

Homophobia and Conscious Hip Hop

Written by Kyle "El Guante" Myhre ID3327
Thursday, 15 February 2007 05:31 -

A call for standards: "conscious" rappers and homophobia By Kyle "El Guante" Myhre

I first heard New York rapper Saigon a few years ago—a few songs here and there from his various mixtapes, from hip hop websites and from friends' mix CDs. Armed with a razor-sharp wit, a real talent for multisyllable rhyme and the bombastic production of Just Blaze, Saigon was a welcome breath of fresh air. To top it all off, Sai was political! He was down with dead prez, he rapped about crooked politicians and he was one of an extremely few artists able to successfully blend street credibility with socially-conscious rhymes.

"Finally," I thought. "A credible rapper who isn't afraid to talk about real issues and actually has some personality. This guy could be the future. He could be "the conscious 50 Cent." Saigon could really change the face of mainstream hip hop."

But it was too good to be true, as these sorts of things always are. Saigon, as it turns out, is virulently, publicly homophobic. For example, Sai's response to Kanye West calling for a moratorium on homophobia in hip hop:

"S to the A I, may I say I never affiliate myself with a gay guy/ Sorry Kanye I, had homophobia ever since I was yay high."

Doesn't really get much more overt than that. And here is his rhymed multiple choice question on "Contraband II:"

"Question number three is for the females/ y'all know how I feel about the details/ this is 100% true, I'll bet with you/ why is three out of every four broads bisexual?/ A; "cause they tired of the problems that the men bring/ B; they just munchin" on carpets "cause it's the in-thing/ C; "cause America say it's okay to be gay/ D; this just Sodom and Gomorrah on replay."

I really had no reason to be surprised. Throughout the years, rappers I had once looked up to as talented and socially conscious have repeatedly let me down when it comes to applying their

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revolutionary fervor to the LGBTQ community. While "mainstream" artists like Eminem, DMX, Busta Rhymes and many others have been publicly criticized for their homophobic lyrics, we've failed to shine that same light on many of our self-proclaimed revolutionary heroes, so-called "conscious" acts like Saigon, Immortal Technique, Brand Nubian, Capital D, El-P, Goodie Mob and many, many others.

Even "conscious" hip hop's champions, the oft-heralded Common and Mos Def, have a history of anti-gay lyrics.

"Homo's a no-no, so faggots stay solo..." (Common on "Heidi Hoe," 1992).

"Cats who claimin" they hard be mad fag/ so I run through "em like flood water through sandbags..." (Mos Def on Blackstar's "Re-Definition," 1998).

"In a circle of faggots, your name is mentioned..." (Common on "Dooinit," 2000).

"Quasi-homosexuals is runnin" this rap shit..." (Mos Def on "The Rape Over," 2004).

To be fair, Common has since changed his view and attitude (at least publicly) and this is to be applauded. The point is, however, that underground/conscious/political artists are just as prone to homophobia as their mainstream counterparts, and we in the broader hip hop community have a responsibility to hold them to the same standards.

And this is usually the place in the discussion where people start getting defensive and/or making excuses for these artists. "We shouldn't expect them to be perfect." Or "homophobia isn't hip hop's problem; it's society's problem." Or "at least they're talking about other important issues." Or "it's free speech; stop trying to censor them." Or whatever.

But this isn't censorship or a demand for absolute ideological perfection; it's a call for some pretty reasonable standards. Don't be a bigot—is that so much to ask?

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Hip hop—and yes, even "conscious" hip hop—has a problem with homophobia. It's high time we just admit this. From mainstream artists to underground artists to local and amateur acts—homophobia, both indirect (the use of homophobic slurs as a general insult; attend any emcee battle and see for yourself) and explicit (overt gay-bashing in lyrics) is far too prevalent in hip hop. Of course, it's far too prevalent everywhere, but hip hop warrants special attention both because of the nature/frequency of the attacks and the visibility and worldwide influence of the medium. I'd write an article about homophobia in polka music, horse racing, or old-world breadmaking, but the people who participate in those activities aren't constantly and publicly making idiots out of themselves (while commanding the attention of a global audience) by calling one another "fags."

This is especially problematic when it comes to artists who are placed on a pedestal by both the hip hop and activist communities as being pillars of progressive or radical thought. Immortal Technique, for example, is a hero to thousands of "revolutionary" minded hip hop fans who are either so desperate for politics in hip hop that they'll ignore his homophobia, or don't care about its presence in the first place. And I'm afraid it's more often the latter.

"Why you tryin' to be hardcore, you fuckin' homo-thug?/ and don't be sensitive and angry at the shit that I wrote/ 'cause if you can take a fucking dick, you can take a joke." (Immortal Technique on "Obnoxious," 2003).

Immortal Tech offers more jewels of wisdom in this interview with RapStation: "As for homophobia, hip hop never embraced faggots. One can't deny that there are probably rappers, DJs and fans that are mo's but I think since the culture was based around proving ones manhood; acting like a fruitpop isn't gonna get you anywhere."

(Tech does, oddly enough, make a very important point about how sexism and outdated ideals of masculinity serve to undergird homophobia in the hip hop community. As always, sexism and homophobia go hand in hand).

The bottom line, particularly for those who consider themselves progressives or radicals, is that homophobia, aside from being morally wrong and flat-out ignorant, is counterrevolutionary. "An injustice anywhere is an injustice everywhere." Rappers can claim anti-government, or pro-black, or pro-social justice or whatever all they want, but if they're casually throwing around

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anti-gay slurs then they're directly participating in the oppression of a significant portion of the world population.

Which is, of course, exactly what the powers-that-be want. We can't have decently-funded schools or universal health care because voters are too upset over the prospect of gay people getting married. We can't have revolutionary organizations because racism, sexism, classism and homophobia hinder people's basic ability to work together. It's divide and conquer, and perhaps it goes without saying, but it's bigger than hip hop too. Politically-minded rappers being homophobic mirrors a lot of other problems associated with the Left: white liberals being racist and completely oblivious about it, male activists being all for smashing the State but not willing to follow female leadership, college student organizers holding meetings that working-class people are not able to attend, the list goes on and on. We all need to start thinking more holistically.

As far as solutions go, this problem needs to be assaulted on multiple fronts. A whole lot needs to be done in the public realm with regards to education and legislation, but that doesn't mean that we in the hip hop community should just wait for those things to happen and filter down to us. It's going to take action.

First and foremost, we can support gay and lesbian rappers, artists like God-des & She, Rainbow Flava, Deep Dickollective, Deadlee, Soce the Elemental Wizard, Johnny Dangerous and many more. The more support these artists have the sooner mainstream acceptance will come. And the flipside of this, of course, is NOT supporting homophobic artists; if a rapper is saying some dumb shit, don't buy his album. Period.

And that's difficult—many of the artists I mentioned earlier are or have been personal favorites of mine. I grew up on the first two Goodie Mob albums and I still love a lot of their material. But group member Khujo's verses on "Fly Away" and "All A's" have really made me take a second look at the group—and at myself. Five years ago, I let his gay-bashing lyrics slide, rationalizing to myself that they're drops of negativity in an otherwise positive stew, and that as long as I'm not beating up gay people or joining the Klan I can't be homophobic.

But there comes a point when lines need to be drawn and principles need to be upheld. I can't take back the mistakes of the past, but I can be sure not to make them again—as much as I've liked a lot of Saigon's and Immortal Tech's material, I won't be buying either of their new albums.

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It takes constant awareness too. I recently included the Lil' Wayne song "Shooter" on some "best singles of '06" list someone asked me to write up. And sure, it's a great song, but it also includes the line "behind door dick-takers/ it's outrageous." It's not as though I just didn't notice the line before. I noticed it and didn't care enough to change my decision to include it in my list, and that was wrong. Being truly anti-homophobic, truly revolutionary, is continuous work. We make mistakes, and we have to be able to acknowledge them while understanding that change is a dynamic process.

We can also write letters, send emails and talk to artists who have used homophobic language or expressed homophobic ideas. This could involve emailing Eminem, but it could just as easily involve talking to some random kid at a battle or one of your MySpace friends and asking him why he uses the language he does. A lot of people are simply never confronted about homophobia, and dialogue may be the necessary first step for many. A significant fraction of the artists who use homophobic language probably don't have any serious beef with the LGBTQ community—the common excuse is that words like "fag" have evolved into all-purpose insults, and that questioning a male emcee's manhood is just a part of hip hop culture. When we can initiate conversations about why that language—regardless of its intent—is harmful, we will start to open some eyes.

Finally, as artists, whether "conscious" or otherwise, we need to take some responsibility. Read up on the history of Gay Liberation and the struggle for LGBTQ rights. Find more creative ways to disrespect the hypothetical wack emcee that we all rap about from time to time (really, when every dis boils down to questioning masculinity and sexuality, it's not just ignorant—it's boring). If you're a battlerapper, point out when your opponent uses homophobic language and use it to your advantage—be creative. And for God's sake stop saying "no homo."

The aforementioned Kanye West recently made waves by passionately speaking out against homophobia in hip hop. But a month or two later he dropped this lyric on DJ Khaled's "Grammy Family:" ""Yeezy got a vision that's clearer than Evian/ used to hit the radio them faggots ain't let me on."

Yes, we all know that West is "complex," but this kind of hypocrisy is unacceptable. As artists at all levels of influence, from the Jay-Zs of the world to the basement emcee rapping into a computer mic, we need to lead with both words and actions—this is our community and it's on us to change it for the better. Silence and inaction both equal complicity.

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(Because this always comes up, one initial point of clarification: the term "homophobia" does not just mean "fear of gay people." It refers to ANY fear, aversion, distrust or hatred directed toward people who identify as gay or lesbian. So I don't want anyone coming up to me later saying "Ayo I hear what you're saying, but see I ain't AFRAID of gays, I just don't like them." I'm glad we're all on the same page now.)