

A Second Opinion on Hip Hop's Vital Signs by Alex Dwyer

Written by Alex Dwyer ID3525
Monday, 02 April 2007 05:20 -

I heard hip hop died.

In 2006, I walked through Madrid's Retiro Park on a Friday afternoon and stumbled onto a grassy corner where a couple hundred kids gathered to hear rap battles spit over DJ Premier's Gangstarr instrumental gem "Full Clip." The cheers escalated in approval for one contestant or another and all, even in defeat, gave love.

In Cascais, the Beverly Hills of Portugal, I discovered buildings beautifully decorated by graffiti art murals, meters from steep beach cliffs. I witnessed B-boys attracting World Cup crowds in Berlin's popular Tiergarten square, popping and locking to the snares and symbols of a live drummer.

The European hip hoppers aren't in mourning.

I wandered along Harlem's Lennox Avenue last spring. Masses of mixtapes cluttered the bodegas as I watched the Big L and Dipset tapes, tees and flags flying from Jamaican storeowners' shelves. A few blocks away, I marveled at the Graffiti Hall of Fame on 106th Street, masterfully painted by the Tats Crew. In Grand Central Station, I tossed bills into hats as I watched a break dancing circle form between the hustle and bustle of a Friday evening.

New York's invitation to hip hop's funeral must be lost in the mail.

Along with thousands of fans, I braved over a dozen hours of scorching summer heat at the NOS Event Center in San Bernardino to see the Wu Tang Clan perform in dedication to the late Ol' Dirty Bastard at last year's "Rock The Bells" event. Kindergarten and third grade children at St. Michael's School in Inglewood, Calif. recited their favorite rap lines to me during recess when I worked there last April.

Last semester, Burns Backcourt was infested with dedicated breakdancers fiercely throwing their limbs through the air, colliding for the Claws Out competition title. Finally, I was in Sunken

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Gardens on St. Patrick's Day and saw 5,000 heads nodding to a rapper's words.

The crowd wasn't dressed in black, and neither was Common.

After his show, Common told me, "I speak about issues of life, growth, spirituality. When I feel something is wrong or right, I express myself." Self-expression is what hip hop is all about. NWA taught us that in '88.

Hip hop is by far the most criticized and demonized major cultural movement in history. It's the scapegoat for racial, gender, economic and cultural problems to an extent that is culturist. The argument that hip hop is dead isn't without merit, but it lacks serious abstract and concrete consideration.

Musically, hip hop is inevitably evolving. "It's like a combination -- the essence of hip hop with the raw drums, clever raps and scratches mixed with the future in thought process with samples," Common said of the new "Futuristic Boom-Bap" sound that he coined for his forthcoming "Finding Forever" album, due out in June.

In fact, Common is just one of many manifestations of contemporary hip hop expression. There isn't just the "underground vs. mainstream" and "conscious vs. dumbed-down" binaries anymore. It's much more complex than that. So many variations of the genre make it impossible to squeeze it into the inadequate box that hip hop purists frivolously try to jam it into. Self-expression isn't meant to be caged or formulaic.

In our discussion, I asked Common what made him different from other rappers. "I'm not afraid to talk about things people are afraid to talk about," he answered. "I don't have to try to be me." Perhaps that is where hip hop's musical crossroads lie -- in the honesty of its artists.

"That's why hip hop gets into so much trouble, because we are not afraid to be us. If being me means, I'm a thug -- accept it! This is me," KRS-One told an audience at Temple University during a 2004 lecture. An artist's credibility and genuineness is dependent on "keeping it real."

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But hip hop isn't simply music -- it's a culture. It's a lifestyle, an attitude, a state of mind.

"Represent, Respect, Recognize" is the motto of "Rock The Bells," the biggest hip hop festival in North America. Represent yourself and where you come from physically, mentally or spiritually -- express yourself. Respect your fellow hip hoppers and their expression. Like 2pac said, "You ain't gotta bump this but please respect it." Finally, recognize those who came before you. Pay dues to hip hop's glorious golden past.

Nas, the man with the "Hip Hop Is Dead" album, had back-to-back shows at the House of Blues on Sunset Blvd., sold out in a matter of hours. Nas' album wasn't a declaration -- it was a question. It was meant to act as the catalyst to put the genre back on its stumbling feet.

How can hip hop be dead when it's constantly celebrated all over the globe? How can it be dying when I hear new tracks every day that blow my mind? How can it even be ill, when we all just witnessed its liveliness, sinking Sunken Gardens further down, during College Fest?

If you ever do make it over to hip hop's funeral, don't be surprised when the casket and the church are both empty.

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