

Violence in Hip-Hop and Rap

Written by Westside ID192

Tuesday, 12 October 2004 20:02 -

Two guys. An argument over shoes. A bloodbath.

"To us it seems absurd," says Det. Sgt Gary Keys, head of Toronto's guns and gangs task force.

"Sometimes it is just one guy looking at the other guy's girlfriend the wrong way.

"It is the gang culture. Disrespecting someone is a major deal."

In the world of gangsta rap, straight from the streets of black gangs, respect is measured by the brand and protected by the gun -- the exact ingredients that came together in a deadly mix along London's downtown Dundas Street in April 2003

On a Saturday night in London's crowded DV8 nightclub, Olutobi (Tobi) Johnson squeezed through some people to talk to a girl and bumped into Michael Dwight Allen.

Johnson accidentally stepped on Allen's black running shoes.

"Hey, those aren't Nikes, they're Pradas," Allen said indignantly.

Two days later, on April 22, they were blasting away at each other in the washroom at the Scots Corner, less than a block away.

It was hip-hop night in the bar.

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Hip-hop is pretty much related to status. Hip-hop is about where you grew up and what you achieved and what you have around you," says Lucian James, head of marketing consultants Agenda Inc.

James helps corporations understand how to use and enhance their popularity among young buyers.

He's set up a website called American Brandstand, devoted to tracking the brands named in the Billboard Top 20 singles chart.

The more times a brand gets mentioned in a Top 20 song, the more points it gets.

In 2003, there were 84 brands mentioned in the Billboard Top 20.

Only one song with brands was not hip-hop or R and B.

No. 6 on the list?

Prada shoes, thanks largely to notorious rapper 50 Cent's song P.I.M.P and Genuwine's Hell Yeah.

"Now shorty, she in the club, she dancing for dollars

She got a thing for that Gucci, that Fendi, that Prada."

50 Cent

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Prada started a long way from high fashion and hip-hop. In 1913, Mario Prada began selling shoes, leather handbags and trunks and opened a couple of boutiques in Milan.

The company declined in the 1970s, until his granddaughter, a rebellious 27-year-old named Miuccia, took over.

She expanded the business into luxury goods and in the 1980s, to shoes and ready-to-wear clothing.

In the 1990s, as rap exploded across North America, so did Prada's fame.

Miucca Prada won a designer-of-the-year award in 1995.

Supermodels Linda Evangelista and Naomi Campbell sang her praises. Actor Uma Thurman wore a custom Prada ensemble at the 1995 Oscars. Sigourney Weaver and Nicole Kidman followed suit at later awards ceremonies. Leonardo DiCaprio, Brad Pitt and Madonna all flashed Prada wear.

Such brand names as Prada are used as a shortcut in hip-hop, a way to communicate globally, James says.

When a rapper drops a name like Prada, you know exactly what they mean: power and money.

Ma, you worry none,

the minks come with the guns

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Prada, the Gucci,

it's all in Bird fun

Genuwine

American Brandstand also keeps track of the gun brands named in the top-selling hip-hop songs.

In 2003, AK assault rifles, Beretta -- a gun manufacturer-- and magnums -- a style of gun -- all made the top 60. This year, high-end gun manufacturer Glock is sitting at 33.

Violence in hip-hop is almost as pervasive as branding, especially in the form known as gangsta rap.

Hundreds and hundreds of lyrics brag about shooting, cutting and slashing male rivals and female betrayers.

The violence has spilled over into the lives of the rap stars. In the late 1990s, two of the biggest, Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace) were gunned down during a war of words between New York-based Bad Boy entertainment and California-based Death Row Records.

Since 1995, 12 prominent hip-hop musicians in the U.S. have been shot to death.

Some black rap artists are violent and angry for a reason, says Mark Federman, a professor at the McLuhan Centre in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto.

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"Is it surprising they would have this anger, given that

150 years after slavery, we still have this huge class division between affluent and poor urban areas? It was a natural emergence of anger and frustration of urban black

America."

Gangsta rappers themselves walk that line between denying the music advocates killing and bragging that they are real killers.

"A lot of people think that . . . what I say on records

or what I talk about on a record, that I actually do in real life

or that I believe in it

Or if I say that, I wanna kill somebody, that . . .

I'm actually gonna do it

or that I believe in it

Well, shit . . if you believe that

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then I'll kill you."

Eminem

Can hip-hop kill you?

The academic, entertainment and spiritual worlds are split on the effect hip-hop has on the people who perform it and listen to it.

"This is a serious problem we have in the community," says Pastor Al Baxter of the Faith Miracle Temple in Toronto.

Baxter has presided over the funerals of young black men killed by guns, most notably the 2001 funeral of two black community leaders in Toronto, shot in what appeared to be a revenge slaying.

"I'm sick and tired of black men dying," Baxter said at the funeral.

Hip-hop has to take its share of the blame for so many young men dying, Baxter told The Free Press.

"We have to work with the young people and say, "This is not good for you." "

There have been a lot of studies examining the effects of violent movies, TV shows and video games on people, but much fewer examining the effects of violent lyrics.

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One of the few studies of lyrics was produced in 2003 by researchers at Iowa State University and the Texas department of human services.

The study was based on experiments with college students. The conclusions:

D College students who heard a violent song felt more hostile than those who heard a similar but non-violent song.

D The students also had an increase in aggressive thoughts.

But Federman argues there's no link between hip-hop and violence.

There are shootings at convenience stores all the time, but no one suggests a link there, he says.

"Is there a 7-11 culture that leads to shooting?" Federman asks.

The shooting at Scots Corner had nothing to do with hip-hop itself, he suggests.

"How many people are there involved in hip-hop culture and how many go out and shoot?"

The hip-hop culture is similar in its effects to the hippie culture of the 1960s and the beat culture of the 1950s.

"I can remember how shocked and outraged people were with The Beatles. And these were four guys with neat haircuts and suits and ties. There is always rebellion, there is always

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shock."

As hip-hop culture becomes more pervasive, it's losing its dominance and cache.

So now, to get attention and seek dominance, artists are becoming more outrageous in violent lyrics, Federman says.

"It is scare-orism."

That kind of attitude by analysts is no surprise to Craig Anderson, a researcher in the Iowa State study.

Studies the past 30 years have shown more and more there are links between media violence and aggression, Anderson writes.

But the media continues to report only that there is a weak link, Anderson says.

There are different kinds of hip-hop, points out Markham Rooza, manager of Club Phoenix in London.

In his downtown club, hip-hop is still big. The Scots Corner shooting did nothing to stop 1,500 people from showing up to dance.

In London, though, there's only a small group of hard core hip-hop fans, Rooza says.

The DJs play it in clubs. But except for huge acts like 50 Cent in the John Labatt Centre in April,

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live performers don't draw huge crowds in his club.

"It is the cool thing, but it is watered down. We play a lot but it is all Top 40. The whole gangsta rap doesn't go over because our crowd is a pretty clean crowd."

Club Phoenix won't allow any gang wear.

Other clubs in London focus their hip-hop nights on gangsta rap and get a rougher crowd, Rooza says.

And it's true young people are influenced by music.

Even so, he doesn't think people should single out rap lyrics as a problem.

"Remember, Elvis was a bad boy."

Besides, video games are encouraging five-year-olds to shoot, Rooza says.

"There is nothing that is popular that is not somebody shooting someone. This stuff, rap lyrics, are not out of line. They're nothing abnormal."

While the debate over the influence of hip-hop continues, on the streets of Flemingdon Park in Toronto, there are clear links between hip-hop, materialism and violence, says a man who grew up there.

"In many ways these young men take for granted they are not going to see 30," says Andrew

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Faiz, a film documentary maker who knew Tobi Johnson.

Faiz met Johnson while making a series of radio and film documentaries about the rough neighbourhood.

Johnson called himself Toba Chung and was part of a hip- hop/reggae crew called Guilty Crime Productions.

"He and his friends want to make it in the music industry and they have some talent for the music but they have no life skill," Faiz says.

"So they get into this underworld of dealing and things like that."

Whatever they made on drugs -- \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month -- they put into producing demos.

And to buy the things that are supposed to symbolize success and power.

"The bling bling. How absolutely absurd is it that the people who are at the bottom financial rung of society covet \$100 to \$200 shoes," Faiz says.

If the rest of us can't understand why anyone would get into a shootout over shoes, men raised like Johnson and Allen would, Faiz says.

Many young men in neighbourhoods like Flemingdon Park in the east end of Toronto, Regent Park in the south, Jane and Finch in the north and the Jungle in the west end have no jobs, no careers and no clear path to getting a home, looking after their wives or making sure their children thrive.

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What they have is pride.

"Shoes are a metaphor, who I am," Faiz says.

Stepping on shoes, he says, is enough to kill somebody.

Source: [LondonFP](#)