

The Cultural Jacking of Hip-Hop

By Bakari Akil II

Recently the New York Times published an article entitled, Hip-Hop Divides: Those Who Rap, Those Who Don't, by Kelefa Sanneh. The article states, "It should be no surprise that hip-hop performers are starting to separate culture from craft. Indeed, you might wonder what's taken them so long. After all, everyone agrees that you can be a rock 'n' roll star without knowing how to play the electric guitar".

At a glance, it appears that this is a harmless analysis, but a deeper reflection will show that this type of thinking is misleading and displays the cultural vampirism that has hi-jacked the original rock and roll, jazz, blues and now hip-hop from Black culture.

Hip-hop is borne from a people and society that has always used oral traditions as a way to pass information from one segment of the population to the next. Drums (or drumbeats) which provide the basic background to lyrics is just as old and is such a strong part of our communication process that it had to be outlawed in times of slavery. Using dance and artistry as a way of expressing appreciation and enjoyment of our culture has also been apart of our Black/African tradition as well.

As other cultures attempt to enjoy hip-hop, some wish to do it without paying homage to the culture that birthed it. This is unacceptable and the actions by journalists and others in the entertainment industry that support this idea are not only misguided, but suspect.

Griots of old in the African tradition, the poets of the 60's and 70's such as the Last Poets and Sonya Sanchez or entertainers such as Dolomite were forebears of this tradition and respect must always be paid to them. Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin (formerly H. Rap Brown) in his book, *Die Nigger Die*, stated how people in the 60's and 70's could "shine, (do the) Titanic, Signifying Monkey and Piss-Pot-Peet" for hours saying things like:

I'm just like the blind man, standing by a broken window,
I don't feel no pain.
But it's your world
You the man I pay rent to
If I had your hands I'd give away both my arms.
Cause I could do without them
I'm the man but you the main man
I read the books you write
You set the pace in the race I run
Why, you always in good form
You got more foam than Alka Seltzer

To deny these roots and state the craft is separate from the culture is criminal. Either purposefully or unconsciously trying to separate hip-hop from its roots by saying lyrics or rap is not apart of the culture, or that beats, dancing or the arts is not a central part of hip-hop is taking the body away from the spirit and soul that sustains it.

As mainstream audiences and even the world continues to emulate and participate in the hip-hop environment there are some in the mainstream who are completely

drawn to it but who do not identify with or resent the Black/African cultural aesthetic. This resentment or social isolation they feel, but strong attraction, often ends up as attempt to gloss over or ignore the culture in an effort to make it acceptable to themselves and their counterparts.

Those in hip-hop who originated it and those who respect it and cherish it should not allow this to happen. If so then the same way Little Richard, Chuck Berry, James Brown and countless others who saw their legacies hi-jacked by people like Elvis, who receive credit for being the "King of Rock and Roll" or people like Eric Clapton who enjoyed success for remaking Bob Marley's music, will see rappers of today being relegated to the periphery of history of hip-hop as well.

Eminem, which the New York Times article stated "has become the most successful rapper of his time by ignoring much of hip-hop culture and concentrating on lyrics" will be heralded as the world's greatest. This is a direct affront to artists who were/are masters at lyrics, emceeing, DJ'ing, entertaining or prophesizing such as, Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, KRS One, Eric B and Rakim, Chuck D, Kool G-Rap, MC Lyte, LL Cool J, Slick Rick, Queen Latifah, Tupac, Biggie, Nas, DMX, Jay Z, Nore, Mos Def, Black Thought, Talib Kweli and too many others to mention.

This author refuses to let hip-hop and its legacy get hi-jacked and let those who like the music only when it fits their cultural vision decide that hip-hop's roots and its heart are no longer necessary.

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