

On Grammy weekend, Christian music bounces back

by [Kim Lawton](#)

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ATLANTA (RNS) Christian recording artist TobyMac's blend of rap, hip-hop, rock and soul raced up the charts last year and shattered many stereotypes along the way.

"Toby blows everybody's perception of what Christian or gospel music is because Toby makes Jesus look cool," Billboard Magazine's Deborah Evans Price told the PBS program "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly."

TobyMac's album "Eye on It," which was released last August, was the first Christian album since 1997 to debut at No. 1 on Billboard's all-genre chart, and only the third Christian album ever to do so.

"I definitely have my ear to the ground as far as sonically what is happening," TobyMac said. "I've always been a pop artist, you know. I rap, I sing, I scream, whatever gets the point across."

Many experts say thanks to artists like TobyMac, the contemporary Christian music industry is experiencing a revival, with strong sales, record-breaking tours, and new success in the mainstream charts.

For three consecutive weeks last fall, the Billboard 200 chart included Christian albums that debuted in the Top Ten. And that success is continuing in 2013. In mid-January, Christian artist Chris Tomlin's new album "Burning Lights" opened at No. 1.

"It shows the power of the Christian music consumer," said Price, who has covered Christian music for Billboard for almost 20 years.

"For people who tend to want to relegate Christian gospel music to the basement, when an act like Chris, or TobyMac comes in at No. 1, you have to give that music its due."

According to the Nielsen Company, in 2012, nearly 23 million albums were sold in the Christian/gospel market, which also saw substantial increases in digital album sales.

"That niche market is bigger than other smaller genres, like jazz, classical, Latin," said Price. "The (Christian) musicians are just interpreting a timeless message in the music that's relevant today and that keeps younger listeners coming and widening the demographic."

The Christian rock band Skillet just announced that its "Awake" album hit more than one million sales, making the group one of only three rock bands overall to certify platinum in 2012.

Another big seller is Christian rapper Lecrae, whose newest album "Gravity," debuted last September at No. 3 on the Billboard chart. In his music and his publicity, Lecrae is outspoken about his Christian faith.

"I'd be crazy to not talk about the thing that's most passionate to me and that is my faith," Lecrae told "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly."

"It's all that I am. It defines me."

Lecrae says he grew up with few positive male influences and looked to hip-hop for guidance. He wanted nothing to do with his grandmother's Christian faith.

"I really mocked it," he said. "I remember one time ripping out Bible papers and using them to roll drugs up with."

His life became a downward spiral of drugs and partying, but he says before he reached 20, he realized the emptiness of it all. Then a friend invited him to attend a Christian meeting and study the Bible, and he says to his shock, the classic Christian teaching about salvation struck a chord.

Now he raps not only about his religious beliefs, but about being a faithful husband and a responsible father, themes he acknowledges are not typical in hip-hop. Lecrae has found an audience in both the Christian and secular markets, something that appears to be happening more and more.

"The walls have come down considerably over the past few years when it comes to the divide between the Christian audience, the Christian market and mainstream

consumers," said Price. "When you have artists like Toby and Lecrae ... that draws a wide audience, not just from the people in the church pews, but from the people hanging out at the mall."

TobyMac says he's pleased to see some of the barriers coming down.

"Jesus didn't hang out in the church," the artist said. "He hung out with the people, where they were. And that's to me where Christian music should be."

TobyMac first entered the music scene in the late 1980s as part of the groundbreaking Christian hip-hop group DC Talk. More than 20 years later, he says he's moved away from direct preaching in his music and now tries to write more from his own life experiences.

"I do think that I have something really good. So when you have something really good you can't help but want to share it with people," he said. "I'm not trying to cram it down their throat. I'm not trying to proselytize. I'm just a guy that loves God with all my heart."

TobyMac says for him, it's not about cranking out hits and making money, but rather watching how the music touches people's lives. For example, he's heard from several people who say his recent song "Forgiveness" prompted them to reconcile with an estranged loved one.

"When things like that are happening, I think that's way beyond me," he said. "That's why I have faith in God, because I know I can't conjure up a lyric that would do that. But if God breathes something through me when I ask Him to, maybe some good could happen."

Both TobyMac and Lecrae have been criticized by some in the Christian world for pushing the envelope too far. Lecrae in particular came under fire for collaborating with secular rappers who often use offensive lyrics in other venues.

"Sometimes I'm too churchy for the world, I'm too worldly for the church and so I exist in this weird dichotomy, this weird place, but there's a lot of people like me and there's a lot of people who resonate with that," the rapper said.

Lecrae too sees a deeper purpose in what he does.

"My hope is that it will be more than music, that it would be a soundtrack of a movement that mobilizes people to see themselves for who they are, for what God created them to be, and, and to change the world," he said.

A version of this story first appeared on the PBS program "Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly."