

# Gospel rap group shares positive messages with youth, community

By Zoe Schaver

It's 2 a.m. in downtown Raleigh. Laser lights glow from inside Solas, a popular nightclub, accenting a lively crowd: women in short form-fitting elastic dresses and skyscraper heels stumble arm in arm with friends, laughing, down the animated street. Men playfully shove each other around, guffawing, drinks in hand.

Amid the crowd stand Julius Hicks, otherwise known as S.J., and Keivano McCoy, called Kevin by most. The two are business partners and friends. McCoy, holding fliers and CDs, steps out onto the sidewalk in front of a group of partygoers. "Hey, how you doing?" He gets a conversation going, works to capture their attention. They start to walk past but pause as he continues to speak. Pretty soon, the original group has become a growing crowd of interested partiers who stop to listen despite their drunkenness. One woman brings her friend by, saying, "This is the guy!" She turns to McCoy. "I saw you out here and just really appreciated your hustle," she says. "You're talking to everybody out here!"

It's true — McCoy is charismatic. He knows how to interact with reckless 20-somethings, though he no longer smokes nor drinks. Hicks works with him, joining in to talk to people or walking farther down the street alongside other groups out for a night on the town.

Sometimes, McCoy and Hicks will sell a CD to whomever they're talking to; sometimes, the two will pray for someone. This is one of their nights for "street ministry," and the music the fliers advertise is that of Handz Up Entertainment, a Durham-based gospel rap label founded on the music produced by McCoy, Hicks and singer-songwriter Miriam Gill. McCoy and Hicks often



**Miriam Gill, Keivano McCoy and Julius Hicks, are members of Handz Up Entertainment, a record label featuring gospel rap artists. The members met through their church, One Love Ministries in Durham. (Photo courtesy of Handz Up Entertainment)**

spend Friday and Saturday nights in Raleigh or Charlotte from 11 p.m. or midnight or to about 2:30 or 3 a.m., talking to anyone they can about the Christian message they express through their music.

## Humble beginnings

The two men met in early 2011 at One Love Ministries in Durham, where pastor John Fitzpatrick first encouraged them to make their musical aspirations a reality.

"Anytime you see people who are on fire for God, you don't want to tame it — you want to unleash it," Fitzpatrick said. "So we did that in a controlled way."

He said one of the greatest struggles for the group at the beginning was not being able to expand beyond performing at One Love Ministries, since many churches were not very receptive to the idea of Christian rap music.

The members of Handz Up still frequently consult Fitzpatrick for advice, constructive criticism and support. The group also raps at One Love every second Sunday of the month. Each member agrees that without Fitzpatrick's help, the record label and rap group may never have materialized.

"We all had a close relationship to him," said Steven Murray, Handz Up's business manager and an original member of the group. "He bought into it, and for him to have faith in it — it was a big comfort. Really encouraging."

Starting out, Handz Up was comprised only of McCoy, Hicks and Murray.

First, the group started performing at the church. By the end of 2011, they had produced a mixtape. Then, in September of 2012, they were invited to participate in the Unity in the Community gospel music festival in Durham, hosted by 103.9 FM. By that time, the group had adopted Miriam Gill, Fitzpatrick's niece who had grown up writing music in Atlanta.

"People didn't really know how to take it at first. It was like, 'Oh my God, they're rapping in the church!'" Gill said.

For churchgoers to take them seriously, the group had to focus.

"I told them the biggest thing is, if you're going to be a Christian rap group, you've got to talk about Christ," Fitzpatrick said. "Don't just do a whole lot of rapping and at the end say, 'God bless you.' I made them stay Christ-centered."

"It's not to condemn people, it's not to preach at people — in the word preach, there's the root words 'reach' and 'each,' so I look at it as reaching each person."

- Keivano McCoy

## Youth connection

As their schedule filled up, Handz Up steadily reached more and more people in the community. However, the group kept in mind the ultimate goal they'd had since the beginning: reaching out to kids.

"We want to let young people know that it's okay to love Jesus, to sing about Jesus, to rap about Jesus," Gill said. "And it's OK to love one another — it's cool, it's not something that's only reserved for your mother, for your grandmother."

In fact, that was their reason for pushing the gospel rap genre — they hoped younger listeners would appreciate a new kind of gospel music that was modern and relatable.

But the group wanted to push to connect with their younger audience beyond the music. This goal led them to create Handz for Kids, a program at McDougle Middle School where kids who had never seen a college campus would be taken on tours of local universities.

At the same time, McCoy, Hicks and Murray produced an episode of a TV show called "More Than Just a Dream," which showcased successful, local, small businesses to send youth the hopeful message that anyone can follow and achieve a dream.

"If you want to inspire somebody, you've got to start young," McCoy said.

## Getting on track

McCoy was raised in the Bronx in New York, where he said he ran into trouble with the law as a boy and young man. When he was 15 years old, his mother and her five sisters chipped in to pay for a trip to military boarding school, where they hoped he would get back on track. Though McCoy said the school taught him how to be independent and stand up for himself, he still served jail time after attending the school.

"I was a fighter, I sold drugs, I was a pimp, I was everything. I used to rob people," he said. "And it's so crazy how your mind can be so far gone — that was my reality. Thinking that it was OK to hurt people, thinking it was okay to hurt myself with drinking, with drugs."

He tells the story of being about 12 years old and throwing large bricks and bowling balls off of a New York bridge onto passing cars. McCoy said after he first got saved, he had recurring nightmares about that time in his life.

"I was like, 'Wow, I'm sorry for doing that. I think about somebody, me, rolling on the highway now as a grown man, and somebody dropping a big brick in my front window while I'm driving 70 miles an hour,'" he said. "Out of all the crazy

stuff I did, that's the thing that bothered me the most, I don't know why. Maybe somebody got hurt when we did that. But that was actually probably the least bad thing I did."

When McCoy and Hicks met, both men had come from rocky backgrounds and had been through a lot. McCoy had moved down South to take care of his great aunt, and Hicks followed his sister from their hometown of Buffalo, N.Y.

"I felt like I needed a change in my life — new scenery, a new scenario," Hicks said. "I felt like I needed to start my life over, and I didn't feel like I could do that unless I moved away from the neighborhood I was in and people I was with."

Through lyrics like "Old friends lookin' at me like I've gone crazy / I tell 'em, this is what God made me," the two partners aim to find common ground with young men and women who might not be on the right track and to show them a possible way out.

## Man on the street

McCoy said that when he's ministering on the street outside of Raleigh's or Charlotte's nightclubs, he comes across plenty of people who brush him off or are unwilling to listen — but instead of getting angry like he would have in the past, he only shows them love.

"A lot of people come out here and they forget about God. When people come out here on Saturday, you know they aren't gonna go to church tomorrow," he said. "It's not to condemn people, it's not to preach at people — in the word preach, there's the root words 'reach' and 'each,' so I look at it as reaching each person. When I talk to somebody, it's not just about giving them a CD."

And the street ministry works, said Fitzpatrick.

"I've seen the fruit of their labors — we've had folks who actually came to the church and got saved and rededicated to Christ through their ministry," he said.

The idea to minister to people late at night in what McCoy calls the "devil's playground," or the raucous party scene, came to him as a way to reach a demographic that would appreciate the music of Handz Up but might otherwise never come across it. He said he's had people call him months after he met them on the street to tell him how they'd started going to church again and how much it had changed the way they were living their lives.

"It means a lot to have an impact like that in the middle of the night when people are drunk at the club," he said. "No one else is out there doing that."

As group members have grown busier,



**Julius Hicks, also known as S.J., raps Handz Up's song "S.I.N." to a crowd of kids at the benefit talent show hosted by the Butterflz, an after-school youth program. (Photo by Zoe Schaver)**

Handz for Kids has gone on hiatus, and the group was never able to produce a second episode of "More Than Just a Dream." But Handz Up still does regular street ministry and performances and holds member meetings to discuss publicity and music production. Every summer, the group hosts a gospel rap-off featuring aspiring gospel rappers and rap groups from around the country.

Handz Up has also started working with a woman named Ebony Bryant, who has the administrative skill to oversee the group's publicity, scheduling and general professionalism.

"I am super proud of them because they have persevered — when they had the TV show and it wasn't quite the right time, they didn't give up. They kept going," Bryant said.

And in the end, perhaps one of the biggest motivating factors keeping the group going is Handz Up's relationship with younger generations.

"There's a young lady that goes to my church who has a son who's only 2 or 3 years old. After buying the CD, she said her son walks around the house singing, 'Glory, glory,' and he'll be trying to act like he's a rapper in the mirror," Hicks said. "To have an impact on a child's life with music that's positive, for a kid to listen to and repeat it in the real world — that's music that's gonna help somebody's life out."