Synthetic soul: AI-generated gospel singer tops Christian chart

Photo illustration: Lindsey Bailey/Axios. Photo: AI-generated by Christopher Jermaine Townsend

An artificial intelligence-generated soul singer named Solomon Ray has climbed Christian music charts, igniting a national debate over authenticity, race, faith and the future of music.

Why it matters: Solomon Ray's rise marks one of the first times an AI-generated Black Christian artist has broken through a major streaming chart, and the conservative

creator behind it is intensifying scrutiny of the creation.

Zoom in: Solomon Ray last month hit No. 1 on a number of music charts, including [Billboard's gospel](#) digital song sales and [Apple Music Christian](#) song lists.

- According to the artist's [Instagram](#) account, Solomon Ray has surpassed 7 million streams across various platforms.
- The artist's YouTube account has also generated more than a million views for his songs.

Context: The artist is the brainchild of [Christopher "Topher" Townsend](#) — a Mississippi-based MAGA rapper, conservative activist and former Air Force cryptologic analyst.

- Townsend, who is Black, launched the Solomon Ray project earlier this year, using generative AI tools to build the singer's voice, persona, lyrics and production.

Townsend tells Axios through Solomon Ray's Instagram account that the response to his creation has been overwhelming.

- "I've received thousands of messages from listeners who feel seen, comforted, and spiritually lifted by his songs. The impact has far exceeded anything I anticipated and the numbers reflect that in earnest," he

wrote.

- "My intention has always been to uplift, not replace; to add to the richness of gospel music, not subtract from its legacy."
- He said that Gospel music belongs to everyone "who reveres it, respects it, and approaches it with sincerity," and that his creation "is a musical project, not a political puppet."

State of play: Solomon Ray's accession comes at the same time as two of the hottest songs in [country music](#) were also created by AI-generated artists, Breaking Rust and Cain Walker.

- Breaking Rust last month had the No. 1 song on [the Billboard country digital song sales chart](#) with the single "Walk My Walk."
- Cain Walker's "Don't Tread On Me" came in at No. 3 on the same chart.

What they're saying: "You can have complete virtual performers...deepfake videos, AI voices. It's unsettling because you can construct an entire artist from scratch," James Grimmelmann, Cornell Tech professor of digital and information law, tells Axios.

- Grimmelmann said AI music also raises difficult cultural questions about marginalized groups being excluded

from training data.

- "What once required weeks of production and millions of dollars can now be generated on a laptop — and updated in real time."

Yes, but: Rev. Chris Hope, founder of the [Boston-based Hope Group](), a church consulting firm, tells Axios that churches have been using synthesizers and electronics in music, and AI is just an extension of that.

- "It should never substitute for human story or human spirit. I don't mind AI artists existing, but I mind that we forget the difference."
- Hope added that Black gospel music is rooted in the tradition of testimony from real people. "If you've never been born, how can you be born again? If there's no authentic witness, then what are you really listening to?"

The bottom line: Mia Moody-Ramirez, a Baylor University journalism professor writing a book on digital blackface, tells Axios that AI music is another way to appropriate and commodify Black people and make money.

- Digital blackface occurs when non-Black users exploit Black people online, often relying on stereotypes. Without documentation, Moody-Ramirez said vast amounts of offensive or inappropriate AI content may

disappear before society fully confronts it.

Go deeper: [AI artists blow up on country music chart](#)