

Hip-Hop's 'New' Positive Look

Written by Robert ID956

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If you watched the Grammy Awards" rap album of the year winner Kanye West arrive for a Hollywood club date the other week, you could clearly see the dramatic change that's overtaken rap/hip-hop in the past months.

Instead of the intimidating, gun-toting crews surrounding older rap stars, with their familiar sour looks, baggy track suits, bulletproof Hummers and threatening poses, Wes and his preppy new-generation pals strolled in as if they were showing up a few minutes early at a business-fraternity mixer. Polo shirts, khakis, sports jackets, friendly smiles, relaxed handshakes - could this spell the end of the expletive-deleted world Snoop Dogg, Nas, DMX and 50 Cent once knew?

The acclaimed West and his chart-topping R&B protege John Legend - along with the likes of the Black Eyed Peas and rappers Commn and Talib Kweli - are spearheading a new musical movement that shuns the misogyny, gunplay, bloody revenge fantasies and mindless conspicuous consumption of a previous generation of hip-hop record makers and breakers.

It's hip pop - a sound that borrows from authentic gospel and its close cousin, vintage rhythm and blues, while also using beats and sampling techniques that have helped place the relatively gentle new genre firmly in contemporary pop culture's big-bucks mainstream.

West - pictured recently in a national magazine wearing a Ralph Lauren shirt and jeans while sitting next to his beaming parents - and his frequently mesmerizing debut, "The College Dropout," is only the most visible tip of the new hip-hop iceberg. Son of a university professor, the 27-year-old producer-turned-rapper, who purposely registers low on the bling-bling scale, has seen close friend Legend's debut disc, "Get Lifted," climb to No. 4 on the albums chart. It's a branch of tuneful, socially conscious hip-hop that first broke through in a big way with Lauryn Hill's 1998 debut.

"It's the return of the middle-class rapper," says Todd Boyd, a hip-hop theoretician, author and professor of critical studies at the USC School of Cinema and Television. "In the '80s, it wasn't so uncommon."

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But Boyd says that with the emergence of N.W.A. and West Coast hip-hop - so-called gangsta rap - in the late '80s and early '90s, increasingly hip-hop was almost solely identified with ghetto culture, the "hood and lower-class sensibilities.

At the 2005 Grammy Awards, a pop/hip-hop/R&B coronation of sorts took place when West won three of his leading 10 nominations, while R&B singer Alicia Keys took four, and pop superstar Usher had three wins. (The late Ray Charles received eight trophies).

"What we're doing is reflecting the values of where we come from," singer-pianist Legend, 26, said just before launching a tour with Keys. "Our values were shaped by our upbringing. We come from regular middle-class families. We weren't exposed to gun violence, and it wouldn't occur to us to carry weapons or pose with them. The people that do that usually do it for a reason - they actually have concerns for their lives."

One tough-guy artist with apparently genuine worries is 50 Cent, the rapper born Curtis Jackson, who survived nine bullet wounds in 2000 and whose record-breaking debut two years ago, "Get Rich or Die Tryin'," stands at 7.1 million records sold. A sophomore effort, much anticipated by retailers, is due in stores March 8, but few believe it will eclipse the widely accepted positive messages now being issued by other hip-hop artists.

"Hip-hop is a reflection of everything that surrounds it," said Will I. Am of the Grammy-winning Black Eyed Peas, a top-selling Los Angeles rap/R&B ensemble whose genre-busting music has long avoided thuggish wordplay and imagery. "Authentic rappers rhyme about their lives - and in many cases that means drugs, guns, gang violence, broken homes and misogyny - and the desire to accumulate wealth. It's what they've been raised around. If I ever got shot, would I rap about how I recovered? I probably would. Now, I don't know if that's 50's whole thing... I personally would never stand in a room with a gun. I don't even feel comfortable walking through an airport with those dudes with the machine guns."

While there have been many previous efforts to market more socially aware, uplifting rap and hip-hop (from its beginnings in the '70s in the South Bronx and in acts like Public Enemy, the music put forth positive messages), the new movement gathered commercial steam with Jay-Z, whose early records drew on a hard-knock upbringing, but whose later works were widely accessible rap-pop collaborations with top producers and artists, including West. Today, Jay-Z - who sports tailored suits on and off stage - heads an entertainment empire and a major label. (In the track "What More Can I Say" from his acclaimed "The Black Album," Jay raps, "I don't

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wear jerseys/I'm 30 plus/Give me a crisp pair of jeans and a button-up").

"Jay-Z was really one of the first to start going preppy," says Zena Burns, music editor of Teen People, which closely covers the ebb and flows of the hip-hop scene. "Pretty much whatever he does, everyone follows. He's a very sharp dresser - he moved away from looking like you're going to work out every time you hit the stage. So Jay opened the door for West's (mainstream) image and look."

As for the music of Jay-Z protege West, "he's not rapping about the types of things that a lot of other rappers have found success doing," Burns says. "His subject matter is pretty much 180 (degrees) from what 50 Cent is talking about."

Boyd adds that "a lot of people seem to be getting excited about the fact that his music is more gospel-oriented, and I think what he's done with that gospel sound is really impressive."

The Ohio-raised Legend (born John Stephens) attended the University of Pennsylvania and provided session work for Keys, Hill, West, Jay-Z and Janet Jackson. Unlike those artists, he grew up on a diet of gospel music, and it's that element that informs hit singles like "Ordinary People" and "Let's Get Lifted."

Legend says he tries to bring together the energy of authentic old-school gospel, with some of the lyrical uplift but not the overt Christian message, and "the language we speak today - hip-hop and soul." The warm production suggests the feel of a revival service.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable making music that glorifies violence or other things," Legend said. "But sometimes, the artists that do that sort of thing best bring a sense of poetry. I mean, 50 Cent makes very catchy songs that lots of people like."

There may even be a political context in which to place West and his comrades. The Black Eyes Peas" Will muses that in times of uncertainty, with a war in Iraq that seems to have no end in sight, audiences turn to more comforting, forgiving music.

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"When you turn on the news and see people being beheaded and all this violence, and you see your cousin get shipped off to Iraq, you want some type of relief, some re-enforcement that everything's gonna be all right," he said. "Especially when you're being bombarded by all this negativity and fear. In earlier times, people probably thought, "Hey, I don't mind a little gun-toting - that's entertainment!" But now that reality is a lot more serious, people are less into being entertained that way - especially with a war going on.

"I think people are scared."

[Source](#)