

Davey D Speaks on Russell Simmons Hip Hop

Written by Davey D ID3629

Wednesday, 25 April 2007 09:22 -

This article was initially written in response to some of the concerns voiced by media activists about Russell Simmons recent decision to call for a banning of certain words in hip hop. Some were upset that he's suddenly getting credit for a fight that was raised by numerous activists and campaigns that on many levels he resisted. Many wanted to know his "true motives", while others wanted to know why he refused to partake in other activities including the recent screening and panel discussion up in Harlem around the documentary "Turning Off Channel Zero" that addresses the issue of media accountability within Hip Hop. – Davey D

This Gangsta Stuff & Russell's Call For Change by Davey D

I've read the recent criticisms launched at Russell Simmons and the assertions that his current position of wanting to ban the use of certain words on records is "self-serving." Of course it is. Anything Russell does is gonna be self-serving. What did we expect? Wasn't that the plan? Weren't we supposed to create an economic, political or social situation where he would see it in his best interest to change up?

He has business interests to protect -- and the social and political climate has rightly changed now, with calls for balance growing substantially louder. Russell's business is being impacted by people who are tired of the mass marketing of the mainstream minstrelsy that we see all day, every day.

Certainly no one seriously expected Russell or Ben Chavis to come up to Harlem to watch a screening of Turn Off Channel Zero. Why would we? And let's be honest...did you really want them there? I think one of the things we overlook is the role that we played in getting these issues as much attention as they've gotten. We are the ones who changed the current climate with our collective efforts.

The fact that so many people are fed up is the result of the Turn off the Radio tribunal longtime radio vet Bob Law had up at the church on 126th street in NYC several years ago.

The climate was also changed as a result of the Hot 97 campaign, lead by REACH which was quite successful in New York. We not only made them lose money, but we blemished people's

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records as well, and even got several people dismissed as that station saw its ratings drop. They went from number 1 to number 8 in their market, which, in the radio industry, is major. Sure there were other factors at hand, but we certainly played a big part in initiating change there.

The climate change that we're seeing is also the result of the KMEL People's Station campaign put together by Tony Coleman of Minds Eye Collective and Malkia Cyrill of Youth media Council in San Francisco after I got bounced from working there. That was a successful campaign that forced KMEL to start playing local music and even offer me my airshift back (which I turned down).

We're seeing the change in climate now as result of Black Out Fridays in Detroit too. There we had intense lobbying efforts by Industry Ears to the FCC, Attorneys General, and Congress about the continued abuses of our airwaves. The new focus on balance is the result of people like Chuck D, dead prez, Immortal Technique and so many others...voices who railed against fucked-up media in public spaces in places. It's also the result of films like Turn Off Channel Zero and Hip Hop Beyond Beats and Rhymes, and of the Zulu Nation's Bring Back The Balance campaign. This climate is the result of us starting our own media outlets like The Block Report, Freemix Radio, Soul Patrol, Harrambe Radio, Breakdown FM and others. I could go on and on...

These changes, both large and small, are due to us pushing and pushing -- and agitating and demanding better scenarios for our collective community. Russell's proposal to change lyrics is but a small victory...he wouldn't have done this a year ago. We now need to take credit and push even harder for substantial change both within and outside of the industry. Having been deeply involved with the first wave of content battles back in '88 when we lead the NWA boycott, I clearly recall how some in the community argued ferociously against our effort. We did two weeks worth of radio shows getting community input back then, and I remember how many well-meaning Black folks who considered themselves conscious and revolutionary told us we were straight-up wrong. Maybe I'll post those landmark radio shows at some point -- shows which which included me, the guys from Digital Underground, Beni B of ABB records and all the Black college deejays from the Bay at that time. Now that time has passed people have a very different stance, but that big debate back then lead to the formation of the Bay Area Hip Hop Coalition.

The debates we had were fierce. Many felt we should never glamorize disrespectful language, while others felt like NWA and Luke were somehow revolutionary. Hell, I even have a tape of KRS coming on our show praising the rough use of language by those guys -- he felt like it was

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good thing at the time.

There were many who felt that the stories by NWA needed to be heard and that they were indeed a reflection of us. I recall people throwing their fist in the air saying "fuck what white people think, this is our music" and "we gonna use the N-word all day long." People felt like keeping it "hood was important. We were coming off the tail end of people criticizing Bill Cosby for not showing his Brooklyn neighborhood as a rough and rugged ghetto. Even Spike Lee caught heat for having a "too clean" Brooklyn "hood when he showed Do the Right Thing.

I recall white writers like Dan Charnas of The Source getting props and blessings from revolutionary types when he praised Ice Cube for reflecting anger in the "hood when he called women bitches. In fact, I even remember Harry Allen almost coming to blows with this cat because he took such a strident stance and had revolutionary types 'supporting his efforts." If you think I'm lying go back and look at the arguments that were raised at that time around this subject matter.

Part of the praise placed upon NWA and gangsta rap was this was Hip Hop's way of "keeping it real" (that's when that phrase started to get popularized). Hip Hop has always been about being honest and true to the subject matter at hand -- but soon that definition got narrowed down to Hip Hop supposedly keeping it "true to the streets."

Complicating this issue further was the fact that West Coast rap prior to NWA often wasn't even considered Hip Hop by our east coast brethren. I have all those early New Music Seminar tapes with Egyptian Lover and Rodney O complaining about being clowned when they came to the Big Apple because their music was considered too soft. I also remember groups like The LA Dream Team, Sir Mix-a-Lot and numerous others being dissed. DJ Paradise of X-Clan even talks about the time when MC Hammer came up to the Latin Quarters by himself to do his song "Ring"Em," which was big hit in the hoods out here in Cali, but was clowned in NY.

NWA, with its booming beats and harsh lyrics, put LA and the west on the map and got Cali some acceptance. This was a big incentive for folks out here to overlook their own morals and common sense and get behind those gangsta groups that knocked the doors down. Personally, despite doing some of NWA's first interviews, I felt uncomfortable calling what they did revolutionary because I recall both Cube and Eazy telling me they were cursing up a storm as a way to initially be funny and that they enjoyed seeing the shocked look on people's faces. They weren't doing it because they really felt that way (as many like to romanticize). Look at some of

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the old articles on them and you'll see them admitting to that.

This was big point of contention, and was also the beginning of how shit started to get co-opted. When we did the boycotts, they were the result of community approval, involvement and support. The boycotts were effective and lasted for a year, and we did follow up interviews with NWA about them. During one landmark interview, Cube spoke passionately about his desire to change and be more political, and even talked about the internal debates he and his group were having about being responsible. It wasn't that long after that that he left the group, and much of what he talked about soon surfaced on his Amerikkka's Most Wanted album.

Ironically the NWA boycott was broken by white college deejays who felt like the group's material, and material like it, should be heard, and that NWA was somehow more authentic and real than groups like X-Clan and Public Enemy. This assessment not only played itself out on college radio, but it was replicated on commercial radio as well -- and I personally saw our playlist switch up almost overnight from playing PE, X-Clan and Paris to gangsta rap. Again, non-black deejays like Theo Mizuhara lead the charge in pushing gangsta material over the positive. This attitude was also embraced by several high profile black writers like Cheo Choker, James Bernard and later Toure -- who once bragged to me via email that he "killed the career of Public Enemy" by writing a widely read negative review of one of their albums.

In hindsight, we can see (and hopefully understand) that it was probably a mistake for us to not have been more involved in demanding what we knew to be right at the time, and we soon began to see people cash on the love that those outside of our communities were showing for gangsta rap. In 2007, we are seeing the end results.

The fact that we helped create a climate to start to turn things around is a good thing. If it manifests itself in stations saying they wanna change up then that's great. If it means it will help get more people excited about doing a different type of rap highlighting different subject matter then I'm all for it. If it means Russell (who for the past few years has said he would never try and tell an artist to change his or her lyrics) is now calling for an end to hateful and derogatory words in commercially-released material, I say that's good thing. We should push harder and encourage more to follow suit.

What's the next step? That's our collective challenge.

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Now that we have people ready to push for better music, how do we intend to distribute? Keep in mind that while we were arguing about Russell being a culture vulture, the RIAA and US Copyright Law flipped the script and developed a new type of payola which effectively has wiped out Internet radio and any other digital distribution streams. They got the US Copyright office to raise rates by 1200% and to have it apply retroactively starting on May 15th. Appeals to this ruling have been denied, which means that most small internet broadcasters and streaming will stop by the end of May because cats are gonna be bankrupt. The big players like AOL radio, Yahoo and Microsoft will be around, but not the rest. So how are we gonna get all this good alternative music across?

If you think you can get around it by using independent artists, think again. Because of fear of lawsuits, most internet providers are gearing up to protect themselves from lawsuits. They won't want to take the chance of one of us putting out RIAA-owned material, so they will take precautions and limit the ability to pass the good music along.

While many small broadcasters like us (who saw the internet as a saving grace) will now find themselves in serious legal and financial jeopardy, the big time radio stations are cutting side deals with the major labels so they don't have to pay the high royalty rates -- in exchange for normal airplay. This is why some of us -- like me, Paul Porter, and Lisa Fager from Industry Ears -- were harping on this payola stuff so much. Now the shit is about to come back and haunt us big time. That's a serious battle that we will have to undertake. For those who have concerns about censorship, this change in copyright law is where the lines are drawn.

Peace out for now,

Davey D

Visit Davey D at <http://www.daveyd.com>

For those who aren't up on the radio rates read this article.

The Age of Dark Payola Netcasters take it in the pooper from the Copyright Royalty Board. The

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FCC certifies the HD Radio scam.

By David Downs

Published: April 18, 2007

Bay Area leading light SomaFM faces crippling debt and insolvency along with many of its Internet radio peers including Pandora and Live 365 this Spring. Late last March, the Copyright Royalty Board — three dudes in Washington — raised SomaFM's webcasting rates from \$10,000 in 2005 to \$600,000 for 2006 (applying retroactively).

"Staggering," is more like it, says SomaFM founder Rusty Hodge. "We were expecting rates to go up 10, maybe 20 percent. It would be painful, but at least it wouldn't put us out of business."

SoundExchange says it needs top dollar for artists. "Webcasters have a number of opportunities to maximize revenue with ... banner ads, pop-ups, video pre-rolls, audio commercials," says John Simson, executive director of SoundExchange.

But Hodge says he isn't interested in annoying his listeners, and exposure means more than gold to the indie bands he streams. Webcasters will seek relief through the legislature, because Hodge doubts such relief will emerge during a possible re-hearing before the Copyright Royalty Board in the coming weeks.

Zooming out for a moment, the whole netcast debacle fits into a bigger picture that spells out the banal maxim: Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. Recording labels suffered two major burns in the 20th century: 1) Labels failed to negotiate terrestrial, on-air radio royalties and radio became a billion-dollar industry with their music; 2) Labels failed to negotiate royalties for music videos on MTV, and another empire cashed in.

Now, no one's building any more empires with their content, goddammit. Not Napster, Kazaa,

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Morpheus, LimeWire, or BitTorrent. Not YouTube (sued by Viacom), MySpace (sued by Universal), and definitely not a bunch of pissant throwbacks to college radio.

The majority of Americans who don't listen to netcasts should care about all this, because developments in that pond have ramifications for the on-air world, says Hodge. Terrestrial radio stations may soon face Internet radio's two sucky choices: 1) Pay SoundExchange through the nose for whatever the station wants to play, or 2) Save money by making direct, legal deals with record labels to play a label's free "Abomination of the Week." I'm looking directly at you, Korn Unplugged.

It's the opposite of payola but with all the effects, says Hodge. It's Dark Payola.

"They're going after the over-the-air broadcasters next," he says. "There's no doubt. And if you think media consolidation is bad now, wait till it's back to the old payola days."

At this point, you, the reader, are supposed to write congresspersons, sign petitions, and make bumper stickers stating: "Down with Dark Payola!" There better be concerts, artists. Good ones. Plugged-in ones. Korn will not be invited.

Being a cynic means you get to be right a lot. So after expecting and then watching Internet radio webcasters strangled in their crib, there comes a certain dark glee in seeing Big Radio finally get its long-awaited approval for its horrid new HD system.

To recap what I wrote in March, HD Radio tops the list of corporate scams. The word "monopoly" fails to encompass this carny shill. Public broadcasting licenses are licenses to print money, and Big Radio's mints just got four times bigger with no givebacks to the public.

"A dream delayed" is what one FCC dissenting commissioner called the dream of a thousand little local radio stations doing their thing. New technology can boost the number of radio stations similar to TV's move to cable. If we stick to the metaphor, it's as if ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC now owned all the cable channels too.

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Cracks in my cynicism have come courtesy of more than dozen letters from all over the country. A lot of veteran broadcasters wrote in positing very cogent points. One pointed out: "All my peers in radio have been silenced, even though they don't want to go along." They say HD's flaws include super-bad distortion in the AM range and a bass-ackward interface courtesy of thirty-year-old technology.

Yet, these keen readers don't see HD and the billions of dollars that support it in Washington as a done deal. Public comments on HD are still open, they say, and people on the street seem to be voting "no" with their pocketbooks. "Big Radio covets our public airwaves," says Milspec390. "Our influence counts. Let's use it."

If by "influence," Milspec means "money," then yes, it does count. But most people are saving their influence right now for something more important to them ... like an iPhone.