

## LAST CALL: THE NEED FOR REVOLUTION IN CONTEMPORARY HIP HOP

by Janelle Harris

The streets are talking, but what are they saying? Grasping the mic passed from a generation of militantly proactive forebears in hands hereditarily calloused from struggle but poised to carve out the path for our future, the streets speak. The voice raspy and slightly indifferent, but the presence bold and authoritative, the streets symbolize an aspect of the Black experience that has been as contributory to the emotional survival and cultural expansion of our people as home-cooked meals, self-education, and Sunday morning church services. For those of us who have managed escape from a mother's watchful eye and lightning-quick grasp and persevered a gauntlet of nosey, albeit well-meaning neighbors, they became the concrete classrooms that introduced life lessons and became a retentive institution for the folklore that has helped mold the idiosyncrasies of Blackness. The streets birthed the cool colloquialisms so fluent in the charismatic language of Black folk. They have nurtured our pride, fueled our independence and mercilessly entrapped misfortunate victims unable to resist the magnetic lure of the streets' downside. They have been our playgrounds, from hopscotch sketches traced in sidewalk chalk to cee-lo and craps tucked into crowded street corners. It was out of this complex arena of cultural energy that hip hop music was born, to give new rhythm to the depiction of the Black experience on America's urban landscapes.

Hip hop is the representative voice of a generation that has in a sense absorbed the teachings of the pioneering activists and educators before but at the same time grapples with persistent external influences uncharacteristic of our African ancestry, like materialism and misogyny. To undermine the positive effects of the emergence of hip hop on the Black community in general, and our youth specifically, is to unfairly discredit the importance of an outlet that has proved to be more than expressive artistry. Hip hop has provided young Black people, especially our men, a voice to relate the frustration of obscurity and the agony of predestined pain. Founded in the lyrical wit of cultural traditions like signifying and the dozens, fed by the flamboyant stylings of musical patriarchs from Cab Calloway to Bob Marley, and evolved from the competitive boasting of young Black men in New York City neighborhoods, hip hop continues to revolutionize contemporary culture both domestically and internationally. But this music, that has infiltrated all corners of the Black community in some way, and has become yet another Africanism adopted by the American mainstream, stands in the wake of a cultural juncture. The streets have always been a part of our reality, but these streets are now the sole depiction of our life in America. The Black experience has never been a monolithic one, but hip hop in its present form is reflective of a one-sided story. The tale is one rife with self-destructive crime and disrespect, devaluation of Black women and ridiculous materialism. The streets are talking, and hip hop is the platform. But what will they say for us?

With its emergence as the most commercially successful genre of Black music to date and the fastest growing music of any market, hip hop artists retain a host of media resources at their influential behest. Their lyrics have also, for the last two decades, solidified the opinions, created the styles and inspired the behavior of an entire generation of our people. But instead of using lyrical prowess and public notoriety to address Black community concerns and offer visible support for critical Black issues, a disturbing many of our prominent Black performers continue to consciously make a mockery of the Black community, the Black family, the essential Black church, and the Black intelligence, making themselves the most ironic and perverse of Negrophobes. It is the increasing disassociation of Black performers with our cultural history and issues in favor of Americanization, paired with wild commercialization in the presence of the almighty dollar, that contributes heavily to the disunity of Black youth and the consequential threat to our future. The phenomenal success of hip hop has propelled some Black performers into the realm of superstardom. But the agendas of those who have attained this level of popularity are, for the most part, antithetical to the prosperity of the Black community as a whole.

When an artist elects to exploit an art form founded in the rhythmic traditions of his African

forefathers and cultivated by generations of his oppressed predecessors in pursuit of gross commodification and capitalistic gain, that individual is a menace to his people. He is ill equipped to serve as a worthy role model for our impressionable youth, and should not be expected to comprehend the eminent importance of such a position. He cannot ethically endorse any community cause and be a sincere representative, since his own lyrics and lifestyle are often contradictory to almost every campaign for the social and cultural progression of Black folk. His credibility as a spokesperson for the collective Black condition is void. This individual is Black by skin complexion alone; his soul, by both definitions, has been compromised for the multifaceted perks of stardom. He is the hustler of our culture. Given celebrity status and recognition by mainstream America--perhaps a cover story for People or Rolling Stone, permission to purchase a home in a socially and economically affluent neighborhood, along with tangible accolades by respected musical institutions, this hustling Negro will do little to nothing to disrupt the sense of security he has established. Refugee from the 'hood to the Hamptons' newest resident, the token hip hop artist sighs in reminiscent relief at a narrow escape from the morbid statistics of a poverty-induced Black community. What then is this hip hop artists' need for sociopolitical activism? A gleaming luxury car in the garage, a roster of chart-topping hits purchased largely by an adoring white fan base, and a delectable array of multiracial honies, why would this artist jeopardize this dream life in favor of cultural revolution? The Black community, and the hip hop generation specifically, must therefore begin to evaluate and question those hip hop egotists and image mongers who we have publicly and financially permitted to represent us in film, music and media.

The dichotomy between the consumer of the music and the creator of the music, the hood life of the masses and the high life of the celebrity becomes painfully evident when, after a chaotic day of recording and promotion, the artist retires to the comforts of a multi-million dollar estate and the company of a (more often than not) partially or entirely non-Black female companion. Therefore, while this individual, in a day's work, has substantiated the traumatic condition in Black communities, attacked the dignity of the Black woman, and demeaned Black male/female relationships, he is generally a removed spectator of the negative consequences that his lyrics perpetuate. Like throwing a Molotov cocktail into a crowded street, his work provides ammunition to fuel physical, emotional and psychological antagonism in our communities while he enjoys the comfort and safety of a remote abode. The idea is not to prevent any artist from moving himself and his family into better, even lavish, living conditions, or to discourage the acquisition of wealth. But by creating songs to sustain the idle, misdirected anger and restlessness of young Black listeners, and allowing intrigued white consumers a second-hand glimpse into Black life in America through their restrictive accounts, these artists are negotiating the integrity of our people. What's worse, many rappers, after complete cultural sell-out to crossover audiences, have proceeded to make music less imitative of the realities of the Black masses and more accommodating of white consumers' desire to vicariously live the urban Black experience (which of course means plenty of guns, lots of sex and drug-slanging). Regardless of the underlying motive, it is negligent on the part of these individuals to see their lyrics as merely a reflection of their own life experiences or a sound stage for their victimized mentality without recognizing the ultimate effect on the community. The packaged sale of Black self-hatred as entertainment by rappers is not only the rape of our rich culture, it is the assassination of true hip hop. By compromising the authenticity of the Black experience and the music form to sensationalize 'hood drama and strife, many artists have allowed themselves to be pawns in white America's longstanding plot for Black destruction similar to the precursory antics of the despicable Uncle Tom.

Though hip hop originated as testosterone-fueled, pretentiously boastful exchanges between young men eager to flex their lyrical muscles with friends and rivals in their respective neighborhoods, it's current form has degenerated to little more than rhyming words with occasional witty highlights over infectious, danceable beats. Continued disregard or blinded acceptance of the condition in the Black community is an open invitation to self-destruction and chaos. The artists that produce the hypnotic flow of hip hop and members of the generation that has been fed by its resultant culture must take action against not just the lyrical content of hip hop, but the consequential behaviors that are prevalent in Black neighborhoods nationwide. So where does hip hop go from here? Before

anything else, it stops defying the ethics and values of its African roots and disengages the self-centered, destructive practices that it has adopted from dominant society. This forces hip hop artists themselves to perform deep introspection into their own Black souls as members of a greater community and evaluate the motive behind their music. It channels funding and resources into Black neighborhoods to remedy the damage that it has created through sadistic propaganda and seeks to counteract the external diseases of American racism and marginalization by supporting independent Black enterprise and education. It uses its public notoriety and media influence to attract widespread attention to issues of concern to the Black community from healthcare to public policy. But perhaps most importantly, it encourages our youth not to resort to the hustling tactics that has contributed to the success and affluence of many of its artists, but instead endorses academics, intelligence, creativity and culture to give our children options for excellence beyond the athletic field or the concert hall. Hip hop artists' continued discount of their musical and ideological influence on the community-at-large will only witness our generation in perpetual moral and psychological disarray. A revolution within the culture can begin by using the power of hip hop to generate social and cultural change, to elevate our people in a generation exodus that will not just ensure our present stability, but our bright, productive future.

Of course, there will be members of our own community who, out of fear, jealousy and ignorance, will be eager to sabotage any progression we aspire to make. It is unrealistic to expect the radical rebirth of every self-proclaimed hustler, thug or diva. But like all revolutions, there must be martyrs for the cause. Those conscious, enlightened members of America's hip hop generation and greater Black community must begin a dialogue for change that can and will result in more than idle suggestion and inactive conversation. To allow our collective disillusionment to continue is to allow the pain and aspirations of our ancestors to die by our own vain hands. In the face of a united hip hop front, those oppositional individuals-Black and white-will be forced to either step aside and witness the change or become sacrificial victims for the cause. Those of us born in the hip hop generation and conscious of its inherent potential implore its fellow members to embrace the possibilities for the future and break our proverbial shackles, to strike a balance between the lessons of our predecessors and the forces of our own innovativeness. For real, the solution is clear or the destruction will be inevitable.

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