

A Rap Artist on the Politicization of Hip-Hop

Written by Donnell Alexander ID1476
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Long before the War on Terror, Paris (a.k.a. Oscar Jackson) was an unusual figure in hip-hop. Coming straight out of Oakland, the son of a physician recorded his 1990 debut, *The Devil Made Me Do It*, while working toward a bachelor's degree from UC Berkeley. Paris released two more albums – including 1992's *Sleeping with the Enemy*, featuring the controversial 1992 single "Bush Killa" – before leaving the industry in 1996 to work in the stock market.

Then came September 11, 2001, and Paris's return. He formed a company called Guerilla Funk to manufacture and release *Sonic Jihad*, an album that sold approximately 150,000 copies worldwide. This month, the Northern California producer is putting finishing production touches on Public Enemy's new album, *Re-Birth of a Nation*, which Guerilla Funk will manufacture and distribute in August. Paris has matched the Long Island legends with compelling vocalists from both the East (Immortal Technique, Dead Prez) and the West (Kam, The Coup) in hopes of creating the first great bicoastal hip-hop album since Ice Cube and the Bomb Squad collaborated on *AmeriKKKa's Most Wanted*.

CityBeat: Did you make money off of *Sonic Jihad*?

Paris: Yeah. It helped me build a business, but I was pretty heavily involved in the stock market. *Sonic Jihad* was really the jump-off for everything that's goin' on now. Guerilla Funk was founded so that we could release *Sonic Jihad* globally, because nobody else would put it out – because of the cover and because it was coming out right on the heels of September 11. We were indicting the Bush administration's involvement with September 11. The climate was not conducive for anybody that expressed dissent at that time. It was so bad that there were even major independent distributors shunning material that was critical of the government, social conditions, and of the war. This had trickled down everywhere. It wasn't just at a label level, but also at an advertiser level. It was at a radio station level, especially with Clear Channel maintaining so much control over commercial radio, and on a video level, to a large extent.

CityBeat: On the stock-market thing: What has that done for you, politically, as a producer, and as a businessman, to have had that experience?

Paris: That's what I went to school for. I have a degree in managerial economics. Hip-hop, I was doing it as a hobby in college. One thing led to another, and I got my deal with Tommy Boy, pretty much as a result of recording my first album independently, on my own on weekends. As

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things progressed and as each album sold more, and I came into my own musically, I started to take a look around and decide what I was gonna do once I laid the mike down. Then I became involved in investment banking. Just in terms of financing, it's empowered me financially. It's made it so I don't have to rely on anybody else.

CityBeat: It hasn't made a significant change in how you see the world politically?

Paris: Nah. The way I feel politically has always been the same. My political influences and my social awareness increase the more that I'm exposed to. [Investment work] was cool for me because I was pretty much in the belly of the beast, learning the workings from the inside out. It provided me the opportunity to reach people with truth that I know needs to be heard and to employ a lot of people in our communities.

CityBeat: What about this political moment makes you think the world is going to embrace a Public Enemy album?

Paris: They ain't got no choice, shit. Everything in entertainment now is politicized. Twenty-four-seven news coverage of war and politics. Popular entertainment is colored with politics. And even the entertainment that is decidedly apolitical makes a political statement.

CityBeat: Let's talk about Flava Flav for a minute. Do you feel that his farcical Surreal World romantic episode with Brigitte Nielsen helped or hurt P.E.?

Paris: It has yet to be determined. I know that, when I first got into Public Enemy, I loved the uncompromising stance. I loved the fact that the music was relentless. And I loved the fact that it spoke to me as a black person in the middle of madness. So, seeing him co-opted by the madness was distressing. But I also have to keep in mind that Flava Flav was never the person to look to in Public Enemy for direction. He was more the comic foil.

CityBeat: Does a rapper have to have a responsibility to be that conscious voice?

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Paris: Most artists, if you want to call them that, adjust the material they do and their angle and the content of what they do to what they think labels are signing. So, if all Interscope is signing, if all Def Jam is signing, is artists who are espousing negativity, and that treat women like shit, that's what these artists are going to adjust to. I use the term [artist] loosely, because if you're an artist and you're true to what you believe and what you know, you're not supposed to waver from that. But the overwhelming majority of these artists would switch if Interscope put out a blanket decree that they would only promote music that is beneficial to the community – which I don't think will ever happen.

But I say that because there's too much of a focus on what these artists do and not enough on those who empower them. In terms of most of these artists, signing some of them is the equivalent of giving a 12-year-old a million dollars. All the shit that you see them do and the things they buy and what they wear, all of that is almost synonymous to how a child would act if given a lump amount of change. You don't know any better. You're gonna buy some outrageous shit, wear a pink fur coat and get your mouth fulla diamonds and ride around in a flashy car and not know shit at all and not be able to hold your own in an interview – not have any worldly experience other than either selling dope or claiming that you sold dope and things that are hip-hop related. You don't have any business being a rapper if you can't talk to me about anything other than hip-hop and if your experience doesn't extend beyond your block. If that's all that's important to you, you aren't telling me shit. You gotta be value-added to the game.

CityBeat: Do you listen to hip-hop right now?

Paris: Not that much.

CityBeat: Who makes an impression on you?

Paris: I dig Dead Prez a lot. I dig Kam a lot. That's not East Coast Cam, this is West Coast Killa Kam. Shit, man, honestly I don't have that much time to listen to music outside of the studio because I'm wearing all these multiple hats.

CityBeat: Do you know of any political figures on your radar today who are changing the paradigm for what can be done?

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Paris: The one politician I have the most respect for is [Georgia Democratic Congresswoman] Cynthia McKinney. She's uncompromising in her views. She says what needs to be said. She represents the disillusioned and the disenfranchised, and she's a sister in this system that seems to be hell-bent on the reduction of civil liberties and rolling the clock back decades for people of color and anybody other than the rich, white, corporate elite.

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