

'Rap with a reason:' Swanton's True Muzik continues unorthodox ministry with this month's release of his fifth album

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BY NICKI GORNY / THE BLADE



Drew "True Muzik" Brennan, a Christian rapper, performs on Jan. 8 at the Dwelling Place in Swanton.

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Drew Brennan has always been a fan of hip-hop and rap.

"I always had a passion for it," he recalls. "I was always drawn to it."

But he's always been religious, too. So he's always felt at odds with some of the language and themes that are prominent in the genre; even as a high school kid, he recalls, he knew it wasn't the sort of messaging in which he ought to be immersing himself.

But what if it could be?

The thought struck him back in his senior year at Bedford High School, as he was listening to some friends try their hands at lyrics that mimicked the sex and violence of the mainstream: “This could be a way to reach people for the Gospel.”

It could – and it is, as Mr. Brennan can now attest after a decade and a half rapping and performing as True Muzik. An independent artist who just released his fifth and latest album, *Jesus First*, with a concert at the Dwelling Place in Swanton on Jan. 8, he performs around the region and sometimes farther afield. He describes what he does as a definite if unorthodox ministry that turns the genre purposefully on its ear.

Put more simply, it's “rap with a reason.”

“My reason being Jesus,” he said. “Putting Jesus first and trying to get people to come to know the God that I know. ... it's 100 percent ministry to me.”

Christian rap is a niche genre, said Angela Nelson, the director of the School of Cultural and Critical Studies at Bowling Green State University. And it's one that she mused might owe that niche status to the difficulty of shaking rap's profane connotations in the minds of would-be listeners – True Muzik can relate to that perceived disconnect, after all.

But it's also not a novel one, said Ms. Nelson, who's also an associate professor in university's department of popular culture. She puts its emergence somewhere in the 1980s; she thinks of it as a natural extension of the broader genre that at that point had been maturing and diversifying for a couple of decades.

Stephen Wiley and Michael Peace stand out as early pioneers, she said, hitting the scene with some of the earliest records of impact. These were Mr. Wiley's *Bible Break* in 1985 and Mr. Peace's *RRRock It Right* in 1987. Solo and group acts have kept things fresh in the years and decades that have followed, up to and including some of the genre's biggest names these days: Consider TobyMac, originally of the rap and rock trio dc Talk, or Lecrae.

Each has taken home Grammy Awards.

And that's not to mention the secular hip-pop artists with even higher profiles who have even more recently dipped a toe into spiritual themes, like Snoop Dogg and Kanye West.

True Muzik said he's largely found his own path in his chosen genre. His lyrics are inspired by personal experience, his art honed by years and repetition; he's never been one to model himself after an artist who's gone before him in the genre.

“I just stay in my own lane, and I do what I feel God gives me to do,” he said.

True, of Swanton, grew up with Christianity, attending non-denominational churches with his family: “That was the routine, that was what we did, I kind of just went through the motions,” he said. He was in high school before that unquestioned relationship in the center of his life began to take on a deeper dimension, he continued: “I really had that experience and realization of who Jesus is and what he did for me. And then I started to understand salvation and repentance and how my sins got erased by something [he] did for me.”

That realization and internalization, he reflected, “totally turned my life around.”

It was long afterward, as a senior in 2007, that he began to explore Christian rap as True Muzik. He recalled that his lyrics at the outset were less religious than they were just clean; he wasn't openly rapping about his faith, so much as steering clear of the sex, the drugs, the violence and the four-letter words.

“And then as years passed, it became much more Jesus first, Gospel-based, Bible-based, that sort of thing,” True said.

He released his first album in October, 2009, and has kept releasing albums independently and sporadically since. (He'd love to pay the bills as True Muzik, but for now is still balancing it with some unrelated professional responsibilities.) Along the way he's developed his craft, too, he said: Better rhymes, faster diction, to coalesce into the old-school sound he's polished for the independently produced audio and video tracks that he releases today.

For more information and updates on his work, go to truemuzik.com.

Jesus First is his latest outing, anchored by a single of the same name that he released on Memorial Day. He said it's inspired by a common refrain of the day: “America First.” The political slogan resonates with him as a patriot, but he said there's been something about it that doesn't quite sit right.

“America first is great, don't get me wrong. But there's salvation in Jesus, not America, you know what I mean?” he said. “I'm really excited about being able to release a project revolving around putting Jesus first, above everything

else, and then he'll provide the rest of the way.”

“The gospel of Christ is always number one on the agenda / I trust his promise so when trials come I won’t surrender,” he raps in “Jesus First.” “I don’t care what you think about me Christ is my priority / He’s the reason I am breathing so I live for his glory.”

True Muzik - Jesus First (Music Video)



True Muzik's discography resonates with Pete Loeschner, a Nevada-based law enforcement officer who came across the indie artist back when he was regularly listening to Christian rap about a decade ago. Once he discovered True Muzik, he said he'd often play his music while he was driving, appreciating the message particularly as he patrolled a high-crime community.

“It was just really encouraging,” he said. “The music is laced with Scripture. So it was kind of fortifying my faith, and encouraging me to do the best I could at the same time.”

Mr. Loeschner reconnected with his music more recently, he said, returning to that sense of encouragement and fortification at a time of heightened emotions for his family. And this time he actually reached out via social media, too, to let True know how much his music resonated. They've stayed in touch.

If Christian rap is a genre that's ripe for a commercialization in his experience, for words that might ring hollow in search of downloads, Mr. Loeschner said he isn't seeing it in True Muzik.

It's entertainment, sure, but it's also ministry. It's rap with a reason.

“He hasn't changed his message, he hasn't watered anything down, nothing has been compromised,” Mr. Loeschner said. “I really respect that.”

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