

Does Hip-Hop's Hyphy Promote a Culture of Death

Written by Eric K. Arnold ID2626
Thursday, 18 May 2006 01:12 -

Go Less Dumb - Does hyphy promote a "culture of death," or help combat it? By Eric K. Arnold

Perhaps we shouldn't take everything E-40 says so literally. "In the Bay Area, there is a deliberate attempt by rappers to promote a "hyphie [sic] movement" that includes "going dumb" and "going stupid,"" explained David Muhammad in a March op-ed piece at NewAmericaMedia.org. "Going dumb or stupid, which is quite literal, is a way you dance while thizzing (using the drug Ecstasy), smoking purp (marijuana), and sipping bo (Robitussin cough syrup with codeine)."

Very helpful. Muhammad, the 32-year-old director of the Oakland-based Mentoring Center, which helps to transition youths coming out of the juvenile justice system, began the piece by declaring that "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp," the infamous Oscar-winning Three 6 Mafia song, promoted a "culture of death." He went on to make some broad generalizations about rap music, saying that it had become "an embarrassing bastion of filth — promoting violence, drugs, irresponsible sex, excessive materialism, and delinquent behavior." The Afrocentric righteousness of the "Fight the Power" era, he argued, had been replaced by "bling bling" and the b-word. Muhammad's historical accuracy may be somewhat colored by nostalgia (both NWA and Too \$hort toured with Public Enemy back in the day), yet his point, while unoriginal, does contain grains of truth.

But Muhammad didn't stop there. The "hyphie movement," he continued, was part of a "deliberate attempt" to "promote a culture of death in order to make money in the industry." Not only that, but "liquor stores have become the depots of the culture of death," selling not only alcohol, but cigar wrappers and "T-shirts with horrific messages on them." Moreover, "outside of the liquor stores is often where you find the illegal drugs being peddled." Muhammad also called today's rappers "New Age sellouts," while conceding some concern he himself might be called that for attacking rap.

Is he a sellout? Not really — Muhammad's intent is to effect positive change and stop the cycle of incarceration. His efforts are commendable. And he's on point when he takes large corporations to task for promoting violent, sexist content, not to mention radio stations that "constantly air the vilest lyrics while ignoring an entire group of "positive" rappers." Yet while he admits his ambivalent feelings for Jay-Z, he neglects to mention any "positive" rap artists by name. Moreover, he's way off target when he attempts to lump in what can be easily seen as positive forms of youthful expression (hyphy's preoccupation with dancing, for example) with his "culture of death."

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Earlier this month, Muhammad followed up his diatribe in an interview with Sheerly Avni for TruthDig.com, in which he basically blamed rap music for furthering preexisting social conditions. "I really can't help but see a correlation," he said when asked about a possible connection between the hyphy movement and Oakland's rising murder rate. The music wasn't exclusively at fault, he explained: "Blight, poverty, high unemployment, a liquor store on every corner, substandard education, drugs readily available, and guns easily accessible" were all "factors that have all been in place for a long time." Yet he claims the music "drives the crime spikes," without offering any substantive proof or factual evidence to back it up.

When Avni suggested that rap music might simply be a reflection of the reality for today's youth, Muhammad vehemently disagreed, though he allowed that "the music did not create the situation." However, he said, "The music has made it worse. It has exacerbated the problems, and it has promoted insane and destructive beliefs and attitudes in the country's most vulnerable communities."

By portraying rap music and hip-hop culture as part of the problem without offering any concrete solutions, Muhammad has done nothing more than rehash an already tired argument. Such hyperbole has much in common with the hardline stance of Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown. But then, attacking sideshows and youth culture without overtly playing the race card is one way to frame yourself as the tough-on-crime candidate for California attorney general.

Muhammad should avoid falling into the same hypocritical trap. If he's so concerned, he'd better address the problem by opening up a dialogue with hyphy artists. He might learn that E-40 isn't just a rapper with a hot-selling album, but a role model for fiscal responsibility. Or that F.A.B. volunteers weekly at East Oakland's Youth Uprising community center, MCing turf-dancing classes in a controlled, safe environment. Or that a few months back, many members of the hyphy movement — including Keak da Sneak, Frontline, EA-Ski, F.A.B., San Quinn, and Too \$hort — donated their time and energy for a benefit concert helping Hurricane Katrina victims. These examples prove that if anything, hyphy represents a celebration of life, and that if a culture of death does exist in America today, it's a far bigger issue, and has causes much more complicated than hip-hop.

Oscar Winning Hip Hop Song Promotes "Culture of Death"

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New America Media, Commentary, David Muhammad, Mar 06, 2006

Editor's Note: The Oscar winning song "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp" promotes the culture of death, so writes NAM contributor David Muhammad. Muhammad is the Executive Director of The Mentoring Center in Oakland.

Oakland - I applaud Denzel Washington, Sidney Poitier, and Will Smith for encouraging Terrance Howard not to perform with the rap group who won an Oscar for their song "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp." It was embarrassing enough that such a song won an Oscar and that the group performed, but at least there were some in the industry willing to take a stand against the derogatory lyrics that have become far too common place in hip-hop.

Rap was once a subculture that most adults thought would be a passing fad. Now, hip-hop has become the dominant youth culture and a multibillion-dollar industry of music, clothes, jewelry, movies, and more. But the culture has denigrated into an embarrassing bastion of filth - promoting violence, drugs, irresponsible sex, excessive materialism, and delinquent behavior.

I am the director of The Mentoring Center, an agency that works with youth coming out of the juvenile justice system. We help youth come out of a criminal mentality, then connect them with vital resources needed to remain crime free and productive. One of the biggest obstacles we face is the strong attraction to a "Culture of Death" promoted by hip hop.

Although I can still be considered a member of the hip hop generation at the age of 32, when I was a teenager, rap was much different. Gone are the days when hip hop was about "Fighting the Power," wearing African medallions and honoring Black women as queens. Now lyrics glorify "bling, bling" materialism and refer to women with expletives.

In the Bay Area, there is a deliberate attempt by rappers to promote a "hyphy movement" that includes "going dumb" and "going stupid." Going dumb or stupid, which is quite literal, is a way you dance while thizzing (using the drug ecstasy), smoking purp (marijuana), and sipping bo (Robitussin cough syrup with codeine).

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While I discuss these issues often with the youth I work with, I have struggled with publishing an article criticizing hip hop. Past critics have been maligned by rappers. But the rappers themselves are also victims. The hip hop culture did not deviate into degeneracy on its own. There has been a deliberate co-opting of hip hop. The current version is much more lucrative, not for most of the rappers, but for the big corporations.

There is still a large segment of talented rap artists who promote positive images but are not given radio time and aren't signed to major labels. Even one of my favorite rappers, Jay-Z, had said on his last album, "I dumb down for my audience and double my dollars." He would rather rap with more consciousness, he said, but it wouldn't make him as much money. Jay Z is now President of one of the largest music companies in the country.

Many rappers are forced to promote a culture of death in order to make money in the industry. This is why my friend and colleague calls rappers the new age "sell outs," but somehow I might get that label for writing this article.

Viacom owns 100% of the national music video stations, videos that promote some of the most degenerate behavior I've ever seen. They own the big three: MTV, VH1, and BET. Yes, BET. One recent music video aired on BET showed rap star Nelly running around with numerous nearly naked women, as almost all videos do, and he ran a credit card down the crack of a woman's behind as if it was an ATM machine.

Then there is Clear Channel, the largest owner of urban formatted radio stations in the country, the very radio stations that constantly air the vilest lyrics while ignoring an entire group of "positive" rappers.

And it is not just large corporations making money. Liquor stores have become the depots of the culture of death. You can purchase malt liquor, like cans of 211, which just happens to be the California penal code number for armed robbery, no wonder so many of my youth clients were intoxicated when they committed their robberies. At the liquor stores you can buy the cigars that are emptied of their tobacco filling and replaced with "purp" - creating the ubiquitous combination called a blunt. And now the liquor stores are beginning to sell just the cigar wrappers to make it easier. And don't forget the t-shirts with horrific messages on them that can also be purchased at the liquor stores. Not to mention that outside of the liquor stores is often where you find the illegal drugs being peddled.

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New York Times columnist Bob Herbert recently wrote that the civil rights movement of the 60's focused on the inequalities in American society, which must still be addressed, but more important now is a movement that seeks to correct irreverent behavior. I agree, but the promoter of the behavior is this culture of death.