

Hip-Hop Is Still On Top

Written by Westside ID145

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If you went to a South Bronx block party in the early '70s, there was a good chance the sound-system was plugged into a hole the enterprising DJ had busted into the base of the nearest streetlight.

Because in the beginning, when the pioneers of hip-hop wanted power, they had to steal it.

These days, hip-hop doesn't have to steal the power; hip-hop is the power. Last week, hip-hop artists accounted for 10 of the country's Top 20 singles, and six of the Top 20 albums. And with the Sept. 14 release of "Suit" and "Sweat," Nelly became the second act in Billboard's chart history to have albums debut at No. 1 and No. 2, simultaneously. (Guns N' Roses was the first.)

Thirty years after DJ Kool Herc started spinning records in the Bronx, the music of the streets has become a pop-culture superhighway, cutting a wide swath through the fertile fields of music, film, television, fashion and advertising. But if you want to see what this groundbreaking genre has gained and lost on its journey from the pavement to the pinnacle, that big picture is as close as your small screen.

For the good news, tune in to VH1 tonight for the first installment of "And You Don't Stop: 30 Years of Hip Hop." Packed with choice performance footage featuring everyone from Grandmaster Flash to OutKast and commentary from the likes of Ice-T, KRS-One, Missy Elliott and Eminem, this five-part documentary series tracks the history of hip-hop from its block-party birth to its emergence as an entertainment force of Godzilla-like proportions.

Tonight's episode – the first of two that were made available to the press – is a loving tribute to the Cold Crush Brothers, DJ Hollywood, Afrika Bambaataa, and all of the unsung heroes who got the party started. It is also a reintroduction to hip-hop's resourceful, hardscrabble roots, before they got run down by a fleet of Cadillac Escalades.

"The thing about hip-hop that is so exciting to contemplate is that it emerged from a community that had very, very little in the way of economic resources," says series producer and writer Bill Adler, who was the former publicity director for Def Jam Records.

"Nobody had an instrument, so they decided that the turntable would be an instrument. Nobody bothered to sing. Give them a microphone, and they'd just start rhyming. All of that speaks of tremendous creativity and people making exciting use of few resources."

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Later episodes will deal with the darker side of hip-hop, including the controversial rise of gangsta rap and the deaths of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls. For these first two hours at least, "And You Don't Stop" is all about the joy of discovery and the ecstasy of the beat.

But if you follow the music-video channel's documentary with a look at hip-hop music videos, you will discover that the glow of the past makes the present look mighty dim.

How bad can it be? Try this handy test. Tune in MTV or BET or the digital-cable MTV Jams, and see how many minutes pass before you see a hip-hop video featuring three or more of the following images:

Loving shot of a shiny Escalade or Humvee; close-up of artist's jewelry; slow-motion shot of artist throwing money in the air; overflowing champagne bottle; rump-shaking women in hot pants or bikinis.

If you make it for more than 10 minutes without being run down by a parade of bleeps, bling and booty, go out and buy a lottery ticket, because this is your lucky day. From LL Cool J's "Headsprung" and Terror Squad's "Lean Back" to Lil' Flip's "Sunshine" and Young Buck's "Let Me In," the latest crop of hip-hop videos shows a lack of imagination we haven't seen since the Great Interchangeable Hair-Band Invasion of the late '80s.

Thirty years after hip-hop pioneered the art of turning something old into something fresh and new, too many keepers of the flame are flushing their considerable resources down a golden drain. If video hasn't killed the hip-hop star yet, it isn't for lack of trying.

You could say Russell Simmons begs to differ, if the word "beg" were a part of the hip-hop titan's vocabulary. Which it isn't. From his office in New York – where he oversees a bustling empire that includes artist management, fashion design and political advocacy – Simmons is vocal in both his enthusiasm for today's performers, and his impatience with the notion that their videos could reflect negatively on the genre as a whole.

"If you watch the Top 10 hip-hop videos on BET, it would make you cry. If you're a fan like I am, you see how dope Lil' Flip is, or how dope Chingy or J-Kwon are. Never mind watching Jay-Z or 50 Cent and all the big giants. It's phenomenal."

As for the girls and the cars and the Cristal . . .

"That's the old-people rap. That's bull," says Simmons, who is the executive producer for the VH1 series. "There is a lot of exciting and different stuff out there. There is a great diversity in hip-hop. Hip-hop is the CNN of young America. And it's much more diverse than CNN."

When it comes to the big picture, he's right. Thanks to Kanye West's riveting and righteous "Jesus Walks," Jadakiss' politically charged "Why" and the all-star cover version of Harold Melvin and the Blue Note's stirring "Wake Up Everybody," the hip-hop consciousness is alive

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and well and getting its share of TV time.

Factor in the get-out-the-vote efforts of Simmons' Hip-Hop Summit Action Network – which have combined high-profile concerts by Eminem, 50 Cent, Beyoncé and Nelly with voter-registration drives – and P. Diddy's Citizen Change, and you have a musical community that is clearly not lacking in heart and a higher purpose.

"Folks from outside the culture tend to reduce it to one dimension," says Adler. "It's all about the bling bling. Or it's all about the violence. It's never, ever been that. And kids who are active consumers of the culture are able to find a tremendous range of values and attitudes. To them, the culture is as diverse as the artists themselves."

The culture is diverse, but the rote visual shorthand employed by lazy directors and inspiration-challenged performers doesn't do that culture justice. No one should judge a genre solely by its videos, but the endless loop of the same tired caricatures makes it easier than ever for the casual consumer to either write off hip-hop as sexist, money-grubbing trash, or to embrace it for all the worst reasons.

On Oct. 12, VH1 will air its first "Hip Hop Honors" broadcast, which will pay tribute to the sparking efforts of DJ Kool Herc, DJ Hollywood, Run-D.M.C., Grandmaster Flash, Tupac Shakur and many others. With performances by the likes of the Beastie Boys, Nas and Public Enemy, "Hip Hop Honors" should be a rousing conclusion to music-television's celebration of hip-hop's past.

But the real fireworks will come when a new generation of videos gives us more reasons to believe in its future.

"It's just a matter of whether these record labels want to teach children all around the world or if they just want to help them party," says pioneering female rapper MC Lyte, who is interviewed in the documentary. "I have to feel that there is a glimmer of hope, and I have to hope that folks who are in the limelight will be accountable and responsible for what they are pushing forth to these kids today."

Source: [SanDiego](#)