

Southern Baptist retailer removes black hip-hop artist's album that includes the word 'penis'

By Bradford William Davis February 8

Popular hip-hop artist Sho Baraka has taken aim at Southern Baptist retailer LifeWay Christian Stores for dropping his album for including the word "penis," a move that shows a growing tension between the black artist and his white evangelical fans.

A spokesman for LifeWay confirmed the retailer's decision, saying in an email that customers complained about the language, but the representative declined to provide further details.

Christian bookstores don't usually place rap albums by black activist artists front and center on their shelves. But in recent years, white evangelicals have embraced several black hip-hop artists such as chart-topping rappers Lecrae and Trip Lee, whose albums are sold on LifeWay's website. Baraka, who was once part of Lecrae's Reach Records label, said he upset LifeWay customers by including the anatomical reference in his album.

His album "The Narrative" debuted in the top 10 on iTunes last fall and was once described with high praise on LifeWay's product page as "saturated in a Gospel worldview." But, Baraka said, the retailer pulled his album last month after customers objected to the final track, which includes the lyrics:

*I was an insecure boy who just thought he was a genius
But always pissed off, that's because I thought with my penis*

*It's all strategic, I'm just asking us the reason
Share my faith on the track, I'm just exorcising demons*

Baraka said the song in question, "Piano Break, 33 A.D." (a reference to Christ's death), is about his past failures to live his life monogamously. It wasn't profane in context, Baraka says, because it communicates how "God has been good in my life," while acknowledging "how wretched and evil I am."

"Like any retailer, LifeWay has a responsibility not to carry resources with content our customers consider inappropriate," spokesman Marty King wrote in an email. "After receiving complaints about some language in The Narrative cd, LifeWay decided to no longer carry it."

LifeWay got into a similar controversy in 2012 when progressive author Rachel Held Evans accused the retailer of not carrying her book over the use of the word "vagina."

Baraka says that the retailer has a double standard when it comes to anatomical references in their books. Other books sold on their shelves [use anatomical references](#). For instance, "Sheet Music," a sex manual intended for Christian couples, contains 45 uses of the word "penis," along with euphemisms like "Mr. Happy."

Frustrated with LifeWay's choice, Baraka says the incident reflects a larger problem with American evangelicals, over three-quarters of whom are white. He believes his own culture, one shaped by a love for hip-hop and a pride in his ethnic heritage, is at odds with a Christianity dominated by white, political conservatives.**

"The Narrative" is an album in praise of and in service to black people. The cover features a three-quarters profile of Baraka in clear homage to 19th century abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

The Atlanta-based artist taps into a black civil rights lineage, from “The New Jim Crow” scholar Michelle Alexander to 18th-century poet Phillis Wheatley; many song titles on the 2016 album reference a significant date in black history (“Foreward, 1619,” “Maybe Both, 1865”). He is what old-school hip-hop fans would call “conscious” or what younger fans might call “woke.”

Baraka’s work reflects his larger mission: He challenges the attitudes of people of all political and religious stripes, even his own fan base on the left and the right.

Politically and religiously complicated

Baraka’s conversion to Christianity while attending Tuskegee University led him into the world of Christian hip-hop. An early member of Lecrae’s Reach Records, Baraka, who attends Southern Baptist Blueprint Church in Atlanta, performed to packed-out sanctuaries of predominantly white, conservative evangelicals.

His father, Reggie, was a former player with the New Orleans Saints and a member of the black nationalist Black Panther Party. Though Baraka’s childhood was marked with a distrust of the government common to the Panthers, the thick conservatism of his newfound faith drew him to, of all places, the far-right former presidential candidate Alan Keyes, a deputy chairman in the Reagan administration.

But Baraka’s idolization of Keyes stopped as he learned more about the candidate’s approach to civil rights. “I followed Keyes blindly,” Baraka said. “I lost a lot of respect for him when I realized he was a token.” Baraka recalls how Keyes was relocated to Illinois to run against Barack Obama for an open

U.S. Senate seat in 2004, a move seen as the positioning of a black opponent to poach voters.

In recent years, Baraka has sought to carve out his own political path. Last year, he co-founded the AND Campaign, a coalition of urban Christians concerned with racial justice who seek solutions to the problems that primarily impact minorities. They want to chart a third way between the increasingly polarized two-party system, which Baraka believes forces black Christians to sacrifice significant aspects of their faith on the one hand and their politics on the other.

AND Campaign leaders draw inspiration from the civil rights work of Fannie Lou Hamer, who spoke out against Jim Crow-era voting restrictions while also vocally opposing abortion. In his song “Fathers, 2004,” Baraka exalts Hamer as the kind of woman he wants his daughter to become. And in an op-ed for evangelical [Christianity Today magazine](#), Baraka wrote that he hoped more people would one day “protest both police brutality and abortions” as central concerns for black communities.

Perspectives on abortion vary somewhat among black Christians. In a 2014 Pew survey, [42 percent of respondents](#) affiliated with historically black Protestant churches believe abortion should be illegal in most or all cases. According to [Pew](#), 82 percent of historically black Protestants identify with the Democratic Party, compared with 67 percent of white evangelicals who identify with the Republican Party.

Baraka believes that the ideological diversity of black Christians is rarely reflected in the voting booth. During the 2016 election, he urged black Christians to ignore pragmatics, even if it meant risking a Donald Trump presidency. He said he doubted either major candidate would improve the lives of

black Americans, citing Hillary Clinton's flawed record on black civil rights, including her support of the 1994 "tough on crime" bill.

Despite Trump's tapping of Jeff Sessions and Stephen K. Bannon — both accused of overt racism — for top posts, as well as his comments about Mexicans, blacks and Muslims, Baraka's advice to fellow black Christians hasn't changed: "Vote your conscience." During the election, he was a vocal supporter of Evan McMullin, a third-party conservative.

Ekemini Uwan, a writer, public theologian, and speaker in evangelical churches, appreciates Baraka's critique of two-party politics. Still, she defends the choice to vote within the party system as a logical, even necessary choice for black Americans. (She voted for Clinton).

"When in the history of this country have black voters ever had the privilege of voting for either party with a clear conscience?" she asked.

Black Americans, she said, have always known "that neither party will align with our values. Therefore, we often vote pragmatically and with the party that can move the needle on issues that impact our livelihood — even if the needle moves by a mere inch."

Exit polls showed 87 percent of black voters favored Clinton in the 2016 election.

Musically complicated

LifeWay's decision to pull Baraka's album reflects a larger frustration he has with white evangelicals and political conservatism, and what he sees as a lack of compassion or solutions for black communities. In "Piano Break, 33 A.D." (the

penis song), he raps that “he hated welfare until a brother lost his job.” Meanwhile, “Maybe Both, 1865” laments the failures of politicians, pundits and pastors to truly meet the needs of African Americans. He also challenges the American exceptionalism found in certain strands of evangelical theology:

*Put a dollar to your ear, you can hear the moaning of a slave
America the great was built off the labor that they gave
Jefferson and Washington were great peace pursuers
But, John Brown was a terrorist and an evil doer
Oh yes, God bless the American Revolution
But, God ain't for all the riots and the looting*

Even though he was an early member of Reach, Baraka found himself increasingly out of sync with its fan base. He felt the label’s projects were designed to fit Christian Contemporary Music, a genre that mimics the style of Top 40 pop music but features inoffensive, Jesus-centric lyrics. The crossover approach led to his 2010 album, “Lions and Liars.” The 21-track-album attempted to meld acoustic spoken word about black self-image with digestible rock-rap anthems familiar to fans of the 116 Clique, a Reach-centered collective of which he was a founding member.

Baraka knew his emerging soulful music would never work with Reach’s audience. “I was performing in New Mexico in front of a crowd of mostly white and Native American fans,” Baraka said. “It wasn’t so much that it was the racial breakdown of the crowd — it was the age ... as I’m rapping on stage, I’m also thinking, *They’re not connecting with my message. They don’t even know what I’m talking about. What am I doing here?*”

Baraka and Reach parted ways in 2011.

Since then, Baraka has relied less on the dominant evangelical structures he once leaned on to spread his music. When he began recording his music outside the label, he made a calculated bet that there was an audience hungry for a third way between the safe Christian music of white evangelicalism and the materialistic excesses of mainstream hip-hop.

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But LifeWay still serves as a prominent storefront for Christian music to spread, which makes its decision especially frustrating for artists like Baraka. According to Baraka, LifeWay and its evangelical customers attempt to reach people in urban contexts without understanding their culture.

Baraka and LifeWay hold the same point of view that sex is intended for marriage, but its customers aren't used to how an artist like Baraka articulates that view. So, when music like "The Narrative" used language offensive to LifeWay's customer base, the retailer bailed.

Baraka believes LifeWay's decision, though "disappointing," was also "typical of the Christian industry." Baraka's experience with LifeWay, which did not contact him about its decision, revealed how uncomfortable evangelical culture can be with his own.

"Everyone on both sides wants to censor the person that doesn't fit their narrative," Baraka said. Still, he said, in spite of all the conservative outcry over political correctness, "The moment someone like me communicates something like this, who's the one being censored now?"

Correction: Due to an editing error, an earlier version of this piece misidentified the denominational affiliation of Blueprint Church in Atlanta. It is Southern Baptist.

****EDITORIAL NOTE:** LifeWay is NOT dominated by “white, Christian conservatives,” but by those who value Biblical principles of remaining clean and pure....and that means not selling lewd material to the public under the guise of “Christian music.”