

## Hip Hop The Voice of Youth Social Activism

Written by Ashahed M. Muhammad ID4491  
Saturday, 16 August 2008 01:53 -

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When hip hop began in the South Bronx, it was the voice of the voiceless. Hip Hop artists spoke to the despair and pain of urban youth and the poor who were often without a voice. The rappers themselves were products of that reality and it was conveyed through their lyrics. It was legendary hip hop pioneer Chuck D of Public Enemy who famously called hip hop the “CNN of the ghetto.” When Public Enemy began infusing references to Black history icons and Black facts in the rap, an entire generation of youth of all colors were raised into a new level of consciousness.

Now, many hip hop artists, heavily influenced by the socially conscious rappers of the past, are picking up the mantle of activism becoming a very important voice of the youth, specifically dealing with social and political commentary. This is something that you might not know by looking at many of the controlled news channels which are much more likely to report a hip hop artist’s run in with law enforcement than their philanthropic deeds and service.

Beyond the violence and materialism that is often associated with hip hop culture, many artists are involved in service oriented activities demonstrating their deep connection to their people, their love for hip hop culture and their desire to improve current social realities.

“I just talk about life as I see it,” said rapper and actor Mos Def. “Everybody has to be involved in some way based on the conditions of the country and our communities right now,” he added.

Mos Def says he draws inspiration from personal experiences and current events when making his songs, as do many other hip hop artists.

### Social activism

Harlem rapper Immortal Technique’s searing political commentary flows through his music. His albums cover topics ranging from the plight of migrant field workers, to religious hypocrisy to political corruption. What you may not know is that his lyrical intensity is matched by his deep commitment to causes that he is involved in. In 2006 he was the headliner for “Lyrics for Liberty II,” a benefit concert to raise money for an organization providing service to children in Palestine and he is well known for his outspoken activism and participation in benefit concerts to bring

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attention to the plight of political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal. He also spoke at the Nation of Islam's most recent Saviours' Day Convention in February 2008.

After releasing his third album titled "Third World," Immortal Technique is now headed outside of the United States—to Afghanistan—in his quest to establish social services for those in need.

"I joined with a human rights organization to open up an orphanage in Afghanistan," said the Peruvian rapper. "That's something that I've been pushing very hard, and we've gotten a lot of donations for that. I pledge to go out to Afghanistan, probably at the end of this year, and oversee the final stages of construction myself."

Immortal Technique said the project originated from his "Project Green Light," in which he dedicates time out of his schedule each year to work with an organization on a special project.

"This year, it'll be Afghanistan because the children out there are orphaned by the war, a war that's continued, an occupation I should say, that has continued since the Russian invasion," said Immortal Technique. "In America, we're very sheltered in this nation. Even though there are people that live in the ghetto and are living in very harsh conditions here in America, it is nothing compared to a ghetto in Africa, or a ghetto in South America or the Middle East," he added.

The leader of the Wu-Tang Clan, The RZA launched WuChess.com, described as "the world's first online chess and urban social network."

WuChess.com was inspired by the hip-Hop Chess Federation, a non-profit group using music, martial arts and chess to keep peace in the streets. The group has hosted fundraisers where underprivileged youth play chess and receive mentoring. A portion of the funds generated by WuChess.com go to the HHCF for educational scholarships.

Using their voices

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Twenty years ago, KRS-One teamed up with many influential hip-hoppers to produce the anthem “Self-Destruction.” He is now on a mission to have urban youth endorse a “Hip Hop Declaration of Peace” to quell the violence in cities as he travels the country gaining support for the resurrected “Stop The Violence Movement.”

Legendary lyricist Rakim was one of the first rappers to advocate resistance to the first Gulf War back in 1991 with the song “Casualties of War.” He rapped, “A desert storm let’s see who reigns supreme/Something like monopoly/a government scheme/Go to the Army, be all you can be/Another dead soldier? Hell no, not me!”

Rakim said he feels the same way about the current conflict in Iraq calling it an “unwinnable war.”

“For all the families and all the tragedies over there, it’s not worth it, and if you look at the economy, particularly when someone goes to war and they’re so called winning, beating a country that is full of oil, then you come back home and gas is \$5 a gallon, you’re losing,” said Rakim, who also weighed in on the current political scene. “I hope my man Barack wins with flying colors and it’s not the color of his skin, it’s his ideas and his points of view—things are going to change, and that’s why everybody is riding with him. Hopefully this can get us as a people on track and wake up the government because what Barack is doing is big,” Rakim said.

On July 24, rapper Nas joined the grassroots organization ColorOfChange.org to present over 600,000 signatures demanding that Fox News end their biased pattern of racist attacks against “Black Americans and the Obama family.”

“Fox poisons the country everytime they air racist propaganda and try to call it news,” said Nas, who also recently announced his support of PoliticalSwagger.com, a new alternative website for political news aimed at the hip hop generation.

B-Real, of the rap group Cypress Hill gave his perspective on the Black/Brown conflict being experienced primarily on the West Coast. B-Real, who did a song with Snoop Doggy Dog to try to reduce levels of Black vs. Brown conflict said “prison politics” is to blame.

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“Basically nobody benefits by that sort of beef,” said B-Real. “Really, it started at the prison systems up in California and it trickled down into the street,” he said, adding that intervention is needed from members of street organizations.

“Somebody’s got to come and be the bridge between the powers that be on both sides in the prison systems (that) will be able to sit down and have a rapport and talk it out and figure out what it is going to take to get everything squashed and back in harmony,” he added.

Those unfamiliar with the origins of Hip Hop might be surprised to hear rappers weighing in on issues such as gang conflict, human rights and geo-political realities. Their misperception of hip hop is based on the mind-numbing, misogynistic and profanity laden music played on radio stations, beamed across the globe via satellite and accessed via YouTube by millions on a daily basis.

Another aspect of hip hop’s cultural identity reflects the influence of the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan and Islam on the entire genre. Some commentators have even said that Islam is the “unofficial religion” of hip hop.

Minister Farrakhan has consistently delivered loving words of guidance, instruction and warning to the leaders of the hip hop community. Minister Farrakhan conducted a hip hop summit in Chicago in 1997, one on the East Coast in New York City in 2001 and on the West Coast in Beverly Hills in 2002.

Always a fair arbiter, strident defender and protector of hip hop artists, he conducted a much needed counseling and intervention session during the escalating beef between Ja-Rule and 50 Cent in 2003. Minister Farrakhan was also the first leader to speak out in defense of rapper T.I. after his arrest in Atlanta in October 2007.

Public Enemy, Brand Nubian, Masta Killa of the Wu-Tang Clan, Ice Cube, Tragedy Khadafy (formerly known as The Intelligent Hoodlum) Big Daddy Kane and numerous others have all paid homage to Minister Farrakhan by using words from his many lectures in their songs. Recently, the rapper Nas made an entire song called “Louis Farrakhan.” (See Exclusive Interview with Nas on Pg. 37)

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Though many hip hop artists are in fact either members of the Nation of Islam, the Nation of the Gods and Earths or Sunni, there are many others—though not professed Muslims—who identify heavily with Islam and its precepts. This is demonstrated by their use of many references to the Lessons of the Nation of Islam and Five-Percent terminology interspersed throughout their songs and raps as a testament to Islam's far reaching influence on hip hop culture.

In other demonstrations of social activism, hip hop icon and mogul Russell Simmons, sister, soldier and activist Erykah Badu and multi-Platinum artist Kanye West all played important roles in promoting the Millions More Movement in 2005 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Million Man March in Washington, D.C.

Long-time activist and member of the hip hop generation Rosa Clemente is married to a member of the Nation of Gods and Earths. She considers Minister Farrakhan "a hero" and said his and Islam's impact on hip hop cannot be denied. "The Nation of Islam and The Nation of Gods and Earth have had a profound influence on hip-hop that (still) exists today," she said.

Ms. Clemente said hip hop is now a universal language and many of the most culturally relevant rappers won't be heard on the radio. She named Dead Prez, Immortal Technique, Jean Grey, Lupe Fiasco, Jay Electronica and Rebel Diaz as some of the artists who represent the culture with lyrics that speak to the suffering of the oppressed.

"Hip hop was created in the poorest congressional district in America, the south Bronx, where I was born and grew up. These were young people who had nothing and have created not only a multi-billion dollar industry but have created an international way that we can all speak to each other. I think the fact that we have that and that hip hop can be found in Palestine, in Ghana, in Venezuela, in Cuba, in Brooklyn and American Indian reservations, speaks to the power of it. It also makes me understand why we are always being attacked and why they are always attacking the hip-hop community," said Clemente.

"They said hip-hop was going to die in 1978 and it's 2008," she said adding that now, hip hop is used in cartoons and commercials, hundreds of books have been written analyzing hip hop culture, professors are teaching classes dealing with aspects of hip hop—including lyrics—and there is a hip hop exhibit in the Smithsonian.

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Immortal Technique says even though some rappers are not delivering culturally responsible material to the people, the hip hop nation should be patient with them—especially many of the new rappers—encouraging them to make a change.

“We shouldn’t be hateful towards the people that make that type of music, because in the beginning, the strength of the hip hop was the diversity,” he said. “We shouldn’t be mad towards our brothers and we shouldn’t attack them, but rather bring them in to facilitate a discussion that says, ‘Listen. I know that you know a lot because you have been running your own life, but understand that you don’t know as much as the elders that have been through this with rock and roll, with R&B, and with early hip hop.’”

\*Hip Hop: The voice of youth and social activism

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