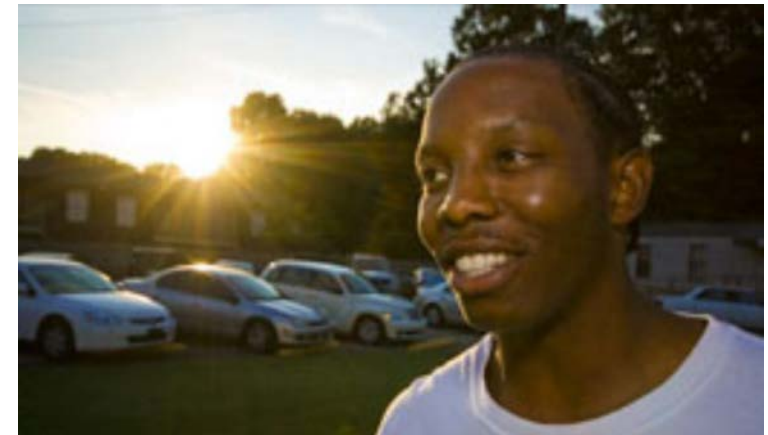


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Preaching the gospel through rap –



**Christian entertainer wins audiences
with heavy emphasis on scripture**

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Todd Smith, aka Te`Luvv, doesn't fit the rapper mold.

The only gold he wears is a wedding ring. He doesn't curse, drink or claim to have emerged from thug life.

"The bottom line for me is that it's ministry," he said. "I decrease myself so God can look bigger and better."

Te`Luvv (pronounced Tay-Love) is a 28-year-old Christian rapper who recently moved to Memphis, and just released his fourth CD, "The World is Not Enough."

Each track is a poetic sermon delivered through a rap beat.

Sitting with his toddler son, Jamin, at a local fast-food joint, Te`Luvv, lowered his head of neat cornrows for a quick prayer.

"I'm all about Jesus," he said, sporting a T-shirt reading "Got Jesus?"

Nearly every item of clothing hanging in his closet has something religious on it, he said.

His favorite is a coat with "Hebrews 3:15." (It refers to a verse that reads: "As it is said, 'Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as they did when they provoked me.'")

"I call it my uniform," he said.

A military kid, Te`Luvv spent his childhood moving around. He also spent it in a poor, turbulent household marked by alcohol abuse and domestic violence.

Because he knows what it's like to dread going home and to feel neglected, Te`Luvv had dedicated the last decade to working with kids before devoting himself last year to becoming a full-time rapper.

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A former Youth Villages counselor , he has worked in dozens of mentoring programs.

That role-model image has stuck, and many of his bookings are now for Christian youth camps and festivals.

Except for a little free-styling as a kid, he had never truly tried rapping until he was saved, he said.

In his freshman year of college at University of Puget Sound in Washington, Te`Luvv was bored with life. Without really knowing what he wanted, he decided to join the Marines.

Before committing, he met a man standing outside his friend's apartment who had the words "John 3:16" on his shirt, a reference to the familiar passage - "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

Usually leery of anyone who looked like they might haul him to church, Te`Luvv said there was something about this guy that pulled him into a two-hour conversation.

By the end, Te`Luvv agreed to attend church and has been on fire for Christ ever since, he said.

"It was like a light went on in my heart," he said.

He stopped cursing and went home and threw out his entire rap collection, replacing it with gospel and choir music, he said.

"I'm coming out of Three 6 Mafia to this," he said. "I didn't know there was such a thing as Christian rap."

He had been writing poetry his whole life and so he began writing Christian poetry.

After a while, he said, "I heard a voice in my head say 'This is rap.'"

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He put his words to music and began winning talent shows and rap contests, which put an end to him joining the military.

Brandis Leverette, a youth pastor at Hosanna Christian Center, where Te'Luvv attends church, recently traveled with the rapper to videotape his performance in Jackson.

By the end of the show, more than a dozen people climbed down from the stands and made their way to the stage to accept Jesus, he said.

"Todd is kind of in a league of his own in Memphis," said Leverette, referring to Te`Luvv's heavy emphasis on scripture.

When he graduated college he was picked up by the label From Crime to Christ Records.

But he knew the image of a born-again thug was not for him.

"I was not into that whole rap culture thing," he said. "I didn't go from crime to Christ."

Through Made Up Mind Productions, LLC, he now produces his own music, hands out his own flyers and does all his own bookings.

"Rapping is like preaching. In every single piece of a song I seek God," he said.

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Todd "Te`Luvv" Smith, a Memphis-based Christian rapper, has released his fourth album, "The World is Not Enough."

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