

## EXPLORING THE GENERATION GAP and Its Implications on African American Consciousness by Christopher Tyson

*"The hip hop culture is just like electricity. It can be used negatively or positively. The same electric current that lights up your house can also electrocute you. It is the misuse of hip hop culture to attack our women and promote violence. We must encourage the proper use of hip hop culture. We are all influenced by the hip hop generation."* (Al Sharpton on social responsibility and hip hop, Jet Magazine, December 2000)

Hip hop is the defining African-American cultural movement of the past 25 years. Yet it is ideologically suspended between the hip hop generation and the civil rights generation. The communication gap between the two generations has serious implications on the development of African-American political power, economic organization, and overall race consciousness. When examined the generations have more in common than not, and their failure to address the issues of the race in a cooperative fashion only underscores their similarities. While the attitudes, styles, and expressions of each generation differ, both aspire to meld into a mainstream reality at the expense of attacking racist institutions through autonomous organization. The development of hip hop culture is a study in the damaging effects of the generation gap, and the failure to communicate and cooperatively organize across the generation divide is a dominant theme in the last quarter century of African-American history.

In the late 1970's and early 1980's hip hop became the expression of a new generation squeezed between the fading promises of civil rights era policies and inner city blight spawned by black middle class abandon. hip hop was as much a byproduct of African-American cultural heritage as jazz and blues, but its aesthetic reflected the growing tide of nonconformity in mainstream culture and the backlash against middle class values among African-American youth. Graffiti and dee-jaying in the underground party scene were the initial cultural distinctions of hip hop, and it grew to include spoken word, song, and dance. Hip hop culture is unique because it is a creation of the first generation of African-Americans to live in what is considered an integrated society. Many of the generation grew up in working and middle class realities framed by affirmative action corporate opportunity, suburban flight, school desegregation, and other post civil rights era policies and trends. In creating hip hop they confounded the integrationist ideology that viewed distinctly African-American cultural movements as self-defeating.

Because hip hop was the conception of the first generation of African-Americans removed from Jim Crow realities, it was out of character with previous African-American cultural movements. Most notably missing from hip hop was a guiding social-political-economic philosophy. Rap artist Grandmaster Flash made a poignant statement in his 1982 song *The Message* (don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge...), but while the song was a powerful reflection of the culture's early social and political consciousness, it did not correlate to any movement with a defined set of strategic goals related to the ongoing struggle of African-Americans. Negro spirituals lead African-Americans out of slavery, jazz was the soundtrack for the anti-lynching movement, and soul stirred the civil rights era. But the early hip hop music offered no agenda and did not even loosely correlate

to any existing race movement.

The absence of an overarching philosophy is significant considering hip hop's position in the timeline of African-American cultural movements. Hip hop developed shortly after the decline of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). In his 1968 essay, *The Black Arts Movement*, Larry Neal characterizes the BAM as "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." Unlike the BAM and in spite of the burgeoning conservative backlash of the late 1970's and early 1980's, hip hop was not the cultural counterpart to a larger political or economic movement of black people or even of the hip hop generation. Hip hop had the opportunity to become a media vehicle and cultural component to a new movement necessary to combat Reagan-era conservatism. But this opportunity was overlooked not only by the hip hop generation, but also by the civil rights generation to which many African American leaders belong. African American leaders initially underestimated the pervasiveness of the culture. Disillusioned with the attack on civil rights and the ever-present shortcomings of social integration, they failed to identify hip hop as the cultural complement to the new movement they struggled to launch. They ignored hip hop; therefore it played no significant role in addressing the growing conservative movement of the 1970's and 1980's.

Both the hip hop generation and the civil rights generation are responsible for hip hop's lack of a social-political-economic philosophy. In an integrated society the hip hop generation was discouraged from gravitating to ideologies outside of the mainstream cultural and social agenda. When the civil rights generation rejected hip hop in its early development, they forfeited the opportunity to mold the activist potential in the new culture. Alienated and underestimated, hip hop became vulnerable to mainstream influence. Since social integrationist philosophy identifies white reality as the default cultural, political, and social norm, hip hop became in some measure a reflection of the "American" culture: the white default reality. Therefore partying and leisure activities were esteemed above the more serious occupations of collective responsibility and organization. In its early development hip hop music was mostly braggadocio party music and edifying storytelling that encouraged fun. If it ventured into the realm of social critique or commentary it was not supported by any strategic goals or mandates. It was the first cultural movement of black youth disinterested in the burden of a political cause.

The civil rights generation joined the American cultural establishment in denouncing hip hop, so when it developed a strong social and political consciousness at the turn of the 1980's/1990's decades they failed to notice. Hip hop music addressed the economic recession of the early 1990's and the crack epidemic of the inner city. It preached about lynchings, police brutality, and genocide in searing lyrical indictments of mainstream society. It sought to uplift the spirits of African-American youth in a groundswell of black pride that rivaled the Black Power movement. It mixed history and contemporary racial issues into a power surge of conscious thought and expression. Songs like *Self Destruction*, *Fight the Power*, *Tennessee*, and many others ruled the airwaves as artists like Queen Latifah, and De La Soul integrated Afro-centric themes into every aspect of their public persona. What had been a free-spirited party movement all of a sudden became very thoughtful and promising. The gush of consciousness was supported by leaders like Ben Chavis who aggressively courted youth during his brief stint as head of the NAACP. The actions of Chavis and a few others offered hope that the generation gap might close. But Chavis's actions were a short-lived exception

to the glaring lack of support groups like Public Enemy and X Clan received from African-American leaders and the civil rights generation as a whole. Their disenchantment with hip hop was too far-gone to give it any serious critique or acknowledgement during its socially conscious and Afro-centric renaissance. This is a critical juncture in the relationship of the two generations and must be considered when analyzing hip hop's sharp turn away from social and cultural consciousness in the mid to late 1990's.

The explosive commercial success of what became known as gangsta rap, brought to the forefront a nihilistic theme in hip hop that was the antithesis of the conscious movement. While the growth in nihilism among black youth paralleled that of white youth, its roots were distinctively of the African-American experience. White youth nihilism stemmed from the erosion of Victorian principles and the reality obsessed voyeurism of the 1990's. As for their parents, black music offered white youth an exotic escape from suburban monotony. But African-American youth nihilism stemmed from the rise in police brutality, the crack cocaine epidemic, and its prison industrial complex counterpart. Without a stable conscious foundation, however, they grew discouraged with their inability to constructively address these racially targeted ills. hip hop's growing commercial appeal provided a dangerous outlet for the generation's frustration, and gangsta rap morphed into "bling-bling-ism" - the supercilious rampage of material worship and indulgence. The new trend was fueled by apathy and materialism unchecked by the paternal influence of the previous generation. "Bling-bling" hip hop promotes stereotypes of criminality, truancy, and white envy that connect seamlessly with the long held negative beliefs about African-American men.

"Bling-bling-ism" claims to innocently celebrate the new wealth of poor inner city youth. But for all of the attention given to the disadvantages of inner city life, hip hop culture and its profitable components have failed in using its wealth to solve the economic disparities and public policy inequities that frame urban blight. Despite the millions of dollars flowing to and through the rap music industry and the so called hip hop or urban clothing industry, very little if any of it has gone to support strategies geared at empowering African-Americans within American capitalism. In his 2000 song *African Dream*, (Reflection Eternal, Talib Kweli & Hitek, 2000) Talib Kweli's lyrics beckon, "*These cats drink champagne to toast death and pain like slaves on a ship talkin' 'bout who got the flyest chains*". Kweli speaks directly to the artificial value of fleeting wealth and the failure of hip hop wealth to strategically better the quality of African American life. Hip hop's disinterest in race consciousness is partly a response to alienation from the civil rights generation. Many rap artists proudly admit that they are only concerned with discussing sex and money in their music. They shun the notion that they should be burdened with "serious" topics or that hip hop artists have to promote race consciousness. They proudly discard the "role-model" label and reject responsibility. The hip hop generation associates economic, political struggle with their parent's generation - one of the first groups to reject rap music and hip hop as a culture.

Hip hop's recent obsession with money, fascination with crime, and selfishness indulgence signals the absorption of the generation into a mainstream psychology and social ethic. Consequently the generation is ill equipped to use its commercial viability and media access to secure economic and political power for African Americans. But to many African Americans the ruthless pursuit of individual wealth is the American dream, and for the hip hop generation athletes and entertainers

are pioneers. Ignorantly some applaud the "bling-bling" culture for having obtained the independent wealth heretofore unattainable for most African Americans. Esteeming irresponsible, self-centered capitalist gain lowers the bar for African-American achievement. But at this most critical phase in the development of hip hop the civil rights generation is remarkably handicapped to render the leadership necessary to save their children.

The rise in the self-destructive behavior in hip hop culture is partly a result of the inability of civil rights generation to offer any paternal guidance throughout the development of the culture. Had the support of Black leaders been present from the outset of hip hop it might not have degraded into some of its present degenerative manifestations. But hip hop is equally to blame for its corruption. The hip hop generation must reject its nihilistic and individualist philosophy. It must boldly accept its responsibility as a vehicle for conscious social organization. It must adopt a unified agenda that pragmatically focuses on the escalating trends in our communities - especially with regards to health care, criminal justice, and education. hip hop must make a wholesale indictment of its misogynistic and violent content and grasp its power as the primary propaganda tool for the reeducation of African American youth brainwashed by the subconscious symbols of white supremacy - many communicated through contemporary hip hop style, language, and music. The ability to use mass media and hip hop's economic potential to reeducate and empower Africans in America and throughout the Diaspora could be hip hop's most lasting contribution.

In his 1999 song *Umi Says*, rap artist Mos Def offers a very emotional plea for the hip hop generation to claim its place in the ongoing struggle for freedom. The song is a light at a time when the soul of hip hop is in jeopardy. He calls to the ancestors and struggles with his ambivalence over the world he has inherited. He acknowledges the need for a new movement of consciousness and hip hop's potential to be it. Previous movements were launched in times where racism was a tangible force that constricted the lives of every African-American regardless of class or social position. Racism is now an elusive, deceiving, and often invisible animal that hides deep within public policy and social mores. Only by working together can the hip hop and civil rights generation dissect the limits of a psychology obsessed with mainstream acceptance and assimilation. Then the proper attention can be given to the awesome responsibility of building independent autonomous institutions that will support the eradication of every vestige of the policies, symbols, and practices based in the belief of the inherent inferiority of African people everywhere.

Christopher Tyson is an independent business strategy and planning consultant in Atlanta, GA. He is a graduate of Howard University will enter the JFK School of Government to pursue a Masters of Public Policy in the fall of 2001.

Urban Think Tank, Inc. welcomes your comments on this article. Send e-mails to [webeditor@urbanthinktank.org](mailto:webeditor@urbanthinktank.org)

**Copyright (c) 2001 Christopher Tyson**

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this article or portions thereof in any form

whatsoever. For reprint information contact Urban Think Tank, Inc , P.O. Box 1476, New York, New York 10185-1476 Email: [UrbanThinkTank@usa.net](mailto:UrbanThinkTank@usa.net)