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## Rap Takes a Bum Rap

JOHN HERSCHEND

Since its birth, Rap music has taken the blame for many of the problems plaguing America's inner cities—violence, drugs, AIDS, you name it. But Rap music cannot take the blame for these problems any more than, say, soap operas can shoulder the blame for infidelity in America. Rap is an art form, a medium which expresses, enrages and educates like most other art forms. As Guru says in the introduction to his album *Jazzmataz*, Rap is "musical, cultural expression based on reality." It does not cause problems but, instead, expresses them just as some movies, television shows and other forms of music do. However, unlike most of the mindless violence depicted in popular movies, Rap is a constructive outlet which brings attention to our country's problems in a creative, innovative and sometimes positive fashion.

In fact, the roots of rap are based in creativity and innovation. With its humble beginnings in the black ghettos as filler between songs at parties, Rap has become a multi-million dollar business and one of the most established forms of new music in the past decade. The original idea was simple: two turntables and a microphone. The DJ, in command of the turntables, manipulates the records in order to form a beat or provide snippets of musical accompaniment. The "MC" then "busts out" in a fit of rhyme based stories, usually about the DJ's ability to "spin" or the MC's ability to "rap." However, as rap became more and more popular, the rappers began focusing their attention on the larger issues of life in the ghetto—violence, drugs, and oppression—forming two separate branches of Rap.

The first is known as "gangsta" rap, a rough mix of extreme violence and heavy rhythms, sounding something like broken glass on an inner city basketball court. The second is hip-hop, a jazz based, dance mix which is much more complex and layered than gangster. The music of hip-hop evokes the feel of a smoky, Soho jazz club in the 1950s while the words relate stories of ghetto life in the 1990s. The message of hip-hop is upbeat, oftentimes offering solutions or alternatives to the problems rather than focusing solely on them. Although gangsta and hip-hop differ in their style and message, both forms are important for their ability to educate and to offer a creative outlet.

Rap's ability to educate its listeners is an often overlooked but crucial element of the music. Several groups envision the music as their way to speak directly to kids. Groups such as the Bay Area's Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy believe that they, as Rap artists, are the only role models the children may have and therefore work to fill their music with thoughts on politics, environmentalism and other social issues in hopes of raising the consciousness of their listeners. Many of their songs are like quick morality plays. For instance, on the Disposable Heroes' album, *Hypocrisy Is the Greatest Luxury*, they have a song entitled "The Language of Violence" about a boy who goes to jail for killing another boy. In the song, the killer is caught and sent to jail where he is raped by the inmates. The song follows a more philosophical vein and asks: "Is this a tale of rough justice in a land where there's no justice at all. Who is really the victim? Or are we all the cause, and victim of it all." Lyricist Michael Franti's aim is to get the kids who might commit acts of violence to think not only of the immediate physical consequences of their actions, but of the larger picture of violence and victimization. He says that "death is the silence in this circle of violence." The same is true of other rap artists such as the Digable Planets, The Pharcyde and Guru. These groups fill their albums with a smoky coolness of life on the streets and the choices available to the kids. They tell stories of street life with a more positive and hopeful edge, working to expand the vision of the listener, to help them see beyond the ghetto. Their music doesn't seek to exploit or cause violence but rather paint a picture of reality and offer alternatives.

But not all Rap music offers such positive alternatives. A good portion of Rap, particularly gangsta, offers little or no alternatives. It simply paints a picture of a bleak world where the gun is king. And it is here where Rap foes focus their efforts and here where I would agree with them. They say that Rap glamorizes the violence on the streets. They say that kids look to these groups as heroes and follow their lyrics as a zealot Christian might follow the Bible. In fact, a recent *Newsweek* article entitled *A Gangster Wake-Up Call* questions whether kids will "change their attitudes about money, sex, and violence now that gangster rap appears to be doing a drive-by on itself?" In essence, the article is assuming that Rap is the only place that kids get these ideas. The article is about the death (due to AIDS) of Eazy-E, one of the first major Rap stars, and the jailing of three other Rap superstars because of their violent ways. It seems that the Rap foes are making an important point: Rap stars live the life they sing about. But all this is presupposing the fact that the listeners of Rap are motivated by the lyrics to take action in the streets. In fact, it completely bypasses the notion that violence has existed in our streets before Rap and that the musicians, particularly the ones indicated in the *Newsweek* article, are victims of these streets.

Rather than say that Rap lyrics are a cause of street violence, I would like to offer the idea that violence is the cause of Rap lyrics, and that our

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society seems to have a double standard when it comes to judging the violence of Rap music versus the violence of popular cinema and television. If we are to isolate Rap for its violence what, then, do we make of movies today? Or while we're on the subject, how about many popular TV shows? It seems that violence is an obsession with Americans and still we don't indict these shows as being the cause of it. They are accepted and even called "artistic," and works of genius. For instance, in "Vox Populi," an article which appeared in *The Atlantic* magazine, Francis Davis credits Quentin Tarantino for his subtle handling of an extremely violent scene in *Reservoir Dogs*. In the scene, a captive cop is bound to a chair while Mr. Blonde, played by Michael Madsen, dances around with a razor in his hand, eventually cutting off the cop's ear and dousing him in gasoline. Davis is impressed with the scene because it takes our emotions for a ride. He writes about the scene, saying that Madsen "does a series of graceful little dance steps to Stealers Wheel's 'Stuck in the Middle with You,' and closes in on his defenseless, screaming captive. 'Was that as good for you as it was for me?' Madsen asks the cop afterward. . . . Madsen might also be asking those of us who sat through the scene without averting our eyes."

Davis feels that this form of violence is more acceptable because it is complex and plays with the audience's emotions. Conversely, Rap artist Ice-T was forced, due to heavy protest from police organizations, to remove the song *Cop Killer* from an album with the same name. The police groups, who felt that the album encouraged kids to kill police officers, won their argument and Ice-T had to pull the song and change the name of the album. Interestingly enough, Tarantino did not meet the same criticism and was praised by many for his "genius" in handling the violence of the police scene. A double standard? To say that one form of violence is better or more acceptable than another is ridiculous. The hard edges of gangsta Rap are no different than Tarantino's violence. By stating that the violence of movies and TV shows does not cause acts of aggression while at the same time indicting Rap music as a reason for aggression, we set an absurd double standard.

Rap music is violent because it reflects the real life struggles of life on the inner city streets. And although this is not an appealing vision for many, it is still a telling story, one that deserves attention. Of course many songs are often blown out of proportion, but the kernel of struggle is still discernible. When groups sing about drive-bys, drugs and beer drinking, it's because the singers grew up with these realities. These are not imaginary issues that are drummed up to sell records; they are the incidents of real life for many kids in America. Rap music is a window to real life, an expression of frustration and a way for Americans to understand what is going on in our streets. This is not to validate the violence, but to say that the expression is a positive release for both listener and singer, something that should not be so readily ignored and dismissed.

We look to expression—music, literature, cinema—as a way of release. Indeed, it is powerful; it can change hearts and minds. But expression is ultimately a product of experience. It is an interpretation of life and all the emotions that go along with it—fear, love, anger, happiness—feelings as old as our ability to express them. Rap, as a member of this community, cannot and should not be singled out as the cause of violence. It is an expression of life in our inner cities, a vision that is sometimes hopeful and sometimes violent but always based in reality. And if we listen without prejudice, we might begin to hear the words behind the violence. We might even be able to begin focusing on the real factors of ghetto life rather than constantly blaming the messenger for the delivery of bad news.

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**A Case for Affirmative Action**

CYNTHIA TUCKER

Why are many Americans—white Americans, mostly—so upset about college admissions programs that take race into account for a handful of students whose test scores are slightly below standards? Why are programs that boost the chances of black and brown students so controversial, while similar programs that benefit white students go without notice?

For example, the county's premier colleges and universities have long reserved places for the lesser-achieving children of their well-heeled graduates and donors. At the University of Georgia, family connections are one of the dozen or so factors—along with race—used to assess about 20 percent of its applicants who don't quite meet academic standards. In other words, a kid whose test scores and grades are not quite good enough may get into Georgia anyway if his mom or dad is a graduate.

That practice allows weaker students—most of them white—to be admitted at the expense of better students. Yet no one bemoans it as an assault on the vaunted "meritocracy."

College admissions also grant athletic "preferences," a device that happens to benefit many kids—black, white, and brown—who otherwise could not get near their chosen college. For some reason, a black kid with low SATs who can score touchdowns and generate a lot of money for the university is not nearly as offensive as a black kid with low scores who just wants an education.

To be fair, some criticism of college admissions efforts is legitimate. Awarding scholarships based on race makes no sense, since they would often

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