

Hip Hop Turning Outrage Into Power

Written by Malik Cooper, WireTap ID2959
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Turning Outrage Into Power By Malik Cooper, WireTap

Harnessing its growing strength in numbers, the National Hip Hop Political Convention is beginning to change the face of American politics.

Saying hip-hop is global now isn't telling you something you don't already know, unless you have been living under a rock since Planet Rock first dropped. But using the art form for political gains is something new, and spearheading this movement is the National Hip Hop Political Convention (NHHPC).

The 2006 NHHPC in Chicago -- the second biennial convention -- opened on July 20 and over the course of three days engaged over 1,000 participants in the debates over issues like misogyny in hip-hop, media justice, the aftermath of Katrina, grassroots activism, organizational leadership and electoral politics. The convention closed with a concert on Saturday featuring Dead Prez, Chicago Poets and Boots Riley among many other artists.

NHHPC was founded in late 2002 when some elders pulled organizers from all over the country for the first national convention in New Jersey that aimed at creating a political agenda for the hip-hop community. I first got involved at this time, as we worked at finding the issues of our community. Born and raised in California's Bay Area, I had been speaking publicly since a young age, but became really active when I finished filming MTV's Real World series. After the show I traveled as a motivational speaker to colleges and got involved with youth organizations committed to the fight against Big Tobacco. Through a good friend I got invited to the Bay Area's Local Organizing Committee (Bay-LOC) meeting, and began to get involved in hip-hop politics.

Like other local organizers around the country, we went around our community with issue sheets for people to fill out, which we used to create a state agenda. During the state convention individuals from over 30 states and Puerto Rico came together and created a national agenda. By February 2005, a group of different LOC members had a retreat in Atlanta and formed a national body with a steering committee whose goals were to help bring local groups together and facilitate any national work that needed to be done.

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After Bay-LOC returned to California, we began to organize a local Hip Hop Summit at Laney College in Oakland in September 2005. One day of workshops and a concert, which included performances from Dead Prez and E40, attracted thousands. We had support and speeches from Rep. Barbara Lee and Bay-LOC's own Dereca Blackman, and handed out voter guides, which we rewrote in new language that identified with the hip-hop generation.

Around the same time, the Chicago-LOC began working as a host committee for the next convention. It was up to them to handle the event program, and the event's success can only be attributed to their hard work.

The convention itself started with a dialogue between organizers of past movements like Civil Rights and Black Power, including Fred Hampton Jr. (Prisoners Of Conscience Committee), Cliff Kelley (WVON Radio Host), Angela Woodson (Federation of Democratic Women), and writer and activist Amina Norman-Hawkins. Organizers both young and old felt this was needed, since many believed the torch was never passed on to the new generation.

Hip-hop politics today -- as I see it -- identifies strongly with the Black Power movement; the lyrics in conscious rap resonate with ideals of Malcolm X and self-determination. The Bay Area especially identifies with the Black Panthers since its roots are found here. But all over the globe -- and even in early days of hip-hop, when most music came from New York -- lyrics focus on the social ills and mistreatment of people of color in this country. The same "fuck the system" attitude gave birth to gangsta rap. And although the majority of it now focuses on the material and the misogynistic, early pioneers of the art form told the world what was going on or was absent in their neighborhoods. In other countries like Brazil, Venezuela, Cuba -- today more than ever -- hip-hop serves this same purpose.

Not everyone at the convention represented a LOC, and with the alliance building that had been taking place since the NHHPC's inception, I saw other hip-hop groups like the Hip Hop Congress represented there in full force, leading workshops and hosting the concert piece. The League of Young Voters had a huge presence, and not only helped raise money for the convention but also taught workshops on branding the hip-hop political movement, lobbying, base building and electoral politics.

The first day's workshops seemed geared at creating better methods of organizing the organizers. Panels and workshops focused on alliance building, using art for activism, political prisoners, organizing against war and occupation, hip-hop and gender politics, nonviolence

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strategies, and the use of electoral politics.

On that Friday afternoon, a jam-packed room of folks from all over the country listened to Kali Acunu (Jericho Amnesty Movement), Troy Nkrumah, (chair of the NHHPC steering committee), and chairman Fred Hampton Jr. (Prisoners Of Conscience Committee) talk about the many political prisoners that are currently incarcerated. Harman Bell, Kamau Sadiki, Zolo Azania Ojora Lutalo, Rodney Coronado, and Veronza Bowers were a few of the names mentioned. Rapper Immortal Technique event came in and voiced his support on the issue, and it definitely was one of the most informative panels.

Saturday, July 21, seemed to begin with many issue-based workshops and panels on education, criminal justice, health and wellness, Katrina, immigration, gender rights, white privilege in hip-hop, and media justice. The media justice panel included Lisa Fager (Industry Ears) and Davey D (Hardknock Radio/Breakdown FM), who talked about a variety of subjects like the media's control over hip-hop and net neutrality. The immigration and gender rights were two new issues added to the 2006 agenda. I led the panel on gender rights, whose purpose was to expose some of the misogynistic rap lyrics in a social context, allowing participants to better understand why the popular rap pushed by record executives and radio stations seem so focused on portraying negative images.

After the panels were over, a concert was thrown with a battle between local folks. Using all the elements of hip-hop, from rapping, break dancing, DJ-ing and graffiti, crews took to the stage to compete for a \$1,000 prize. Afterward, local conscious artists like Akbar, and national artists like Dead Prez and Immortal Technique gave amazing performances. Even Chicago's rain and thunder could not clear the crowd formed at Mandrake Park.

Sunday was a day for the national steering committee to hear the voices of participants. Delegates representing different LOCs, artists and organizers for different groups were allowed to change the agenda and recommend action steps that the LOCs can take home and start implementing. The location for the next convention will be announced soon. Will it be back East in New York, down South in Atlanta, out West in the Bay Area, or will newly formed but highly active Las Vegas LOC take the 2008 to its Red State? We shall have to wait and see.

The organization as a whole has a talent at balancing the varied political views of its members, some of which seek to fight for social justice through electoral politics, while others seemed more determined to fight through grassroots activism. The way these varied ideologies have still

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found a way to work together for a common goal is why the NHHPC is still going and growing strong. The structure with no leader but still led strong through the local organizing committee gives this organization a type of strength that I have not seen in many other organizations that function more top-down. I believe this unique model will help keep their work relevant, and the organization intact.

For more information about the NHHPC, or to learn how to start a LOC (Local Organizing Committee) in your area, go to www.HipHopConvention.org

Malik Cooper is the national spokesperson for the NHHPC, as well as a Bay-LOC member. He also owns a silk-screening and embroidery shop called People's Choice Printing.

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