

Hip-Hop Pioneer Comments on Culture Changes

Written by Damon Muhammad ID1369
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In the early 1970s, a movement was growing in the South Bronx section of New York. A young DJ (disc jockey) going by the name of Afrika Bambaataa—taken from the name of the Zulu leader who fought British colonialists in the 19th century—was drawing a crowd to his performances at the local Bronx River Community Center. As an ex-member of the Black Spades street organization, he formed a crew of performers known simply as The Organization.

On November 12, 1973, this group of DJs, MCs (rappers), dancers and graffiti artists transformed into the Universal Zulu Nation. Rapping at that time was a poetic call-and-response routine involving the MC (master of ceremony) and the crowd. This was done during the “break” or “bridge” in a song that DJs would extend by using two recordings of that song and switching back and forth between turntables, a practice originated by another Bronx DJ, Kool Herc.

“The term (hip hop) itself came from my brother Love Bug Starski. He used it in his rhymes,” Bambaataa shared in an interview during a recent trip to Chicago. “Locking,” “the robot” and other dance crazes of the young brothers and sisters who attended these functions evolved into breakdancing. Bambaataa decided to use the term “hip hop” to describe the collective element of DJing, MCing, breakdancing and graffiti writing, which was becoming more creative and widespread. While he matter-of-factly asserts that the Zulu Nation is the root of hip hop culture, unquestionably the Universal Zulu Nation is one of the greatest pioneers that established hip hop as a strong societal influence.

In 2004, the negative expression of hip hop music is on a world stage. Artists involved in the culture today have opted to use the names and images of pimps, gangsters, serial killers and movie villains rather than monikers like the Zulu Kings and Queens or Afrika Islam.

“A lot of our people, we get so caught up in trying to be other than ourselves,” Bambaataa stressed, “not knowing who they are and who they represent, where they came from, where they’re at today and where they’re going tomorrow. So, we start glorifying gangsters and all these other things that come on television and we start thinking that we’re that and we get caught up in the mind control syndrome.”

Initially, there was very little financial gain from hip hop, if any gains were made at all. Now, rappers can earn a decent living and escape their poor condition. Many complain that the desire for mainstream success, which has been equated with monetary security, has corroded the

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purity of the art form.

Many observers say that those who have found mainstream acceptance later discovered that financial security isn't promised, so they can be persuaded by record labels to compromise their creativity. Bambaataa gives a solution.

"We can scream and holler all about, you know, 'the label's not doing this' or 'we're getting robbed' or 'we're not getting paid.' I remember the Minister (the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan) said, in 1973 when he had Black Family Day that, with all of these churches and mosques that we have, we need to start forming our own distribution. I guess people didn't heed the call, then and still."

He continued, "People sell their companies. We had great powerful companies like Motown, great and powerful companies like T-Neck that The Isley Brothers had. Form your own companies. Try to build your own things. Like the Honorable Elijah Muhammad said, we need our own hospitals, our own doctors, our own lawyers. We've got to get out there and start doing for self."

On the issue of reparations to descendants of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the hip hop pioneer had much to say to The Final Call.

"For people to say they want reparations, we have to start talking about 'we'—the people all over the planet. We're the indigenous people of Europe. We are the indigenous people of the Americas, as well as all of Africa. We can't just claim Africa as a home. We are the indigenous people of Australia and New Zealand. They have to fight to get their rights back, for the land and everything that they had there," he said. "The reparations thing, it sounds good. My whole thing is that these people stole you. So, how much do you think that they're going to be planning to try to give back?" he asked.

"Yes, they gave to the Germans and the Japanese;—we may get some peanuts. We've got to start knowing how to pool our resources and trading with our own brothers and sisters from many other continents and countries. We've got to do for self," he concluded.