

## What Would Jay-Z Do?

By Jeremy Del Rio "So everybody, just follow me 'Cause we need a little, controversy" -Eminem

How's this for controversy? She was one of the lead vocalists of a multi-Dove award winning, Contemporary Christian Music hit maker. He was a rising star of CCM as well, a writer and producer for some of its most recognizable names. But within the last couple of years, both husband and wife made a radical ministry decision to leave CCM in favor of secular recording contracts. Exiled from the CCM bubble of Nashville, they moved, first, to Los Angeles, and then New York City. He has gone on to produce songs for some of pop music's most successful artists, and she is recording a pop album for a prominent industry label.

Are they compromising their faith, or, even worse, backsliding? They don't think so. [Discuss this in the forums] They shared with me that their motivation is to bring Christ and His character to kids who do not purchase "Christian" entertainment. They talked about how they and other CCM icons routinely "ministered" to capacity crowds that knew the lyrics, cheered the artists, and needed not to respond to the altar calls. The disconnect: the kids attending CCM concerts were already "saved." At most, they came to "rededicate" their lives or seek forgiveness of sins nurtured by a culture that Christians have effectively abandoned. Rarely would unbelievers attend, and then only if a trusted friend persuaded them, not because of the glossy poster or Christian-radio ad.

By contrast, both Christians and non watch TRL (if the acronym means nothing, tune in to MTV during after-school hours), read Vibe and Rolling Stone magazines, vote for "American Idol," download MP3s online, listen to Hot-97 or Z-100, and make movies like Eight Mile and Hustle and Flow certifiable hits. Parental conflicts notwithstanding, teens flock to secular entertainment, with the film, television, music, fashion, and gaming industries exerting disproportionate - and increasingly Godless - influence on their values. Ask any junior high or high school student, even youth group kids, who Usher, Snoop Dogg, or Jessica Simpson is, and they'll tell you. Ask for song titles, and they'll give those as well. Ask them to recite lyrics, and more often than not, they can do that too. Ask them who Toby Mac, Third Day, or Zoegirl is and eight out of ten won't have a clue, except maybe youth group kids, even though they are top draws for CCM's teen market.

For longer than I have been alive, American evangelicals have lamented that they are losing a "culture war." Since Elvis swiveled his hips on national television and the Beatles dared to grow their hair beyond their shirt collars and Jimmy Hendrix celebrated purple haze, many have demonized pop culturists as doing Satan's work. In response, they have boycotted movies, burned books and magazines, and bulldozed CDs. They have protested in the streets, published scathing editorials, and debated hostile reporters on news magazine shows. But mostly, they have retreated inward, developing alternative entertainments and fostering Christian equivalents to all things cultural, while decrying the ever worsening condition of "Must-See TV." In recent years, some have conceded that the so-called war is all but lost.

Into the fray, this couple is daring to defy conventional Christian wisdom by attempting to reengage the culture without the trappings of cliché Christianity. Thus the controversy. Yet their approach is authentically Christ-like and one the wider evangelical community must learn to embrace, even follow.

The standard for outreach that Christ himself set is a far cry from the insular subculture evangelicals have created over the last three or four decades. Rather than retreat into heavenly glory, He degraded His divinity by assuming the likeness of created humanity; forsook His celestial throne to be born in a barn by an unmarried teenager; lived in an obscure community with a reputation for producing mediocrity; worked a blue-collar job until the age of thirty; roamed the desert serving strangers; and finally died the unjust death of a violent criminal three years later. His preferred manner of preaching was to embed ordinary stories about pearls and seeds and wheat and coins with spiritual truths. None were overtly "Christian" in the same way CCM and Christian television are, and he rarely bothered to explain them. Instead, he allowed His parables and His life to speak for themselves, while challenging those with "ears to hear," to hear their message. And throughout His ministry, he groomed "fishers of men" who would do likewise. That is, disciples who would live among those they served, smell their smells, relate to their realities, empathize with their pain, and meet their needs with compassion in a culturally relevant way - just like He did.

Fast forward two thousand years and this couple, who are attempting to do exactly that in a mission field that is "unreached" by any objective evangelical standard, are looked at with cynicism, and in some cases, self-righteous disdain.

There's a reason why hip hop has revolutionized youth culture at the same time that Christian music has only revolutionized itself. Why self-proclaimed "controversies" like Eminem and "hard-knock" lifers like Jay-Z sell millions of records and have made a raw, gritty urban lifestyle the fantasy of millions of suburban kids all over America, while too many Christian sub-culturists churn out copy-cat cheese.

Fundamentally it's because Jay-Z and his counterparts have become better fishers of men than we are. As perverse as

some of their songs and lifestyles might be, they nevertheless identify with kids' pain and address their needs in language they understand and a forum they frequent, while we have evacuated the forum in order to entertain ourselves.

A little controversy might do us some good. Jeremy Del Rio, Esq. is the Executive Director Generation Xcel in New York, NY. You can reach him online at Generation Xcel.