

## CULTURE THIEF?

### Confession of a White Negro Who Came to Save Hip Hop

by Tim Adkins

Stealing from other people is an American tradition as old as the Constitution. Among America's first counts include its theft of land from native tenants, its theft of people through systematic slavery, and its theft of ideas to accommodate a lack of national history. These historical offenses, of course, became habit and have made way to more recent indictments of cultural theft.

In the 20th century, for example, mainstream pop culture has made a practice of shoplifting black music traditions for its own profit and enjoyment. First America "borrowed" jazz. Then it "borrowed" the blues, then rock and roll, funk and, most recently, Hip Hop.

It is this final booty that most interests me: Hip Hop. Why? Because Hip Hop is my culture. It is the foundation on which my frame of reference is built. Born a few years before me, Hip Hop has not only shaped my worldview, but has sculpted the era in which I live. One might say that instead of a double helix, I have two turntables and a cross fader spinning DNA throughout my body. Hip Hop is more than just a part of my life; Hip Hop is me. Yet, my complexion is as pale as William Cooper's New World Order horse.

I. Am. White.

I walk and talk like the worst clichéd character from a Sprite commercial. Although my behavior lacks the awkward histrionics associated with these advertising industry caricatures, the absence of pigmentation in my skin immediately describes me as one of Danny Hoch's Whiteboyz. While my skin tone does not preclude me from participating in Hip Hop, it absolutely calls my motives into question.

Do I speak with Marshall Mathers' accent out of a desire to be down with Viacom's version of pop culture? Or am I one of Norman Mailer's disenfranchised white Negroes, merrily following contemporary hipsters who beat box? Is there any possibility that I approach Hip Hop with passion and genuine benevolence? Can a wigger save Hip Hop?

The answer to the final question is, of course, no. Not because I am white. Not because my resume lacks Hip Hop credentials (I do not rhyme, spin, dance, or write.) And not because Hip Hop does not need saving - because it most certainly does. But because no single person can save it. Instead, if Hip Hop is to be saved, every human being who cares about the culture must do it. We - all of us who have an interest - need to take Hip Hop back, and reclaim it from the mass-marketing mailboxes of Middle America.

To understand Hip Hop's current crisis, we must first trace a bit of its back-story. Human beings have an easy history of coming together to express their joy through rhythmic movement. In the early or mid-1970s, Hip Hop emerged as the latest in a long line of soundtracks to these exhilarated writhings.

Hip Hop was born in the Eastern United States as both a social and an urban experience. Its parents were of African descent - black and brown city dwellers. Among early hip hoppers were a mix of harsh poverty and middle class affluence. People of varied economic backgrounds mixed casually because crack cocaine was still a decade or so away from carving out the economic chasm that currently exists in America's inner cities. Urban life was far from prosperous, but in the 1970s it had not yet bottomed out either.

These circumstances instigated the creation of Hip Hop - a very simple organism that acted as a

communication device among city folk. It inhaled frustration and desperation and exhaled insightful expression. In its infancy, Hip Hop traveled from its native New York to other American metropolitan hubs. Hip Hop proliferated, but remained true to its nascent ethic: bring folks from the neighborhood together to have a good time. As the toddling culture gained its bearings, Hip Hop expanded upon its candid nature by becoming more comfortable discussing social ills. Emcees and graffiti writers had always been quick to critique the problems of their world, but songs such as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's *The Message* encouraged the formation of a nationwide (and later global) network that became more than the soundtrack to so many block parties. According to one oft-quoted line from Hip Hop luminary Chuck D, the culture evolved to be "a black CNN," passing information from city to city. Hip Hop was a shared experience uniting urbanites by leisurely pursuits and common hardships.

Along its journey, Hip Hop left some debris in the small, suburban towns dotting the pathways between its bigger, urban destinations. This fresh, new art form proved irresistible to America's kids, regardless of their color or rung on the economic ladder. It was quickly adopted by white kids throughout the country as the unofficial language of youthful rebellion. Soon after, corporate America found they could generate huge profits by packaging the salacious elements of the music and peddling it back to the youth responsible for its creation. Once Hip Hop developed a business model, it shed its innocence in favor of the lavish goodies provided by the bottom line. Hip Hop moved from the music of city - the sounds of black and brown life - to become the score of the suburbs - which tend to be guided by Caucasian pathos - where it has languished ever since.

There is quite a bit of debate as to the precise timeline of Hip Hop's downward spiral. Some believe 1986 - Run DMC's *Raising Hell* and the Beastie Boys' *III Communications* both cracked the upper echelon of the pop charts - sounded the death knell for Hip Hop's innocence. Others suggest that Dr. Dre's 1992 album, *The Chronic*, paved the way for Hip Hop to become the official rebel music of American youth. Still others cite the late 1990s emergence of rap-rock and Eminem as the surest sign that Hip Hop had been jacked by Western pop culture.

Whatever date we ascribe to the crime, let there be no doubt that Hip Hop is now an American institution.

Much like its musical predecessors, Hip Hop was ripped from the arms of its African origin parents and incorporated into mainstream American culture long ago. Now, Hip Hop is equally comfortable in the mouths of three fresh-faced emcees crowded together in the hallways of Cabrini Green or in the mini-disc player of an upwardly mobile, 30-something Certified Public Accountant from Evanston. Once reserved for the disenfranchised hoards of black and brown urban youth, Hip Hop is now the chew toy of white suburbia.

What was once thought to be a passing fad has endured as the most disposable American institution. By 2001, a generation or two of suburban youth have had the opportunity to outgrow Hip Hop and look back in jest at the follies of their awkward years. Artists such as Hammer, 2 Live Crew, Will Smith, and the Beastie Boys have a camp value to the 30-something set. While far from the standard bearers of Hip Hop, these artists are important because of their success and their lasting, though inconsequential, impact on a significant segment of the American population. America has not only eaten its young, it has swallowed and digested the culture of its youth with impunity.

Yet Hip Hop is far from fecal matter. While Egotrip's *Book of Rap Lists* said, "you can't kill hip hop because it's already dead," I would argue that Hip Hop is simply enduring some growing pains. Yes, Hip Hop is in grave danger. But recognition of its true problem will allow all of us - black, white, brown, purple, green, or other - to act as its collective savior.

Hip Hop's crisis mirrors the crisis of the American suburbs and their middle class residents

Suburbia in the United States is excessively comfortable, which breeds boredom and encourages rebellion for the sake of rebellion. Where Hip Hop is concerned, American youth have sought to engage in the hedonism in which the culture has dabbled. On an isolated basis, this may not be a problem, but when all of our major media outlets pepper our senses with sex and violence - we are left to believe that Hip Hop is little else.

We should not assign blame to TV or to the record labels because they are only pushing a product that has proven selling power. Def Jam has incontrovertible proof that an album from DMX will achieve platinum status. Fans not only pack arenas to see him perform, they request his video on MTV, wear T-shirts bearing his name, and pack movie theaters for a film in which he stars. On the other hand, Rawkus is left to hope that a Reflection Eternal album will sell enough copies to cover costs. Several hundred fans may gossip about the group on the Internet and a few dozen DJs will empty underground record stores of advance 12" vinyl singles, but album sales beyond 100,000 would register a major victory for the group and the burgeoning mid-major independent label.

The evolution of suburban culture in the United States has promoted voyeurism. We have become a nation of spectators. With regard to Hip Hop, the culture that once was handled by its participants is now being handed to them with a hefty price tag and little social merit. While Hip Hop now must be contained in 20,000 seat venues, it was never meant to be performed at people who passively fill seats. The crisis in hip-hop is that too many of us are ingesting it like cultural junk food, with little thought as to what function it serves or how it can be shaped by the hands of the consumer.

Hip Hop may have had very benign origins, but it has evolved into the most powerful cultural influence of the last decades of the 20th century. Hip Hop may still be shaped by the mores of Americans of African descent, but the culture now includes significant contributions from all shades of the human pigmentation spectrum. As a result, it's difficult for us to attribute Hip Hop's nadir to white appropriation of the culture - as has been the case with its musical ancestors. It is not a good thing that a popular white rock band can add a DJ and now be considered Hip Hop. Neither is it a good thing that one of Hip Hop's shining black stars used his third - and to date most successful - album to extol the same vices that his first two albums passionately railed against. While Hip Hop has not necessarily been helped by the intrusion of white America, we would be foolish to believe that the black and brown creators of the culture have not also aided the decline of Hip Hop.

If Talib Kweli is correct when he says in *Soul Rebels* from his 2000 *Train of Thought* album that, "Hip hop lives for us," then we must refuse to sit back and be sold a poor bill of goods. The people who consume Hip Hop must become more involved in the creation of it. It is not necessary for every member of the Hip Hop nation to become an emcee or graf writer or DJ, but it is necessary that we exercise our free will to refuse that which we do not need. Hip Hop does not need to get lost in the proclamation that white America has infiltrated the culture and ruined it. Nor does Hip Hop need redundant contributions that cover well-worn ground without demonstrating real talent. And finally, Hip Hop does not need to be defined and distributed by an uncaring external source that believes the culture only has value as a sellable commodity.

This process of saving Hip Hop requires a great deal of compromise because not every form of Hip Hop will be palatable to each member of the Hip Hop nation. We must first understand that there is a place for both Master P and Mos Def, that we can be entertained and educated by the same schizophrenic culture. The dilemma is establishing standards that we will not allow some corporate entity to violate. We know that injustice can require harsh words to describe it, but never should the description be to the detriment of the people suffering from the inequity. Likewise, we can grant creative license to artists who weave tales of mild debauchery, but to portray lavish lifestyles without explaining consequences is an oversight we must not permit.

So can Hip Hop be saved?

Absolutely. Any current decline in Hip Hop does not suggest its pending demise, but rather indicates the growing pains Hip Hop must endure as it slouches toward adulthood. While maturity would seem to be the last goal of any youth culture, so must Hip Hop mature if it wishes to survive. Hip Hop does not need to completely shed the trappings of youth, but by taking responsibility for itself, Hip Hop can better guide the people who consume it. Perhaps Hip Hop will lose its dangerous appeal in the process, but the result will be that "Hip Hop lives for us."

And that is why the art form was born in the first place.

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