

Hip Hop Politics Joins Conservative Hitlist by Bakari Kitwana

Written by Bakari Kitwana ID4489

Wednesday, 13 August 2008 23:25 -

When John McWhorter landed a summer 2008 release date for his book [*All About the Beat: Why Hip Hop Can't Save Black America*](#)

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, those working behind the scenes to get it published correctly anticipated two variables that would give the book an edge: grassroots Hip Hop organizers would be in full force this election season, and big name Hip Hop stars would attach their names to youth-oriented get-out-the-vote efforts. What they didn't predict was that McWhorter would not have done his research.

Who could blame them. McWhorter, a former linguistics professor at Cornell University and the University of California - Berkeley, is the author of 12 books and reads 13 languages. He has been outspoken about Hip Hop in his *New York Sun* column, lectures and media appearances.

He's also a senior fellow at the conservative [*Manhattan Institute*](#) whose fellows in the past have published books like

Bell Curve

The

, *Coloring The News: How Crusading for Diversity has Corrupted American Journalism* and McWhorter's own

Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America

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Hip Hop joins the hit list.

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The mainstream image of Hip Hop is already so negative that it's easy for just about anyone to critique it. McWhorter has been given a national platform to do so, hawking *All About the Beat* on CNN, Fox News, C-Span and on several morning shows. But in attempting a book length analysis on Hip Hop culture and the political organizing efforts connected to it, McWhorter bit off more than he could chew.

Instead of a scholarly investigation of this emerging movement, McWhorter relies solely on Hip Hop's negative public image to carry his thesis: young people are misguided if they believe they can connect Hip Hop to any political effort.

This would make an interesting argument, if McWhorter actually engaged young activists involved in meaningful grassroots political organizing around the country. He could have scratched the surface with [Global Policy Solutions](#) founder Maya Rockey Moore, Milwaukee Campaign Against Violence head Rob Biko Baker, and [Green Party Vice Presidential Candidate Rosa Clemente](#), to name a few.

Or he could have begun with national efforts like the [League of Young Voters](#), The Young Voters Alliance, and The National Hip Hop Political Convention (Full disclosure: I along with three others initiated the Convention, which brought over 3000 young people to Newark in June 2004). He doesn't.

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To the contrary, he gives us cynical rants that suggest supporters of Hip Hop politics believe popular rap stars will lead a movement—a conversation that hasn't gained traction in Hip Hop circles since the 1980s. In doing so, McWhorter misses the real point of Hip Hop's effectiveness as a political force: Hip Hop's cultural arts movement has created a national infrastructure of various youth collectives, a unified youth culture that Hip Hop organizers are tapping into to organize youth politically—much the same way the [Christian Coalition](#) did with radical right-leaning churches in the 80s.

Rather than analysis, this book is a mean spirited attempt to deter these young activists from working toward their own visions for change in their communities—especially as they depart from his Black conservative impulse.

He seems hell-bent on discrediting them in much the same way the Right attacked Sixties radicals, defining them as outfits with no agenda beyond "hating whitey," a phrase that McWhorter repeatedly uses throughout the book to describe Hip Hop political thought. That much of Hip Hop activism is multi-racial and engaged in cross-racial organizing escapes him.

McWhorter refuses to address altogether the impact of this group of grassroots organizers on the national election scene in recent years.

The 2004 presidential race marked a turning point for Democrats. They logged incredible voter turnout among youth—an increase of [4.6 million 18-29 year-old voters](#) from 2000. This surge

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laid the foundation for rising youth turnouts in 2006 and again during the primaries earlier this year.

What is particularly frightening to conservatives about these often left-of-center organizers is that they don't leave the battlefield after presidential campaign euphoria dies down. Day in and day out, they remain in the trenches still planning and growing organizations until the next national election rolls around. The Hip Hop Caucus and Hip Hop Congress for example, weren't major players in 2004. This year, they are among the most innovative groups the watch.

McWhorter may not have done his homework, but someone on the Right followed the money trail from Democratic party big donors and their array of 527s to on-the-ground Hip Hop efforts-even if they didn't clue in McWhorter.

Democrats may be conflicted about their success with young voters. But if there is anything to be learned from this book-a major publication on Hip Hop in a presidential election year by a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute-it is that those on the right are clear about the new danger.

Bakari Kitwana is co-editor of the forthcoming *Let's Get Free: Strategies for Organizing the Hip Hop Voting Bloc* (Third World Press, September 2004)

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