

REVELATIONS

A gospel singer comes out.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

Anthony Charles Williams II has never had a comfortable relationship with the industry that made him famous. Fans know him as Tonéx. “Pronounced Toe-Nay” was the name of his breakthrough album, a decade ago, and it marked the arrival of a major new voice in gospel music. Tonéx’s eccentric style and vertiginous high notes helped make him one of the most acclaimed praise singers of the past decade and, for a time, one of the most successful. He had a certain hip-hop swagger, and he cultivated a coy, teasing sensibility; he had the status of a sex symbol, while portraying himself as a righteous alternative to the decadent mainstream. One early song, “Waiting,” sounded a lot like a breathy slow jam, though the lyrics were about “waiting” for divine guidance. (“Now that I listen back to it, I cannot believe I got away with it,” he says, chuckling proudly. “That’s where I got a lot of my female fan base from.”) In his music videos, he flirted with raunchiness: he couldn’t thrust his hips, but he could undulate his torso and snap his knees open and shut. A boisterous live double CD, “Out the Box,” won him six trophies at the 2005 Stellar Awards, gospel’s most prestigious event, and sold more than half a million copies. His success was proof of the continued popularity of gospel music, a vibrant genre with its own infrastructure and star-making machinery; he was a welcome guest at all the biggest black churches, a regular presence on BET’s gospel shows, and a headliner at the gospel festivals that fill theatres and arenas nationwide. But then Tonéx fell from grace—or, depending on your point of view, was pushed.

He is only thirty-four years old, a young veteran. He has released dozens of CDs, which contain some of the strangest and most seductive Christian pop music since the glory days of James

Cleveland; his most evident musical forebears are adventurous pop stars such as Stevie Wonder, Janet Jackson, and Erykah Badu. He knows his way around an old-fashioned spiritual, but from the start he delighted in embracing the cultural signifiers of the nonchurch world: Indian incense, hip-hop slang, Rastafarian head wraps, slim-fitting European suits, trunk-rattling bass. He also made a habit of tweaking old-fashioned, upstanding churchgoers, though not always intentionally. For gospel stars, as for other black church leaders, there remains something slightly scandalous about divorce, and in 2005 Tonéx was divorced, after four years of marriage to Yvette Graham, a singer who had sometimes recorded as Ms. Tonéx. Since then, he has made a series of inflammatory statements in which he denounced the industry and questioned church doctrine.

This past September, the television host known as Lexi broadcast an interview with Tonéx on the Word Network, a gospel channel, in which the singer made his clearest public statements so far about his sexual orientation, which had long been a subject of speculation and debate. In the interview, Tonéx sits on a pale-green couch, quietly but confidently answering questions that he had been avoiding for years.

Lexi asks, “Have you struggled with homosexuality?”

“Not ‘struggled,’” Tonéx says, cagily. “It wasn’t a struggle.”

Lexi perseveres. “Is being attracted to men under control?”

Tonéx repeats the phrase, weighing it. “‘Under control.’”

“You said you were attracted to men, at one point.”

“Am.”

“‘Am?’”

“Mm-hmm.”

“So. Do you practice?”

“Like, piano?”

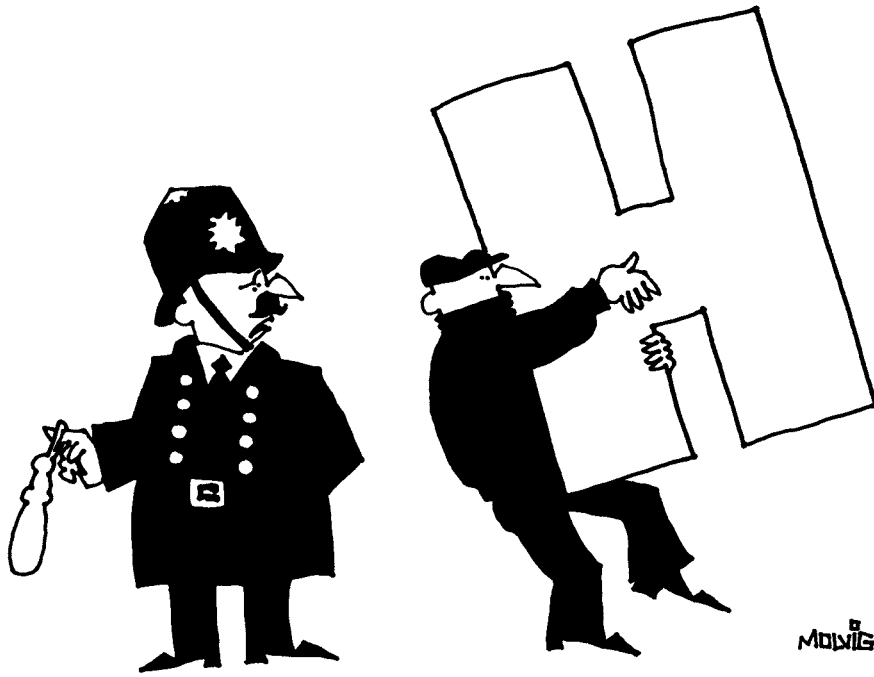
Tonéx laughs, clearly enjoying Lexi’s discomfort. Later in the interview, he says he believes that God honors “same-sex covenants,” and implies that churches should, too. Lexi asks whether he is waiting for God to deliver him from his attraction to men. “I’m not sure that’s something I have to be delivered from,” he says.

The interview was an immediate sensation. Tonéx is an unlikely activist, and in the video he declined to label himself gay, or to advocate gay marriage. (He told Lexi that he believed the term “marriage” was “set aside for man and woman.”) Even so, Tonéx is the first high-profile gospel singer in history to come out of the closet. Many of his fans wondered what took him so long. Maybe some of them wondered, too, what took gospel music so long, because the question that Tonéx finally answered has been haunting the genre for the better part of a century.

Within hours, Tonéx started to realize what he had done. “The next day, like, six things just cancelled,” he says. “Like, ‘Oh, no.’” Upcoming concerts melted away. His relationship, however strained, with the mainstream gospel industry—an interconnected world of radio stations and publications and promoters, built on the fractured but sturdy foundation of the black church in America—was effectively over. For Tonéx, there will be no Pentecostal-convention appearances, no religious-radio hits, and no grand (and remunerative) gestures from sympathetic and well-connected megapreachers—at least, not any time soon. He had been singing tenor in a local choir, but he quit, because he was afraid that his reputation would damage its legacy. He says that he got a surge of e-mails, from friends and strangers, but in public his fellow gospel stars remained silent, or

Tonéx says that his industry friends haven’t defended him: “They want to, but they can’t.” Photograph by Elena Dorfman.





"And wot 'ave we 'ere, guv'nor?"

worse. (The gospel singer Deitrick Haddon declared, via Twitter, "I don't have a sissy bone in my body," although he claimed that the post wasn't aimed at Tonéx.) And pastors began to use his life as a parable about what can happen when a Christian strays from Biblical truth.

Tonéx is hopeful that the attention generated by his announcement, and the righteousness of his message, will make him more successful than ever. The Bible says, "The glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former," and Tonéx adds, "Either I'm about to run into that latter greatness or I've done something incredibly wrong." In the meantime, he is starting over, equipped with little more than a music studio and a small but eager band of devotees. On a recent Thursday afternoon, the man who used to be called the future of gospel music could be found in his studio, in a small business suite in Lemon Grove, a suburb of San Diego, where he was teaching a lanky kid named Eric how to sing.

Tonéx was dressed in cheerful hip-hop chic: a black-collared shirt with polka dots, half-way-baggy jeans, maroon high-top sneakers. In the past, he was known for outlandish hair (he had a mohawk phase) and wigs, but nowadays his appearance is anti-theatrical. And al-

though his various public rants and recantations have sometimes suggested that he is impulsive to a fault, he has a sober manner that seems calibrated to foster the opposite impression. He is muscular but slight, with a mellow speaking voice, soft enough to draw an interlocutor toward him.

His studio is decorated with an image of himself in a samurai pose, against the backdrop of a Japanese flag (when he is giving singing lessons, he calls himself Vocal Sensei); a moody photograph of a shirtless man embracing a naked woman; a poster of Johnny Depp in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory"; reproductions of Afrocentric paintings. "Star Guitar," a dreamy electronic track by the Chemical Brothers, came through the speakers, and Tonéx led Eric in a rhyme: "I never, ever, ever do a thing about the weather/'Cause the weather never ever does a thing for me." The exercise was designed to improve enunciation and breath control. After a few minutes, he moved on to the subject of vocal runs—the ostentatious embellishments that gospel singers use to demonstrate the strength of their anointing, and their lungs. He sang a wordless phrase, full of wild swoops and yodels, and then disassembled it, showing Eric how to build a

big flourish out of small ones. Tonéx turned to an open laptop and addressed its built-in video camera. "If you want to be a track star, and run real well, then you've got to break down that sequence of notes, and make sure you're hitting every one," he said. He paused. "Y'all there? Can we move on to the next one?" A few dozen people had logged in to watch the lesson live on the Web; this session was free, but Tonéx hopes to turn online vocal instruction into a business, charging fifty dollars per session. Later, when the camera was off, he did a quick calculation. "A forty-student class? That's rent!"

The next morning, Tonéx arrived at his office later than he'd planned, and he seemed subdued. He was wearing a turquoise-and-white striped American Eagle polo shirt with the collar up, and he was holding a duffelbag that contained Boston, his white Maltese. He said, "When I got up to see you, man, I woke up to a disconnected cell phone, on the verge of being evicted, living with my mom—to take care of her—and thinking, How the hell did I end up here?" Along one wall, there was a rack of polyester dresses and gowns in SweetTart colors, which he sells to churchgoing women of a certain age. ("Church jumpsuits," he calls them.) Next door is a boutique he owns, the Ink Spot, a shag-carpeted place that sells affordable bohemian clothes, many of which seem to have come straight from Tonéx's personal collection, along with designer sunglasses of uncertain provenance; it was closed, and stayed that way all weekend.

He was sitting at his computer, and he pulled up a recent unsolicited e-mail:

If you're running from something, remember, you're only running from yourself. Re-evaluate yourself, your life, and spirit, and ask yourself, "Is it all worth it?" You know your charge and your calling, but it's up to you to pick up the mantle. I'm praying for you, and supporting you. No matter what you do, you will always have me in your corner, God bless.

He laughed without smiling and said, "Well, obviously not." He still seems wounded when confronted with evidence that some old fans feel betrayed; he can conceive of no good reason that people everywhere shouldn't love him. "Usually, I just delete," he said, as he scanned

the e-mail one last time. Because he thinks of himself as a brave and often misunderstood artist, he eschews false modesty. He is given to grand pronouncements—at one point, he held forth on “all the wonderful things that I’ve accomplished in a short period of time, and all that I’ve endured in a short period of time.” But it doesn’t take much to make him crumple. When asked whether any of his friends in the industry had stood by him, he took a deep breath, and his eyes filled. “In their hearts,” he said, barely keeping his composure. “They want to, but they can’t. And I understand that.”

Tonéx calls the church world “the hyper-bubble,” and he was brought up entirely within it. His father, who was known as A. C. Williams, followed a love of music out of the church and into the secular world, where he found some success as an R. & B. saxophone player—he backslid, and did so happily. Then, one Sunday in 1970, he went to church and heard an aunt sing “The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power,” and he was saved all over again, which inspired his wife, Betty, Tonéx’s mother, to get saved, too. Williams had considerable personal charm—Tonéx remembers his “grand-piano smile”—and he put it in the service of salvation. In 1993, after working as a schoolteacher, he founded Truth Apostolic Community Church, in the San Diego suburb of Spring Valley. He died in 2004, and Tonéx has led the church ever since, although he tries to keep his gospel stardom out of the pulpit; visitors are often surprised to find that in a typical service there is lots of talking and not much singing. Tonéx’s church follows an experimental philosophy: the chairs were replaced by couches for a while, to create a student-friendly coffeehouse environment, and he has sometimes preached lying down, holding the Bible the way a kid might hold a coloring book. But these days attendance is low, and for Tonéx the church is more a liability than an asset; its mortgage is one more monthly bill that he has to figure out how to pay.

Tonéx grew up in an unpretentious San Diego neighborhood called Oak Park, in a tidy one-story house that he still likes to visit, with an eye toward buying it back someday. (One suspects that if the city offered to buy it, name it

a historical site, and convert it into a museum, he would not object.) He stopped by on the way to lunch, and squinted at the lawn through the car window. “It was way plusher than this,” he said. “They screwed all this up.” In the context of gospel music, Tonéx has always seemed unusually streetwise, or tried to. (He once delivered a Christian boast in hip-hop form: “I be poppin’ caps in demons’ aspirin/I know you’re drooling off my beats—here’s a napkin.”) But, as he tells it, he wasn’t the kind of boy who tended to inspire fear: he was studious and curious and slightly freaked out by neighborhood violence. He remembers that his grandmother lived on “one of the scariest streets ever.” The family stereo was devoted strictly to gospel music, and he spent hours in the living room leading an imaginary gospel choir. “The record-player was the lead vocalist,” he said, seeing himself back inside. “The book-cases were tenors, the couches were the altos—because they were usually stout.” But he had five older brothers, and a different atmosphere prevailed in the basement, where they hung out; their tastes ran more to Rick James, Bootsy Collins, and Prince. He remembers hearing “Let the Sunshine In,” from “Hair,” and having a revelation that he can now describe in precise musical terms. “It was a minor and a major chord working together,” he says. “I didn’t know that that sound could be accomplished outside of gospel.”

The Williams family belonged to the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World; like most Pentecostal denominations, the P.A.W. traces its roots to Azusa Street, in Los Angeles, where, in 1906, a half-blind preacher from Louisiana named William Joseph Seymour led a series of revival meetings that grew into a worldwide movement. The name comes from Acts 2, which describes the gathering of the apostles, soon after Christ’s ascension, on the day of the Pentecost: “They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.” (Peter had to explain to a skeptical crowd that, appearances notwithstanding, the apostles weren’t drunk—they were saved.) The Pentecostal Church aimed at nurturing and

spreading the jubilant atmosphere of that worship service, including the practice of speaking in tongues.

Depending on his mood, Tonéx can describe his childhood among devout Pentecostals—who call themselves “saints”—in comic or tragic terms. In his office, he had told a story about films he had seen in church when he was five or six that featured lurid visions of the apocalypse, complete with suggestions that bar codes might be the mark of the beast. He said, “Practically all my life, I walked around on eggshells, homey—like, ‘Is this the end of the world, today?’” He paused for a long time and looked away; when he started talking again, his voice was breaking. “Any time I couldn’t find my parents, or they didn’t come home on time, or didn’t answer their phone, I’m thinking, It’s the Rapture,” he said, in a whisper. “That shit used to scare me to death.”

Now, after visiting his old house, he was thinking of his childhood differently: as an elaborate game, with rules he didn’t really understand until he had stopped playing. He drove to a favorite Mexican restaurant and, over enchiladas, cheerfully swapped P.A.W. war stories with his assistant, who was also reared in the P.A.W. “I didn’t even think that there’d be white people in Heaven, because there were only black people in our congregation,” Tonéx said, and the assistant nodded vigorously. Tonéx looked at the other diners, most of whom were middle-aged and casually dressed. “I’ll give you a mind-set from 1982,” he said. “None of the people in here are saints—even me, because this shirt calls attention to the flesh.” (It did look a little snug.) Instead of taking vacations, the Williams family went to P.A.W. conventions, which were, in a sense, more exciting. “From a sexuality point of view, it’s bananas, because now you’ve got all these closeted freaks in the same place,” Tonéx said. “The adult-channel audience goes up sixty per cent. We’re so repressed that when we do wrong we don’t even do wrong the right way!”

The biggest black Pentecostal denomination is the Church of God in Christ, whose faithful are often known as COGICs. While COGICs baptize believers “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (as prescribed in Matthew 28:19), the P.A.W. follows

Acts 2:38, in which Peter tells the disciples, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ.” Tonéx remembers advocating oneness theology—“bangin’ Acts,” in church slang—when he was as young as ten, and when he was a teen-ager he had “Acts 2:38” tattooed on his right biceps. Though he takes great pleasure in mocking the old sectarian disputes, he holds fast to much P.A.W. doctrine, including the importance of baptism in Jesus’ name.

This seemingly obscure theological dispute helped inspire an ecclesiastical split that became a cultural divide. “COGIC is really tall and very wide and very bright and very flamboyant—they wore makeup in the eighties,” Tonéx said, with mock horror. “We thought we were more righteous: ‘Honey, that’s why they dress like that—because they don’t have the fullness.’” Nearly all the Pentecostal gospel stars were COGIC; Andraé Crouch, who wrote “The Blood Will Never Lose Its Power,” got his start with a singing group called the COGICs. Still, the P.A.W. had a strong enough musical tradition for Tonéx, who had a spiritual awakening at the age of seven, drawn in by the vague idea that being saved would make him more powerful (“like the Bionic Man”), and by the

church drum set, which could be played only by a saint. So he tarried for the Lord, which means shouting “Thank you, Jesus!” and “Hallelujah!” until you receive the gift of tongues. “It’s the most intense joy I’ve ever felt in my life,” he says. He was a saved soul, but also, he freely admits, a poor sport: “Other kids hadn’t got it yet, and I remember grabbing the Communion and looking at them like”—he smiled, and cocked his head—“Sorry!”

For most of its history, gospel music has had two missions: to smuggle secular thrills into church, and to smuggle spiritual fervor out of it. Three missions, really, since the first two often turned out to be quite lucrative. America’s first gospel stars were the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who were recruited in the late eighteen-sixties, from the campus of Fisk University, by George Leonard White, a Civil War veteran who served as the school’s music teacher and also its treasurer. The first Fisk Jubilee concerts were held in order to plug a hole in the school’s budget. Audiences were soon praising the group for bringing an authentic taste of plantation life to the concert stage (never mind that these were college students, singing modern arrangements of old melodies and lyr-

ics); they sang for President Grant in 1872, and, the next year, for Queen Victoria. In the early twentieth century, black vernacular hymns got tangled up with the sound of the blues, and by the nineteen-twenties a new style was emerging, guided by the Baptist singer and songwriter Thomas A. Dorsey, who split his early career between the sacred and the profane. His extraordinary catalogue includes “Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” which became, in Mahalia Jackson’s rendition, a staple of the civil-rights movement, alongside such smutty masterpieces as “It’s Tight Like That” and “Somebody’s Been Using That Thing.” As the industry thrived, fans came to expect gospel singers to praise the Lord full time, but the genre remained ambiguous, because it found expression in praise songs that echoed (or influenced) pop songs, and praise singers who sounded (and, sometimes, acted) like pop stars.

Gospel was a sound, but it was also a process: the ongoing combination of African-American sacred music with whatever was on the radio. By the early nineteen-nineties, that often meant hip-hop, or hip-hop-inflected R. & B., and so Tonéx taught himself how to use drum machines and sequencers, and he put together a singing group, ATACC, which stood for “Anointed Truth Apostolic Contemporary Chorale.” He says that in churches “it was not common to see lasers and fog and strobes and signs outside that say ‘It’s going to be a very loud event.’” The first ATACC concert was held at Truth Apostolic, which was starting to thrive. Tonéx’s fame was growing along with his father’s. For the second concert, the group booked a bigger church, down the street, and soon it was crossing over to non-Pentecostal congregations. Tonéx was signed by a local Christian label called Rescue, and then by Jive Records, the home of Britney Spears and R. Kelly, which also operates a gospel subsidiary, called Verity.

Jive issued “Pronounced Toe-Nay” in 2000. The album contained Tonéx’s first breakthrough song, “Personal Jesus,” which borrowed its title from the British New Wave band Depeche Mode. Tonéx’s “Personal Jesus” had a spaced-out funk groove that recalled Sly & the Family Stone, and a simple declaration: “You are my personal Jesus/I love you



“We lose a little dexterity, but we gain a lot of confidence.”

more and more.” Tonéx now suspects that the song, with its drawled vocals and strutting beat, might never have found a home on gospel radio, or in church-choir repertoires, without the prophylactic power of Jesus’ name. “As long as you have ‘Jesus’ in every other lyric, you’re safe,” he says. Pious listeners probably heard the title as a playful exercise in spiritual tautology—Jesus is my Jesus. But perhaps a person’s “personal Jesus” could be, for better or worse, something else altogether: a spirit, a drug, a woman, a man.

By 2003, Tonéx was eager to be more than an outlier, so he booked himself into the San Diego Civic Center and recorded “Out the Box,” a live album that is his most traditional gospel release. Backed by a proper gospel choir (albeit one called the Peculiar People), he sang and preached and hollered, sounding like a cross between a Broadway actor and a tent revivalist. The album spawned his signature song, “Make Me Over,” which is an earnest plea for redemption, despite the cheerful title. (One verse begins, “Time after time I failed you/Pierced your side, when they already nailed you.”) It quickly graduated from a live favorite to a gospel-radio hit and then to an African-American church staple. Even now, it is one of those songs which everyone in the pews seems to know, and YouTube is full of renditions by local choirs, soloists, saxophonists, and a few Christian mime troupes. In January of 2004, Tonéx travelled to the Stellar Awards, in Houston, where he performed with Sheila E.; although “Out the Box” hadn’t arrived in stores yet, the performance was a kind of coronation.

A few hours after the show, Tonéx learned that his father had had a stroke. Tonéx took over the family business, although his father continued to preach occasionally. That July, Pastor Williams had a heart attack, and Tonéx’s temporary assignment became permanent, more because he felt he couldn’t refuse it than because he wanted it. “I felt like I’d be letting him down—my dad didn’t raise a quitter,” he says. But he was angry, because he felt that his father’s single-minded devotion to the church had taken him away from his family and, ultimately, contributed to his death. His apocalyptic childhood nightmare had



come true: his father had disappeared forever, and the church was to blame. As the services grew more idiosyncratic, formerly loyal members started to leave, including most of his father’s side of the family.

One of the people who left was T. L. Carter, a former yeoman in the Navy who had been an armor bearer for Pastor Williams—a personal assistant who travelled with him, protected him, prayed for him. Carter is a tall, animated man, with closely cropped hair set off by a rakish gray goatee, and he says that he was prepared to be Tonéx’s armor bearer, too, but was troubled by his unorthodox style. One Sunday, Tonéx called himself Prophet N8tion. Carter says, “My daughter came up and asked me, ‘Dad, what are you going to change your name to?’ That’s when I decided I had to get out of there.”

A few years later, Carter started his own congregation. Tonéx’s church, Truth Apostolic, lies halfway up a hill; from the parking lot, you can see past homes and shops to the serrated peaks of San Miguel Mountain. In a scruffy shopping center down the road about a quarter mile, jammed between the Veteran’s Thrift Store and Hector’s Taco Shop, sits Pastor Carter’s three-year-old venture, Mt. Calvary Pentecostal Church. Beyond a humble storefront, there is a large sanctuary, with space for about two hundred worshippers. Mt. Calvary was

mostly empty on Saturday morning, except for a worshipper who stopped by to purchase a Treasure Box—a carton of groceries that the church sells to bargain-hungry members. Carter speaks fondly of Truth Apostolic, but he said that some of Tonéx’s teachings are “unfounded in Scripture.”

When Carter talks about “the sin of homosexuality,” he is speaking for the Pentecostal mainstream, and probably the broader Christian mainstream, too. “It is an abomination,” he said, pressing his palms together for emphasis. “God hates it. But I do not treat it any different than the sin of fornication, than the sin of adultery, than somebody who drinks, smokes, cusses—it’s all sin. So do I have homosexuals in my church? Yes. On both sides, male and female. Do I treat them any different than the liar I have walking in my church? No.”

Tonéx sensed early on that he was attracted to other boys, and he spent the better part of three decades trying to figure out what that might mean for him. One day when he was eighteen, he told his parents that he thought he was bisexual. His father said, “You need to go listen to some gospel records,” and his mother just cried. Not long afterward, Pastor Williams preached a sermon in which he decried “faggots.” (The next week, Pastor Williams apologized to the congregation for his choice of

words.) Tonéx says, “Perhaps he thought that by speaking on it so harshly it would make me turn the other way.” When Tonéx started preaching, he occasionally denounced homosexuality, too, partly because such denunciations work so well. “You can talk about a slut, a hussy, a heifer, a player, any other subject—you are not going to get the response you get when you start talking about fags, or gays,” he says. “It’s like a football game!”

Decades of evasion, followed by the sudden shock of disclosure and its consequences, have underscored Tonéx’s habitual seriousness; the result is that he tends to talk about sexuality in abstract terms. In the face of a church culture that views homosexuality as a form of decadence, he has deemphasized lust and joy, at least during interviews. (When one blogger asked him if he was single, he said, “It’s more about energy and love and an understanding of oneself. Right now I’m dating me.”) And he won’t say much about his marriage to Yvette Graham, except to insist that they had a “wonderful sexual relationship.” But, in his music, a slightly different sensibility emerges, more playful and more disquieting. “Feelings,” from the double album “Oak Park: 92105,” is a diaphanous ballad—it sounds like Michael Jackson at his gentlest—about sexual addiction, coiled around an unexpected Karen Carpenter sample. And in a spoken introduction to a song on “The London Letters” he teases listeners with an introduction that sounds like a bombshell: “So I’m digging this guy, right. And I dig him for who he was. But I’m really digging him for who he almost is. To me, that’s the epitome of sexy.” The dénouement arrives immediately—“As a matter of fact, that guy is me. I like me!”—but it doesn’t quite cancel out the illicit thrill of those opening words.

The provocation got sharper in 2007, when Tonéx, feeling frustrated with his record label (which still hadn’t released a follow-up to “Out the Box”), and beset by rumors, released a song called “The Naked Truth,” which circulated widely, and in which he proclaimed, “I did it, I made it/The genius, the faggot,

the weirdo, the homo, the hobo, the magnet.” This was, he explained, a statement of defiance, not a declaration of identity, but it hardly quelled the curiosity about his personal life. (He later apologized on his MySpace page to his church family and to the P.A.W. hierarchy, asking forgiveness for the “pain and embarrassment” he had caused.)

It’s not only gospel purists who might be bewildered by Tonéx’s discography. In the years since “Out the Box,” he has given his fans almost nothing but sketchbooks—self-released albums, freewheeling mixtapes, remixes, and miscellaneous singles—and yet along the way he has honed a style of his own, a sly but ecstatic form of electronic pop. (As much as any singer alive, he could use a greatest-

hits-and-misses album, or a few of them.) Early last year, he made a major-label comeback with “Unspoken,” which was propelled by quirky electronic percussion and elusive lyrics. It was, in retrospect, a final, halfhearted attempt to succeed in the gospel mainstream. Despite positive reviews, the album was largely ignored by the gospel industry, although the secular world was slightly more receptive. The lead single, “Blend,” was a moody, rock-inspired ballad, and it earned Tonéx a Grammy nomination, in a suitably open-ended category: “urban/alternative.”

Tonéx taped his interview with Lexi in Nashville in April, during the networking exercise known as Gospel Music Week, where he was promoting “Unspoken”; he says now that being there reminded him of everything he hates about the gospel industry, which may help explain why he answered Lexi’s questions with unusual candor and a minimum of filibustering. Torrence Glenn, who blogs about gospel music for BET, says that fans had long made their own assumptions about Tonéx, adding, “There’s certain things that you assume or that you even know, that as long as it doesn’t become real, you’re fine with it.” By going public, and by suggesting that a homosexual relationship can be as godly (or ungodly) as a heterosexual one, Tonéx went from being just another sinner to being a high-profile heretic. Glenn remains a

fan of Tonéx but says, “He would have to definitely seek or claim some kind of deliverance, in order to be accepted in gospel.”

The most forceful response came from Donnie McClurkin, a Long Island pastor and singer, who for the past decade has been one of gospel’s biggest names. (He performed at the 2004 Republican National Convention, and, in 2008, at a gospel concert organized by the Obama campaign.) This past November, at the youth meeting of the annual COGIC Holy Convocation, in Memphis, he delivered a sermon on the dangers of homosexuality. McClurkin was weeping before he even started preaching, and, between sobs, he said, “I can’t condemn Tonéx. I got to love Tonéx! But I got to tell him the truth: this is not the will of God.” The jeremiad eventually morphed into a message of healing:

Right now, every one of you young people that say, “I need this, and I can’t leave out of here acting like this, I’ve got to be right, I don’t want to be an effeminate man, I don’t want to be a hard woman, I don’t want to be in homosexuality, bisexuality, trisexuality—I’m not a lesbian, I’m a holy woman of God! I’m not gay, I’m born again!” Come now. Run now! Run, run young people! Get up! Get up! Get up! GET UP! I said run!

In the video, which was posted on YouTube, blurry teen-agers stream toward the stage, and McClurkin, speaking in tongues, lays hands on them. He also makes a personal appeal. “If it hadn’t been for this Jesus, I would be homosexual to this day,” he says, or, rather, roars, and his knees buckle as if someone had slugged him.

In his memoir “Eternal Victim/Eternal Victor” (2001), McClurkin told the story of his life. He was raped when he was a boy, and says that, as a result, feelings of “homosexual lust and desire” grew in him, and nearly consumed him. (Tonéx, too, has talked openly about being sexually assaulted—at three, by a relative, and again, at six, by a preacher—but he is careful to say that he doesn’t “blame” those experiences for his orientation.) Eventually, through prayer and practice, McClurkin says, he reoriented himself, defeating a proclivity that is, in his account, as tenacious, and as conquerable, as any addiction. Tonéx has known McClurkin for years, and he was deeply offended to hear himself named



in McClurkin's sermon. Tonéx said, "He owes me an apology, and he owes me a private phone call."

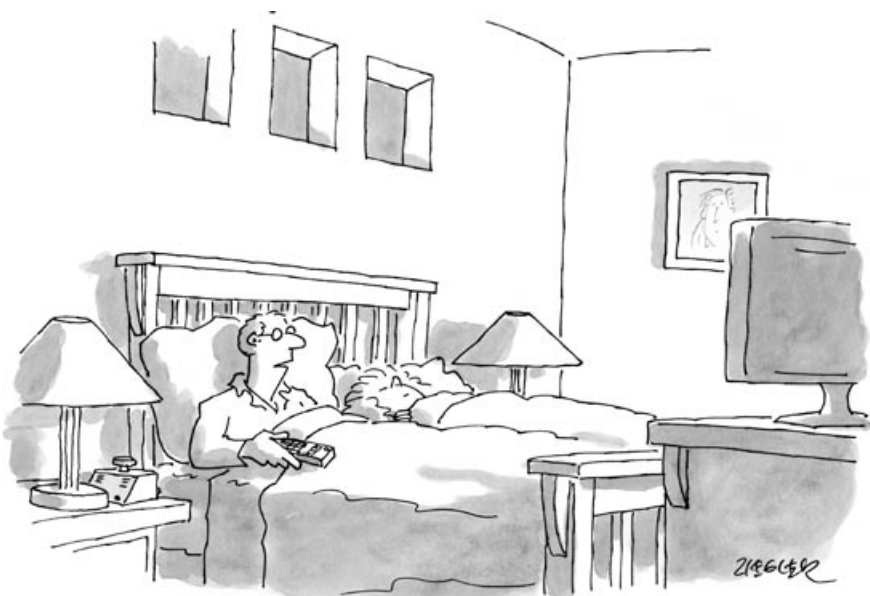
When lifelong heterosexuals denounce homosexuality, they often speak in terms of disgust, but McClurkin speaks about desire. In his view, same-sex attraction isn't natural, but it isn't unusual, either. He takes it for granted that heterosexual manhood is both an identity and a project. In one of the most moving passages in his book, McClurkin explains that he was tutored in masculinity by some of the older women in his church. "If you held your hand up in a feminine way," he writes, "they'd hit your hand and tell you to 'Put your hands at your side. Men don't hold their hands like that!'" This instruction extended to music, too: "When you wanted to sing soprano, you'd hear them say things like 'Get some bass in your voice!!' or 'Men don't sing soprano!'"

To anyone who associates gospel music with whooping and hollering, this last injunction—"Men don't sing soprano!"—might come as a surprise. In fact, gospel's falsetto yawp, sometimes known as the "high who," was popularized in the late nineteen-forties, by the Ward Singers, an all-female group known for their flamboyant vocal embellishments, and for the wigs and the dazzling gowns they wore onstage. Their innovations helped inspire "Professor" Alex Bradford, a world-class whooper in the forties and fifties who was also gospel's first great provocateur. He made the "high who" one of his signatures (it was also adopted by Little Richard, who, in turn, transmitted it to the Beatles); like the Ward Sisters, Bradford saw no reason that God and glamour should be incompatible. In "The Gospel Sound," Anthony Heilbut's spirited history of the genre, Bradford recounts a trip he took with his group, the Bradford Singers, to Georgia. "We were wearing black robes, each fellow had a different-colored pastel stole," he said. "Child, those country women died laughing, they thought it was dresses." Later in the book, a gospel fan from Detroit praises Bradford, saying, "That man can do the most ridiculous things, but I want to tell you, Professor can sing, do you hear me?"

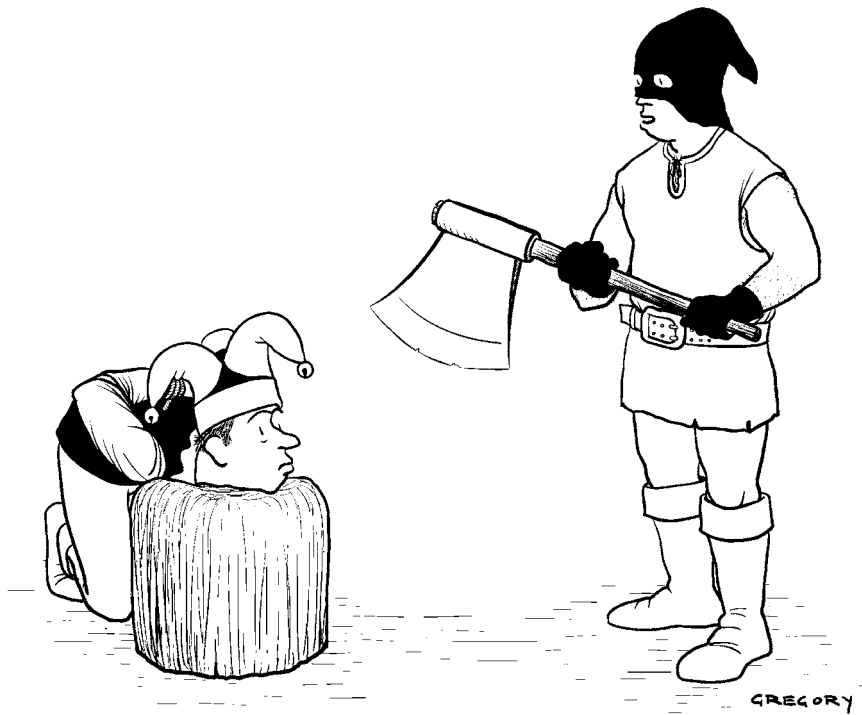
Bradford's spiritual mentor was Prophet Jones, a Pentecostal preacher from Detroit, who was sometimes called the Messiah in Mink. (As the historian Tim Retzlaff has written, there was a "homosexual subtext" to Jones's rise, and he was eventually brought low by a gay sex scandal.) But, even more than preachers, gospel singers have always been allowed a certain amount of "ridiculous" behavior; many have discovered that theatrical excess is, in fact, a job requirement. "Since gospel is theatrical, and theater is the paradigm for much of gay life," Heilbut writes, "gospel has a special allure for gays." The explanation may not be satisfying, but the affinity is indisputable. As a stock character in African-American folklore, the gay choir director probably predates gospel music, and by the time Heilbut published the first edition of his book, in 1971, he had no trouble amassing evidence that the gayness of gospel was an open secret. One gospel singer tells him, "There's more sissies and bull daggers in the Sanctified churches, and they all think they're the only ones going to Heaven." Decades later, the cultural anthropologist William G. Hawkeswood described the "flirtatious" atmosphere in the choir dressing room at a large Harlem church. One singer told him, "They all carry on, even the straight ones. But as long as it's kept in the family nobody's gonna say nothing."

The open secret got less secretive with the rise of disco, which fused roaring, churchy vocals with a hard dance-floor pulse. Gospel singers and groups found themselves embraced by the free-spirited culture of night clubs. In 1977, Carl Bean, a former member of the Bradford Singers, scored a hit with "I Was Born This Way," which became a gay-rights anthem and a disco classic. (Bean later founded Unity Fellowship Church, which serves African-American gay and lesbian communities in Los Angeles.) Sylvester, the most outré of all the disco divas, was also a regular worshipper at the Love Center Church, in Oakland, an inclusive COGIC congregation led by Walter Hawkins, of the famous Hawkins family. (He was a member of his brother's group, the Edwin Hawkins Singers, which recorded the 1968 smash "Oh Happy Day.") Hawkins played piano on one of Sylvester's last singles, and when Sylvester died, in 1988, of AIDS-related causes, Hawkins delivered the eulogy at his funeral, which was held at the Love Center.

For many listeners, the golden age of gospel ended on February 9, 1991, with the death of the Reverend James Cleveland. He was beloved for his warm, granular voice, and for the precise way that he combined huge choirs with muscular rhythm sections; he did as much as anyone to give gospel music its funk and its



"I never watched him at eleven-thirty-five and I didn't watch him at ten, and now, once again, I won't be watching him at eleven-thirty-five."



"If it's any consolation, that was an amazing impression of the king."

swing. A year later, in March, the magazine *Jet* complicated Cleveland's legacy with a one-page article that bore the headline "James Cleveland Infected L.A. Youth with HIV, \$9 Mil. Lawsuit Claims." The plaintiff was a man who said that he had had sexual encounters with Cleveland for three years, starting when he was a teen-ager, and the suit was settled quietly out of court. The allegation didn't undermine Cleveland's popularity—his fans had long since learned to ignore the whispers. One of those fans was Tonéx's father. "He just loved anything James Cleveland," Tonéx says. And the rumors? "He just blocked that out of his mind." It was only a few years later that Tonéx told his father he might be bisexual; apparently, Pastor Williams didn't register the irony of prescribing gospel records to his son in the hope of straightening him out.

Part of the job of a gospel singer, nowadays, is to reinterpret the genre's perilous history, translating it for listeners who may have come to love the music while ignoring the context in which it was born, and the lives of the people who created it. The provocative tradition of Alex Bradford lives on in singers like Ricky Dillard, a brazen Chicago show-

man who got his start in the city's house-music scene; his swooping, twirling conducting style sometimes scandalizes the worshippers. (A performance at the 2008 Stellar Awards, during which he kept dropping to a squat, was particularly controversial online, though it received a standing ovation from the audience.) Others have taken a more confrontational approach. The gospel hip-hop star Kirk Franklin, who was, for a time, one of Tonéx's closest friends in the industry, once wrote that homosexuality is "a problem today in gospel music—a major concern—and everybody knows it." And Tye Tribbett, a frenetic beanpole who puts on one of gospel's most exciting live shows, blends fierce dance moves with messages of deliverance, shouting, "Come out of lesbianism! Come out of homosexuality!"

Bishop Yvette Flunder is a same-gender-loving pastor and singer who grew up COGIC, and worked alongside Walter Hawkins as an assistant pastor at the Love Center Church, which was, as she puts it, "quasi-affirming": all people were welcome, but not all relationships were celebrated. Flunder is one of the founders of City of Refuge, in San Francisco, which is part of the United Church

of Christ, and which explicitly affirms same-sex relationships, and, more recently, of the Fellowship, a nationwide network of like-minded congregations. In her view, gospel music is gay music, with vanishingly few exceptions; she estimates that the proportion of gospel performers who are, or have been, same-gender-loving might be as high as ninety per cent. "And I'm being conservative," she says. She thinks Tonéx could be a harbinger of the next Christianity, one that is "radically inclusive of the same-gender-loving community." Maybe that's unlikely, but it's clear that the old arrangement can't last forever. Gospel music has offered generations of same-gender-loving singers a place to call home, in exchange for their obedience, or their silence. This tricky and sometimes hard bargain shaped the genre, guiding its transfigured love songs, its expressions of praise and sorrow, its twinning of the orthodox and the outrageous. And there's no telling what gospel will sound like when that tacit arrangement no longer holds.

It was Sunday morning at Mt. Calvary Pentecostal Church, and Pastor Carter, having sweated through his undershirt and his striped dress shirt, was getting to work on his gray suit jacket. A woman in a white skirt, white tights, and white flats handed him a small white facecloth that seemed entirely inadequate. It was time for the sermon, and Carter was waxing accusatory. "In church, we like to act like we know the Lord—like, buddy-buddy," he said. He was preaching on the reality of human suffering, and its impermanence; the vastness of God's grace, and its mystery. He found his way to an old favorite, Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." A violent exposition followed, to balance the peaceful imagery. Carter was finding his rhythm:

I want to cuss somebody!
But the Lord says, "Lie down!"
I want to slap somebody in the mouth!
But the Lord says, "Lie down!"
He maketh me to lie down!

Soon, the choir had started singing, and congregants were approaching the altar to pray, to be prayed for, to be touched, to collapse. New members were invited up, and some of the older mem-

bers formed a line, hugging each newcomer in turn.

Around the time that Pastor Carter was wrapping up and announcing the evening-service preacher (“Elder John Black—he used to be a musician in the Gap Band”), Tonéx was getting ready for his sermon, up the hill, at Truth Apostolic. The apse was painted black, like a theatre stage, and a lava lamp, from an earlier era, sat unplugged, near the small bandstand. There were perhaps fifty worshippers, virtually all African-American, and overwhelmingly female, and Tonéx stood before them in a black cassock, buttoned from ankle to neck. A woman made an announcement about the upcoming fright night, a Halloween alternative, which had been scaled back (there was no money for it) but not cancelled. Tonéx smiled. “God has not given us the spirit of fear, yet we’re having fright night—the irony of the Cross,” he said.

“What Do I Do When My Faith Needs Faith?”—that was the sermon for the day. Tonéx said, “This is for the saint that says, ‘I hate my life and it sucks,’” and he built gradually from explication to exclamation. There was prerecorded gospel music, with a drummer and an organist playing along, and Tonéx, carrying a cordless microphone, went back to the sound board, where he fiddled with the mix while delivering a repeated exhortation: “I know that God is able!” He returned to the pulpit, shouting now, and singing praise, and worshippers were starting to weep or collapse or dance; a woman in a long jean skirt was running laps, and ushers moved swiftly to prevent mid-aisle collisions. “This church has been in need of a breakthrough,” Tonéx said. He was pleased by the response, and perhaps also by the timing of it—he certainly knew that there was a reporter in the house. But, even as he hugged the saints and watched them crumple to the floor, he held something in reserve, as if he were still trying to figure out how it all worked, and whether it did.

The day’s real message was not, in fact, about how faith conquers all but, rather, a consideration of faith’s limits. “This is the season you are authorized to say no,” he said. He offered a prediction, and a dispensation: “Between now and February, it will be the time when you need to pour into yourself.” A few people

nodded. “The churches are in a drought right now,” he said. The saints were shouting their assent, but Tonéx wasn’t really talking to them. In fact, he might have been talking about leaving them. “You only have enough oil in your lamp to keep *yourself* saved,” he said. Later, he asked, “If this word blessed you, can you sow again?” The response was slow, so he tried again. “Come on, everybody, sow at least five dollars,” he said. “Last Sunday, we raised five hundred dollars, so that might have kept *this* row of lights on.”

Tonéx’s rival, Pastor Carter, suggests that Tonéx might have done better, and done more good, as a travelling evangelist, touring and spreading the word, churchless. The congregation at Truth Apostolic has dangerously few of the financially secure seniors whose loyal tithes help keep a lot of churches afloat; many weeks, Tonéx, too, wonders if it’s worth it. Asked if he would keep pastoring, he made eye contact and said, “You’re here right now in the middle of I-don’t-know-ville.” In his ministry, as in his music, Tonéx offers only a promise to be true to himself. And listeners can’t ask for much more than that—but perhaps worshippers can.

It was past midnight in Lemon Grove, and Tonéx was in the studio, getting ready to record his vocals over a booming funk beat, with a snare roll inspired by Southern hip-hop. The song was an updated version of “Twelve Gates to the City,” a gospel standard based on a description of Jerusalem from Revelations 21. The song was both a nod to gospel history and a reproach to critics who have accused Tonéx of abandoning the genre. Boston was asleep in one corner, and his assistant came and went—there was no soundproofing, and Tonéx didn’t seem too worried about background noise. Sitting at the mixing board, he leaned into the microphone and sang, “Shaka-laka, shaka-laka, shaka-laka, boom.” Working quickly, he moved the blinking cursor back and sang the phrase again and again, each time with a different tune. After a few minutes, he played back what he had created: a rich and precise gospel harmony. He could almost have been back in that Oak Park living room, conducting a choir of one.

Tonéx has a new mixtape on the way, a tribute to Janet and Michael Jackson,

and he is trying to make a name for himself as a pop songwriter and producer. He also has a new album that he has promised to release early this year; it’s called “A Brilliant Catastrophe,” and he says it’s his most ambitious work since “Out the Box,” though he doesn’t yet know what record label, if any, will release it. (One of the songs on the album is called “The Details”; it’s a tense and sensual—though not quite gender-specific—monologue sung in the voice of a suspicious lover.) He wants to turn his life story into a musical (he got strong reviews for a recent turn in a San Diego production of “Dreamgirls”), he has signed on with a modelling agency, and he is figuring out how to cultivate his growing contingent of same-gender-loving fans. By talking plainly about his sexual identity, Tonéx has scrambled his professional identity. Almost since the day he got saved, he has been a preacher, a gospel singer, a testifier. Now he is merely a musical prodigy with lots of options, none easy. And, on December 28th, his mother died; she was his strongest connection to the old Pentecostal world, which was once the only world he knew.

In the studio, Tonéx works fast and alone—in the course of three hours, he never looked puzzled, and he hardly ever erased anything. He laid down a multi-tracked chorus, a couple of short verses about Heaven, and some ad-libs; the end result was a quirky and profoundly funky gospel song, complete with nineteen tracks of overdubbed vocals, all of them his. There were lyrics about an aspiring gospel songwriter (“Wrote a song about Heaven/ But he just couldn’t get that big break”) and, near the end, a beautiful yodelling interlude. “This is a good low-rider song—like, top down,” Tonéx said. He played it through one last time, at top volume, and then dashed into his office, where he slapped together a record cover, using a photograph from a fashion magazine of a white man in a Calvin Klein suit. He called the song “12,” uploaded it to his MySpace page, e-mailed it to a few gospel-radio d.j.s who still support him, and sent out an exuberant message to his followers on Twitter: “New Joint hot off the press from TON3X™.” ♦

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Kelefa Sanneh on Tonéx and his music.