

Hip Hop Profanity Misogyny Violence Blame the Manufacturer by Glen Ford

Written by Glen Ford ID3646

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Hip Hop Profanity, Misogyny and Violence: Blame the Manufacturer by BAR Executive Editor
Glen Ford

The often convoluted debate over hip-hop lyrics and images frequently misses the point: mass marketed rap recordings, videos and stage acts are corporate products, and the artists are virtual employees and subcontractors of huge multinationals. Corporate control of the cultural marketplace is the real villain in this story, not artists who did not pick themselves for stardom and cannot on their own alter boardroom business models. Corporations have been usurping and reshaping Black mass culture for decades - hip-hop is just the latest product line.

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"African Americans do not control the packaging and dissemination of their culture."

On a Spring day at McDonald's fast food restaurants all across Black America, counter clerks welcome female customers with the greeting, "What you want, bitch?" Female employees flip burgers in see-through outfits and make lewd sexual remarks to pre-teen boys while bussing tables. McDonald's managers position themselves near the exits, arms folded, Glockes protruding from their waistbands, nodding to departing customers, "Have a good day, motherf**kers. Y'all my niggas."

Naturally, the surrounding communities would be upset. A portion of their anger would be directed at the young men and women whose conduct was so destructive of the morals and image of African Americans. Preachers would rail against the willingness of Black youth to debase themselves in such a manner, and politicians would rush to introduce laws making it a crime for public accommodations employees to use profanity or engage in lewd or threatening behavior. However, there can be no doubt that the full wrath of the community and the state would descend like an angry god's vengeance on the real villain: the McDonald's Corporation, the purveyor of the fast food experience product.

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Hip Hop music is also a product, produced by giant corporations for mass distribution to a carefully targeted and cultivated demographic market. Corporate executives map out multi-year campaigns to increase their share of the targeted market, hiring and firing subordinates - the men and women of Artists and Recordings (A&R) departments - whose job is to find the raw material for the product (artists), and shape it into the package upper management has decreed is most marketable (the artist's public persona, image, style and behavior). It is a corporate process at every stage of artist "development," one that was in place long before the artist was "discovered" or signed to the corporate label. What the public sees, hears and consumes is the end result of a process that is integral to the business model crafted by top corporate executives. The artist, the song, the presentation - all of it is a corporate product.

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Yet, unlike the swift and certain public condemnation that would crash down upon our hypothetical McDonald's-from-Da Hood, the bulk of Black community anger at hip hop products is directed at foul-behaving artists, rather than the corporate Dr. Frankensteins that created and profit from them. As the great Franz Fanon would have understood perfectly, colonized and racially oppressed peoples internalize - take ownership - of the social pathologies fostered by the oppressor. Thus, the anti-social aspects of commercial hip hop are perceived as a "Black" problem, to be overcome through internal devices (preaching and other forms of collective self-flagellation), rather than viewed as an assault by hostile, outside forces secondarily abetted by opportunists within the group.

In order for our nightmare McDonald's analogy to more closely fit the music industry reality, all the fast food chains would have to provide the same type of profane, low-life, hyper-sexualized, life-devaluing service/product: "Bitch-Burgers" from Burger King, served with "Chronic-Flavored Fries," "Ho Wings" from KFC, dipped in too-hot "187 Murder Sauce." If you wanted fast food, you'd have to patronize one or the other of these thug-themed chains. So, too, with hip hop music.

A handful of entertainment corporations exercise total control of the market, in incestuous (and illegal) conspiratorial concert with corporate-dominated radio. Successful so-called "independent" labels are most often mere subcontractors to the majors, dependent on them for record distribution and business survival. They are no more independent than the owner of a McDonald's franchise, whose product must conform to the standards set by global headquarters

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in Oak Brook, Illinois.

As "conscious" rapper Paris wrote in an article republished in BAR, April 25, there is no viable alternative to the corporate nexus for hip hop artists seeking to reach a mass audience. "WHAT underground?" said Paris. "Do you know how much good material is marginalized because it doesn't fit white cooperate America's ideals of acceptability? Independents can't get radio or video play anymore, at least not through commercial outlets, and most listeners don't acknowledge material that they don't see or hear regularly on the radio or on T.V."

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The major record labels actively suppress positive hip hop by withholding promotional support of both the above- and below-the-table variety. Hip hop journalist and activist Davey D reported that Erykah Badu and The Roots' Grammy-winning hit "You Got Me" was initially rejected by the corporate nexus due to its "overtly positive" message..."so palms were greased with the promise that key stations countrywide would get hot 'summer jam' concert acts in exchange for airplay. According to Questlove [of The Roots], more than \$1 million in cash and resources were eventually laid out for the success of that single song." (See BAR, "Commerce is Killing the Spirit of Hip-Hop," March 7.)

Black America's hip hop problem cannot be laid at the feet of a few hundred wayward performers - and should certainly not be assigned to some inherent pathology in Black culture. African Americans do not control the packaging and dissemination of their culture: corporations and their Black comprador allies and annexes do. The mass Gangsta Rap phenomenon is a boardroom invention. I know.

From 1987 to early 1994, I co-owned and hosted "Rap It Up," the first nationally syndicated radio hip hop music program. During the first half of this period, the Rap genre accomplished its national "breakout" from New York and LA, spreading to all points in between. By 1990, the major labels were preparing to swallow the independent labels that had birthed commercial hip hop, which had evolved into a wondrous mix of party, political and "street"-aggressive subsets. One of the corporate labels (I can't remember which) conducted a study that shocked the industry: The most "active" consumers of Hip Hop, they discovered, were "tweens," the demographic slice between the ages of 11 and 13.

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"A whole generation has been locked in perpetual arrested social development."

The numbers were unprecedented. Even in the early years of Black radio, R&B music's most "active" consumers were at least two or three years older than "tweens." It didn't take a roomful of PhDs in human development science to grasp the ramifications of the data. Early and pre-adolescents of both genders are sexual-socially undeveloped - uncertain and afraid of the other gender. Tweens revel in honing their newfound skills in profanity; they love to curse. Males, especially, act out their anxieties about females through aggression and derision. This is the cohort for which the major labels would package their hip hop products. Commercial Gangsta Rap was born - a sub-genre that would lock a whole generation in perpetual arrested social development.

First, the artists would have to be brought into the corporate program. The term "street" became a euphemism for a monsoon of profanity, gratuitous violence, female and male hyper-promiscuity, the most vulgar materialism, and the total suppression of social consciousness. A slew of child acts was recruited to appeal more directly to the core demographic.

Women rappers were coerced to conform to the new order. A young female artist broke down at my kitchen table one afternoon, after we had finished a promotional interview. "They're trying to make me into a whore," she said, sobbing. "They say I'm not 'street' enough." Her skills on the mic were fine. "They" were the A&R people from her corporate label.

Stories like this abounded during the transition from independent to major label control of hip hop. The thug- and -"ho"ification of the genre is now all but complete.

Blame the manufacturer.

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