

For Us, By Us: Marginalized Groups Need to Take Back Hip Hop

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As two people who grew up loving Hip Hop, the current state of the genre – especially the seeming oversaturation of sex, money, and violence – sparked a peculiar conversation about the health status of the “Message.” Is Hip-hop dead, on life support, or has one of the most sonically creative audio movements of the past 30 years been paralyzed by the alleged consumerism and narcissism of the “Get Money” generation? We ponder, the life span of the current state of Hip Hop as in a day and age of “Change” and “Yes We Can,” it is curious to consider how long the new era of Hip Hop can thrive -- without life support – given its seemingly drastic movement away from its indigenous socially conscious and community uplift roots.

“I Used to Love Her...”

Back in the day -- where it *all* began – Hip Hop was an art. It was an art with attitude and art as a form of expression from the culture and environment that young blacks and browns from around the way and via the Islands were experiencing. Since the good ole days of music with a message and a mission to warn against “Self Destruction, ya headed for Self Destruction,” Hip Hop has seemingly been over-saturated and co-opted by both corporate music industry executives and money, power, and respect hungry artists and producers who refuse to take personal responsibility for polluting urban concrete jungles via “get rich” quick mantras in the name of “keepin it real.” As Todd Boyd argued in *Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self*, “Rap represents the emotional range of urban, male, existence. At the same time, the commodifying impulses of the music industry have opened a space for selling cultural products that in their very construction undermine the structure that distributes them(327).” In essence, it seems as if one of the challenges with the current state of Hip Hop is the seeming inability and/ or unwillingness of the drivers of the genre to raise the level of *awareness* and consciousness of its loyal listening base.

The unraveling love story of Hip Hop is well documented and has not come as a surprise to its vanguard audience, supporters, and critics. As Jeff Chang detailed in his groundbreaking book Can't Stop, Won't Stop, "As the 1970s gave way to the '80s, popular culture still largely depended on the decisions of a small, centralized few who dictated the seasonal tastes of the masses (191)." While the faces of the "centralized few" have diversified to include some of the "get money" generation ground crew, the decision making as it relates to *who* becomes "famous" and *what* songs receive heavy rotation has not experienced such diversification. As such, artistic freedom and freedom of expression still remains a mountain of justice and equality to be climbed and conquered. The battle is not modern but has been a historic issue in the Hip Hop community. Let's take Afrika Bambaataa and "Planet Rock," for example. After the success of the single, "Planet Rock" Afrika Bambaataa got into a creative battle with Tommy Boy label head Tom Silverman. As Chang wrote, "When he started, Silverman had planned on releasing only twelve-inch singles. But Bambaataa's success demanded an album. Silverman and Bambaataa began to argue. 'He likes rock and calypso and reggae. He wanted every song different. And people wanted more 'Planet Rock',' Silverman says" (Chang 190). So, even "back in the day" the decision making (based upon ownership) was concentrated and artistic freedom versus business interests was a burgeoning problem. Needless to say, Bambaataa and many artists after him (in all genres) did not win the battle for creativity. Today, the battle looms and as conglomeration and internationalization in the music business as a whole is the norm, it continues to infringe on artistic freedom, creativity, and continues to make it increasingly difficult to "love" Hip Hop.

Moreover, in this day and age of political and social consciousness, increasingly, Hip Hop music has become about the bottom line profitability of the artist/ art form and not messages of uplift, empowerment, and economic, political, and socio-cultural equality. For many, Hip Hop's current bottom line must change if the genre is to reclaim its economic, political, and socially conscious soul. As Boyd further articulated in *Check Yo Self Before You Wreck Yo Self*, "It is well known that rap's massive popular audience consists of dominant and marginal audiences. Nor is it a revelation that the capitalistic courting of this massive audience at some level solidifies the music's political message.

However, there is a point at which radical political discourse meets the demands of the marketplace and the two merge.” In so doing, beautiful music can be made that encourages both political leaders and everyday people to “Fight the Power,” “Keep Ya Head Up,” and be “Successful.”

Profit Over Personal Responsibility

Hip Hop, in the early days, was self-contained. It was “for us, by us.” Moreover, the target audience was the community; and, the expression came from the community. However, in 1981, when Afrika Bambaataa took Hip Hop to the masses, he opened wide the flood gates of consumerism and carnivorous behavior which has morphed the art into a survival of the fittest [illest] MC mode. Although “He [Bambaatta] was taking the music and culture of the Black and brown Bronx into the white art-crowd and the punk-rock clubs of lower Manhattan,” it has been well documented that profit agendas, coupled with the naïve business skills of many “Old School” Hip Hop artists, overshadowed and in some instances diluted the unintended racial integration that was the real success of Hip Hop. As Chang articulates, “the iron doors of segregation that the previous generation had started to unlock were battered down by the pioneers of the Hip Hop generation (92).” However, with the good, comes the bad. Soon, Hip Hop was being both exploited and misused both intrinsically and extrinsically. So much so that by the time Hip Hop evolved from an innocent child to an adult it have been corrupted and diluted by “grown people” who just wanted to make a buck.

Without a doubt, Hip Hop is a moneymaker; this is why with Billboard reporting on October 1st, 2008 that record sales are down 28.8% from the year-earlier period. Its lucrative nature has many executives pressuring their hottest Hip Hop artists to drop more sales worthy (mainstream appealing) albums. By pushing profit over artistry, it seems as if the industry has treated Hip Hop like a magical “genie” that grants what ever fantasy the consumer imagination can fathom. Whether alcoholic beverages or acrobatic women – and some times both – Hip Hop artists have been able to use their global appeal and consumer cross marketing skills to impact and effect just about every segment of society. An often-used example of Hip Hop commercial consumer appeal is Busta Rhymes’ and

Diddy's "Pass the Courvoisier" track. It has been well documented that the ode helped increase the liquor conglomerates bottom line sales and was a cross-marketing dream, as everyone got "put on." Many followed suit (while others were the initiators of the product placement / name dropping trend in Hip Hop) as Nelly stomped in his Air Force One's while Rev. Run must be crowned the "King" as arguably he, along with his counterparts DMC and Jam Master J, started it all with "My Adidas." Even late night television icon Ed McMahon is in the mix rapping in a commercial for creditreport.com complete with scantily dressed women, gold, bling, and lots of 'tude.

A Change is Gonna Come

What can Hip Hop culture do to get off of life support? Will it ever be reflective of the genuine and authentic change that it was birthed out of? Will its representatives continue to misuse its power and influence and end up "Dead and Gone" or will Hip Hop be resuscitated into a new birth of social responsibility, political involvement, and cultural relevance? We believe that if Hip Hop is going to take its position as a responsible shaper of thought and culture, it must do three things. First, Hip Hop must make a space and place for socially conscious artists and lyricists such as Dead Prez, the Roots, Lupe Fiasco, to make their mark in the market. Additionally, the Hip Hop community must work to bring balance to its genre by promoting the conscious lyrics of popular artists as well. It does not seem like too much to ask to encourage the genre to play and promote Young Jeezy's "It's a Crazy World" just as much if not more than his "I Put On For My City."

Secondly, the Hip Hop community must reincorporate and empower female MCs, executives, and consumers. Clearly, the invisibility of the female MC has become tantamount in the last five to ten years and seemingly has given rise to the popularity and increasing profitability of the video "model." With women allowing themselves to be objectified and the media setting them up as the sexualized other, women in Hip Hop have lost their central position – talent, intelligence, opinion, and femininity. As Yvonne Bynoe argued women in Hip Hop must create a place of voice and visibility. "Women have not become visible, insofar that they have not staked out spaces that allow their

stories and complex realities to be heard by the masses. Whether it is fear of access to capital or some combination of the two, Hip Hop generation women have not created our version of the Lilith Fair to support female rap artists(2).” Bynoe’s idea of a Hip Hop Lilith Fair is brilliant. The creator of the original Lilith Fair, Sarah McLachlan detailed her frustration at the male-dominated recording industry that shut out intelligent female artists. So she sought sponsorship and Lilith Fair was born -- even though many said a female-driven, all-female festival would fail. The fair became a movement among women and feminists, it was successful, it launched careers, and record labels scrambled to fill the niche of the intelligent, female musician. Women in Hip Hop must do the same to be heard.

Finally, Hip Hop must look to the context clues of the 2008 Presidential election and make holistic lifestyle changes that will trickle down into the underprivileged and impoverished communities that know more about them and their lyrics than they do about globalization, global warming, and what is going on around the globe. Undoubtedly, music as a whole is in a sad state right now; Hip Hop is in even worse shape. As such, women and men that truly love and appreciate the culture need to put aside lust for money and power and come together to save the integrity of the art form. As Ayanna’s article on “The Exploitation of Women in Hip-hop Culture” states, “Censorship of hip-hop music is not the solution. Instead, the solution is to change the culture, system, and ideology...” (4). Until hip-hop returns to its roots and back into the hands of the marginalized groups that created it, it will continue on its headlong crash course into extinction and its thirty plus years of existence will continue to spiral out of control as “lollipops,” “lambos” and the “last train to London” intoxicate the masses ‘til the next go ‘round of Michael Richards’ and Don Imus’ use of the interchangeable “N” word.

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