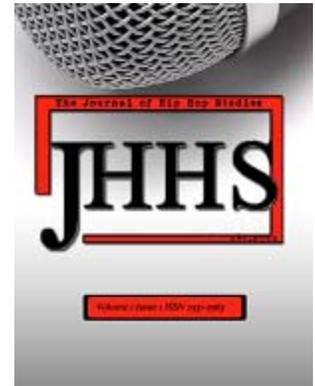


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## **Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae's Contribution to Hip Hop**

**Travis Harris**

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# Refocusing and Redefining Hip Hop: An Analysis of Lecrae's Contribution to Hip Hop

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## Abstract

Hip Hop scholarship has overlooked and separated emcees who publically identify themselves as Christians who exist to make God famous. This deficiency contributes to an inadequate understanding of Hip Hop and places Hip Hop in a dangerous position of alienating ostracized voices. This paper aims to draw attention to these shortcomings by analyzing Lecrae's contribution to Hip Hop. Influenced by his worldview, Lecrae leads a socially conscious movement and helps to bridge the "sacred" and "secular" gap. Lecrae redirects Hip Hop back to its roots. I will examine Lecrae's lyrics, websites, social media and interviews. Interviews of Lecrae will come from several mainstream Hip Hop websites and videos found on YouTube. The combination of all these areas of inquiry will present a holistic view of Lecrae. The goal of this paper is to provide one article about Christians in Hip Hop with the hopes of spurring more discussion around such a vast field of study.

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Eh, they don't know about us, they don't, they don't know about us  
They think we dum, dum diddy dum, dum  
But they gon' know, they gon' know about us - Lecrae and Tedashii, "Dum  
Dum"

## Introduction

Out of the dust and ashes from apartment buildings burning in the streets of the Bronx, New York, among the disenfranchised Black and Hispanic youth rose Hip Hop. Hip Hop provided an identity and a voice to the voiceless; therefore, the exclusion of certain voices in contemporary Hip Hop is antithetical to the genre's foundation. Particularly, the voices of Christians in Hip Hop, whose focus is to make God famous, are rarely included in discussions by academic and Hip Hop communities. On September 4, 2012, Lecrae Moore released *Gravity*, his sixth studio album. *Gravity* debuted as the number one bestselling album on the overall iTunes chart and number three on the Billboards 200 chart. Despite the success of this album, the academic community has not given adequate attention to Lecrae. If Hip Hop scholarship does not pay attention to Lecrae and other Christians in Hip Hop then it will contribute to the very illegitimacy it fights against. American society has misunderstood, misrepresented and wrongfully accused Hip Hop. Hip Hop is notorious, not only in America, but around the world, for misogyny, the glamorization of gang violence and a seemingly insatiable pursuit of money. Therefore, there is a need for Hip Hop scholars to examine Christians in Hip Hop in order to help combat this limited view of the genre and

provide a comprehensive definition of Hip Hop, nationally and internationally. The absence of any voice within a group quite often leaves the entire group vulnerable to improper identification, disenfranchisement and oppression.

Christians have been a part of Hip Hop throughout its history. During Hip Hop's beginning, Charles Howard, in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture*, discusses Sylvia Robinson's encounter with the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> Stephen Wiley, who is recognized as the first "Christian Rapper," wrote the lyrics to the song "Basketball" performed by Kurtis Blow. In 1982, Peter Harrison, who goes by MC Sweet, released an album titled *Jesus Christ (The Gospel Beat)* on the Lektion Record label. Wiley and Harrison were nationally known artists but there were several local emcees who were also Christians.<sup>2</sup> There is a whole community of Christians in Hip Hop that includes Lecrae; out of this community has grown a movement with Lecrae at the forefront.

The movement that Lecrae both leads and invests in challenges Hip Hop to go back to its roots of providing a voice to the voiceless and addressing the issues that the disenfranchised of American society confronts. As the face of the movement to mainstream American culture, Lecrae has also had success by winning a Grammy in 2013 in the Best Gospel Album category for *Gravity*. He is breaking down the barriers that have kept Christians out of rap music by bridging the gap between the church and Hip Hop. He amalgamates "Christian Hip Hop" and Hip Hop and offers new ways of conceiving what is considered "sacred" and "secular." Furthermore, Lecrae does not perpetuate negative stereotypes; he is one of many Christians who is not ostentatious in Hip Hop. He has chosen to "play the background," he raps: "Yeah, so if you need me I'll be stage right. Prayin' the whole world will start embracing stage fright. So let me fall back and stop giving my suggestions. Cause when I follow my obsessions I end up confessing. I'm not that impressive, matter of fact I'm who I are. A trail of star dust leading to the Superstar."<sup>3</sup>

### Scholarship on Religion and Hip Hop

I know when I first, at least in the circles that I ran in, started the conversation of hip hop, religion, and spirituality it was very much frowned upon and there just weren't that many resources. - Daniel Hodge, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Howard, "Deep Calls to Deep: Beginning Explorations of the Dialogue between the Black Church and Hip Hop," in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*, ed. Emmett G. Price III (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Hooker and the New Testament Troop were local emcees who were Christians. In 1982, Hooker had a song recorded and played locally in Washington, D.C. In 1984, New Testament Troop had a song called "Gospel Rappin." Further, there have been emcees, deejays, b-boys/girls and graffiti artist who have identified themselves as Christians through the 1980s, 1990s and into the 2000s. Most notable is D.C. Talk who was the first "Christian Rap" group to win a Grammy. D.C. Talk won four Grammys in the Best Rock Gospel Album category.

<sup>3</sup> Lecrae Moore, "Background," *Rehab* (Reach Records, 2010).

The dearth of scholarship on religion and Hip Hop is confined to several books published in 2011 and a few book chapters and articles. In addition to Utley, books on religion and Hip Hop are Anthony Pinn's *Noise and the Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, Monica Miller's *Religion and Hip Hop* and Daniel Hodge's two books *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* and *Heaven Has A Ghetto: The Missiological Theology of Tupac Amaru Shakur*. Michael Eric Dyson provides a thorough analysis of Tupac Shakur's Christology in *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex Culture and Religion*.

Scholarship on Christians in Hip Hop is even more limited than religion and Hip Hop. The one book that devotes several chapters to it is Emmett G. Price III's book *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*, released in 2011. The only full account given to "Christian Hip Hop" is a dissertation by Shanesha Renée Frances Brooks-Tatum entitled: "Poetics with a Promise: Performances of Faith and Gender in Christian Hip-Hop," which was issued in 2010. Two articles focus on "gospel rap/hip-hop," Josef Sorett's article "Beats, Rhymes and Bibles: An Introduction to Gospel Hip Hop" and Sandra Barnes' article "Religion and Rap Music: An Analysis of Black Church Usage." Sorett's article is also included in Price's book. Pinn's book contains one chapter on Christian rap music.<sup>4</sup> Also, the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music* written by Mark Powell includes some history on several emcees. Other than that, scholars barely mention "Christian Rap."

Scholarly work on religion and Hip Hop has been primarily viewed through a "Christian" lens. Although Hip Hop's perspective of Christianity has been examined, more work still needs to be done. There aren't any books or articles that mention the New Testament Youth Troop, a group of Christians who released "Gospel Rappin" in 1984. The articles that have been written mention Stephen Wiley as the first "Christian Rapper," but Peter Harrison is not referenced at all. There are hundreds of artists on the Holy Hip Hop database website but other than the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*, these emcees are seldom referenced, if at all. Intentionally or unintentionally, Hip Hop scholarship has overlooked Christians in Hip Hop. Now is the time for academics and the broader Hip Hop community to give Christian artists the attention they have earned and deserve.

Who is Lecrae?

Listen, partner, they're lying to us, they're selling pies to us  
 They teach us how to be gang bangers and nine shooters  
 I've been where you've been, seen what you've seen  
 Group up with old dawg, looking mean on the screen  
 When Nas was street dreaming, and Biggie was still breathin'  
 And cash ruled everything around me, creamin' - Lecrae, "Rise"

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<sup>4</sup> The chapter in Anthony Pinn's book *Noise and the Spirit* is entitled "African American Christian Rap: Facing 'Truth' and Resisting It" by Garth Baker-Fletcher.

Lecrae Moore was born in Houston, Texas. He was raised by his mother and lived in several cities during his childhood, including San Diego, Denver and Dallas. Lecrae lived in the “hoods”<sup>5</sup> of these cities.<sup>6</sup> In an interview done by Desiring God, Lecrae provides further details about his upbringing.<sup>7</sup> A significant part of Lecrae’s childhood, the departure of his dad due to drugs, mirrors the greater Hip Hop community. In “Just Like You,” Lecrae raps about his struggle with fatherlessness, he states:

I don't know another way to go, this is the only way they ever show. I got this emptiness inside that got me fightin' for approval cause I missed out on my daddy sayin, "Way to go." Didn't get that verbal affirmation don't know how to treat a woman, how to fix an engine, to keep the car runnin'. So now I'm lookin at the media and I'm followin' what they feed me. Rap stars, trap stars, whoever wants to lead me. Even though they lie they still tell me that they love me. They say I'm good at bad things, at least they proud of me.<sup>8</sup>

Lecrae’s absent father left him searching for male role models. He then turned to the men in his ‘hood for guidance which led to Lecrae being affiliated with gangs and drugs.

Lecrae’s encounter with Christians in Hip Hop played an integral role in his “conversion.” When he was nineteen years old, he saw some men who dressed liked him and talked like him. These Christians made Jesus relevant to Lecrae and invited him to a conference. Here, James White<sup>9</sup> presented the “clearest gospel presentation that [Lecrae] had ever heard.”<sup>10</sup> Lecrae shares in the same interview the conviction he felt of his wrongdoing and that he had “hurt Jesus” after hearing the sermon. He then shared that he fell on his knees and asked forgiveness. After Lecrae graduated from the University of North Texas and married, he moved to a ‘hood in Memphis, Tennessee. Lecrae’s deep concern for the ‘hood and Hip Hop created a drive to provide inspiration to people who were in the very same situation he was in. He partnered with Ben Washer and founded the record label Reach Records. Lecrae also founded and is President of ReachLife Ministries, which “exists to help bridge the gap between biblical truth and the urban context.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ‘hood is a common term used in Hip Hop which is short for neighborhood. The “neighbor” is dropped, leaving hood.

<sup>6</sup> “Lecrae’s Biography,” published online at <http://reachrecords.com/artists/show/Lecrae> (accessed December 12, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> “Lecrae Interview Part 1 of 3” *YouTube*. Online Video Clip, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeOVOjelOOE> (accessed December 12, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Lecrae Moore, “Just Like You,” *Rehab* (Reach Records 2010).

<sup>9</sup> James White was one of the speaker’s at the Impact conference Lecrae attended.

<sup>10</sup> “Lecrae Interview Part 2 of 3” *YouTube*. Online Video Clip, [http://youtu.be/m\\_xxDo6XgNM](http://youtu.be/m_xxDo6XgNM) (accessed on December 12, 2012)

<sup>11</sup> “About ReachLife Ministries,” published online at <http://reachlife.org/about/> (accessed December 20, 2012)

## What is Hip Hop?

The world incorrectly identifies Hip Hop with the tool of delivering the message, rap, as the summation of Hip Hop. Tricia Rose, in her landmark book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, discusses the dialectical views presented by Hip Hop. She states: "Rap music brings together a tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society. Rap's contradictory articulations are not signs of absent intellectual clarity; they are a common feature of community and popular cultural viewpoint."<sup>12</sup> Rose refutes the incomplete understanding of rap music in American society and discusses the various factors worth considering in order to properly understand the full essence of Hip Hop.

Rose and several other Hip Hop scholars have done an excellent job explaining the various socio-economic and historic factors that have contributed to Hip Hop's development. In addition to Rose, Jeff Chang provides an in-depth history where he discusses Hip Hop's developmental environment in *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. Hip Hop scholars have also repudiated the perception that Hip Hop is rap music. There are at least four elements of Hip Hop: DJing, B-Boying, MCing, and Graffiti Art. Scholars have shown that there are "conscious" Hip Hoppers who are aware of the social ills of American society and fighting against it. Some scholarly examples are Charise Cheney's *Brother's Gonna Work it Out: Sexual Politics in the Golden Age of Rap Nationalism*, Jeffrey Ogbar's *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Cultural Politics of Rap*, and A. Sahid Stover's *Hip Hop Intellectual Resistance*.

Although Hip Hop scholarship has considered those that are "conscious," further attention to Christians in the culture is still required to develop a well-rounded definition of Hip Hop. Christians and "conscious" Hip Hoppers have homogenous goals. Christians have similar backgrounds and were just as involved with Hip Hop as much as the greater Hip Hop community. They grew up in 'hoods, listened to the same music, went to the same parties, were involved with gangs and experienced the same social ills that many Hip Hoppers experienced. Therefore Christians should be included in the conversation about identifying Hip Hop.

## Hip Hop (Re)defined

And I don't play church, partna, this is what I'm living  
 Hey Bun called from Texas, told me Crae, I get it,  
 You are no imposter, you spit it how you live it  
 Them inmates tellin me keep spittin' n don't quit it  
 Cause when that music play, they ain't worried about the sentence  
 25 to life boy the dead has risen, so tell Sing Sing, the king is coming back to get  
 em - Lecrae, "Rejects"

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<sup>12</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 2.

Lecrae identifies himself as authentically Christian<sup>13</sup> and authentically Hip Hop. His identity of being authentically Christian shapes his worldview and does not always line up with certain aspects of the current representation of Hip Hop. He does agree with the perspective provided by Hip Hop scholars that Hip Hop is more than rap music, especially the music that is heard on radio and the videos seen on television. Lecrae contributes to a definition of Hip Hop an inextricable link between what he raps and how he lives. Inspired by Lecrae's faith, his life is committed to entering dark situations and providing light; whether that's to the fatherless young man in the 'hood or the pop stars who are secretly struggling. He does not see a contradiction between being a Christian and being Hip Hop. Essentially, Lecrae is Hip Hop and being Hip Hop means a desire to provide hope in a hopeless situation.

Two aspects of Hip Hop that Lecrae's Christian faith looks to refocus are "realness" and the aggrandizing of fortune and fame. Jeffery Ogbar, in *Hip-Hop Revolution*, provides a definition of "realness." Ogbar states: "At its most fundamental level, 'realness' in hip-hop implies intimate familiarity with the urban, working-class landscapes that gave rise to hip-hop in the 1970's. Additionally, it recognizes that the conditions in the South Bronx around 1974 are not unfamiliar to poor urban communities elsewhere... A brash intimacy with crime has also been assumed within the dominant definition of hip-hop authenticity during the last decade."<sup>14</sup> Ogbar goes on to explain how a "real nigga" is a "thug" and the two terms have become synonymous. "Thugs" are raised in the housing projects and "extol ghettoized pathology (drug selling, gang banging, violence, pimping etc) to affirm their realness."<sup>15</sup>

Ogbar does provide examples within Hip Hop that challenged the "real niggas" identity including "conscious" rappers like Common and Talib Kweli, "black-conscious rebel" like Jay-Z and those of different races, such as Bubba Sparxxx, since "realness" usually associates with blackness. Lecrae adds another dimension to understanding "realness" in Hip Hop; someone who can stay true to their Christian faith and maintain Hip Hop authenticity. The combination of staying true to Christianity in the face of the pervasive identification of "realness" is quite difficult. Non-thug emcees are not as respected throughout Hip Hop. Lecrae's portrayal of "realness" is staying true to one's identity despite the disrespect.

Black Nationalist, Jeru the Damaja, offers another perspective to who is a "real nigga." Jeru recognizes himself as a "real nigga" in the song "One Day" in which he

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<sup>13</sup> In the interview with The PODIUM Magazine, Lecrae was asked what it means to be "authentically Hip Hop." Lecrae responded by saying that he is not doing "church boy rap" which is forced or contrived. He grew up in the 'hood and in the Hip Hop culture. He also names the elements of Hip Hop: graffiti and b-boying and states "I was bathed in it." "Lecrae Interview" YouTube. Online Video Clip, ThePODIUMChannel, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_detailpage&v=iLS1rGFlvH8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=iLS1rGFlvH8) (published November 6, 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Ogbar, *Hip-Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2007), 39.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 43

“rescues hip-hop from the corrupt, greedy and materialistic forces of the industry.”<sup>16</sup> Jeru reveals that the popularity of Hip Hop has also led to the temptation of Hip Hop “selling out” for money. The possibility of gaining luxurious houses, cars, top of the line clothing and other materialistic possessions may be alluring to those in a lower socio-economic class. Hip Hop’s pursuit of success is not inherently evil. The issue lies in Hip Hop losing its identity to attaining the maximum amount of material possessions. W.E.B. Du Bois, in *Criteria of Negro Art*, asked this series of questions referring to what Blacks would do if their social circumstance changed:

... suppose, too, you became at the same time rich and powerful -- what is it that you would want? What would you immediately seek? Would you buy the most powerful of motor cars and outrace Cook County? Would you buy the most elaborate estate on the North Shore? Would you be a Rotarian or a Lion or a What-not of the very last degree? Would you wear the most striking clothes, give the richest dinners, and buy the longest press notices?<sup>17</sup>

He then goes on to say: “Even as you visualize such ideals you know in your hearts that these are not the things you really want. ... but nevertheless lived in a world where men know, where men create, where they realize themselves and where they enjoy life. It is that sort of a world we want to create for ourselves and for all America.”<sup>18</sup> Hip Hop pioneer, Clive Campbell (DJ Kool Herc), agrees with Du Bois. He states: “To me, hip-hop says, ‘Come as you are.’ We are a family. It ain’t about security. It ain’t about bling bling. It ain’t about how much your gun can shoot. It ain’t about \$200 sneakers. It is not about me being better than you or you being better than me.”<sup>19</sup> Du Bois and Kool Herc are arguing against insurmountable assets and for the ability to create an identity as part of a loving family.

Lecrae’s paradigm shift away from being a “thug” and avaricious is in line with Jeru, Du Bois and Kool Herc. In the song “Chase That,” he makes a similar argument that Lauryn Hill makes in the song “Final Hour.” Hill rapped “You could get the money/ You could get the power/But keep your eyes on the final hour.”<sup>20</sup> Lecrae and Hill believe the issue is much deeper than the surface level pursuit of fame. They believe the real issue is a heart issue. The hook of Lecrae’s song “Chase That” is:

*And you can have the money  
And you can have the fame  
But me I want the Glory  
I’m living for the Name  
See life is just a picture  
I see outside the frame  
I’m living for a kingdom that I ain’t never seen*

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 43

<sup>17</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art” in *The Crisis*, October 1926, 510.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 510

<sup>19</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 12 Reader I-book.

<sup>20</sup> Lauryn Hill, “Final Hour,” *Miseducation of the Negro* (Sony, 1998)

Lecrae and Hill do not have a problem with getting money. Lecrae in “Confe\$\$ions” states: “Ain't nothing wrong with havin' it. Matter fact, go and get it.”<sup>21</sup> The cautioning to Hip Hop is that pursuit of money and prominence may signify an empty and envious heart. Hill's warning about the final hour points to judgment by God. Hill mentions the 73<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which is a Psalm by Asaph pondering the prosperity of the wicked while the righteous suffer.<sup>22</sup> Hill realizes, despite the prosperity of the wicked, they will fall.

Lecrae argues that before judgment, pursuing fame will never satisfy the heart. In “Chase That,” Lecrae goes on to say: “The same kind Alexander the Great felt, when the Earth ran out of room / He conquered all he could, but yet he's feeling consumed / By this never ending quest for glory he couldn't fuel.” Lecrae believes that only God can quench the thirst of a human heart. Lecrae's presentation of Hip Hop pointing to Jesus for value provides a different image of Hip Hop and contests the popular perception of Hip Hop finding its identity in possessions.

Authentic Hip Hop does not prevaricate the glamour of amassing wealth. Lecrae is refocusing Hip Hop from the voracious quest of riches to what it was originally meant to be, empowerment to the disenfranchised providing purpose and identity. Dante “Yasiin” Smith, formerly known as “Mos Def,” provides the clearest definition of Hip Hop as an identity. In “Fear Not of Man” Yasiin raps:

“People always ask me, ‘Yo, Mos what is happening with Hip Hop.’ I tell them what ever is happening with us, if we smoked out then hip-hop is going to be smoked out, if we are fine then hip-hop is going to be fine, people be talking about hip-hop as if it is some type of giant sitting on the hillside, ‘WE ARE HIP-HOP,’ so the next time you wandering where hip-hop is going ask yourself where am I going, what I am doing.”<sup>23</sup>

Yasiin articulates that Hip Hop finds its identity in the people and that people find their identity in Hip Hop. He articulates that Hip Hop's identity is not a distant entity; instead, it is interconnected with the community's life.

Kool Herc provides similar commentary that affirms the understanding of authentic Hip Hop being a way of life. He explains: “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.”<sup>24</sup>

Kool Herc then goes on and lays out a framework of the true essence of Hip Hop. He says: “There are a lot of people who are doing something positive, who are doing

<sup>21</sup> Lecrae Moore, “Confe\$\$ions,” *Gravity* (Reach Records, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> Psalm 73 is a Psalm by Asaph and he shares how, at first, he was envious of the wicked prospering while they were living immoral but he was living right and not prospering. In verse 17b – 19, he states: “[T]hen I perceived their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms.” New Revised Standard Version

<sup>23</sup> Dante Smith, “Fear Not of Man,” *Black on Both Sides* (Rawkus Entertainment, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 12 Reader I-book., 12.

hip-hop the way it was meant to be done.”<sup>25</sup> Kool Herc is arguing for Hip Hop to be active in the community and providing encouragement to the demoralized.

“Doing something positive” is exactly what Lecrae is doing and the depiction of authentic Hip Hop that Lecrae presents. Lecrae started by reaching out to young males who had problems with the law. He writes about this period in his life in the blog “Church Clothes – Purpose, Passion, Progression.” He states: “That project (Real Talk) opened doors for me to travel a bit – mostly prisons, churches and inner city outreaches – and perform my songs.”<sup>26</sup> Lecrae reached out to men in prison and in the ‘hood. He also rapped at different churches. Lecrae’s outreach started at the local, grassroots level.

As previously mentioned, after Lecrae graduated from college, he moved to Memphis, Tennessee. He says this about his time in Memphis: “Personally, I couldn’t simply talk about change. I had to be a part of it, so I spent my life living in the inner city, doing foreign missions and serving in the local church. All of that was ammunition for my Rebel album. My life bled out in that project ...”<sup>27</sup> Lecrae’s ministry grew and so did he as an emcee. In addition to living in the inner city, he also went to other countries. Lecrae discusses his mission trip to Central America in the song “Go Hard” and references this period of his life in the song “Sacrifice.” Lecrae has poured out his life in service to others; authentic Hip Hop.

This definition of Hip Hop Lecrae represents, involves his faith, which impacts his life and influences his music to paint a picture of hope. As Lecrae transforms and grows, Hip Hop grows. Lecrae is akin to an illustrator who paints a beautiful portrait of redemption that was birthed out of a filthy past. Initially, he thought he had to overtly scream Jesus in his music and life. His ascension in music, among other factors, has contributed to bridging a divide.

### Bridging the Gap to Continue the Movement

My, my, my generation is known for being complacent, but, don't change the station cause we might change the nation. – Lecrae, “Our Generation”

Derrick Alridge, Emmett Price, Charise Cheney and several other Hip Hop scholars have argued that there is a dissonance between the Civil Rights generation and the Hip Hop generation. Many leaders who are a part of the Civil Rights generation are also involved with the “Black Church.” Alridge, in the essay “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas,” explains: “Activists and scholars of the Hip Hop generation, in turn, often criticize the civil rights generation for being out of touch with contemporary ‘real world’ problems of black youth, for failing to reach out to black youth, or failing to understand the complexities of the postindustrial society in which

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 13

<sup>26</sup> Lecrae Moore, “Church Clothes – Purpose, Passion, Progression.” Published online at <http://reachrecords.com/blog/post/Church-Clothes-Purpose-Passion-Progression>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

black youth live.”<sup>28</sup> Scholars of religion and Hip Hop, including Lerone Martin, Daniel Hodge and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, have all argued that the church is responsible for taking the first step in bridging this generational chasm.

The divide between the church and Hip Hop has contributed to the divide between “Christian Hip Hop” and Hip Hop. Lecrae’s ability to fill the void between the church and Hip Hop is significant in building relationships between Christians and Hip Hop. The church’s inability to cooperate with Hip Hop jeopardizes the church’s ability to meet its mission. Therefore, Lecrae’s appropriation of an adequate theology that reaches Hip Hop is essential to both the church’s and Hip Hop’s identity of empowering the outcast of society.

Price discusses the discontinuity between the Civil Rights generation and the Hip Hop generation in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture*. The first chapter, Alton Pollard’s essay “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop,” sparks the conversation by challenging the Hip Hop generation to continue the fight for social equality where the Civil Rights generation left off. He states, “However, I see the same divine presence that was at work during the era of civil rights and Black consciousness pervasive in Hip Hop music and Hip Hop culture today.”<sup>29</sup> In order for the Hip Hop generation to continue the fight, “we need to join Hip Hop and faith where coexistence is possible and where mutual integrity and respect can be maintained.”<sup>30</sup> Pollard believes in the aggregation of the church and Hip Hop.

Cheney discusses Hip Hop resistance to Christians in *Brothers Gonna Work it Out*. She states: “During the golden age of rap nationalism, Christianity no longer held center stage as the dominant theological structure of black liberatory philosophy--Islam gained prominence with a prophetic promise of the rise of the ‘Asiatic Black Man’.”<sup>31</sup> The prominence of Islam, Nation of Islam and Five Percent Nation directly contested Christianity. Further, Cheney explains, Black Nationalists argued that Christianity was a “white man’s religion” that enslaved and oppressed Americans of African descent. Christianity was also critiqued for a number of other issues including immorality of black preachers, over emphasis on the “after life,” and overall hypocrisy.

The oppositional views Black Nationalists presented against Christianity were not confined to “raptivists.” Hip Hop has issues with the “Black Church’s” presentation of Christianity. In ‘hoods all across the United States where Hip Hoppers live and represent, churches are physically present but not present in bringing about real change. Martin discusses the church’s lack of involvement with Hip Hop in the essay “Binding the Straw Man: Hip Hop, African American Protestant Religion, and the

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<sup>28</sup> Derrick P. Alridge, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: Toward a Nexus of Ideas,” in *Message in the Music: Hip Hop History and Pedagogy*, ed. Derrick P. Alridge et al. (Washington, D.C.: Asalh Press, 2010), 37.

<sup>29</sup> Alton Pollard, “From Civil Rights to Hip Hop: A Meditation,” in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*, ed. Emmett G. Price III (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 121

Dilemma Dialogue.” He states: “Rap music is not the oxygen of homophobia, sexism, and misogyny; rather, it is simply our society’s and faith community’s ‘mirror mirror on the wall.’ Attacking, scapegoating, and ignoring Hip Hop is tantamount to ‘shattering’ the mirror.”<sup>32</sup> The church’s unwillingness to see its own sin leaves Hip Hop avoided.

The church’s inadequate theology propagates the avoidance of Hip Hop. Howard Thurman, in *Jesus and the Disinherited*, argued that the church does not have a proper theology for the disenfranchised. He states:

I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of times that I have heard a sermon on the meaning of religion, of Christianity, to the man who stands with his back against the wall... The masses of men live with their backs constantly against the wall. They are the poor, the disinherited, the disposed. What does our religion say to them? The issue is not what it counsels them to do for others whose need may be greater, but what religion offers to meet their own needs.<sup>33</sup>

As Rose and many other Hip Hop scholars have indicated, Hip Hop comes from the margins. Thurman contends that the churches he encountered had nothing to offer the outcast of society. This still stands; churches are theologically deficient in reaching the marginalized of American society, namely Hip Hop. The result of the church not developing an adequate theology for ministering to the oppressed is stagnation and lack of engagement with Hip Hop.

Theology that can be used by the church in reaching Hip Hop has been explained by Hodge and Michael Eric Dyson. They believe that a “nit grit” theology, one that people from the ‘hood can relate to is necessary for reaching those in the ‘hood. Dyson uses Tupac as an example and discusses Tupac’s song “Black Jesuz.”<sup>34</sup> In the song, Tupac says: “Somebody that hurt like we hurt. Somebody that smoke like we smoke. Drink like we drink. That understand where we coming from.”<sup>35</sup> Hip Hop is looking for someone that relates to them.

Lecrae, being authentically Christian and Hip Hop, fits this mold. He effectively bridges the incongruity between Hip Hop and the church. Lecrae’s background provides him with a unique perspective and relevance to Hip Hop. His background is significant in the development of a theology that provides sustenance to those in a needy situation. In several interviews, Lecrae talks about Tupac’s influence on his life. This is important because he could fall in line with developing a theological view that Dyson and Hodge are putting forth. In the *Desiring God* interview, Lecrae shares how

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<sup>32</sup> Lerone Martin, “Binding the Straw Man: Hip Hop, African American Protestant Religion, and the Dilemma of Dialogue,” in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*, ed. Emmett G. Price III (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 60.

<sup>33</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), 13.

<sup>34</sup> Michael E. Dyson, *Open Mike: Reflections on Philosophy, Race, Sex, Culture and Religion* (New York, NY: Civitas Books), 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Tupac Shakur, “Black Jesuz,” *Still I Rise* (Interscope Records: 1999)

he was drawn to Tupac because Tupac also grew up in the inner city and was well read.<sup>36</sup>

In an interview with Vincent Funaro of Christian Post, Lecrae states: "The thing I loved about [Tupac] was that he wasn't afraid to talk about God or faith, and his misunderstandings, or understandings of it. He just talked about that, [faith] and I think it's healthy. We need people to talk about these realities and ask these questions, and its dope to do that within hip-hop."<sup>37</sup> Tupac encouraged Lecrae's transparency in his music and to rap about real life struggles.

Lecrae's background has allowed him to understand the issues the underprivileged are facing.<sup>38</sup> Lecrae's description of his past struggles provides insight and a connection to Thurman's critique of the church. In "Release Date," he raps:

*Outgrown and on my own/ They say when in Rome  
Do as the Romans do/ But I found when I do that I die like Romans too  
Yeah, I'm reading Romans 2 (What's it say)  
Your words are on my heart (truth)  
But I ain't got no excuse (no)  
It's time to play my part*

Lecrae's exposition of his past immediately relates to Thurman's critique of the church. Thurman explains: "It was this kind of atmosphere that characterized the life of the Jewish community when Jesus was a youth in Palestine. The urgent question was what must be the attitude toward Rome."<sup>39</sup> Thurman discusses how Jesus, a Jew, lived under Roman oppression. The Jews, at that time, struggled with pursuing freedom from domination or staying bound at the brink of nihilism.

Thurman continues and says: "[T]his is the position of the disinherited in every age. What must be the attitude toward the rulers, the controllers of political, social, and economic life? This is the question of the Negro in American life."<sup>40</sup> Lecrae could relate. He makes the connection between the pressures of living in the 'hood with the Jews living in Rome. When he does "do like the Romans" he "dies" or, as Thurman describes, loses his identity. Lecrae then mentions Romans 2 and communicates that the law is written on his heart.<sup>41</sup> Although he is not a Jew and does not have the actual law

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<sup>36</sup> "Lecrae Interview Part 1 of 3" YouTube. Online Video Clip, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeOVOjelO0E> Accessed December 12, 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent Funaro, "Lecrae Talks Tupac, New Album 'Gravity,' and Staying True to Hip-Hop" published on line at <http://global.christianpost.com/news/lecae-talks-tupac-new-album-gravity-and-staying-true-to-hip-hop-78914/#dT5f0sJfF50p6QRU.99> [cited July 26, 2012] (accessed December 12, 2012)

<sup>38</sup> Lecrae talks about these issues in several songs: "Black Rose," "Just Like You," "Change," "Violence," "Sacrifice," "Cold World" and "Rise."

<sup>39</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), 22.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23

<sup>41</sup> In chapter 2, Paul is arguing that God's judgment is righteous. In verses 12 through 16, Paul discusses the judgment and justification of Gentiles who do not have the law. The law was given to specifically to the Jews to reveal right and wrong. Since the Gentiles did not have the law, Paul is arguing

given by Moses, there is still no excuse because God's word penetrates his heart and impacts his conscience.

Lecrae and Thurman articulate that any effective outreach to Hip Hop involves recognition of the struggles that the outcast of American society endure. The song "Cold World" fully discusses issues that people from the 'hood encounter.<sup>42</sup> Lecrae is "conscious"<sup>43</sup> of the issues crippling 'hoods that many Hip Hoppers come from and represent, and his consciousness has contributed to his development of a theological view to reach Hip Hop. He discusses this in an interview with David Holzemer of "Collidephoto" that is posted on YouTube.

In the interview, Lecrae recognizes himself as an apologist and a missionary. Lecrae's theology of reaching Hip Hop is to "speak as if people who don't believe in what I believe in are in the room... How can I say things that resonate and relate but still unpack the truth? The church has to look at different people from different cultures as missionaries. The church is not used to indigenous missionaries. We are from a particular culture and we are going back into it."<sup>44</sup> Lecrae articulates that effective ministry acknowledges that others have differing theological views. He aims to find common ground first and then present the truth.

Lecrae, as a Hip Hop and faith-oriented revolutionary, will put him in line with what Cheney describes as a "raptivist." Cheney, in "Representin' God: Rap, Religion and the Politics of a Culture" defines a "raptivist" as a rap artist who uses rap as a tool to be political and is influenced by faith, in most cases, the Nation of Islam. One raptivist she identifies is Paris who believes that "raptivists" are "dedicated to producing music 'to spark a revolutionary mind-set'."<sup>45</sup> Paris, in the song "Brutal," states: "Best believe I won't stop / teachin' science in step with Farrakhan / drop a dope bomb, word to Islam / peace my brothers up on it 'cause I'm / Black and now

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that it is written on their hearts. Verse 14 and 15 of chapter 2 states: "When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them." The translation used the is the New Revised Standard Version

<sup>42</sup> Lyrics to "Cold World" that talk about issues in American society are "And don't nobody care though, the schools ain't teaching / McDonalds selling poison, got people working for cheap and / The military, drug's, or prison only way to eat, man / It's cold in the streets, let the track bring the heat in / This world's cold like no clothes and snow blown/ Like when the devil take the breath out of a baby's nose/ And the people won't hear more metaphors and word-play / My sister's sick of stripping, she need hope up in my words, man."

<sup>43</sup> Lecrae's consciousness does not fit the traditional understanding of a "conscious rapper," such as Common. In the song "Good Life," he does not outright agree with the claim of being "conscious." He is "conscious" to the extent he recognizes social issues including but not limited to problems in the school system, poverty, hunger, fatherlessness, females stripping and degradation of women, pre-mature death, and crime.

<sup>44</sup> "Comfortable in his own skin. An interview with Lecrae" *YouTube*. Online Video Clip [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n10oML\\_Vv5A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n10oML_Vv5A) (accessed December 12, 2012)

<sup>45</sup> Charise Cheney, "Representin' God: Rap, Religion and the Politics of a Culture," *The North Star: A Journal of African American Religious History* Volume 3, Number 1 (Fall 1999) pg. 1.

you know I'm brutal."<sup>46</sup> Cheney argues that Paris has an agenda that aligns with many Black Nationalists who speak out and fight against social injustice.

Cheney mentions several raptivists in Hip Hop that are challenging the negative social views of black males. She states: "From East Coast groups such as Public Enemy, KRS-One and Boogie Down Productions, and X-Clan to West Coast artists like Ice Cube, Paris and Kam, rap nationalists intentionally conjure a tradition of model, and militant, Black manhood."<sup>47</sup> Cheney provides a framework in describing how a rap artist is more than an emcee. Reviewing Lecrae through this lens, he fits the "raptivist" categorization. As already mentioned, Lecrae listened to many of these artists when he was younger. In the *Desiring God* interview, he said that listening to these "raptivists" made him very "ethnocentric and rough around the edges."<sup>48</sup>

Lecrae's political agenda does not match up to what Adolph Reed, Jr. is arguing for in *City Notes*.<sup>49</sup> Reed would argue that Lecrae is not "political" enough. Lecrae does align with Cheney's description of politics and what Reed refers to as "infrapolitics" via Robin Kelley and James Scott. Lecrae is "political" in that he raps about and addresses issues that the lower class of society deals with. Lecrae's Christianity compels him to care for the disenfranchised of American society. He talks specifically about his faith and how it influences his lyrics in an interview with Hard Knock TV:

If I am trying to do anything for people it is give them hope. Paint a picture of inspiration, tell a story from an entirely different paradigm. There's a lot of issues and a lot of realities that's not spoken on in music. I enjoy talking about fatherlessness because they need to hear this issue and hear that hope.

Lecrae is unique because, although he is not a Nation of Islam Black Nationalist, he aims to provide hope to the hopeless as a Christian. He has the same drive, passion and militancy as a Black Nationalist raptivist to encourage the downtrodden, transform a culture and lead a movement that impacts the world. Lecrae ends "Cold World" with: "A lot of people thinking I'm on a hopeless endeavor / nah, I know someone who can change the weather forever, ever."

### Rethinking Sacred and Secular

And when I started penning lyrics / I wasn't thinking bout no cypher  
I was thinking about them addicts / And them juvies and them lifers  
Well this is what the people lose they life for  
And what they give up all they rights for

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>48</sup> "Lecrae Interview Part 1 of 3" *YouTube*. Online Video Clip, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qeOVOjelOOE> (accessed December 12, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> In *City Notes*, Reed argues that currently, there is no Black Political Movement. What he means by that is there is no "force that has shown capability, over time, of mobilizing popular support for programs that expressly seek to alter the patterns of public policy or economic relations" (Reed, 3).

...Some want to call this gospel rap / Naw homeboy this is sacrifice! – Lecrae, "Sacrifice"

Lecrae's mission of reaching Hip Hop and providing hope inextricably links to his life. As Lecrae described in the song "Sacrifice," the music he creates and the mission flow seamlessly together. Therefore, the most accurate understanding of Lecrae as an emcee is to understand the unification of his life and music; they are one in the same. Based on this definition, the sacred and secular divide requires reexamination which means that the label of "Christian Rapper" also needs reconsideration.

Several scholars have talked about the limitations of the terms "sacred" and "secular" including Cheney, Andre Johnson, James Cone and Charles Howard. "Sacred" and "secular" should no longer be used in discussing Hip Hop and African American music in general. The breaking down of the sacred and secular wall would lead to the recognition of Lecrae and other Christians as a part of Hip Hop and not a distinct group. Therefore the terms "Holy Hip Hop," "Christian Hip Hop," "Christian Rap," and "Gospel Rap," should be used cautiously.

Cheney briefly discusses the sacred and secular divide in her analysis of Paris as a raptivist. She states that Paris "declares in 'Brutal' his mission is both sacred and secular. Cheney makes this claim because in "Brutal," Paris raps about the Nation of Islam and educates with his music as a part of the revolution. Paris' mission is "sacred," in that Paris is from the Nation of Islam. It's "secular," in that he is educating about science. Although his mission is "sacred" and "secular," it is still one mission, which means that it is unnecessary to split the mission into two categories.

Cone believes that there should not be two categories of "sacred" and "secular." In *Spirituals and the Blues*, Cone states:

Both the spirituals and the blues are the music of black people. They should not be pitted against each other, as if they are alien or radically different. One does not represent good and the other bad, one sacred and the other secular. Both partake of the same black experience in the United States.<sup>50</sup>

Cone articulates how the spirituals and blues both came out of the same experience of oppression. African Americans use music as an expression of their life experiences and, according to Cone, this expression of their life should not be separated to a "sacred" experience and a "secular" experience. The "sacred" experience should not be categorized as good and the "secular" experience categorized as bad. R. Dannie Bartlow, in "Defying Gender Stereotypes and Racial Norms: Naming African American Women's Realities in Hip Hop and Neo-Soul Music," provides more insight into the direct connection between music and African American life.

Bartlow explains the connection with support from James Standifer. Standifer states: "If African music and music behavior teach a lesson, it is this: such music and

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<sup>50</sup> James Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, (New York: Orbis, 1992), 39.

musical behavior are about people—the way they move, the way they feel, the things they experience, the sounds they make.”<sup>51</sup> Bartlow goes on to explain and restate Standifer:

Standifer points out that the ‘black musical experience is frequently a facing of realities and, often, a relieving of the burdens of living.’ He asserts that ‘Black musical behavior often chronicles, interprets, and sometimes transforms reality. However it never loses touch with life, for that, after all, is the very essence of the behavior.’ Thus, ‘music and the responses to it become a remaking of reality.’<sup>52</sup>

Bartlow and Standifer make the direct link of black music to black life. They argue, similar to Cone, that Blacks deal with their struggles through music. Just as the spirituals and the blues addressed the adversity the slaves endured, Hip Hop addresses the adversity today’s generation faces.

Howard enters this discussion of the sacred/secular divide by challenging the term “Christian Rapper” with the article “Deep Calls to Deep: Beginning Explorations of the Dialogue between Black Church and Hip Hop.” He states:

What is it that makes the former sanctified and the latter not? Is it baptism or church membership? Apparently not, since Snoop was baptized and even sang in the church choir at one time! Is it rapping about Jesus? Does that mean Kanye West should be mentioned on the first list? Or rather is it the way that they live their lives? What does that mean for ministers and Christians who find themselves caught in some of the very terrible public scandals that we see from time to time?<sup>53</sup>

Howard makes a convincing argument against categorizing someone as a “Christian Rapper.” He also talks about mainstream emcees that are not overtly Christian in their music but have faith. These questions cannot be answered without a contradiction if the label of “Christian Rap” stands and the terms “sacred” and “secular” continue to be used.

Primarily, Christians are responsible for isolating themselves and propagating the sacred/secular divide. The term “Christian Rap” started with Stephen Wiley and his first album *Bible Break*.<sup>54</sup> On the cassette tape cover was the phrase “Christian Rap.”

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<sup>51</sup> R. Dannie Bartlow, in “Defying Gender Stereotypes and Racial Norms: Naming African American Women’s Realities in Hip Hop and Neo-Soul Music,” in *Message in the Music: Hip Hop History and Pedagogy*, ed. Derrick P. Alridge et al. (Washington, D.C.: Asalh Press, 2010), 163.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Howard, “Deep Calls to Deep: Beginning Explorations of the Dialogue between Black Church and Hip Hop” in *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide*, ed. Emmett G. Price III (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 37.

Howard is referring to a statement made by Baker-Fletcher in his article African American Christian Rap, which stated: “L.G. Wise, BB Jay, Lil Raskul, King Cyz, E-Roc, ad Easop all were homies from the streetz. The feeling, tone and attitude of their rap music similar to that of secular rappers like Eminem, Dr. Dre Snoop Dog, Notorious B.I.G., Tupac Shakur, Bone Thugs-n-Harmony, and Ja Rule. Their overall sound still “reaches homies” because they still sound like homies-just sanctified!

<sup>54</sup> Bible Break is recognized as the first nationally distributed “Christian Rap” album.

Lecrae followed suit. In his first album *Real Talk*, in the song “Nothing,” he states “Cats say they gon' change the game / This is Christian rap, why they barely using the savior's name.”<sup>55</sup> He also said in an interview with Reyna Day that he “used be a Jeremiah type of cat.”<sup>56</sup> Lecrae preached hard and up front against wrongdoing without fully showing grace. His goal was to say Jesus as many times as possible so that Jesus would be glorified through his songs and not himself.

The label “Christian Rapper” limited Lecrae’s ability to go beyond the church and his immediate surroundings. He discusses on the blog: “Sure, some were rejecting the Gospel but others didn't give it a spin at all due to the labels placed on it. I was respected by my non-religious friends, but my music to them was very limited and didn't speak to any areas of life other than salvation and living right.”<sup>57</sup> Lecrae faced the challenge of maintaining his convictions as a Christian but opening up his outreaches’ accessibility to those who wouldn’t necessarily define themselves as Christians.

The barriers that Lecrae encountered led to his growth. He shared that he “was led to books by people like Francis Shaffer, CS Lewis” and provided a list of books at the bottom of the blog.<sup>58</sup> The whole premise of Lecrae’s new way of looking at the world is that one’s worldview impacts all areas of life. He explains: “We limit spirituality to salvation and sanctification. As long as we are well versed in personal piety and individual salvation, we think we're good. But most Christians have no clue how to engage culture in politics, science, economics, TV, music or art... We are missing out on the gospel's power of redemption and glorification in all things.”<sup>59</sup> Lecrae argues for Christians to expand their worldview beyond “salvation” to all areas of life.

Lecrae talks about his growth in the song “2 Human”:

*You used to print your whole sermon in your songs, now you sounding kinda watered down  
Man what's going on?  
Homie I had to mature  
I have so many issues at heart  
Thought that screaming through my art made me better, set me apart  
If I never get to make another rebel, it's cool  
That was a season in my life that is settled  
And I live a new season*

<sup>55</sup> Lecrae Moore, “Nothing,” *Real Talk* (Reach Records, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> “KING FM's Reyna Day Interview's Lecrae,” YouTube, Online video clip, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E4WFPVvytUs> (accessed December 12, 2012)

<sup>57</sup> Lecrae Moore, “Church Clothes – Purpose, Passion, Progression.” Published online at <http://reachrecords.com/blog/post/Church-Clothes-Purpose-Passion-Progression>

<sup>58</sup> This is the list provided: Biblical Worldview Testing - [http://www.nehemiahinstitute.com/peers\\_test.htm](http://www.nehemiahinstitute.com/peers_test.htm), Francis Shaffer - <http://amzn.to/KnKnab>, Charles Colson - <http://amzn.to/JWeM1Y>, Nancy Pearcy - <http://amzn.to/Lng2QZ>, CS Lewis - <http://amzn.to/J9A4bs>, Tim Keller - <http://sermons2.redeemer.com/category/sermon-hierarchy/mission/renewal/arts>

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

Lecrae's growth outside of the church and personal contacts led to a growth in his music. The "I never get to make another rebel" line refers to the aforementioned *Rebel* album. In this "new season," Lecrae is making music and impacting people with substance that is relevant, accessible and covers a variety of issues. Lecrae has been able to do this by removing the label "Christian Rapper."

In the same blog, Lecrae discusses the sacred and secular divide and the label of "Christian Rapper." He describes how the sacred and secular divide actually started thousands of years ago with Plato. Plato believed that matter preexisted and could be evil. Lecrae goes on to portray from his Christian worldview that only God preexisted and creator of all. All that God created is good. The verses he cites are Psalm 24:1, Genesis 1, and 1Timothy 4:4.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, classifying matter as "secular" and or "evil," according to Lecrae, is incorrect.

Lecrae provides another explanation in an interview with Nick Barili of Hard Knock TV. Primarily, Lecrae argues that music does not have faith. He states:

I don't think they call Brand Nubian a Muslim Rapper or Lupe (Fiasco) a Muslim Rapper. I think it's Hip Hop and we should give Hip Hop a chance because it's Hip Hop. Everybody is coming from a particular perspective or worldview. I'm a Christian but my music is not a Christian. Music doesn't have a faith, I have a faith. If I'm a plumber, I'm not a Christian plumber.<sup>61</sup>

Lecrae is arguing that music was not preexisting and that it is not inherently evil. Music does not have a heart or faith, humans have faith. The evil that comes from the music actually comes from humans and not the music in and of itself.

Lecrae's presentation of "sacred" and "secular" unites the abovementioned arguments against the sacred and secular divide that were presented by Cheney, Cone and Howard. In Cheney's argument, Paris is not recognized as a "Nation of Islam Rapper." Lecrae argues that Brand Nubian and Lupe are not called "Muslim Rapper," even though they are Muslims. Lecrae should not be called a "Christian Rapper."

Lecrae confirms Cone's argument of African Americans creating the spirituals and the blues out of their experiences. Lecrae articulates how all emcees portray a certain worldview in their music. In the interview with Reggie Legends, he explains that a "worldview" is how people perceive the world from a particular perspective and paradigm. The direct connection to Cone is that Hip Hoppers' experiences influence their worldview. The stamina, perseverance and hope provided through the spirituals compares to Lecrae's music and mission. The inextricable link between music and life enables Lecrae in "Sacrifice" to rap, "*Well this is what the people lose they life for,*" when referring to writing lyrics to address drug addicts and those serving a life sentence in jail.

<sup>60</sup> In the blog, Lecrae states: "Psalm 24:1 'The Earth is the Lord's and all it contains.' In Genesis 1, God repeatedly identifies His creation as good, meaning no part of creation is inherently bad or evil. Paul in 1 Tim 4:4 says, 'Everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving.'"

<sup>61</sup> "Best of Hard Knock TV: Lecrae talks Jeremy Lin, Christian Rap, Lupe, Kendrick, J. Cole + more," YouTube, Online video clip. <http://youtu.be/FRIrOYHOul4> (accessed December 12, 2012)

Lecrae addresses the concerns presented by Howard by pushing to get rid of the label altogether. In the interview with Reggie of MalachiVEVO 6, he pinpoints the limitations of “Christian Rap” or “Christian Hip Hop,” which is once Christian is added to something, it is automatically thought of as “whack or corny”<sup>62</sup> He goes on to talk about Tim Tebow and Jeremy Lin; he says that “they are not pros because they are Christians; they are pros because they are good.”<sup>63</sup> Lecrae is arguing for the acceptance of Christians based on their artistic ability. Maintaining the “Christian Rap” label will continue to be a barrier for quality Christian artists and an inadequate understanding of Hip Hop for Hip Hop scholars.

Looking at Lecrae, who is authentically Hip Hop and Christian, provides fresh ways in understanding the link between music and life. He reveals how the growth in his ministry experience affected both his ability to have a wider audience and his music. Lecrae also makes strong arguments to eradicate the categories “Holy Hip Hop,” “Christian Hip Hop,” “Christian Rap,” and “Gospel Rap.” Andre Johnson makes a brief statement in his interview with Ebony Utley that points to Lecrae and addresses the category of “Holy Hip Hop.” He states: “Also been listening to Lecrae. I think he is beginning to redefine the holy hip hop scene. By the way, there is really no such thing as holy hip hop; it’s all hip hop.”<sup>64</sup>

## Conclusion

Lecrae’s success requires more attention than this analysis. Based on previous categorization of Hip Hop emcees, Lecrae would have been classified as underground because his songs were not played on the radio or on music television. Lecrae’s success from “underground rapper” to number one on iTunes deserves more research in the social realm. Some obvious factors to consider are technology and social media. One question to be considered is how can an emcee become popular if they are never seen on music television and their songs are never played on the radio?

Lecrae’s ability to reach thousands of people around the United States and the world as a Christian presents a new model of evangelism. The religious studies community and the church should take note and investigate. Songs about substitutionary atonement, total depravity, ecclesiology, missiology, and soteriology are played in ‘hoods in Memphis, Houston and all over the United States. In addition to ‘hoods, these songs are being played in suburbs and churches where congregations are predominately White; which leads to another question: “How is Lecrae able to reach such a diverse group of people and still stay true to the gospel?”

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<sup>62</sup> “Lecrae: Meet The Musician (2012 Interview) YouTube, Online video clip. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_detailpage&v=5FDM2RIyLWM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=5FDM2RIyLWM) (accessed December 12, 2012)

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ebony Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta’s God*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2012.) 3021 Kindle Edition.

Shanesha Brooks-Tatum, in her dissertation “Poetics with a Promise: Performances of Faith and Gender in Christian Hip-Hop,” explores issues of masculinity in examining Lecrae. She also discusses female identities. This analysis and Brooks-Tatum did not fully cover these areas. In 2011, Reach Records released *Man Up* which discusses “Biblical Manhood” and includes a full length movie, album and conferences. Lecrae has numerous songs about respecting women and staying faithful to one wife on the soundtrack. A full exploration of these issues from future scholars should contribute greatly to our understanding of Lecrae and his ability to resonate with audiences across theological and racial categories.

This analysis of Lecrae only grazes the plane of the impact he and the movement are having on America and the world. Lecrae is not an aberration. Several other Christians in Hip Hop have reached iTunes and Billboard success. In addition to the success musically and on stage, they are in the streets, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, speaking out on social injustices, and the list goes on. Lecrae is redefining Hip Hop socially and theologically, but will he spark a scholarly discussion? If Hip Hop blocks out Christian voices, is it really Hip Hop?

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