

Is Hip Hop's Audience Really 80 White

Written by Davey D ID2854
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Is Hip Hop's Audience Really 80% White? By Davey D

In recent days a debate has ensued on my website daveyd.com, around one of Hip Hop's biggest myths. It started in 1991 when Newsweek Magazine did a cover story on Gangsta Rap and in their article they put out an un-researched statistic that said 80% of Hip Hop's audience is white and that it's reflected in record sales. That stat has been bantered about ever since as an undisputable stone cold fact.

Adding to this myth was a conversation that took place at the Gavin Convention in San Francisco around the same time when Ice T during a panel discussion stated that anything above his average 750 thousand record sales was attributed to white kids.

But is this really true? Granted if one goes to a Mos Def show or even a Wu-Tang concert you will see a majority white audience in many cities, but does that translate to that 80% white audience? How does an all white Wu-Tang show in Northern Cali compare to a sold out predominantly Black T.I. or Yung Joc show in Atlanta or in Oakland? How does that compare to a sold out predominantly Latino Psycho Realm or Sick Symphony show in East LA?

Back in 91 when this 80% first surfaced, there was no study or methodology that that kept track of race when it came to album sales. About the closest one could come was by estimating based upon record stores in a particular area, but that would yield far from accurate results. To start in many areas, folks from different ethnic backgrounds would frequent stores that were in sections of a city dominated by one race. For example, if you came to Berkeley in Northern Cali, you found three main record stores up near the UC campus in an area that was statistically majority white. Folks from all over including predominantly Black South Berkeley and majority Black Oakland shopped at those stores. How were statistics based on purchases by race kept?

The truth of the matter is that this 80% white Hip Hop fan myth has long been a nice marketing tool used by media corporations to justify ad revenues for Top 40 radio stations. Here's a little background on this.

Back in the late 80s and early 90s, many rap artists complained how the urban (Black) radio

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stations did not play rap except on the weekends and even then it was only in the mix late at night. Chuck D highlighted this concern in his song "Don't Believe the Hype". He goes into further detail about this lack of support by Black urban programmers in a song called "How to Kill a Radio Consultant".

According to Black radio programmers they avoided playing rap, because it was affecting their advertising. In spite of Hip Hop's cross over success with groups like Run DMC and the "positive, vibe that existed within rap at that time-(it was the Golden Era), many companies associated Hip Hop with violence done by Black people. Hence a Black radio station playing Hip Hop was likely to have difficult time getting money.

The Showdown Between Urban & Top 40 Radio Over Hip Hop

Around this time several prominent Top 40 radio stations were starting to aggressively play Hip Hop. Most notably was KMEL in San Francisco which became very successful and quickly moved into the number one spot over its urban competition KSOL which had been number one for years.

This sparked a lot of controversy and resulted in a big face off in 1992 at the Gavin Convention in San Francisco between Black urban programmers and white Top 40 stations that were starting to play Hip Hop. The packed panel discussion was hosted by Lee Michaels an African American editor at Gavin who interestingly had laid down the groundwork and started Top 40 giant KMEL which went on to win Best Rap Station in the country 5 years in a row. He posed the question as to weather or not Top 40 stations should be playing Rap or were they exploiting it?

The argument put forth by Black programmers was that they were playing the music but not getting both the ad dollars and promotions benefits from record companies. They talked about how the industry had a dirty secret which two sets of rules and budgets, one for Black urban stations which were small and one for Top 40 stations which in some cases were 3 to 4 times bigger. These budget disparities were also reflected in the Black music departments of and the Crossover and Pop music departments of the record labels

They went on to talk about how major labels would come to town and show support to these

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urban stations by giving them a bunch of tapes and later CDs for giveaway to the audience while across town these new pop stations playing rap were given huge prizes like tickets and all expense paid flyaways to music awards and album release parties.

Black programmers contended that they were responsible for breaking a lot of the urban music into the market place only to see their cross town Top 40 rivals reap the benefits.

The biggest point of contention was that these Top 40 stations were being allowed to keep their Top40/ CHR classification in popular industry trades like Gavin, Billboard and R&R which kept them in a higher budget class.

Hence Top 40 stations could walk into an ad agency and even though their playlist was 90% identical to their urban counterparts they could walk away with a higher ad rate even if they were not number one in the marketplace. Plus they wouldn't have any negative stigma attached to them for playing rap. A white Top 40 station playing rap weighed differently in the minds of ad buyers compared to a Black station playing rap.

The top 40 programmers countered by saying that many of the urban stations were missing the boat by not playing rap. I remember it being said that the urban stations were not staying close to the streets and paying attention to what was going on with their own kids who no longer wanted to hear slow jamz and sappy R&B songs.

They also insisted that they keep their Top 40 classification. What they emphasized was that Hip Hop was the new Top 40 and that was what was being reflected in the playlists was what the mainstream (white audience) now wanted to hear. The compromise to this particular point was the creation of a new classification called Churban which meant Crossover-urban. However it got applied to the Top 40 stations playing rap and not to the urban stations so in many people's mind they were still seen as Top 40 crossover entities

They also pointed out that like their urban counterparts their sales departments had a difficult time convincing ad buyers to purchase time on a station playing rap. One of the Top 40 programmers pointed out that this was a competitive field no matter how you sliced it and that it was up to the urban programmers not only to put together a strong programming team, but to also have a strong sales team as well that could successful convince skeptical advertiser to

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purchase air time.

What wasn't stated and this is where this 80% myth comes in, is the fact that the Top 40 stations had this Newsweek quote along with their CHR status that they could present to ad buyers. Essentially they were able to say, "yes we're playing Public Enemy, NWA and 2 Live Crew" which we (KMEL) was doing at that time, "but this is what the mainstream (white audience wants). Look at this Newsweek article. It's proof positive that 80% of the people who like this aggressive music are the main ones purchasing it. I recall specifically seeing sales kits with that page and quote highlighted.

The bottom line whether we like it or not is that many advertisers have a hierarchy of who they want as consumers. It may be as follows depending on the product; White males between 18-34, White males 25-54, White women 25-34. Women of color 25-34, white teens etc. Last on the list is often time Black males. The pervasive belief is that white males have the most disposable income and can afford to purchase expensive appliances, cars and computers.

Women are desirable because they not only have income of their own, but usually influence the purchasing in households if they are married.

Black men, especially young males are seen in many instances as unwelcome. We all got a glimpse of this several weeks ago with the Cristal debacle where their spokesperson dissed Hip Hop artists for supporting them. He said all the mentions by artists like Jay-Z and P-Diddy was "unwelcome attention". Author and former ad agency executive Hadji Williams in his book "Don't Knock the Hustle" underscores a lot of what I've written and goes into greater depth about all this in his book.

So it's with all this in mind that we can better understand how and why this 80% myth was sold over and over again. It was if people's lives depended on it or in this case, people's livelihoods depended upon it.

Now the real question was weather or not Top 40 stations KMEL and later stations like Hot 97 in New York and Power 106 in Los Angeles which followed suit a couple of years later really had large white listening audiences.

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Asians, White Folks, Arbitron and Hip Hop

Well as I mentioned earlier one of the first and more successful Top 40 stations to embrace rap was KMEL who's sale staff definitely flipped that Newsweek quote their advantage. They had another thing to help them out, and that was Arbitron Ratings to show large white listener-ship.

If I remember correctly we were boosting a number one rating with half our audience being white. However, you wouldn't have known that from the large numbers of people of color who would show up at our events. You never saw like 50% of our crowds being white. It was always explained that many of our white listeners weren't our "active" P1 listeners who would enthusiastically show up at station functions. I later learned something different.

What wasn't really publicly known or even taken into account was how Asians were classified when it came to radio ratings. They were always counted as white people. You see in the Bay Area where KMEL is based there is a huge Asian/Pacific Islander population. In San Francisco more than 50% of the population is Asian with Chinese followed by Filipino being the largest ethnic groups. Outside of their respective countries, the largest concentration of Filipinos, Tongans and Cambodians live in the Bay Area. There's a sizeable Vietnamese, Korean Samoan and Laotian populations. Many of the people within these Asian groups have grown up and listen primarily to urban music. Many of the younger people went from listening to Latin Freestyle to Hip Hop as stations like KMEL evolved.

I recall when the Arbitron people came to our station to talk about ratings and this fact about Asians being counted as whites was made clear one of our Asian deejays damn near hit the roof and went off. She wanted to know why Asians did not have their own category and she said she found it offensive that they would put an entire population down as whites. She noted that it played into the model minority myth that was impacting a lot of Asian communities and it also added to this pervasive perception of them being an invisible group of people.

The Arbitron rep said he understood the concerns and acknowledged that although the Asian population was growing, it would be a while before they would count Asians as a separate group away from whites. Nevertheless the large amount of "white listeners" enjoyed by Top 40 urban leaning stations in California was touted to advertisers and helped rake in a substantial amount of ad dollars. It was later estimated that the actual percentage of white listeners was

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more like 20% when we subtracted the Asian count, but we never really knew for certain.

But lets suppose for the moment many of these Top 40 Hip Hop radio stations have large white audiences as asserted with the 80% myth, why is that we rarely hear many of the artists being played in regular rotation that we know for fact have a large white audience?

When was the last time we heard Living Legends, Del, Sage Francis, Atmosphere etc etc? We might hear an Eminem song, but hardly a Mos Def, Public Enemy or even Talib Kweli. The aforementioned artists seem to always have packed houses at their shows. Some of those groups do pretty well in record sales as independent artists, but dont hear them now and we didnt in the past-why is that? Shouldnt they be getting airplay to satisfy the tastes of this 80% white audience?

Who is Hip Hop's Biggest Ethnic Supporter?

So now that we understand how and why the 80% myth came about lets look at the results of an actual study that was done. In January 2003 Jesse Jackson and his Rainbow Push organization held their 6th Annual Wall Street project conference. In the past Jackson had not put together panels focusing on the entertainment industry and its impact on Wall Street, but that year he did. He put together is memorable standing room only panel which included some very distinguished guests including; former Vibe Magazine CEO Keith Clinkscales of Vanguard Media, Carol H Williams of Carol H Williams Advertising, Thomas Burrell of Burrell Communications, Samuel Chisholm of the Chisholm Group, James L Winston of the National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters and Daisy Exposito-Ulla of the Bravo Group

The Bravo Group is part of the powerful Young and Rubicam company is considered the third largest multicultural agency in the US. The panel discussion talked about market share and leveraging dollars. During the discussion Daisy Exposito Ulla was making her remarks and while it wasn't the main focus she mentioned that her company had done a study and come to find that the Latinos are the biggest purchasers of Rap music. They buy more rap music than both African Americans and whites.

Because this wasn't a Hip Hop specific panel her remarks were made in the context of talking about some other issues, what she was not met with any big gasp from the audience or

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anything like that. But for me I took special note as she continued her presentation, because it basically coincided with the push in broadcast media to target Latinos as a primary audience. <http://www.daveyd.com/article/ainsupport.html>

Yes, Hip Hop is large and everybody enjoys it. And yes, a large part of that audience are white folks. But 80%? No way. Unfortunately white Hip Hop fans were used to validate to skittish advertisers and even venue owners that Hip Hop is safe and non threatening. To me its no different and just as bad as those programmers and industry experts who hawk Black gangsterism and stereotypes and make it appear as if its a vital part of Black culture and a true representation of Hip Hop.