

Political and Lyrical-The Politics of Hip Hop by Dr. Walter D. Greason, Ph.D. © 2006

A generation ago, some thought it was radical to claim that the personal was political. Women across the globe seized this idea to exclaim their voices in the halls of legislatures, courtrooms, and executive offices. African Americans, too, have been silenced by the idea that their intellect was too raw, the emotions were too passionate, to contribute to legitimate political discourse. Just as the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements' leadership were coalescing to form the Congressional Black Caucus in the early 1970s, the next generation of black voices began to emerge from the streets. Rap was the expression of the communities still disenfranchised after the legislative victories of the previous decade. It was not always – or even often – a strictly organized political expression. However, it was always cultural.

Rap explored the overlooked logics and strategic consciousness of the impoverished black and Latino communities of the declining inner-cities. Young men and women reasserted the lessons of the Feminist movement in a new form – the cultural is political. The more educated among the society still struggle to articulate the depth and dimension of this concept. Meanwhile, over the last forty years, hip hop has attained a new sophistication for synthesizing rage, creativity, kinesthetics, logic, symbolism, humor, polyrhythm, liberation, and joy into 180-second soundbytes that change humanity wherever it is heard.

Many popular and scholarly voices have attacked hip hop culture generally (and rap music, in particular) for their perceptions of materialism, sexism, violence, homophobia, and superficiality in the movement. A small number of critics have noted the multilayered meanings woven into hip hop lyrics, the variety of rap performers, and the innovations in musical techniques that have transformed global music over the last thirty years. Still, serious analyses of rap music are very rare, and lyrical studies of political hip hop are so unique that they are the pink diamonds of public discourse.

Four works shine light for hiphoppas, activists, gangstas, intellectuals, and citizens who grow as part of the hip hop culture. Tricia Rose's "Black Noise" is the premier study of hip hop's limitations and possibilities in the 1990s. She combined lyrical analysis with historical context and commentary on musical theory to produce the single best work on hip hop so far.

James Spady's three volumes on various themes within the hip hop community introduces the

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study of hip hop to the new readers. He approaches the subject from the perspective of the artists and their audience and raises important questions about the past, present, and future of rap music.

William Eric Perkins' edited collection, "Droppin Science" laid the foundation for more detailed study of hip hop as a social phenomenon. Although it often condemns without sufficient understanding (Ernest Allen, Jr.) or overemphasizes hip hop's multiculturalism to expand its audience (the book's entire first section), "Droppin Science" leads the way in broadening the discussion about hip hop into areas its participants may never have anticipated.

Finally, the best example of historical scholarship using hip hop analysis is Robin D.G. Kelley's "Race Rebels." With the exception of a freestyle that needs work to close the book, "Race Rebels" is an inspiring testament to the relevance of history to our present and future. Kelley explores the "hidden transcript" of African American lives that generated hip hop and discovers the way rap music addressed the adapting racial oppressions of the 1980s and early 1990s.

In the tradition of these works, this essay will examine two rap songs that defined the political moments at the beginning and end of the 1990s. Political rap in the 1990s has been largely ignored by the mass media (and even by the majority of younger hip hop listeners) because "gangsta rap" constituted a simpler message to a society already polarized by gender, class, and race tensions.

It was easy to focus on Dr. Dre's "Chronic," Snoop Dogg's "Doggystyle," Notorious B.I.G.'s "Ready to Die," DMX's "Flesh of My Flesh," Nelly's "Country Grammar," and 50 Cent's "Get Rich or Die Trying." These were all based in historical stereotypes of African Americans. Obscured by these violent, misogynist, materialistic, and racist messages were Tribe Called Quest's "Midnight Marauders," Nas' "Illmatic," Common's "Resurrection," Gangstarr's "Moment of Truth," KRS-One's self-titled album, and BlackStar's "Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are ...". (The women rappers like Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Trina, Eve, Rah Digga, and Lauren Hill deserve an essay all their own as do the Wu-Tang Clan and Eminem.) This essay is a first-step toward a more accurate understanding of the 1990s rap music scene – one that includes the dramatic changes that occurred in the sub-genre of political hip hop.

There was an abundance of conscious rap music to choose from the 1990s, so the scope had to be narrowed. To show the largest difference in the evolution of the music, I chose two songs – one from the early 1990s and another from the late 1990s. These selections reveal my bias

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toward music that meets three criteria. First, the songs must have dope beats – if the music doesn't get my attention, then it doesn't deserve analysis. Next, there must be some basic lyrical creativity. Double meanings, unusual rhymes, varied verbal rhythms all meet this standard. Finally, the lyrics must construct some larger message or meanings. Several interesting metaphors, similies, and syllabic rhymes are entertaining, but only in the most basic sense. The two songs studied here raised level of hip hop music in every way. Gangstarr's "Who's Gonna Take the Weight" (1990) and BlackStar's "Thieves in the Night" (1999) are two of the greatest hip hop performances ever recorded (and also served as personal inspirations for me).

Gangstarr is a two-man group. Guru rhymes, DJ Premier runs the (turn)tables. They have produced a dozen of the best hip hop songs in their 16-year career. At the top of this list are the songs: "Dwyck," "Just to Get a Rep," "Code of the Streets," "Take It Personal," and "Above the Clouds." Rhyming about relationships, violence, sex, politics, and culture, Guru can move the crowd with both inspiration and intimidation. Primo (Premier's nickname) is widely acknowledged as the best combination of producer (beat and sample selection) and turntablist (scratching and cutting on the wheels of steel) in the history of hip hop music. "Who's Gonna Take the Weight" stands as the singular example of both artists' best work – the pinnacle of Gangstarr's excellence as musicians so far.

"I was raised like a Muslim / Praying to the East." Guru opens with a statement of his disciplined upbringing and fundamental spirituality. "The nature of my life relates to rhymes I release." The words he speaks are honest and straightforward, taken from personal experience. "Like a cannon / 'cause I been plannin' to be rammin' what I wrote/ straight on a plate down your throat."

His words are intense and irresistible so you have to pay attention. Guru ties together religion, personal experience, and violence in the first 30 seconds of the song. Yet these connections are basic compared to the larger analysis of social responsibility he offers.

Early in the rhyme, Guru tells his listeners the level of intensity required in his music. "So digest as I suggest / we take a good look / at who's who while I'm reading from my good book."

He implies a level of satisfaction that is derived from those who question the intent and authority of the people around them. As always, Guru maintains a reference to spiritual insight as the foundation for any judgments. Later, he discusses the limitations of material possessions and

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envisions a different society where human beings value themselves and each other.

"But all of that is just material / So won't you dig the scenario / and just imagine / if each one was teaching one / we'll come together / so that we'd become / a strong force / that we can stay on course / Find your direction through introspection / and for my people out there / I got a question / Can we be the sole controller of our fate? / Who's gonna take the weight?"

This is the heart of the song where Guru poses the problem of disunity and confusion within the African American community. He outlines the first step of changing the situation as a renewing each individual's sense of self as part of the larger community. Then, he closes with the questions he will attempt to answer in the second verse.

Primo then takes the chorus and uses a repeated sample saying, "You can't handle the whole weight." This reflects both his grounding the song in previous hip hop music and his technical proficiency in the way he repeats the message. In a larger sense, it is an affirmation of Guru's statement that individual and community identity cannot be separated.

Guru opens the second verse with "the weight of the world is heavy on my mind." This return to the intensity of the first verse also raises the standard for critical thought among the audience. He is challenging the listener to see the global community as the forum for discussion and resolution of social problems. Guru spends much of the second verse emphasizing the importance of the Nation of Islam to the formation of his community orientation. However, his most specific proposal comes near the end of the verse.

"Land is power / so give me 40 acres / let's see how far I can take ya / original, invincible / that's how I'm lookin' at it / I use my mind like a Glock automatic / "any means necessary" / I'm goin' all out / before the rains bring the nuclear fallout."

In this complicated lyric, Guru endorses the reparations movement (based on the historical claim from General William Sherman's Field Order #15) and offers a challenge to contemporary wealth rooted in the Nation of Islam's concept of the African as the original human being. Guru then uses a gun metaphor combined with Malcolm X's famous call for black self-defense and empowerment within the context of post-Cold War tensions surrounding nuclear weapons proliferation.

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At the core of the entire lyric, however, are confidence and determination about the ability of black people to outwork anyone who attempts to oppress them. In this moment, Guru answers his title question by implying that all African Americans can (and will) take the weight of responsibility for global empowerment. Primo closes out the song with a definitive use of the turntable as a musical instrument. The improvisational quality of his work here clearly reflects the jazz roots of hip hop as well as his own instrumental genius.

Eight years later, BlackStar released their first album. Mos Def and Talib Kweli rhymed over beats produced by DJ Hi-Tek. The result shook the foundation of a Pop-Rap culture consumed with violent materialistic sexism. The album overall was a victory for the spirit of political hip hop from the late 1980s. However, its last three songs, "Respiration," "Thieves in the Night," and "Twice Inna Lifetime" reinvigorated lyrics as the foundation for hip hop music.

Talib Kweli suggested doing "Thieves in the Night" after reading Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's novel, "The Bluest Eye." He adapted a section of the novel into the chorus of the song. "Not strong, only aggressive / Not free , we're only licensed / Not compassionate – only polite, so who's the nicest / Not good, but well-behaved – chasin" after death just to call ourselves brave – still livin" like mental slaves / Hidin" like thieves in the night from life / Illusions of oasis makin" you look twice."

There has been no more succinct and eloquent condemnation of American culture in the late twentieth century and African Americans" adoption of that culture. One of the most profound conclusions this chorus offers is that African Americans after the Civil Rights Movement voluntarily accepted and expanded on the stereotypical behavior Paul Lawrence Dunbar described as "the mask." It became more acceptable to live within a stereotype than it was to re-define the realities of strength, freedom, compassion, virtue, and bravery.

Talib Kweli opens the first verse with a rejection of materialism and an acknowledgement of Morrison's novel. "Give me the fortune / keep the fame / said my man, Louis / I agreed, knew what he mean / because we live the truest lie / I asked why we follow the law of the bluest eye / he look at me / he thought about it / it was like I'm clueless. Why?"

Here, Kweli summarizes the lessons of Dunbar, W.E.B. DuBois, and Ralph Ellison about

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double-consciousness.

Kweli continued, "The question was rhetorical / the answer is horrible / our morals are out of place / and got our lives full of sorrow / and so tomorrow comin" later than usual / waitin" for someone to pity us / while we find beauty in the hideous."

This lyric connects the loss of moral awareness to the declining quality of life among black working families in the 1990s with an acquiescence to this status quo in exchange for whatever small respites from suffering may happen to occur. He then discusses the way the love of money continues white supremacy, especially through the prison system that he rightly defines as a continuation of slavery. However, at the end of the verse, he provides the best lyrical composition.

"Caught up in conversations of our personal worth/ brought up through endangered species status / on the planet Earth / survival tactics mean bustin" gatts to prove you hard / your firearms are too short to box with God/ without faith, all of that is illusionary / raise my son, no vindication of manhood necessary."

Kweli begins with an introspective dialogue on living as black man in the United States. It is clear this is an intelligent and philosophical conversation – something most media have a problem imagining, especially when articulated by black men. More importantly, Kweli moves this discussion into the way that men are socialized in a sexist society to be violent, individualistic, and cynical. With an acknowledgement of Zora Neale Hurston, he transcends the losses of his own generation and makes a promise to raise his son in spiritual faith and without the idea that violence is masculine. More than Guru's vision of an empowered black community, Kweli's determination to reshape the future through responsible fatherhood is a specific and introspective step many listeners can adopt for themselves.

Mos Def complements the first verse well by focusing on the social pressures and norms that make Kweli's level of introspection more difficult. He opens with criticism for those who believe the lies and false images newspapers, magazines, radio, movies, and television offer. However, Mos' best lyrics come in rapid succession at the end of the second verse.

"They"ll put you on a yacht / but they won"t call it a slave ship / the strangeness / you don"t

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control this / you barely hold this."

This was an explicit condemnation of the materialism so common in Pop-Rap music in the mid-1990s when million dollar budgets for videos were seemingly a requirement for an album's successful promotion. Mos correctly asserts that rappers who portray material wealth as the only measure of success are simply the most recent incarnation of slaves, especially in light of the fact that they don't own the infrastructure and distribution systems of their industry. He continues,

"I find this distressing / there's never no in-betweens / we either niggaz or kings / we either bitches or queens / the daily ritual seems immersed in the perverse / full of short attention spans, short tempers, and short skirts / long barrel automatics released in short bursts / the length of black life is treated with short worth."

Here, Mos connects the positive and negative stereotypes that imprison African Americans in the United States with the anger, violence, sexuality, increased death rates, and lack of focus commonly expressed by black people. By holding people to unrealistic expectations – positive or negative – an individual's ability to realize the importance of their everyday lives without these extremes is severely limited. Worse, if an individual accepts the idea that they have to live at an extreme, it can become very easy to devalue the "average" aspects of life that define human experience.

"Get yours first / them other niggaz secondary / that type of illin" that be fillin" up the cemetery / this life is temporary but the soul is eternal / separate the truth from the lie / let me learn you."

This is technically the end of the second verse, but Mos uses it as a bridge into an extended chorus. Like Kweli, he closes with his strongest point in condemning the selfish, blinding individualism that is taught as virtue in the United States. He then returns to the most common message in political hip hop – base your values and thinking in the spirit and you have taken your first step towards freedom.

In his expanded chorus, Mos offers three profound statements. First, he emphasizes that the "captives are the masters to what we're writing." This is the philosophical transformation of music that hip hop offers. It is an extension of West African call-and-response ritual practices.

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In hip hop, the audience is the center of the experience – the arbiters of meaning and importance – not the performers. Too much of Pop-Rap tried to ignore this transformation in the 1990s. Next, Mos invalidates the entire "gangsta rap" philosophy by emphasizing that all men die and that death is not to be feared, much less pursued. It is one of the most direct revelations of the insanity of "gangsta" thinking ever to appear in hip hop. His closing line returns to the foundation of spiritual thinking that is the heart of political hip hop.

"I give a damn / if any fan recalls my legacy / I'm tryin' to live my life / in the sight of God's memory."

The inspiration here is for listeners to share Mos Def's rejection of the physical, and perhaps in that way, the hip hop audience could reorient the entire human legacy toward a collective memory of peace and virtue.

Mos Def adopted a more grounded approach to his discussion of the politics of hip hop in 2004 on his solo album, "A New Danger." The song, "The Rape Over," is a succinct condemnation of how rap music became corporate after 1990. However, instead of punishing the MCs who labor at the bottom of the industry, Mos attacks the powers of corporate rap – Music Television (MTV); Viacom (MTV's conglomerate owner); and AOL/Time Warner. In the verse, he takes on the voice of the industry master who systematically rapes the symbolic MC, while rewarding him with material goods (money, a Mercedes, jewelry).

The satirical edge arrives at the end of the verse when Mos explains the ultimate confusion that underlies the abuse of the art form by corporate managers. Exposing the drug addiction, cultural ignorance, and economic exploitation at the center of corporate rap, Mos Def reveals the threat to liberation that mainstream black radio became after 1997.

Immortal Technique raised the level of quality for all hip hop music in the twenty-first century with his two albums, "Revolutionary, Volume 1" and "Revolutionary, Volume 2" in 2001 and 2002, respectively. "Volume 2," in particular, was an immediate underground classic, fusing Latin beats, New York bass, and militant political imagery. However, Technique scored his most impressive song with his 12" release, "Bin Laden (remix)" in 2005. The track opens with a sample from Reverend Al Sharpton's 2004 speech at the Democratic Party's convention. When Sharpton says, "So you may have a momentary victory, Mr. Bush, but you don't know who we

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are!," it is clear Technique has decided to craft a rallying cry for civil disobedience against the Bush-Cheney administration.

In two tightly-packed verses, Immortal Technique assesses the expansion of white supremacy in terms of American culture, neighborhoods, healthcare, and the Iraq War, while he also crafts a broad strategy for guerrilla warfare within American cities in response to hostility against immigrants and environmental poisons that supermarkets sell in poor communities. However, the exclamation point comes during the chorus of the song. Somehow, Technique enlisted the two greatest legends of political hip hop – Chuck D and KRS-One – to say, "Bin Laden didn't blow up the projects / It was you, nigga; It was you, mothafucka / Bush knocked down the towers! / Tell the truth, nigga, tell the truth."

This is arguably the most incendiary hook in the history of American music, especially given the fact that the 9/11 attacks are still fresh wounds in the American psyche. Technique issued a challenge to all MCs to imbue greater meaning in their songs. No song better exemplifies the re-emerging trend of politically radical hip hop from the foundation laid by Gangstarr and BlackStar than Immortal Technique's "Bin Laden (remix)."

As a result, smaller market artists like Binary Star (from Michigan) are able to gain an international underground hip hop audience that would have been impossible even in 2000. On their only album "Masters of the Universe/Waterworld" (issued in 2003, but gaining widespread recognition in 2005), MC Decompoze offers a song titled "Indy 500." The chorus is a basic call for rappers to return to the independent labels and distributors of the 1980s.

The prospective withdrawal from major record companies would pose significant challenges to the earning power of hip hop as an industry, but it would reignite the creative control of the hip hop culture that created current recording juggernauts as Def Jam and Interscope. Like both "The Rape Over" and "Bin Laden (remix)," the main argument of "Indy 500" is that the producers of hip hop culture receive the smallest economic rewards of its production and distribution. This harkens back to Talib Kweli's point in "Thieves in the Night," to "give me the fortune and keep the fame." All of these songs discussed in this essay combine to answer Guru's rhetorical challenge from 1990 – "who's gonna take the weight?" Since Immortal Technique has taken the torch to the next level, the new question might be "who's gonna distribute the wealth?"

GangStarr and Blackstar form the symbolic beginning and ending of political hip hop in the

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1990s. Lyrically, both groups offer a complicated vision for a fuller, more democratic human civilization. Musically, they craft art that is spiritual, inspirational, and uniquely exceptional. It is past time more of us explored these visions of a hip hop future rather than lose ourselves criticizing those who are already lost. The opportunity to advance the economic, cultural, and social power to transform the lives of billions of people around the world lies in the words and music hip hop encompasses. It is only our willpower that is required to take a step forward and save our entire world. "Stop hidin", Stop hidin", Stop hidin" your face / cuz there ain't no hiding place."