

Local

# Deuteronomy meets Deadmau5 as church DJs seek exaltation

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By Michelle Boorstein August 11, 2013

When you're DJing a Baptist church service, is it more appropriate to mix electronic music by Daft Punk and Fatboy Slim as congregants are being ushered in or as they exit?

Such were the choreographic and theological questions at play Sunday at the 104-year-old high-steepled Church at Clarendon, which for the day replaced its usual eight-piece band and singers on the pulpit with an Atlanta wedding DJ who has hipster glasses, a table of music-mixing technology and a tendency to fist-pump while playing.

"Okay, let's get going!" said Hans Daniels (whose DJ handle is Hans Solo) after being introduced at the start of the service, cranking up the beat — and volume — and eliciting a whoop that filled the bright, airy sanctuary. "Blessed Be Your Name" quickly became "B-B-Blessed Be Your Name," and congregants started cha-cha dancing in their seats.

The concept may have been radical at the 125-member church a decade ago, when worship meant a piano and traditional hymns. But in order to keep its doors open during a period of churn in American religion, the Arlington church has changed its pastor (three times), rebuilt its building, overhauled its services and now finds itself in one of the epicenters of young Washington life.

And to people younger than 30, the drums and electric guitars of the contemporary rock that dominates much of American Christianity are not only *not* edgy, "but for them, it's like singing hymns," Daniels said. "Why does the music you worship to and jam out to have to be completely separate?"

Music is perhaps the most powerful spiritual tool there is, and experimentation is hardly rare for institutions trying to connect with a fickle public. Sixth and I synagogue in Chinatown puts racily dressed klezmer rockers on its altar, and the Community of Hope AME in Hillcrest Heights incorporates a go-go band, an improvising rapper and Christian hip-hop.

A DJ seems like a reasonable next step, particularly at a time when they are filling concert halls and festival lineups, seen in some circles as artists in their own right.

Yet a sole DJ, up there with his big foamy headphones in the spot usually reserved for robed choirs and clergy, raises questions: Does one person (doing a job most people associate with weddings and nightclubs) turn the service into a performance rather than a prayer? Or does it simplify a stage that has become visually busy, like some sporting events?

Daniels and associate pastor Stephen Taylor, who came up with the idea of “Church Remixed,” see it as the latter.

“This is such a pushback — where are all the musicians, and it’s just one guy? — but I think it’s what we need, instead of all this ‘let’s add another singer and someone walking back and forth!’” Daniels said before the service. “When I’m singing in church, I’m either looking at the screen or my eyes are closed.”

Taylor’s sermon in a way mirrored that idea, positing that early Christianity was a simplified alternative to ancient Judaism, with its 613 mitzvot, or directives of things to do or not do.

“Jesus Christ said: ‘Whomever knows me knows my God. . . . Let’s keep this simple,’” Taylor said.

Anyone orchestrating a spiritual experience in 2013 walks a fine line between performance and worship.

“Today there’s a lot of entrepreneurialism, but I wonder if it’s more of a philosophy or a pragmatism than theological,” said Ed Willmington, music director at the Fuller Theological Seminary’s Center for Worship, Theology and the Arts. “One of my worries is, am I thinking about God first? That becomes the question for anyone: Does it serve theology or some other purpose?”

A DJ, Willmington said, isn’t inherently more distracting than anything else. “A tasteful DJ could make that work. In some cases, people might go away and say: ‘It’s cool we had a DJ today.’ Is the focus the person and performance?”

Tony Lee, pastor at the 3,000-member Community of Hope, noted that what we now call classic gospel — practically the soundtrack of contemporary black Christianity — came out of jazz and originally was seen as “too worldly” for church. Thirty years ago, drums were seen as outrageous, and then liturgical dance. Of course, there are still some faith communities that forbid music during worship or the sounds of women singing.

Lee’s musical staff includes Chris Chiles, a gospel songwriter who raps and DJs during services as part of a broader music team. He uses Christian hip-hop pieces, including Trip Lee’s “Robot” and Kirk Franklin’s “Before I Die” — both about God.

“The purpose isn’t to get people bouncing. Our purpose is utilizing music, or whatever we’re doing, to communicate the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ,” said Lee, who studied divinity at Howard University and the Union Theological Seminary in New York. “If we hit that, we’re able to communicate to a generation that knows nothing about old-school gospel music. But they do know about a DJ.”

Many of the congregants at the Clarendon church Sunday are under 30, and they seemed excited by seeing something new. Like many Baptist congregations, the ethos is relatively restrained; there isn’t much freewheeling clapping, dancing, shouting or

singing. But they applauded between Daniels's pieces.

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"It was much more upbeat," said Sean Hipe, 23, who teaches preschool at the church. He especially noticed that vibe during the offering, when donations or tithes are collected. "Usually, that's a very toned-down time. This was awesome. When he cranked it up, I feel awesome; I'm ready to give."

Taylor emphasized to his congregation that this was a one-time thing. Finding anything that would satisfy every member of such a diverse congregation would be challenging, as there are still some longtime, more traditional members, as well as people from around the world and a group of families from the Southeast D.C. neighborhood of Garfield Heights.

After the service, people swapped stories of growing up hearing everything from somber Slavonic a cappella music in an Orthodox church in Russia to Catholic folk hymns in a Virginia parish to gospel singing in a Prince George's County mega-church.

Jackie Doll, 81, who has been active in the church for more than a half-century, said she has become used to changes there — but she still wasn't comfortable with clapping after a song, because it made it feel too much like a performance.

"I like the music more than I did last year," she said.

Michelle Boorstein is the Post's religion reporter, where she reports on the busy marketplace of American religion.

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