system right in the middle of the four high-rise buildings. Suddenly, in the middle of one of his songs, Soup felt something hit his arm. There were people on the roofs of the buildings, flinging objects and firing BB pellets down at them. Soup saw blood running down his soundman's face after something struck him in the head.

Drug lords, committed to protecting the ongoing need for their products among the project's residents, heard Soup's performance of Christ-centered hip hop as a direct threat to their business. After weathering the storm for a while, they quickly began to pack up their equipment, but Soup kept preaching and rapping. Monetary payment for this treacherous performance came in the form of another type of shower. This time it was the older women—mothers and grandmothers—throwing money through the windows of Soup's van as it sped away, encouraging him to come back and preach his hip hop gospel to their struggling community. Soup recalled how this spontaneous concert also helped him garner street credibility and authenticity among people in that neighborhood who had previously seen gospel rappers as soft, cheesy, "wannabe" rap artists.

Holy D, a gospel rapper residing in Palmdale, California, and godbrother of Battle Cat (a hip hop producer who also made beats for Snoop Dogg), was pulled over on his way to an evening church service in Compton. He had been invited to perform a gospel rap song for his uncle's congregation. Holy D's baby blue truck was "flossed out" with rims, tinted windows, a personalized license plate, a subwoofer stereo, and a slick, two-toned paint job. It was one of the most memorable and conspicuous gospel rap vehicles I encountered, and as such, it begged to be pulled over. The cops said they stopped him because the tinting on his front windows was too dark, but Holy D was convinced they were hoping to catch him for another offense. In his words, the cops were rude, antagonistic, and distrustful of his explanation of where he was going until he showed them his holy hip hop CD, *God's Creation*, as proof of his innocence and good character. The album cover features an image of Holy D in an oversized jersey and backwards baseball cap with angel wings fanning out from behind him. Upon seeing this angelic image of the gospel rapper, the cops let him go. In a moment of visual misrecognition, Holy D's gospel hip hop CD became a critical resource that literally got him "off the hook."



FIGURE 17. Soup the Chemist, c. 2013. Photo courtesy of Daley Hake.

Gospel rappers often used their CDs as a material catalyst for face-to-face encounters that would ideally blossom into deeper conversations about God—a point of entry, a portal, a conversation piece or gift that would promote further exchanges. Their music was the milk that would warm the palette to receive the meat of the Gospel. Their automobiles were the chariots that carried them in and out of dangerous scenarios and unpredictable territories as they hustled to win souls for Christ.

DO THE HUSTLE

All of these examples demonstrate the multifaceted and unscripted nature of gospel rappers' evangelical hustle, as well as the complex ways holy hip hoppers were seen, heard, interpreted, and recognized (or misrecognized). The manner in which churches, hip hop communities, and other groups in positions of cultural and legal authority perceived and portrayed holy hip hoppers *mattered*, affecting and informing the conditions of possibility for gospel rappers' ongoing livelihoods and the strategic performance of their own subjectivities. Thus, one of the main branches of activity in evangelical hustling was the practice of authenticating oneself to Christians and non-Christians, hip hop heads and critics, both old and young, which required knowing how and when to adhere to, and disrupt, dominant structures. These earned authenticities—street authenticity, hip hop authenticity, and spiritual authenticity, among others—fused together, forming an aggregation of resources that would hopefully be *converted* into economic payback and result in the *conversion* of souls. The activities of Los Angeles gospel rappers may have translated into more souls won for Christ, but not necessarily into better paying jobs or increased credit. Conversion, as a transformative religious, musical, and economic process, held immeasurable currency in the everyday spiritual marketplace of holy hip hop.

While the music industry clearly comprises the most significant portion of the business of sounds, gospel rap practice opens up discussions of alternative economies of faith, sentiments, and livelihood defined beyond material success. The informality of gospel rap's evangelical hustle, and the acquisition of nonfinancial currencies, did not necessarily occur outside the formal economy. Rather, their activities, while privileging social collaborations and relationships over purely economic concerns, were still located within macroeconomic situations. Gospel rappers rerouted and redeemed some of the ideas, associations, and attendant forms of currency rooted in the street hustle into a hardcore urban evangelism. In so doing, they were developing what they saw as morally sound and musically sounded business ministries, born from their own individual and collective histories, and contingent on their religious beliefs, monetary realities, situated knowledges, artistic imaginations, and the expectations of specific urban populations.

In a final sequence of spin moves on the word hustle, the original meaning of "shaking to and fro" is given new significance in the dancing body of the holy hip hopper as well as in the seismic shifts of urban terrains. Participants and audience members at gospel hip hop shows often did the electric slide—a social line dance that is considered the generational offspring of the 1970s dance form the hustle. Dancers slid from side to side, flowed from back to front, forming human lines across the dance floor with their simultaneous

movements. Such powerful moves suggested traversals and lateral networks of coordination and collectivity across urban spaces. Such moves demonstrated how holy hip hoppers created flow among different economic, spiritual, and social currencies circulating through territories and practices of gospel rap. Below the radar of commercial visibility, these street disciples conducted their everyday *Kingdom Business*, hustled in the here and now with their eyes on the prize of the hereafter.