

Hip-Hop Activists Decry Urban Radio Programming

Written by Davey D ID2887

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Last weekend, people from all over the country converged on Chicago's historic South Side for the second National Hip Hop Political Convention.

They spent four days at the Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies on the Northern Illinois University campus tackling crucial issues for the hip-hop generation. Many of these revolved around education, health, the "prison industrial complex," urban gentrification, immigration, Hurricane Katrina and the war in Iraq.

But another topic kept surfacing in panel discussions - local media.

Delegates spoke emphatically about battles with the media, particularly radio, over the treatment and portrayal of the urban community. Many argued these outlets spark controversy, reinforce ghetto stereotypes and play up petty beefs between public figures while ignoring significant issues.

For example, Cincinnati delegates alleged an increase in police brutality. A big challenge, they said, has been to try to get urban radio to pay attention. They also pointed to a need to combat the onslaught of "misinformation" put out by conservative talk radio.

Pittsburgh delegates spoke about the late-June FBI raid of a mosque frequented by rappers. The raid was conducted during a prayer service (Juma'ah). The person the FBI was hoping to capture on a warrant from Utah actually had been arrested two hours earlier in another part of the city, mosque leaders contend. Ultimately, the raid prompted a huge show of support for Pittsburgh's Muslims and united the city's religious and hip-hop communities, which held a press conference to condemn the raid. But the story was all but ignored by local urban radio.

In Chicago, hip-hop activists who live in the much-publicized Cabrini-Green housing project have been fighting to prevent closure of public housing throughout their city. So far, they have

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prevented the shutdown of Cabrini-Green, which sits on what developers consider choice downtown land. The activists also have locked horns with the city government over demands that public housing residents be able to obtain jobs on construction sites where new housing is to be built. And, like delegates from other parts of the country, they say their efforts were not reported by urban radio in Chicago.

Delegates from a variety of cities complained about a lack of relevant news coverage on urban radio. Comparing notes, they concluded that most urban stations have replaced newscasts with gossip-filled entertainment "news." It also appears that very few have done any coverage of local election issues. In addition, most stations that air any community-based broadcasts schedule them at 5 or 6 a.m. Sundays, when most people are asleep.

Concerns were also voiced about radio's assaults on the psyche through song after song containing graphic images of violence and sex. It's one thing to hear such complaints in just one locality, but when they come from all over the country they suggest a disturbing trend.

Some delegates pointed to those who have started their own Internet radio stations to address these concerns. Others have set to work devising creative strategies for approaching the media. The convention's media training sessions appeared to be the best attended.

Some at the meeting cited the Bay Area's earlier media reform campaigns as inspiration for their efforts.

Afrika Bambaataa and his Universal Zulu Nation have mounted a national campaign to Stop the Imbalance on Commercial Radio, calling for stations to feature not just sex and violence on their playlists but also other kinds of lyrics to help broaden the perspectives of listeners. Some Chicago organizations are calling for marches and boycotts against media outlets.

The recent revelation that hip-hop/urban stations in New York and Los Angeles have experienced significant drops in the ratings may be a persuasive sign that people won't be happy until some changes are made.