Culture



The cast of Dr. Kevin P. Johnson's "Hip-Hop Mass" performs during a premiere at Lyke House, the Catholic Center at Atlanta University Center Consortium, on Feb. 15 in Atlanta. (Black Catholic Messenger/Samantha Smith)

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A new musical blending contemporary hip-hop music and Catholic liturgy debuted Feb. 14-16 at the Lyke House, a Catholic Newman Center serving historically Black colleges in Atlanta.

The "Hip-Hop Mass" from composer Kevin Johnson consists of 24 songs in the order of a Mass. The production includes choreography, liturgical dance and even a depiction of the Eucharistic Prayer.

"The beauty of the 'Hip-Hop Mass' is bringing young people back to the church," Johnson said.

The ensemble cast in the performances this month in Georgia consisted of choreographers, actors and students affiliated with the Lyke House. Johnson emphasized that there was no way to create the project without including young adults.

"[It] was an opportunity to engage young people, which stems from the missionary discipleship program at the Lyke House, where we could actually work with collegiates," he said.

Before the premiere, the cast performed some of the music at Morehouse College on Feb. 13 at an induction Mass for a portrait honoring the late Sargent and Eunice Kennedy Shriver for their human and civil rights contributions.

The liturgy was celebrated by Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Washington, an African American cardinal who formerly led the Atlanta Archdiocese for nearly 15 years from 2005 to 2019.

The musical premiere was at the Newman Center, where it was livestreamed and recorded.

Creating the music

Timothy Shriver, son of Eunice and Sargent, said he was moved by the "Hip-Hop Mass," which he commissioned Johnson to compose.

In addition to being an associate professor of music and the glee club director at Spelman College, Johnson is an active composer of African American Catholic liturgical music. His extensive catalog includes seven Mass settings, more than 300 psalm settings and numerous sacred songs.

Some of his more well-known works include "The Mass of St. Benedict the African," composed for the Archdiocese of Chicago, and "The Mass of St. Peter Claver," written for the Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary.

Last summer, Johnson led a one-week retreat to create the "Hip-Hop Mass" with Grammy Award-winning songwriter, musician and producer Jason Taylor. Also participating in the creative retreat were Johnson's children Ryanne Pigford, Kevin Johnson and Sarah Johnson along with their families.

Kevin Johnson said that writing the music was initially stressful because there were so many elements to consider — especially given his role as co-writer, co-producer and cast member.

"But then the Lord reminded us that it's about him, and we started to mesh and gel a little better as time went on," he said.

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The younger Johnson also explained that the creative process brought him closer to Scripture.

"I had to live in the Bible to make sure I was being faithful to the parts about Jesus and trying to expand on his thought process as he went to the cross," he said.

After the retreat, Shriver listened to songs from the "Hip-Hop Mass" and was blown away, not expecting an entire musical, explained Johnson.

"That is what God gave us," he said.

A new production

When the Shrivers' induction Mass was scheduled for mid-February, it seemed a good time for Johnson to premiere the "Hip-Hop Mass" for the Atlanta Catholic

community.

To help make it a theatrical production, he contacted Cameron Smith, an actor, singer and parishioner of Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in the city, where Johnson previously served as choir director.

Smith helped with the basics of the show, as well as rehearsals and promo videos. He is also part of the cast and served as a soloist. He describes the "Hip-Hop Mass" as having more freedom compared to a more traditional liturgy.

"Our goal is to get younger people excited about church and embracing a relationship with God," said Smith.

Kevin Johnson said he was pleasantly surprised by Smith and other professionals outside the creative team who helped bring the project to the stage and community.

"It's a lot of work in a short amount of time," Johnson said. "People heard about it and got offered to do it, and have stuck around despite the challenges we've faced."

During its opening weekend, the "Hip-Hop Mass" received many positive reviews.

"I got emotional," said Skylar Mobley, a Spelman senior and glee club member who came to the premiere. "Every single song was good."

"The premiere is just the beginning," said Johnson, who hopes to bring the production to Catholic parishes throughout the nation over the next few months. A team is also creating sheet music so music directors can independently use the songs for Masses.

Kevin Johnson hopes people can resonate with the music as a new path in Catholic worship.

"Each song walks you through a different aspect of faith," he said.

"So, at any point in your faith journey, you should be able to connect with some point of the show."

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