In 2000, Delmar “Mr. Del” Lawrence’s secular single “Ass and Titties” went gold and Mr. Del was a member of the Memphis rap group Three 6 Mafia. But shortly after that success, he had a conversion experience and dedicated his career to holy hip-hop music. I met Mr. Del at the office of his record label, Dedicated Music Group, to discuss his crossover from secular to Christian music, his background growing up in Memphis and his latest projects.

00:50 DL says that he was born in the Whitehaven neighborhood of Memphis, Tenn. and later moved to Cordova. He says that he never had a relationship with his father, but his mother was an entrepreneur who owned a daycare, a hair salon and real estate. He has a younger brother and two older sisters and describes himself as “the only musical person” in his family.

01:50 DL recalls beating on pots and pans as a child and calls himself a born drummer. He later studied percussion in school. He also grew up writing poetry and says that he got introduced to hip-hop music at the age of 7. He describes hip hop as poetry over a beat.

02:28 CS asks, “What did mom think about the hip hop music?” DL replies, “She didn’t really think nothing about it until high school when she felt like it was interfering with my studies, you know, which it wasn’t. It was more so—it played my father, it played an escape. You know so, I use to listen to it every day. Wake up and go to sleep to music.”

03:38 CS asks, what was hip hop an escape from? DL replies, “It was an escape from my household. I lived in an abusive household, so, that’s all I’m going to say about that. [laughs] So all the drama that was going on in my house hip-hop and music played an escape to that.”
04:45 DL says the song “So Many Tears” by Tupac describes his childhood. Although he raps for a living and grew up with hip-hop he is more of a jazz fan today. He also enjoys soul music and old R&B, particularly the Isley Brothers.

07:26 DL says that in high school he started performing professionally. [JD coughs in the background] DL continues,

“I was making mixed tapes in high school. I was running with my former band members—DJ Paul, Juicy J, DJ Squeeky—all of the pioneers of quote, unquote Memphis rap. You know I was infatuated with them. I use to follow them and everything. So I kind of took to them, doing mixed tapes. I use to sell them at my high school. And that popularity from doing different teen parties and stuff like that, like I’d rap at a lot of teen parties and stuff like that, it caught the attention of this rapper by the name of Indo G and I got put on a compilation that he did while I was in high school. I was a senior in high school. That was my first introduction to, you know, the music industry. And after that, you know, once my foot was in the door I just went all the way in.”

08:35 DL says he met DJ Paul because they lived in the same neighborhood and Juicy J because Juicy ran a club in downtown Memphis [called Juicy J’s Place according to an outside source]. DL had a God-aunt that worked for Def Jam Records and in 1994, he took tracks recorded by Paul, Juicy and himself to his God-aunt. She passed on signing the artists and DL says the aunt still regrets that decision.

10:34 DL describes how the equipment used to produce music has advanced from 4-tracks and reels to digital computers and editing software.

11:03 DL talks about the first time he heard one of his songs played on the radio.

“It was ’99, the spring of ’99 and I recorded this song “A and T” [Ass and Titties]. That’s the abbreviation, I don’t know if I can, you know— I will just say it like that. Howard Q—at the time, who was the biggest promoter, he ran Denim and Diamonds, which, at that time, was the biggest club in Memphis, and he was the biggest DJ – he supported me. He funded me and then he played it in the club. And it took off so big in the club that it got to radio. And when it got to radio it just exploded. From there, that’s when Paul and Juicy offered me a deal and I went on tour with Cash Money, which, at the time, had 14, 15-year-old Lil Wayne. And we did a couple of shows and we went on tour and it was awesome. A great feeling, great feeling.”

12:13 DL says the inspiration for “Ass and Titties” was “that club life” and his infatuation with women. “It started as a joke in the studio actually and when we came up with the hook we were like oh yeah, that’s it.” The single later went Gold. He followed that single with a hit call “Shake It Up” then his career “shifted.”
14:45 DL says his transformation to living a more God-centered life occurred instantly after he heard God speak to him. He said he was in church when he heard God speak to him and he had come to the end of a service to see his family. He had just come back from a tour and had not seen his loved ones in eight months. He did not hear the sermon or the choir that day and his moment of conviction was not outwardly dramatic, but rather a silent conversation between him and God as he sat on the pew at Bountiful Blessings church in Memphis. Before that moment he said he did not have “a relationship with God.”

17:33 In describing his conversion experience DL says, “I didn’t really have no feeling about it. I knew I was hearing God. I knew that I had a purpose and I made a decision, you know, to do that.”

18:01 CS asks, “If it’s not too personal can you tell us what God said?” DL responses,

“He said, come out. I want you to do the same thing you’re doing now but do it for me. I told him no, then he gave me a vision of what I was going to do. And I told him if I do it you’re going to have to take care of me because I had just signed a contract and I had money coming in. And he said, trust Me. And that was the end of the conversation.”

18:30 DL says that when he told his family and former band mates about his decision to do holy hip-hop music they were happy, but he does not think that they believed him. They thought it was a “phase,” he says. They knew he was serious when he recorded his first holy hip-hop album.

19:50 DL talks about the process of making Enter the Light, his first holy hip hop album in 2000. He found a producer in church named Chris Morris who assisted him with the album. He wrote in the car, his apartment and the studio. It took him a week to make the album. He adds,

“Very fast, the fastest I have ever done anything. It was real quick. Real quick. We had studio time booked for four days. I wrote for three. I wrote Sunday, Monday, Tuesday; went in Wednesday through Saturday. The album was finished Saturday night.”

21:40 DL says that the hits on that album were “Another Place,” “Shine” that featured Salt from the group Salt N’ Pepper and “Who Got It” that was about catching the Holy Ghost. He reissued the album this year digitally.

23:49 DL says he knew little about holy hip-hop or gospel rap in 2000 when he crossed over into that genre. At the time, there was a label out of Texas that was the leaders in expanding and promoting the genre.

24:50 DL says that he considers himself a hip hop artist and does not think the genre should be subdivided into categories like gospel rap, gangsta rap and conscious rap. Artists have long talked about a variety of subjects on each album and the subdivisions are corporate distinctions rather than artistic distinctions.
The conversation switches from his professional interest in music to his personal musical taste. DL reveals that he is a fan of Boney James, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Raymond Tisdale, Will Downing and Michelle Forelle.

CS asks if he enjoys Memphis music. DL responds enthusiastically,

“That’s all a part of me. I’m Southern, you know. I’m from the South. That’s another part of who I am and all of those things, I think, are represented in my music. Even from the way I talk. My Southern drawl or whatever. My voice—the thickness of it.”

DL says he has “Southern Pride” and the place that was once hostile towards black people is now the capital of the black music scene. He says Atlanta is a hotbed for holy hip-hop and some other music as well. He continues and talks about Memphis’s role in the music industry.

“Being that I’m from Memphis, that represents all music. That represents blues, rock n roll, soul, all of that. So it’s only right for hip-hop, for me to take that and put Memphis on it. And that’s just a part of it. All of my stuff ain’t all hip-hop. It’s singing. You hear the rock n roll element. You hear the blues element in my music because I’m Memphis to the core.”

He talks about the culture and history of Memphis and said that Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination in Memphis left a “stench” in the city, but that negative past has been used as creative inspiration for many artists. [phone rings in the background].

DL talks about his body of work as a Christian artist. His holy hip-hop albums are Enter the Light released in 2000, Church Age released in 2003, The Future released in 2005, Hope Dealer released in 2007 and Thriller released in 2009 that earned him a Dove Music Award nomination in 2010 for Best Rap Album of the Year. In 2009, he also negotiated his own record label with Universal Records called DMG (Dedicated Music Group). In 2004, he received a Grammy nomination for a compilation that he assisted with called Holy Hip Hop: Volume 1. “God has been good,” he said. His upcoming album is called Tenn Man. The title marks his 10th anniversary as a holy hip-hop artist, is an homage to his Tennessee roots and will be released on October 10, 2010 or 10-10-10.

DL says that because of his contract with Universal the album will be widely distributed and available for download on iTunes. Today, he is more financially successful than he was when he walked away from the secular music world 10 years ago. He has five artists/groups on his label including the artist Mali Music who also won a Dove Award nomination in 2010.

When CS asked about the state of holy hip-hop today, DL replies,

“The state of it is good, but it’s not an industry. That’s the difference between holy hip-hop and everything else. It’s ministry. It doesn’t have an infrastructure. I have an infrastructure when it comes to my business, but if we talk about the holy
hip-hop movement it’s really not. It’s really about different artists who have been called to do this and they have individual ministries. And as long as they go out and do what God has called them to do then they will be successful just like I have.”

40:40 DL said that everything that God has promised him he has given him. For the next stage of his career he is focusing on growth and touching more people.

41:34 JD asks DL a couple of questions. JD starts by asking DL how he feels about profiting from religious music. DL says that he does not classify himself as a “religious” artist tied to a formal structure, but rather as messenger of good news. He adds the Bible says that “workman is worthy of his pay” [I believe he is referencing either the scripture “the labourer is worthy of his hire” Luke 10:7 or “The labourer is worthy of his reward.” 1 Timothy 5:18, both found in the King James Version of the Bible]

42:50 JD ask DL how involved he is in the production process of his albums and DL says, he is very hands on and has input on photo shoots, art direction, mixing and mastering. “I’m involved in every area.”

44:10 Recorded interview session ends with a closing note from CS.