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Music Review

On the Artist

Niels Petersen, aka R. E. A. L.

Faith and Christianity are not common topics in German-language rap. Moreover, while in the United States gospel rap is a genre in which Christian artists have had enormous chart success – for example, Lecrae and Andy Mineo – in Germany the genre is an absolute niche phenomenon. In 2021, with the creation of the first German gospel-rap label, Realtalk Records – possibly a reference to Lecrae’s debut album of the same name¹ – Niels Petersen (stage name R. E. A. L.) took an initial step towards establishing gospel rap in Germany. Petersen has signed seven Christian rappers (Copain, E. R., Kardo/Cardo44, Phuong Dao, G-Time, and the duo Double M), and the album *Sampler 2*² was in the German charts for a week in May 2023. As of July 2024, R. E. A. L. has released more than 20 tracks (both solo and collaborations) on YouTube, some of which have been streamed over 250,000 times. His first studio album, entitled *Blessin IV Society*³ – an obvious reference to the feature film *MENACE II SOCIETY*⁴ – was released in July 2024 as a collaboration with Cardo44. R. E. A. L. mainly raps in German, although some collaborations with Colombian underground rappers are in Spanish. In late 2023, Petersen published his autobiography, *Hope Dealer. Vom Drogenhändler zum Hoffnungsbringer. Meine 180°-Wende im härtesten Knast Kolumbiens* (Hope Dealer. From Drug Dealer to Bearer of Hope. My 180° Turnaround in Columbia’s Toughest Prison). I use that autobiography as the starting point for this consideration of the artist, as it is essential for understanding the mindset, self-image, and (artistic) self-

1 *Real Talk* (Lecrae, Reach Records, US 2004).

2 *Sampler 2* (Realtalk Records, DE 2023, Realtalk Records).

3 *Blessin IV Society* (R. E. A. L. & Cardo44, Realtalk Records, DE 2024).

4 *MENACE II SOCIETY* (Allen Hughes and Albert Hughes, US 1993).

presentation (be it in songs, video clips, or interviews) of the evangelical rapper R. E. A. L.

Petersen narrates his personal story as follows: his life begins in a suburb of the northern German city of Flensburg in 1983, where he grows up as the sole child in a middle-class family. He describes himself as a good athlete and quick-tempered; his strong desire for recognition means that since childhood he has literally bullied his way through. While still at school, he starts taking drugs and initially deals cannabis, amphetamines, and ecstasy, later primarily cocaine. He discovers his love for American rap music and writes his first gangsta rap-style lyrics using the stage name Dirrrty. After graduating from secondary school Petersen spends the next years commuting between northern Germany, where he studies sport, and Colombia, where he makes contacts in the drug scene. In Hamburg, he meets more well-known German rappers such as Bonez MC, subsequently contributing the song “Hustler” to one of Bonez MC’s mixtapes.⁵ When his Colombian girlfriend gets pregnant, she aborts the fetus, an act subsequently described by Petersen as murder.⁶ He continues to try to find a foothold in the drug business in Colombia and claims he survives an assassination attempt and escapes being kidnapped, whereas some of his business partners are less fortunate and are murdered over the course of time.⁷ Petersen plans to smuggle about 500 grams of a preliminary stage of cocaine into Germany in a prepared backpack. However, he is caught by the drug squad at Bogotá airport and faces a prison sentence of eight to twelve years; a deal with the public prosecutor’s office later reduces his original sentence. In July 2011, he is sent to the prison La Modelo, which according to Petersen is the most dangerous prison in Colombia. After a short time there, he has an epiphany. He describes how one morning, after two weeks in jail, he feels a strong urge to join the daily church service. There, in his words, “the hope of the gospel caught me completely: that God, the Father, would accept me, no matter what I was like, no matter what I had done”.⁸ From this point on, Petersen attends church every day, and after a while he is baptized. The German embassy in Bogotá arranges for Petersen to be transferred to a prison in Itagüí (near Medellín), where he serves just over eighteen months of his

5 *Mehr geht nicht* (Bonez MC, Jentown Crhyme Records, DE 2008).

6 Petersen 2023, 72.

7 Petersen 2023, 105.

8 Petersen 2023, 151. Translation mine.

sentence before being released on parole at the end of October 2013. After returning to Germany, he initially takes a job as a warehouse worker but soon reverts to his old behavior (partying, womanizing, drug use). Only after his “second conversion”⁹ through a chat with a devout Christian woman does he finally rethink his life. He breaks off his contacts in the milieu and sets up a company to import fruit purées from South America. In 2023, he establishes another company in Colombia, where he gives former prisoners a second chance by providing them with work on his fruit plantations. In 2019 and 2023, he travels back to Colombia and preaches in various prisons, including Itagüí and La Modelo. In addition to his business activities, he founds the first German gospel rap label in 2021 and preaches in free churches.

As I had previously perceived Petersen primarily as a gospel rapper – or “gangsta gospel rapper”, as he describes his musical style – I was somewhat surprised by the subordinate role that music plays in his autobiography, with occasional comments on his love of hip-hop culture. His short career as rapper Dirrrty is given just a few sentences, and his label Realtalk Records is only mentioned in the last chapter. Nevertheless, the book offers a wealth of information on his self-staging.

Petersen’s self-presentation is particularly revealing with respect to the discourse on authenticity in rap music. Ultimately, he describes his life up until his second epiphany as an accumulation of clichés typical for gangsta rap: women, partying, sex, drugs, easy money, violence, and even imprisonment – and not just anywhere, but in the “toughest jail in Colombia”. Life as a criminal is described in detail, yet not glorified as is often the case in gangsta rap. Nonetheless, Petersen / R. E. A. L. – it is apparent from several interviews that he makes no distinction between his stage persona and the private person¹⁰ – proves his street credibility and can present himself as “real” in contrast to “fake” rappers (i. e., rappers who claim to be tough guys but have not experienced any of the things they rap about).

This contrast shifts unexpectedly, however, when he retrospectively describes his performance within the genre as also fake, but for a different reason: “Sex, drugs & money, none of that is real, it’s just an illusion and not reality. Real life is faith, love and hope. [...] I used to be fake too. Not because I told garbage in my songs that wasn’t true, but because I hadn’t yet arrived

9 Petersen 2023, 190.

10 WIE LEBT EIN GOSPELRAPPER? (Heukelbach, 2023), 00:00:31.

at the truth.”¹¹ Petersen’s mindset that “true” faith in the Christian God is the only path to “the truth” comes through clearly in his autobiography, and his missionary approach is expressed by incorporating an appendix that includes some Bible passages with his own commentary and a sermon that he gave in Hamburg in 2023. The track “Reformation”,¹² written as a reckoning with the institutional church, makes clearer what Petersen considers to be aspects of “true” faith: a personal relationship with God in his human form Jesus Christ, acknowledgement of the Bible as the source of truth, and – derived from a specific reading of selective biblical passages – the rejection of liberal stances on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and diversity. Petersen expresses the second and third of these attitudes explicitly in interviews with secular YouTubers, always emphasizing that his rejection is never directed against people, only against a supposedly ungodly way of life.¹³

Petersen’s autobiography is an example of the classic evangelical narrative of conversion and religious awakening. This event forms the core of his self-staging, and he tells it in detail in practically every one of his numerous interviews with Christian broadcasting stations and YouTube channels. Moreover, in terms of self-promotion, the autobiography is also an expression of how carefully Petersen has planned his career as R. E. A. L.: in interviews from 2020 and 2021, after telling his life story Petersen always points out that his personal story is not over yet, as God told him to make Christian rap and that he will soon have something published.¹⁴ R. E. A. L.’s first EP¹⁵ dates back to 2021, and the title track, “180°”, is essentially a short summary of his autobiography. The EP’s artwork alone is revealing, packed with links to hip-hop culture combined with references to Petersen’s religious background and his life story: both the EP’s title and R. E. A. L.’s logo are in a graffiti style; a small label in black-and-white with the text “Straight Outta Scripture” is based on the iconic “Parental Advisory” warning label and is an adaptation of “Straight Outta Compton”, the title of the biopic of the influential US hip-hop crew N. W. A.¹⁶ R. E. A. L. aligns with the phenotype of a well-trained “tough” gangsta rapper with numerous tattoos, wearing

11 Petersen 2023, 227. Translation mine.

12 R. E. A. L. & PHUONG DAO – REFORMATION (Realtalk Records, 2022).

13 For example, R. E. A. L. INTERVIEW (TV Strassensound, 2022), 00:52:44.

14 For example, MIT JESUS IN DEN KNAST (ERF Mensch Gott, 2020), 00:24:00.

15 180° (R. E. A. L., Realtalk Records, DE 2021).

16 STRAIGHT OUTTA COMPTON (F. Gary Gray, US 2015).

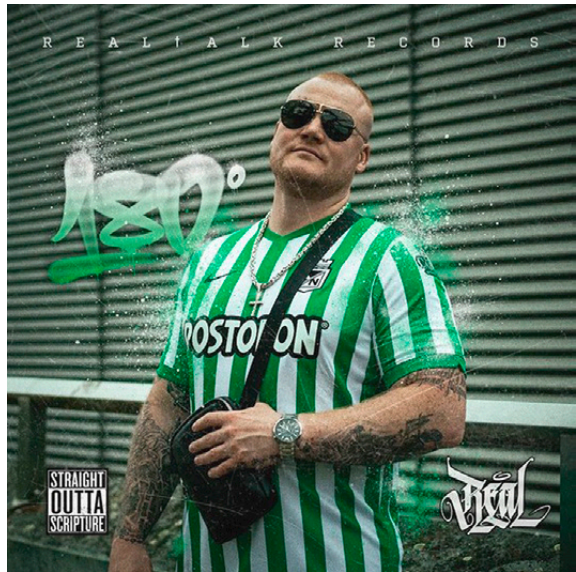


Fig. 1: Cover of the EP 180° (R. E. A. L., Realtalk Records, DE 2021).

sunglasses, a large silver cross on a chain around his neck, and a jersey of the Colombian football team Atlético Nacional from Medellín (fig. 1).

Another element of the careful staging of R. E. A. L.'s career is that a total of eight QR codes are cleverly integrated into chapter headings in his autobiography and link to thematically appropriate songs/video clips by R. E. A. L. or to collaborations on YouTube. These video clips are indicative of the professionalism of Realtalk Records: all are well made technically and are in no way inferior to those of German-speaking gangsta rappers who are far more successful commercially. The themes of gangsta rap are also sometimes taken up visually, for example through the video clip *Brief an die Straße*¹⁷ (Letter to the Street), which accompanies the chapter in the autobiography entitled "Street Credibility".¹⁸ The video clip is shot between blocks of flats; R. E. A. L. walks through streets where easy money is made with drug deals and violence prevails. Crime is omnipresent in the video clip, but more to illustrate life on the street, which – according to the song's message – does not end well. This theme is illustrated by a group of young men who are shown several times with balaclavas over their faces and

17 R. E. A. L. – BRIEF AN DIE STRASSE (Realtalk Records, DE 2021).

18 Petersen 2023, 31.

handguns – one member of this group is shot at the end of the video clip and lies dead, gun still in hand, next to the fancy car in which the group had driven up shortly before. R. E. A. L., by contrast, is a calming influence who offers an alternative to violence and crime by praying with young people¹⁹ and reading the Bible.²⁰ Simultaneously, he reconstructs gangsta rap motifs to give them new meaning: selling drugs from the trunk of a car becomes distributing Bibles from the trunk.²¹ Status symbols such as gold jewelry or expensive watches play a role around him, but not for Petersen himself, who wears everyday clothes. Finally, R. E. A. L. replaces firearms with the Bible – true to the motto “the weapon is the word”. Especially in connection with the autobiography, R. E. A. L. presents himself as “real” compared to people who are only “fake” – another classic gangsta rap motif – as he raps lines like “Pushers wanna be like Pablo [likely referring to Pablo Escobar – a notorious Colombian drug baron] but never been to Medellín, street credibility, kids are on Tilidine.”²² The narcotic Tilidine (also sold as the medication Valoron) has been glorified in several songs by German gangsta rappers in recent years – for example in the extremely successful eponymous song by Capital Bra and Samra, which reached number one in the German, Austrian, and Swiss single charts.²³ By using such references and buzz words, Petersen demonstrates on the one hand that he is familiar with the secular rap scene, and on the other hand that he is trying to present a “meaningful” alternative with his Christian rap. Only time will show the extent to which he succeeds.

A closer look at artists such as R. E. A. L. reveals the complexity of the interplay between evangelical Protestantism and popular music. By appealing to and at the same time reinterpreting common motifs of a particular genre (here, gangsta rap, drugs, violence, etc.) while overemphasizing genre authenticity, evangelical artists such as R. E. A. L. attempt to connect with audiences beyond their own circle. The success of gospel rap from Germany has so far been limited, but current developments will allow us to understand the self-image, mindset, and staging practices of evangelical musicians. This short consideration might be a first step in that direction.

19 R. E. A. L. – BRIEF AN DIE STRAÙE (Realtalk Records, DE 2021), 00:01:28.

20 R. E. A. L. – BRIEF AN DIE STRAÙE (Realtalk Records, DE 2021), 00:02:03.

21 R. E. A. L. – BRIEF AN DIE STRAÙE (Realtalk Records, DE 2021), 00:01:43.

22 “Pusher woll’n wie Pablo sein doch war’n niemals in Medellín, Street Credibility, Kids sind auf Tilidin”; R. E. A. L. – BRIEF AN DIE STRAÙE (Realtalk Records, DE 2021), 00:00:51.

23 *Tilidin* (Capital Bra X Samra, DE 2019, Urban).

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