

The Materialism of Hip-Hop

Written by Westside ID166

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Hip-hop has transformed pop culture -- or maybe it's the other way around. That being said:

Hip-hop -- its slang, style, rhythms and influence -- is everywhere. Stars like Fat Joe are selling soda. Rappers like Mos Def and Ice Cube have become Hollywood actors. Hip-hop dominates the music charts -- in October 2003, it filled the entire top 10 of the Billboard Hot 100, a first in the 45-year history of the chart.

But that overwhelming success doesn't necessarily mean all is well in the hip-hop nation. In fact, some longtime fans are wondering if hip-hop has transformed our popular culture -- or if instead our consumer culture has transformed hip-hop.

When it first boomed out of New York's South Bronx more than 25 years ago, hip-hop was bare-bones but expressive, made by young men too broke to buy instruments. With turntables, microphones and words, they made music that, at its best, spoke out against poverty and injustice. Early milestones such as Grandmaster Flash & the Furious Five's "The Message" and Public Enemy's "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back" established rap as a new form of protest art. Public Enemy's Chuck D famously said, "Rap is CNN for black people."

The music's impact was visceral. In one of the most famous examples, gang member-turned-rapper Ice-T ignited debates over free speech with his 1992 track "Cop Killer." Politicians and law enforcement officials condemned the song, and Charlton Heston disapprovingly read the lyrics at a Time Warner annual meeting. Ice-T pulled the track from his "Body Count" album, while insisting the song didn't advocate killing police so much as it protested police brutality against black people.

But now, with a few exceptions, mainstream hip-hop is more party than politics, defined by videos featuring artists rapping about their cars, their jewelry and their booty-shaking women -- the all-American materialism of Madison Avenue.

And it's worked for Madison Avenue. After P. Diddy and Busta Rhymes sang the praises of Courvoisier, for example, sales of the cognac jumped nearly 30 percent. Pete Snyder, CEO for a Washington, D.C., research company called New Media Strategies, said earlier this summer

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that corporations had woken up to hip-hop now that its "artists can mean serious bling-bling for their bottom lines."

Indeed, even CEOs like Snyder, as well as soccer moms and their kids, are using phrases like "bling-bling" -- hip-hop slang for jewelry that's now casually used to mean flashy consumerism. Portland-based rapper Libretto, whose first album comes out this month, isn't surprised. Once music born in the ghetto started selling in malls, the game changed forever, he says. It had moved onto corporate America's turf.

"You've got (music) labels now deciding on what's dope and what's good hip-hop," the 28-year-old rapper says. "Before, it was somebody on the corner, somebody's sister, somebody around the neighborhood, who was understanding what was going on."

Terrance Scott, who, as Cool Nutz, is a veteran Portland-based hip-hop performer, says hip-hop has followed a familiar path. "It's like anything, from garage rock or grunge," says Scott, 32. "It becomes so lucrative that it gets watered down."

At 31, Matthew Felling remembers when the music was simply called rap, before the more inclusive term of hip-hop -- which refers to rapping, MC-ing, DJ-ing, graffiti and break-dance culture -- took hold. To Felling, the media director for the nonpartisan Washington, D.C.-based research group Center for Media and Public Affairs, hip-hop's shift in the past 20 years from hard-edged rap to party-all-the-time dance hits parallels the mainstream news media's shift from serious news to Britney Spears-wedding-style brain candy.

"Rather than talking about racial disparity and economic realities, why not just talk about how cool it is to be a gangsta?" Felling says of both hip-hop and the news media's obsession with entertainment values today. "And while you're at it, pass the Courvoisier."

That doesn't mean political activism has disappeared from hip-hop -- only that it's gone legit. This summer, P. Diddy threw a star-studded party -- Mary J. Blige, Leonardo DiCaprio and Queen Latifah were among the glitterati -- to launch his Citizen Change campaign to promote voting. The message has evolved from the raw street anger of "Cop Killer" to the grown-up values of political participation. As Diddy said at the party, "We have the power to make things cool, hot and sexy -- from the clothes we wear to the cars we drive to the bling we buy. Now

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we're going to make voting cool."

Also in the mix is the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, co-founded in 2001 by rap entrepreneur Russell Simmons, which sponsors events around the country to engage the "hip-hop generation" in efforts to fight poverty and injustice.

This movement to marry politics and hip-hop culture comes to Salem on Friday, with "The State of the Hip-Hop Nation," a one-day symposium at Willamette University. Conceived by Thabiti Lewis, assistant professor of English at Willamette, the event was inspired in part by the National Hip-Hop Political Convention, held in June in Newark, N.J. The Willamette symposium features guest speakers discussing such topics as building political clout, the global impact of hip-hop and the form's artistic roots. "We need to understand what the culture is about," says Lewis, "and how does it function as an agent of political change?"

One of the guests at the symposium is Hashim Shomari, chief of staff for New Jersey state Sen. Sharpe James. In 1995, Shomari wrote the book "From the Underground: Hip Hop Culture as an Agent of Social Change," and he's still committed to that ideal. He wants to see the hip-hop generation stepping into voting booths and taking responsible leadership positions.

"Just because an artist is conscious, and says all the right things on wax, doesn't mean much," he says. "It's not about 'fight the power' but about taking the power."

Not everyone, however, agrees that enthusiasm for all things hip-hop can be turned into political activism. "People seem to routinely agree that hip-hop was political at one point, then it became gangsta, then it spiraled downward in terms of its significance and importance," says Todd Boyd, professor of critical studies at the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television. "That is not true."

As Boyd points out, the 1979 single that started it all -- Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" -- wasn't what you'd call deep (not with such lyrics as, "I said a hip hop the hippie the hippie to the hip hip hop, and you don't stop.")

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"What is sillier than that?" asks Boyd. "You can't make hip-hop into something it's not. It's not politics. Hip-hop, at the end of the day, is about beats and rhymes."

That said, the rise of hip-hop to its commercial triumph is itself political, Boyd says. "When you see hip-hop in Madison Avenue and Hollywood, what you're seeing is the amazing significance of the culture. I don't think there's anything apolitical about that. As Jay-Z said, we didn't cross over -- we brought the suburbs to the "hood."

Source: [OregonLive](#)