

Exodus

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By now there is little question that Hip-Hop culture has reached the status of a global phenomenon. Therefore, I will dispense without any academic analysis and instead use an alternative perspective to consider the real transformative power this artistic urban movement is having in terms of human evolution. Put simply, I submit that Hip-Hop culture will be a primary vehicle for conscious evolutionary change. To lend viability to that admittedly audacious claim, I'll emphasize numerous indicators in an historical context. First, in order to recognize its profundity, it is necessary to revisit Hip-Hop's genealogy and place it in the proper sociopolitical context. Finally, I'll engage in a brief analysis of the most popularly hated aspects of rap in an attempt to show that these are not regressive but natural and ultimately healthy social expressions.

Under Class Creativity

The extent of knowledge most folks have of Hip-Hop's early development is that its godfathers are DJ Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa and that they dropped mad science in the culturally vibrant neighborhood of South Bronx NYC. However, so much more is revealed about the gritty nature of Hip-Hop when one looks at the historical context in which it was born. It was a time when Americans were just starting to recover from the shock of the Vietnam Era and suddenly were confounded by the Watergate scandal and a world energy crisis. The country had lost its so-called innocence causing the majority of the population to succumb to a kind of despondency toward politics, and out of this came brave new expressions of common folk counter posing the dominant value structure.

Black Power, Brown Power, Red Power, Gay Rights, the Drug Revolution, the Environmental, and the 3rd wave of the Women's Rights Movements gave people a delicious sense of empowerment. Then came the Reagan era, championing religious piety, conservative values, commercialism, and greed as the new American virtues; desperately shallow ideas, which many hoped would finally exorcize the ghosts of Vietnam. Nevertheless, not everyone was buying into the pomp, particularly the youth, who had a tendency to see through the goody-goody sermonizing. Seeking a more solid basis of reality, many discontents found solace in dissident music, and certainly none more subversive and hostile to the social order than punk rock and rap. These genres presented an unruly consequence to the self-obsessed status quo, yet because of its make-up and appeal to White fans, punk rock was more readily dismissed than these new restive Black expressions. Rap was speaking to a new generation of Black youths who's memories were far enough removed from the tribulations of the 60's to embrace a new, more unabashed attitude of self-image and resistance. Thus a degree of psychological emancipation not imagined by previous generations was achieved by the growth of Hip-Hop culture. Suddenly the white supremacist power structure in America was on notice that a new, more prolific, set of agitators were in the house.

No doubt, as a result, we see the rap music industry retains the ultimate say as to what message is heard by Hip-Hop's substantial consuming audience. Yet ironically, by spreading Hip-Hop culture, the business apparatus of this power structure is ostensibly raising public awareness of the social ills and contradictions that are required by the

ruling elite to stay in power. Or put another way: Hip-Hop culture (to borrow the words of Robert Anton Wilson) is a praxis in which self-expression and disruption of authority are one and the same. Lastly I feel it is important for us to have an appreciation for the fact that this worldwide phenomenon is a creation of a traditionally under privileged folk whose essence begat and remains the appeal of Hip-Hop culture.

Open your eyes and look within: Are you satisfied with the life you're living? ... We're leaving Babylon!

-Bob Marley, Exodus

Babylon

Identify the problem. Those at the helm of the ship have a vested interest in creating collective and individual mental infirmity in order to remain firmly in power. The more contracted and disturbed one's mind is, the more pliant it becomes to an advanced matrix of propaganda. The pseudo-science or quasi-religion of capitalism has finally consummated its union with an imperious state to infuse an either-or binary structure upon our social thinking. Such a system of population control is ubiquitous in its alternating use of pleasure and fear to pacify over worked and grossly under-informed citizenry. But such injustices are not sustainable in a rapidly changing world; the collective tolerance for this bondage of mental slavery is reaching a breaking-point and has already begun to trigger avalanches of powerful resistance. Some may argue that historically there have always been cases of resistance, but that kind of outlook is a tactical shortsightedness that effectively reduces one's options within the increasing complexity of modern life. A deeper than cursory look at current events reveal that resistance to the old paradigm is morphing into numerous sophisticated and not so traditionally identifiable forms.

When the critics don't get, that for the streets you spit it
When your lyric they fear, that's UNDERGROUND
If the government can't see you, or deceive you
You love your people, believe you
UNDERGROUND
If you refuse to play the game, you go against
the grain
You ridin the train, you UNDERGROUND - get it!

- KRS One,
Underground

The so-called First World nations who have traditionally "called the shots" for 2000 years are predominantly white, yet in the context of the world's population they are the minority, not the answer white Americans generally assume. Seventy-one percent of rap records sales are to young whites, and with every new convert - white power and privilege is, by proxy, further diluted. The Hip-Hop culture is a pattern that replicates within youth communities when they are exposed to its vibrancy— this is known as a viral social phenomenon.

Hip-Hop Activism

Similar to the way that Rock & Roll served as a unifying role in the popular resistance during the Vietnam Era, so too has Hip-Hop in the resistance to steadily increasing social constrictions in the post-9/11 world. Old ways of youth organizing, youth development, and cultural work have been naturally altered by Hip-Hop activism. These activists have been overwhelmingly engaged in grass-roots local

issues, assembling local and sometimes regional capacities. Often times this work takes place away from the glare of the media spotlight, and so much the better because such attention, more often than not, decontextualizes and undermines the accomplishments of grass-roots activism. One of the first politically effective instances of Hip-Hop activism came when Boogie Down Productions and Public Enemy virtually provided the soundtrack to the anti-apartheid movement in the early 1990's; the media had turned on its glare too late since public opinion was heavily behind the cause.

Hip-Hop activists now use the culture to update or educate a new generation. OLIN organizers, a youth and student organizing group that has worked around issues of education, gang violence, immigrant scape-goating, and the decolonization of Xicana/o communities, bring turntables to demonstrations and march along to beats and rhymes. Youth Speaks poets, an organization designed to build the next generation of leaders through the written and spoken word, use the word to liberate consciousness. Underground Railroad educators, a women's Hip-Hop centered organization that has organized activities from political rallies to cultural performances for social change, uses images of Hip-Hop to spark discussions over social issues and celebrities like Russell Simmons lend their names to causes like fighting educational budget cuts and challenging inhumane drug legislation. Hip-Hop activism is developing new procedures that are merging political and cultural activism. Visual Element's artist-educators, an Oakland-based visual arts program for high school youth that facilitates the production of authorized murals and apprentices youth in intensive, hands-on work with established third-world artists, train graffiti muralists to do legal walls that help stimulate a sense of community. Activists like Freedom Fighter Music create CDs to disseminate their messages to the masses and media workers like Third World Majority, a new media training and production resource center run by a collective of young women of color and our allies dedicated to developing new media practices that affect global justice and social change through grassroots political organizing, train young people in how to "harness technology to represent their own voices and culture."

According to his official website, author of the composition, Can't Stop, Won't Stop, Jeff Chang frames the massive potential for Hip-Hop culture most accurately when he writes:

Hip-Hop activism reflects a deepened understanding of the importance of culture, and forges a new praxis between culture and politics. In the process, it moves outside of traditional funding streams. Organizations that get money for arts work may use it to develop activism. Organizations that get money to do organizing may use it to create art. In this way, Hip-Hop activism demands closer scrutiny to the interface between funding and practice. It straddles traditional funding areas, such as the arts, community development, youth development, and youth organizing (www.cantstopwontstop.com).

The Dark-Side

Bakari Kitwana, in *The Hip-Hop Generation*, asks Black cultural integrity, "how have the very public images of young Blacks in Hip-Hop music and culture affected the

larger Black community?” Well one angle it could be viewed from is: the moral controversies in rap provide a major catharsis for psychological development in the Black community – with implications for the wider community. What self-critique do Whites have? This is no doubt why rap music has such a strong appeal to young Whites today; the underlying message of “ghetto” rebelliousness feeds a hunger to express inner angst. Rap music is training the youth of the “dominant culture” to think on morality and justice, and whatever they decide is the measure of that character... you can never censor the youth. Where is the equivalency of this moral-indignation in the White community? Nowhere and the lack of it is called repression which is why our nation (whose decision-makers are comprised overwhelmingly of Whites) is engaged in immoral and illegal actions all over the world, invasions of sovereign countries, torture prisons and graft at the all levels of leadership. I think what’s got people all in an uproar is that the appalling aspects of HH are simply a reflection of this society’s ethics & values: pimpin’ ho’in, flossin’, killin’ to make a name, havin’ a good time... “F**k everybody else.”

Conclusion

A change in the collective heart and mind is necessary in order for tangible change to occur in the world today. That change is already naturally taking place on an ethical level where the abuse of power is being challenged by the people; an outcome not of a massive political organizing but a response of the toiling masses hungering for true freedom. Specifically we have to transform our language through a cooperative interaction between understanding and intuition, and dissolve the boundaries that the capitalist culture has sanctioned between us, to get on with the process of evolution. Hip-Hop Culture is on the forefront of doing just that. The cultural worldview of modern capitalism is being overtaken by the Hip-Hop Culture and its resurrecting accomplice the Counter-Culture, clearing the way for the next evolution in human consciousness.

Works Cited

Kitwana, Bakari. The Hip-Hop Generation. New York, Basic Civitas. 2002.

Chang, Jeff. “Constant Elevation: The Rise of Hip Hop Activism New Paradigms and Praxis,” (2006) www.cantstopwontstop.com/

Study Questions

- 1 What historical events helped to create Hip-Hop?
- 2 What is the message that rap music initially hoped to spread?
- 3 What can we do to help Hip-Hop music reach “Babylon” and return back to the way it once was?
- 4 Explain the concept “Visual Elements” and discuss its contribution to the Hip-Hop generation.