

The Cotton Club Black-Conscious Hip-Hop

Written by Bakari Kitwana ID1638
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Armed with messages of Black political resistance, Black pride, and opposition to militarization and corporatization, designed in part to counter the commercial hip-hop party-and-bulls**t madness dumbing down the nation's youth, hip-hop's lyrical descendants of the "fight the power" golden era today are booking concerts in record numbers—far beyond anything imaginable by their predecessors. Problem is, they can hardly find a Black face in the audience.

As the Coup (Pick a Bigger Gun), Zion-I (True and Livin"), and the Perceptionists (Black Dialogue) get set for a wave of touring to promote their new CDs this summer, the audience that will be looking back at them unmasks one of the most significant casualties of hip-hop's pop culture ascension: the shrinking Black concert audience for hardcore, political hip-hop.

"My audience has gone from being over 95 percent Black 10 years ago to over 95 percent white today," laments Boots Riley of the Coup, whose 1994 *Genocide and Juice* responded to Snoop Dogg's 1993 gangsta party anthem "Gin and Juice." "We jokingly refer to our tour as the Cotton Club," he says—a reference to the 1920s and '30s Harlem jazz spot where Black musicians played to whites-only audiences.

Boots says he first noticed the shift one night in 1995, in a concert on the outskirts of Portland, Oregon. Opening for Coolio, he stepped center stage and grabbed the mic as usual, but then saw something unusual about the audience: a standing-room-only sea of whiteness. Some were almost dressed like farmers, he recalls. Others had their heads shaved. "Damn, skinheads are out there," he thought. "They can't be here to see us." But the frantic crowd began chanting along rhyme for rhyme.

Zion, MC of the independent rap group Zion-I, agrees the similarities to jazz are striking: "Jazz went white, then Black, then white again. At this point African Americans aren't the ones supporting live jazz [performances]. It's the same in many ways with independent hip-hop. I've been to shows where the only Black people in the place are onstage. It's kind of surreal."

"I love Boots Riley's music, but in general people in the "hood are not checking for the Coup," says Brother Ali, part owner of the Minneapolis-based hip-hop collective Rhymesayers Entertainment. "It's hard enough to get some of our people to go to a Kweli show. It has a lot to do with the fact that the emphasis on the culture has been taken away. It's just the industry now and it's sold back to us—it's not ours anymore. It used to be anti-establishment, off the radar,

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counterculture. People in the streets are now being told what hip-hop is and what it looks like by TV."

According to industry insiders and most media outlets, though, the shifting audience isn't just a Black consciousness thing— it's prevalent in mainstream hip-hop as well. Whites run hip-hop, they say, from the business executives at major labels to the suburban teen consumers. But the often-intoned statistic claiming that 70 percent of American hip-hop sells to white people may cover up more than it reveals.

No hard demographic study has ever been conducted on hip-hop's consumers. And Nielsen SoundScan, the chief reference source on music sales, by its own admission does not break down its over-the-counter totals by race. "Any conclusions drawn from our data that reference race involve a great deal of conjecture," a SoundScan spokesperson insists.

Wendy Day, founder of the Rap Coalition, a hip-hop artist-advocacy group, says she's attempted to pair up with several popular hip-hop magazines on such a study, but none would commit to help fund it. When she asked an executive at a major record label, she got an even more interesting response: "He didn't see the value in writing that kind of check," she says. "Because rap is selling so well, he didn't see the value in knowing who his market is. "It's not broken, Wendy," he said. "We don't need to fix it." "

And distinctions must be drawn between buyers and listeners. In terms of hip-hop's listening audience, Nielsen SoundScan doesn't weigh those passing on and burning CDs. (In July 2003 Nielsen SoundScan began tracking companies like iTunes that sell downloads for a fee.) Nielsen SoundScan, which claims to track 90 percent of the market, doesn't take into account underground mixtape CDs, mom-and-pop store sales, or big retailers like Starbucks and Burlington Coat Factory that refuse to share their sales information.

Concert crowds are another matter. Looking for the 70 to 80 percent majority white audience? In most cases you won't find it at a Nelly concert or any other top-selling hip-hop artist's show. At large venues like Detroit's 40,000-capacity Comerica Park, where Eminem and 50 Cent will headline the Anger Management Tour in August, estimates suggest that 50 to 60 percent of the seats are filled by white fans. By contrast, Caucasian concertgoers staring down culturally focused Black hip-hop artists topple these numbers. Although to date there's been no attempt to track concert demographic data, fans, promoters, and independent MCs who play live more than half the year give estimates of 85 to 95 percent.

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Back in the day, artists like KRS-One, PE, Brand Nubian, Queen Latifah, Poor Righteous Teachers, and others coexisted with more purely party-oriented acts like Kid 'n Play, Heavy D, and DJ Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince. They could also be found alongside those who got a little more gritty wit, such as Schoolly D and Luther Campbell's 2 Live Crew. In those days Afrocentric MCs rolled neck and neck with their counterparts, routinely reaching 500,000 units—the gold sales standard of the mid '80s. By decade's end, a few such records—Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, for instance—had gone platinum.

That's no longer the case. In today's mainstream hip-hop, the mark of success is multiplatinum sales. 50 Cent's most recent release sold over 1 million units in four days; Nelly's 2001 *Country Grammar* to date has moved over 9 million units. By contrast, dead prez, the sole contemporary political hip-hop group with mainstream distribution, struggled to top 500,000.

Dead prez aside, the most widely circulated conscientious commentary in mainstream hip-hop mostly comes in the form of surprise protest tracks from artists who would never be deemed "political"—Jadakiss's and Eminem's pre-election hits "Why" and "Mosh," for example.

And whereas a decade ago artists consistently banged out social commentary with mass appeal, today the closest equivalents are Kanye West, Common, and the Roots, whose stance on wax focuses more on aesthetics than resistance—closer to *A Tribe Called Quest*, say, than to Public Enemy. PE's more direct lyrical descendants have been ghettoized in the underground, with high-end sales in the 25,000-to-50,000 range—over months or years, rather than weeks.

"Today, there are no purely conscious MCs competing on the level with the top-selling artists in the game," says Erik Smith of Critical Mass Consulting, a firm that does street-level lifestyle marketing for major labels' new releases. But does this mean there is no longer a Black market for Black consciousness in hip-hop?

In the '80s the gap between the civil rights generation and their hip-hop generation offspring was less severe. Culturally centered artists in that era were often steeped in the politics of the turn-of-the-'70s Black power movement. The lyrical content of the time didn't venture far beyond those borders. Such was the case of Public Enemy's 1990 *Fear of a Black Planet*. The CD jacket even extensively quoted psychologist Frances Cress Welsing's "Cress Theory of

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Color Confrontation" that emerged in the 1970s, likening to white supremacy football, basketball, baseball, and other ball games where the color of the ball and what is done to it are subconsciously connected to America's racial politics.

Welsing also had another, less-known theory, regarding the inferiorization of Black children. Welsing argued that soon white supremacists wouldn't have to worry about making Blacks seem inferior— they'd just need to keep providing them with inferior education, housing, health care, child care, and the like, and in a generation or two they would be. After 15 years of gangstas and bling, perhaps hip-hop's Black audience has been so inundated with material garbage that they don't want an uplifting message?

Zion, who believes the withering Black audience reflects the diminishing discussion of Blackness in public discourse, thinks so. "I do so many shows in front of mostly white audiences that it's the norm," says Zion. "When I get in front of a Black audience it's like, "Finally you're here, feel me." We've done shows in Chicago and São Paulo, Brazil, and it feels good to be in front of our people when they are feeling it. But there are some thugged-out crowds where our message doesn't resonate, and Black folks will say that they aren't trying to hear hip-hop artists remind them of their problems."

Today's climate is indeed a far cry from the African medallion mania of the 1980s. In the academy, we've gone from 1980s discussions of Black studies and Afrocentricity to multiculturalism to current-day debates about post-Blackness and polyculturalism. At the same time, in the arena of mainstream politics we've gone from discussing the collective Black impact of Jesse Jackson's run for president to the individual career successes of Clarence Thomas, Colin Powell, and Condoleezza Rice. In the streets we've gone from the Nation of Islam patrolling housing projects to whites reclaiming Harlem, South Side Chicago, and East Oakland, and Black scholars like Columbia University's Lance Freeman arguing that poor Blacks aren't significantly displaced by gentrification.

"So many Black people don't want to hear it," Zion continues. "They want that thug shit. That's why I'm thankful for the audience we do have."

Mr. Lif, whose success as a solo artist led him to the recent partnering with Akrobatik and DJ Fakts One to form the Perceptionists, agrees. "It's disorienting. It's bizarre," he says. "But no artist is in a position to choose his fans. Whoever is in the audience, I love them for being there. They are allowing me to make a living doing what I love."

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And the demand for art-as-a-weapon hip-hop music is so great that the best-known independent MCs are able to book from 150 to 200 concerts a year in venues where the capacity ranges from 200 to 1,500, all the while not breaking through to the mainstream.

Recognizing the success of such underground white MCs as Aesop Rock, EI-P, and Sage Francis—all moving around 100,000 units per release—Brother Ali says, "Our genre is looked at as white rap. It's almost like a white chitlin circuit of underground rap music." The more popular underground white hip-hop artists are helping to nurture the audience at venues that now regularly feature conscious Black hip-hop artists. At the same time as political hip-hop's audience has gotten whiter, audiences for old-school socially conscious hip-hop (think De La Soul) and politically conscious hip-hop (think Chuck D and KRS-One) have merged. It's an audience that includes white kids, college students, and those tapping into what remains of the counterculture of hip-hop. This requires fans with the time on their hands to search out MCs in independent record stores and on the Internet.

The largely Latino concert turnouts for these MCs in specific areas of cities like Houston, El Paso, and Los Angeles, however, quickly reveals that none of this is an exact science. In Oakland, one MC reports a majority Black and brown audience, in contrast to a mostly white audience when he performs next door in San Francisco. In the South, in cities like Baton Rouge and Charleston, independent labels like Slaughterhouse and Pure Pain are posting Aesop Rock numbers and their concert audience is nearly all Black.

"None of these factors change the fact that the audience supporting Black hip-hop artists with a political message is mostly white," says Nicole Balin of Ballin Entertainment, a Los Angeles-based PR firm representing underground hip-hop artists. Yet according to Wendy Day, no matter how many white kids are being drawn in, the Black stamp of approval is critical even when the audience is primarily white.

"I can tell you as someone who works with independent labels in parts of the South and Midwest that if you are breaking a record at the street level in these communities, and you don't have young Black kids buying your record, you will not go anywhere," Day says. "Unless it's legitimized by the Black community, these kids are not buying a damn thing other than what their friends of color are listening to."

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Black hip-hop kids as the gatekeepers for what's hot has long been the state of affairs for mainstream and cutting-edge hip-hop— but that may be changing in some parts of the country like Minneapolis, for example, where white MCs and white audiences have it on lock. And while there are countless white hip-hop kids supporting the underground who see Blackness as key to hip-hop's sense of urgency, growing numbers believe white underground MCs are hip-hop's avant-garde. More and more they insist without pause that their favorite white underground MCs are smarter and hence better.

"One of the hardest things we're dealing with now is the underlying feeling of white supremacy among fans who feel they are a part of hip-hop, but are listening to and prefer mostly white MCs," says Brother Ali, who recently toured with several old-school legends together with Atmosphere— a biracial independent rap group who, like Brother Ali, hails from Minneapolis. "They believe that Aesop Rock is better than independent artists who are Black and mainstream artists like Ludacris. These MCs are doing a lot with hip-hop artistically that they have learned from Black people, but [their fans] don't want to hear from the old-school originators because they believe it's the white MCs who created the styles they like. This isn't an underground-versus-mainstream thing—, it's a racist thing."

Check out Bakari Kitwana's book *Why White Kids Love Hip-Hop*.