

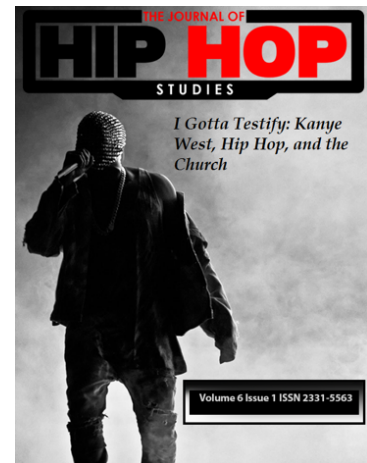
---

## Meditation - On Millennials, Hip Hop, and Faith

Larrin Robertson

Journal of Hip Hop Studies, Special Issue *I Gotta Testify:  
Kanye West, Hip Hop, and the Church*  
Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2019, pp. 30–32  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34718/gsfy-qr10>

---





---

## Meditation - On Millennials, Hip Hop, and Faith

---

Larrin Robertson

Question considered: *How do you view the influence of Hip Hop and rappers like Kanye West on the spiritual lives and mental health of your millennial members and those millennials that you are hoping to bring into the church?*

The millennials with whom I engage have the metropolitan, suburban experience of living in and around Washington, DC. Much like the lyrics of the hymns of the church are best appreciated with time and experience, where millennials developed an appreciation for Hip Hop as a musical genre through its musicality, time and experience helped them to better appreciate its lyrics. Their faith development was uniquely their own, but often, they valued the lifestyle of others who more closely identified with the inner-city culture they identified as Hip Hop. Like most, and like myself, the millennials with whom I engage, had to come to grips with how much of church and Hip Hop have been accessible to them. What some heard as social or moral failings in both realms, others viewed as social or moral norms. Reconciling these to produce one set of doctrine, even a personally held doctrine that may not have matched the church or the culture, created a struggle.

A heart that wrestles - struggles, even - with questions about the reality and presence of God is not a heart that has necessarily failed the faith test. Passing the faith test does not require an unquestioning existence. In the same way, a mature, or at least maturing, faith is not characterized by the absence of suspicion of who God is, or how God chooses to act. Of this, many of the heroes of the Biblical and our own personal witness would give assent. Among these witnesses are Abraham (concerning God's promise of a son and a future linked to the Divine) and Jesus (particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane). It seems that Kanye West, Chance the Rapper, and others have also become witnesses.

I suppose that part of the conversation should center around whether it is one's faith or their practice of said faith that creates the conditions which lead to a falling away. As Tyrell Jemison references in his article, *Coloring Book Faith*, these can be different or in opposition to one another. Jemison further refers to "his" faith as being different than that of his father, whom it seems Jemison respects, but apart from whom Jemison developed a different ideation of faith.

Lauren Chanel Allen writes in her article on Kanye's "Ultralight Beam" of the cognitive dissonance felt by Black Christians, which is a result of the reality that "Black people are being murdered."<sup>1</sup> As evidenced by Black Lives Matter, The Black Youth Project, and similar movements, millennials will not be satisfied with the status quo for the sake of maintaining the appearance of stability. They ask questions and desire answers so they can process them, test them, and either advocate for a cause or resist said cause. On this point, millennials do well. As a pastor, part of my calling is to disciple believers – newly converted and maturing. One way to do that is to create space for questions and to demonstrate faith in practice. To the extent that Hip Hop thrives in this space, I view the genre's influence on the reflective millennial as a positive.

Hip Hop requires its practitioners and its adherents to reflect on a multitude of life and cultural experiences. The vast catalog from which one chooses to explore narrows the field only by theme, leaving open for analysis how one will examine and report on their experience. There is not one clear lens through which all analysis takes place. This avails space for creative expression within the culture as experienced and learned by the artist.

In the same way, faith permits its practitioners space to examine their thoughts, intentions, motivations, and actions. But there is a standard against which this examination takes place. For Christians, the standard is that of love, as initiated by God, as demonstrated through Jesus and regenerated among one another. Space remains for creative expression of faith, but the Christian is granted boundaries within which safe faith expression can take place.

For the millennials with whom I engage consistently, the challenge is often the idea that there are boundaries. In other words, even modern expressions of Christianity has limits on how far is too far before one's professed faith is no longer aligned with one's practiced faith. Of course, charges of hypocrisy may be leveled when one has crossed the line, but the logical conclusion should not be that their professed faith was at fault.

My concern about the faith of Christians, generally, and for the sake of this response, millennials, is the belief that faith in Jesus the Christ for eternal salvation is being replaced by faith in Jesus for temporal satisfaction. This is not the Christian message, and attempts to persuade others on this basis are to be condemned. The Christian faith was neither born nor developed during a time of peace for its adherents. Modern Christianity has this as its foundation. The church would do well to point here for help with navigating the cognitive dissonance which Allen addressed in her article on Kanye's "Ultralight Beam." The message is that we are the legacies – ancestral and spiritual – of persons who endured hardships. We are not the only ones to endure, and we will not be the last ones to endure. But endure we must.

---

<sup>1</sup> Lauren Chanel Allen, "How an Ultralight Beam Helped My Dark Depression," *Abernathy Magazine* <https://abernathymagazine.com/ultralight-beam-helped-dark-depression/>.

Where I am not concerned is with the ability of millennials to navigate the empty spaces created by the absence of answers to the questions they are asking. First, I have determined to credit young adults, namely, today's millennials, with the ability to navigate spiritual and mental health complexities with a skill that exceeds my own at the same stage of development. Often what many fail to acknowledge is that millennials ask courageous questions. Arriving at, and responding to, a courageous question requires reflection, research, introspection, and a willingness to advance the conversations around them, or a determination to create their own movements toward progress. I believe that those who can ask these questions are capable also of holding on until revelation comes.

Second, I have determined to consider millennials as no different than previous generations of young adults. Of this opinion, I acknowledge that many others disagree. Opposing views would point to technological, cultural, and legislative advances, among others, that reflect these vast differences. I would agree with aspects of those points. Where I separate from this view is the consideration of what this demographic seeks. At the basic level, people desire to be honored as human beings. To the extent that Hip Hop recognizes the complexities of human experiences and teaches positive ways to live, hopefully, I view its influence as positive.

In an era of deepening concern about the church's ability to attract, engage, welcome, and disciple millennials – both members and non-members alike – I view the influence of Hip Hop as I do other elements of the culture. As stated, some elements of Hip Hop should be considered, others condemned. My concern is that the church will determine not to blur the line such that the culture no longer views the church as distinct. This, I believe is the greater need for millennials – that they recognize the church as the bastion of hope.