

# VIBE

## RAP AND RELIGION

Street credibility, meet holy righteousness. Once greeted by ridicule and derision, Christian hip hop is gaining momentum.

The young fans gathered in the asphalt lot beside Richmond, Va.'s Creighton Court projects weren't quite ready to go home. Dressed in do-rags, fitted caps, knee-grazing T-shirts, and baggy jean shorts, the audience shouted for an encore, demanding one song in particular, "Live Agua."

The four members of Philadelphia-based the Cross Movement camp charged back onstage to grant the request and spit lyrics over a tight, merengue-flavored hip hop beat. Reaching a high point of emotion, one of the rappers, the Tonic, 36, rattled off a long list of beverages, only to tell the crowd none could compare with water—the Living Water of Jesus Christ, that is.

Clever rhyme treatments like "Live Agua" are fueling the current transformation in Christian hip hop: rappers who can rip mixes and serve God. "You couple biblical context with lyrical skill and excellent production," says the Tonic (real name: John Kevin Wells), "and over the years, it continues to grow."

Ken Pennell, the president of EMI Gospel

and a fan of the Cross Movement, agrees. "There's a huge movement of young people getting involved in Christianity," he says. "The culture that those young people have grown up in is hip hop. Yet in their creative art forms, they want to express their faith in God."

Just as contemporary gospel artists like Kirk Franklin bring Jesus to a growing secular audience, Christian hip hop is gaining more acceptance in the church. Artists such as T.R.U.T.H., J-Silas, and Corey Red & Precise have also helped propel a genre that wasn't always so vibrant. "I think Christian hip hop used to be something to laugh at," the Tonic says. "The artists had a heart for God, but they weren't excellent in hip hop. It probably set us back a couple of years." But a new day is coming.



**IN GOD THEY TRUST:** Members of the Cross Movement (from left): the Ambassador, the Tonic, OJ Official, T.R.U.-L.I.F.E., and the Phanatik.

### > HEAVY ROTATION:

Timothy Brindle *The Great Awakening* (Lamp Mode Recordings)  
Corey Red & Precise *Resistance Iz Futile* (Life Music Records)  
R-Swift *Elevation 8.02* (1-66 Entertainment)  
The Cross Movement *Holy Culture* (Cross Movement Records)  
Lil Irocc Williams *Lil IROCC Williams* (Forefront/EMI Gospel)

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