Hip-Hop Dogmatism and Potential Problems for Political Organizing By Matthew Birkhold, (WireTap Mag.org)

Issue: Progressive hip-hoppers avoiding internal issues. Why? The culture's need to address sexism, homophobia and gender issues.

Action: A call for deeper critique and reflection within the hip-hop community.

Over the last few months hip-hop has been under attack in the mainstream media. However, the political hip-hop community (PHHC) -- a group comprised of socially conscious hip-hop fans, grassroots activists, prominent hip-hop generation artists and intellectuals -- has not been silenced. We have defended hip-hop from outside and feel confident in our defense. Unfortunately, most of our attempts to defend hip-hop have deflected valid criticisms of the music and culture. In response, this essay argues that being hip-hop is often a roadblock to intellectual honesty and hinders political organizing by allowing us to deflect critique.

When people identify as hip-hop, using the phrase, "I am hip-hop," criticisms of hip-hop may be internalized and may thus pose a problem for political and intellectual work. For example, following Don Imus'' assertion that hip-hop itself was to blame for his degrading description of the Rutgers women's basketball team, the PHHC's reactionary response to the attack on its culture played in to an "us versus them" archetype, rather than spurring ownership and self-reflection.

Hard to earn

On Feb. 20, Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes premiered on PBS. Directed by Byron Hurt, Beyond Beats is a loving insiders'' critique of hip-hop and an excellent examination of how men involved in hip-hop construct masculinity. Hip-hop has been one of the few places where black men can express themselves publicly, and Hurt's film focuses on the ways young black men construct their masculinity in a racist, sexist, capitalist world. Hurt skillfully probes several rappers and fans of rap music about the ways that women are portrayed in music and videos and asks rappers why their lyrics are consistently violent and sexist. By the film's conclusion, the need to redefine masculinity is clear.

When questioned about violence and sexism, many rappers in Hurt's film respond by saying that only explicit music makes money. Rap, for many young black men, has become a job and a way to earn a living. Yet they work in a racist, capitalist state where employees, particularly black, do not receive a fair share of profits. To further complicate matters, black male artist-employees are faced with the reality that their primary consumers, young white people, are not willing to pay black men to behave in ways that pose a threat to institutional white supremacy.

This grim reality poses a difficult problem for individuals and artists who are committed to both hip-hop and social justice.

Hip-hop is a profitable business that's earned a handful of black people access to capital that has been otherwise elusive in the entertainment business. For many black men, looking at the career paths of Jay Z, Russell Simmons, Diddy, or equally successful independent artists who''ve made a living pressing and distributing their music, hip-hop employment seems both wise and lucrative.

However, if we look at the artist-employees in Hurt's film, the question begging to be asked is, "At what cost to the black community has the hip-hop career path come?" Gender has certainly suffered in the wake of a profit-driven rap game. The image of black women and men must certainly be considered among the costs.

Abandon hip-hop?

By the end of the 2005 Feminism and Hip-Hop Conference, it was clear that hip-hop was central to the identities of many people present. After Joan Morgan, author of When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost, said that hip-hop as she knew it was dead, many audience members grew visibly upset. They were further angered when Black Noise author Tricia Rose said that, because the music had internalized capitalism and misogyny, it was time to let hip-hop go.

The intellectual conflict between those angered by Rose and Morgan and those who were not was apparent during a panel that included video model Melyssa Ford and video director Jessy Terrero. Ford argued that there wasn''t a problem with her portrayal in videos because she was in control of her image. Terrero stressed that women were portrayed in videos in a manner that guaranteed profit for both the director and the label.

Terrero's "sex sells" position was interrogated during the question-and-answer period, when Tricia Rose asked panel participants, "If having the Klan come through your video and lynch black folks is going to make you money, are you going to do it?" Terrero responded "No." Rose followed up by saying, "We have drawn a line with race. When will we draw a line in regards to gender?" Terrero responded evasively (and elicited applause) by saying that if education were better, viewers would be equipped to make informed viewing choices and women dancing in videos would peruse other options.

Terrero's response is problematic because it indicates an unwillingness to take responsibility for the sexist images he creates which are then televised around the country to a market that awaits subhuman, hypersexual images of black women. The crowd's approval demonstrates their unwillingness to hold him accountable and also illustrates that they too would rather engage in a conversation concerning the failures of education than discuss the ways in which hip-hop has internalized patriarchy and sexism. There is no doubt that American public schools are ill-equipped to educate youth and are in desperate need of reform. However, there is also no question that hip-hop has internalized patriarchy, and this too needs be addressed.

Wider rep

Beyond Beats and Rhymes provides the PHHC with the perfect place to begin this conversation. Unfortunately, the PHHC has not picked up where Beyond Beats leaves off. In response to the attack on hip-hop, the PHHC has called for a wider representation of hip-hop's musical, aesthetic and cultural diversity without addressing the culture's internalization of capitalism, misogyny and patriarchy. In response to Don Imus, and the blame he placed on hip-hop for providing him with the term "nappy-headed hoes," grassroots hip-hop activists, prominent hip-hop generation artists and intellectuals such as the National Hip-Hop Political Convention, Paris, Saul Williams and Jeff Chang have collectively responded to Imus and the attacks on hip-hop proclaiming, "Don''t Blame Hip-Hop!"

Collectively, the PHHC has argued that labels and radio should be blamed because the hip-hop provided by these outlets is limited to materialistic, individualistic, sexist and violent portrayals of black folk. The PHHC has also argued that the sexism found within hip-hop is simply a reflection of sexism within the greater society and therefore should receive the brunt of criticism. These assertions of the PHHC are absolutely correct. Unfortunately, they do not address the sexism that runs rampant in hip-hop.

The bigger question

While there is no question that a broader representation of hip-hop is needed, such an achievement will not eliminate sexism. Both the PHHC's response to the attack on hip-hop and the audience response to Terrero at the Feminism and Hip-Hop Conference evade the internalization of patriarchy and capitalism by hip-hop. So why are folks committed to both hip-hop and social justice avoiding the discussion about the ways in which a music and culture we deeply care for has internalized patriarchy and sexism? Moreover, in the words of political scientist Jerry Watts, "If hip-hop only mirrors the existent pathologies of the parent society (ala sexism or outright misogyny or homophobia) then of what good is it to a subjugated community trying to emancipate itself?"

One answer is that the PHHC, largely dominated by men, silences women and lacks the intellectual tools to address sexism. This is inexcusable and must be changed. Perhaps we are intent to hold on to a culture that has internalized the worst aspects of a racist, sexist, capitalist society because, as a generation, our identity is deeply rooted in hip-hop. This unfortunately means that a critique of the way hip-hop has internalized patriarchy must lead to a painful examination of the ways we have internalized patriarchy. Despite the soreness this may cause, reflection and self-critique is necessary. In many ways, refusing to engage in this reflection mirrors the refusal of many whites to admit to collaborating with racism or acknowledging that America itself is a racist nation.

While rappers such as Dead Prez and Immortal Technique take revolutionary positions on race, neither have progressive views on patriarchy. Additionally, while the poster boy for political hip-hop progressivism, Mos Def, takes an insightful position on race and economics, in Hurt's film, he walks out of the room when asked by Hurt if a gay rapper could ever be embraced by the larger hip-hop community.

What the PHHC must question is whether Mos Def, and other politically progressive rappers, can be called progressive if they refuse to address sexism and homophobia within hip-hop.

Hip-hop is a vibrant and diverse subculture with a global audience and rich cultural significance. Progressive and committed hip-hop activists must embrace critique and not let our affinity for and loyalty to hip-hop trump the political contradictions that, once resolved, will allow it to solidly contribute to the struggle for social justice.

For More Info Check Out: Yvonne Bynoe, "Hip Hop's (Still) Invisible Women", Jay Woodson, "Hip Hop's black Political Activism".

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