

Gangsterism Within Hip-Hop

Written by Dr. William Jelani Cobb ID2831
Tuesday, 11 July 2006 00:44 -

We Still Wear the Mask-(Gangsterism Within Hip-Hop)

We Still Wear The Mask By Dr. William Jelani Cobb

We could have known that it would come to this way back in 1896. That was the year that Paul Lawrence Dunbar dropped a jewel for the ages, telling the world that "we wear the mask that grins and lies." The poet's point was that beneath the camouflage of subservient smiles, black folks of the Jim Crow era were hiding a powder keg of other emotions, waiting patiently for the chance to detonate. The thing is, Dunbar never got the chance to spit bars with 50 Cent or throw in a guest collabo on a Mobb Deep album. If he had, then he would've known that grins and lies were only half the story.

These days, camouflage is the new black. Glance at hip hop for less than a second and it becomes clear that the music operates on a single hope: that if the world mistakes kindness for weakness it can also be led to confuse meanness with strength. That principle explains why there is a permanent reverence for the thug within the music; it is why there is a murderer's grit and a jailhouse tat peering back at you from the cover of damn near any CD you picked up in the last five years. But what hip hop can't tell you, the secret that it would just as soon take to its deathbed is that this urban bravado is a guise, a mask, a head-fake to shake the reality of fear and powerlessness in America. Hip hop will never admit that our assorted thugs and gangstas are not the unbowed symbol of resistance to marginalization, but the most complacent and passive products of it.

We wear the mask that scowls and lies.

You could see which way the wind was blowing way in the early 90s when Dr. Dre was being ripped off by white Ruthless Records CEO Jerry Heller, and nonetheless got his street cred up by punching and kicking Dee Barnes, a black woman journalist, down a flight of stairs. In this light, hip hop's obsessive misogyny makes a whole lot more sense. It is literally the logic of domestic violence. A man is abused by a larger society, but there are consequences to striking back at the source of his problems. So he transfers his anger to an acceptable outlet – the women and children in his own household, and by extension, all the black people who constitute his own community.

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Nothing better illustrates that point than the recent Oprah Debacle. Prior to last month, if you'd heard that a group of rappers had teamed up to attack a billionaire media mogul you would think that hip hop had finally produced a moment of collective pride on par with the black power fists of the 1968 Olympics. But nay, just more blackface.

In the past two months, artists as diverse as Ludacris, 50 Cent and Ice Cube have attacked Oprah Winfrey for her alleged disdain for hip hop. It's a sad but entirely predictable irony that the one instance in which hip hop's reigning alpha males summon the testicular fortitude to challenge someone more powerful and wealthy than they are, they choose to go after a black woman.

The whole set up was an echo of some bad history. Two centuries ago, professional boxing got its start in America with white slaveholders who pitted their largest slaves against those from competing plantations. Tom Molineaux, First black heavyweight champion came up through the ranks breaking the bones of other slaves and making white men rich. After he'd broken enough of them, he was given his freedom. The underlying ethic was clear: an attack on the system that has made a slave of you will cost you your life, but an attack on another black person might just be the road to emancipation.

The basis for this latest bout of black-on-black pugilism was Oprah's purported stiff-arming of Ludacris during an appearance on her show with the cast of the film Crash. Ludacris later complained that the host had made an issue of lyrics she saw as misogynistic. Cube jumped into the act whining that Oprah has had all manner of racist flotsam on her show but has never invited him to appear – proof, in his mind, that she has an irrational contempt for hip hop. Then 50 threw in his two cents with a claim that Oprah's criticism of hip hop was an attempt to win points with her largely white, middle class audience. All told, she was charged her with that most heinous of hip hop's felonies: hateration.

But before we press charges, isn't 50 the same character who openly expressed his love for GW Bush as a fellow "gangsta" and demanded that the black community stop criticizing how he handled Hurricane Katrina? Compare that to multiple millions that Oprah has disseminated to our communities (including building homes for the Katrina families, financing HIV prevention in South Africa and that \$5 million she dropped on Morehouse College alone) and the idea of an ex-crack dealer challenging her commitment to black folk becomes even more surreal.

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In spite of – or, actually, as a result of -- his impeccable gangsta credentials, 50 basically curtsied before a President who stayed on vacation for three days while black bodies floated down the New Orleans streets. No wonder it took a middle-class preppie with an African name and no criminal record to man-up and tell the whole world that "George Bush don't care about black folks." No wonder David Banner – a rapper who is just a few credits short of a Master's Degree in social work -- spearheaded hip hop's Katrina relief concerts, not any of his thug counterparts who are eternally shouting out the hoods they allegedly love.

The 50 Cent, whose music is a panoramic vision on black-on-black homicide, and who went after crosstown rival Ja Rule with the vengeance of a dictator killing off a hated ethnic minority did everything but tap dance when Reebok told him to dismantle his porn production company or lose his lucrative sneaker endorsement deal.

But why single out 50? Hip hop at-large was conspicuously silent when Bush press secretary Tony Snow (a rapper's alias if ever there was one) assaulted hip hop in terms way more inflammatory than Oprah's mild request:

"Take a look at the idiotic culture of hip-hop and whaddya have? You have people glorifying failure. You have a bunch of gold-toothed hot dogs become millionaires by running around and telling everybody else that they oughtta be miserable failures and if they're really lucky maybe they can get gunned down in a diner sometime, like Eminem's old running mate."

(We're still awaiting an outraged response from the thug community for that one.) Rush Limbaugh has blamed hip hop for everything short of the Avian flu but I can't recall a single hip hop artist who has gone after him lyrically, publicly or physically. Are we seeing a theme yet?

It's worth noting that Ludacris did not devote as much energy to Bill O'Reilly -- who attacked his music on his show regularly and caused him to lose a multi-million dollar Pepsi endorsement – as he did to criticizing Oprah who simply stated that she was tired of hip hop's misogyny. Luda was content to diss O'Reilly on his next record and go about his business. Anyone who heard the interview that Oprah gave on Power 105.1 in New York knew she was speaking for a whole generation of hip hop heads when she said that she loved the music, but she wanted the artists to exercise some responsibility. But this response is not really about Oprah, or ultimately about hip hop, either. It is about black men once again choosing a black woman as the safest target for their aggression and even one with a billion dollars is still fair game.

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Of all their claims, the charge that Oprah sold out to win points with her white audience is the most tragically laughable. The truth is that her audience's white middle-class kids exert waaay more influence over 50 and Cube than their parents do over Oprah. I long ago tired of Cube, a thirty-something successful director, entrepreneur and married father of three children making records about his aged recollections of a thug's life. The gangsta theme went cliché eons ago, but Cube, 50 and a whole array of their musical peers lack either the freedom or the vision to talk about any broader element of our lives. The reality is that the major labels and their majority white fan base will not accept anything else from them.

And there we have it again: more masks, more lies.

It is not coincidental that hip hop has made Ni@\$a the most common noun in popular music but you have almost never heard any certified thug utter the word cracker, ofay, honky, peckerwood, wop, dago, guinea, kike or any other white-oriented epithet. The reason for that is simple: Massa ain't havin' it. The word fag, once a commonplace derisive in the music has all but disappeared from hip hop's vocabulary. (Yes, these thugs fear the backlash from white gays too.) And bitch is still allowed with the common understanding that the term is referring to black women. The point is this: debasement of black communities is entirely acceptable – required even – by hip hop's predominantly white consumer base.

We have lived enough history to know better by now – to know that gangsta is Sonny Liston, the thug icon of his era, threatening to kill Cassius Clay but completely impotent when it came to demanding that his white handlers stop stealing his money. Gangsta is the black men at the Parchman Farm prison in Mississippi who beat the civil rights workers Fannie Lou Hamer and Annell Ponder into bloody unconsciousness because their white wardens told them to. Gangsta is Michael Ervin, NFL bad boy remaining conspicuously mute on Monday Night Football while Limbaugh dissed Donovan McNabb as an Affirmative Action athlete. Gangsta is Bigger Thomas with dilated pupils and every other sweaty-palmed black boy who saw method acting and an attitude as his ticket out of the ghetto.

Surely our ancestors' struggles were about more than creating millionaires who could care less about us and then tolerating their violent disrespect out of a hunger for black success stories. Surely we are not so desperate for heroes that we uphold cardboard icons because they throw good glare. There's more required than that. The weight of history demands more than simply this. Surely we understand that these men are acting out an age-old script. Taking the Tom Molineaux route. Spitting in the wind and breaking black bones. Hoping to become free.

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Or, at least a well-paid slave.