

Decision Time For Rap

Written by Westside ID244

Saturday, 23 October 2004 02:25 -

For Matthew Dave, hip-hop is like an old friend -- the fun one, the one you really liked, the one who inspired you. It's also the friend who never grew up, the one with esteem issues, the one who's a bit too flashy, who swears too much, and is still too obsessed with sex. For Dave, hip-hop is the friend you know you've outgrown.

The 36-year-old Dave grew up in New Orleans under the sway of the hip-hop culture born 30 years ago in the Bronx and brought to the mainstream 25 years ago with the Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight."

"The first party I ever went to was a "Rapper's Delight" party," said Dave, who now lives in Hicksville, N.Y. "Every time they played it, everyone danced. When they tried to play something else, everyone sat down."

He battled with classmates over whether hip-hop would turn out to be a passing fad. He battled with his mother over the explicit lyrics on Ice-T's gritty "Rhyme Pays" CD. ("I told her, "If all you hear is the swearing, then you're not really listening,"" Dave recalled.) He battled with friends about the power of the music.

"I remember one night I was working in this small restaurant in New Orleans when this guy with big gold teeth, wearing a big clock around his neck, came in," Dave said. "This girl I worked with came running back and she's like, "Did you see Flavor Flav?" I'm like, "Flavor who?" And she hands me this CD that he gave her and says, "Here, you take this home and listen to it." That CD was Public Enemy's "It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back," and I never was the same again. There was no one else on wax who was saying what I felt until then."

But that was 15 years ago, in the middle of what many call "The Golden Age of Hip-Hop," when the music was at its most unpredictable, when Run-D.M.C. and LL Cool J were superstars and groups such as Public Enemy and De La Soul were stretching the genre's borders, while Ice Cube and Ice-T were building scenes on the West Coast.

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Since then, Dave has left hip-hop in disgust several times. "Hip-hop has gotten kind of stagnant," he said. "The movement has gone another way. It's frustrating to see the G-Units, the Cash Money, the No Limit all day, every day. That's not about hip-hop. That's not music that has social meaning. That's all about shaking ya -- -- -- .

He is not alone in his protest.

Two of hip-hop's biggest stars -- Jay-Z and DMX -- have announced their retirement from the genre, in part because they have tired of rappers competing over who seems most "street" or extravagant. Rappers such as Will Smith, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and Ja Rule find that acting may be more lucrative and less taxing.

Hip-hop is at a crossroads. Does it continue down the currently popular road -- pushing tales of gangsta street life and fantasies of escaping into a world of bling-bling and babes? Or does it try to harness the power of the hip-hop generation to deal with the problems of urban culture?

Of course, the decision is not that simple. Hip-hop's current incarnation generates \$2.8 billion in CD sales annually, according to the Recording Industry Association of America, for an industry that still is struggling with falling profits, making the major labels hesitant to fix something they feel isn't broken.

In the past decade, hip-hop's share of the music market has nearly doubled, to 13.3 percent, and it has gone from the fifth- most-popular type of music to second, behind rock. But does the industry really only want rappers who talk about crimes, partying and sex?

Raymond Scott, best known as rapper Benzino and co- owner of hip-hop magazine The Source, says yes. He believes that many in the music industry seek out only rappers who fit these stereotypes because that is how they want to portray African-Americans.

"Hip-hop, at one time, was a conscience for African-Americans, but they pretty much wiped that type of music out," Scott said. "I think the real revolutionaries aren't being heard these days. Right now, we're in a dangerous time because there's a double standard being applied."

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Many believe hip-hop has brought the races closer together. Mogul Russell Simmons said, "Hip-hop has done more for race relations than any other force in America in the last 50 years." Walk into any mall and there will be hordes of white suburban teens dressed like 50 Cent or any number of black rappers, and struggling to sound more "street."

Though recent studies show that America's largest cities are largely segregated, more than any other multicultural country except South Africa under apartheid, clearly, the races know more about each other's lives than ever before -- even if there are only a few ways they interact. Hip-hop, like sports, is one of those few ways.

However, many in the industry believe hip-hop's financial success may be pushing the mostly white music industry decision-makers and mostly black artists in different directions.

Davey D., California-based hip-hop radio DJ and author, said that when hip-hop was developing, the music brought the races together because everyone was equal.

"Hip-hop was a unifying force and a beautiful thing," Davey D. said. "At the beginning of the scene, I felt it was very genuine in terms of cross-pollination; the white new wave kids downtown were taking from the black and Latino hip-hop kids uptown and in the Bronx and vice versa. There was an appreciation of what was going on in the music without the racial baggage. The seeds were being planted for it to be a worldwide phenomenon. As the people participated, it was more like sports. What was respected was skill level and not your race."

When hip-hop began to be seen as a successful, money-making art form rather than a novelty, things began to change, Davey D. said.

"Age-old racial dynamics came into play -- resentment, misperceptions and out-and-out racism," he said. "Though 90 percent of the people making the music was black, the major players and the shot-callers were white. That's when we started to go back to stereotypes. People outside the community would tell artists they weren't 'street' enough. They would vicariously try to live out age-old ghetto stereotypes. Is it really how the black people live? Or do you subconsciously try to keep those conditions going? The biggest challenges hip-hop will face now will be around this issue of race."

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Eminem's rise to dominance in hip-hop shows how thorny the race issue can be. The white rapper from Detroit has become the genre's biggest star, with a mix of talent and controversy. Eminem had skills, so his race didn't matter to most fans. He was not only accepted but also nurtured by hip-hop's black power structure, especially his mentor, producer-rapper Dr. Dre.

The problem is that his race did matter a great deal to the music industry -- video channels, radio stations and record companies got behind Eminem in a way that no black rapper has ever seen.

"When (Eminem) came out, there was across-the-board respect for him -- he's got skills, he's got a great flow on the mike, though I see it more as a Larry Bird situation than an Elvis situation," Davey D. said. "Now, before he even had an album coming out, he was on the cover of Spin magazine. A Tribe Called Quest, one of the greatest groups of all time, were retiring around the same time, and they were putting out their final album and they didn't get the cover. Radio stations that had said, "I'll never play rap music," suddenly played Eminem and, later, Limp Bizkit. They play Eminem, but they won't play Wu-Tang Clan. Why? Because radio is about demographics and ratings and the key aspect of that is race."

Even Eminem acknowledges race played a factor in his success, rapping in "White America," "Look at my sales -- let's do the math -- if I was black, I would've sold half."

Hip-hoppers don't begrudge Eminem his sales. They complain that black hip-hop artists never had the same opportunities he did.

The Source's Scott said fans need to revive the spirit of racial unity from the culture's early days.

"To me, the greatest thing to come out of hip-hop is that it started to really unite black and white people," he said. "We know there's a lot of people that don't want that happening, a lot of people pushing the buttons in our society."

Scott is referring to what a growing number in hip-hop believe are moves coordinated in a plan

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similar to the FBI Cointelpro programs of the '60s, when the agency used a mix of tactics to discredit civil rights groups.

However, most believe there is plenty of blame to go around before pulling in a government shadow organization: to the music industry for what it promotes, to the artists for what they create and to the fans for accepting what is offered to them.

Public Enemy rapper and radio talk show host Chuck D. said many African-Americans need to stop idolizing rappers who "keep it real" by rhyming about violence, women and high-priced products.

"Real people do real things," he said. "They can try to be a guy who's a music person -- Puffy or Russell or Chuck -- but a lot of it is bread and circuses. Real people need to pay their mortgage. Real people need to get health care for their child. Real people need to learn how to fend for themselves in society. Real people have responsibilities. Maybe we should try to make this message more hip, more palatable. But that doesn't make it any easier."

Chuck D. says the reason so many of today's up-and-coming rappers adopt a thuggish persona is a simple matter of business. For example, with the multiplatinum success of 50 Cent -- whose oft-told background of being a pre-teen drug dealer and surviving being shot nine times can overshadow his music -- record companies are looking for rappers who can duplicate his style and his lyrical content -- whether they are telling tales of their own lives or not.

"In the beginning, rappers didn't want to be like nobody else," said Chuck D.

"They wanted to be original. But now, with the whole money aspect and this idea of "I got to get paid," people want to see how similar they can be to someone else. That's not to say that these guys are wack, it's just that the similarity is so important. Now, hip-hop is like one big casting couch, where these new cats are just trying to get the role."

The fantasies that many of today's rappers construct are essentially the same. They have survived the tough life of the streets by being tough and living outside the law. That success has

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brought them loads of cash so they can buy lots of flashy jewelry and fancy new cars. It also means the most beautiful women are now throwing themselves at them.

It's a nice fantasy if you're the guy, though, unless you're actually the guy, it gets old pretty quick.

"I started listening to hip- hop when I was 6 years old," said Farai Chideya, San Francisco author and radio talk show host. "I have an understanding of what happens. I liked the storytelling of hip- hop, but I started to have a huge problem with this.

"I went on a three-year strike," she continued. "I decided, "I'm not listening to this -- -- -- . This has no respect for me." But I came back, both because I like it and because I know that if I don't listen to it, I'm going to miss something."

And after years dominated by gangsta rappers such as 50 Cent, this year, a certain amount of righteousness is beginning to work its way back into hip-hop. Kanye West has made a splash with "Jesus Walks," a religious rap where he says, "Radio needs this/ They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus -- that means guns, sex, lies, videotapes/But if I talk about God, my record won't get played, huh?"

Mase, who left multiplatinum success five years ago to become a preacher, says, "I'm just a bad boy gone clean" in his comeback hit single "Welcome Back."

Whether these developments are the start of a new road in hip-hop or simply a detour of the gangsta train remains to be seen.

As the Internet continues to erode the stranglehold the major labels have on distribution of hip-hop, more and more rappers will get the opportunity to speak their minds, Chuck D. said. "Rappers are starting to learn that they need to make the record companies work for them, that they can do things on their own and force people to give them as much access as they want, as long as they have something important to say and enough people want to hear it," said Chuck D., who started one of the first Internet-based record companies, Slamjamz.com, to offer more

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rappers a chance to be heard. "My thing now is trying to help people get organized."

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