
WITH VOLUME! HIP-HOPPERS AND THEIR RESPONSES TO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES, BEFORE RAP'S GOLDEN AGE

Clifton Watson, Department of History, North Carolina Central University

Introduction

This paper will explore some of the ways that the hip-hop community has been in relationship with social action efforts. In doing so, this paper attempts to highlight instances of rap artists and/or their productions at the center of social action efforts. In order to provide some context for artist involvement, this paper also delves into the personal politics and social and political development of artists.

Hip-Hop's Early Connection to a Culture of Resistance

Hip-Hop culture has been firmly connected to the African-American community's tradition of resistance. Not only have "hip-hoppers" been traditionally hell-bent on expressing their opinions on pertinent social, economic, and political issues, they have also consistently attempted to educate, organize, and mobilize their peers and communities around issues of concern and importance. Some argue that this type of activity amongst hip-hop communities has been overstated (Reed, 1999; Bynoe, 1990; Lewis, 1997). They contend that the role of the "hip-hop activist" has been romanticized and that such people, "for the most part [do] not follow up their declarations with programs to facilitate substantive changes" (Bynoe, 1990). This argument does have some legitimacy; however, we must remind ourselves that the hip-hop community has always been diverse. By extension, its artists' relationship to politics and social action have been equally diverse. We must also be sure to remember that the pool of socially/politically-conscious artists is larger than those who are most visible. However, beyond arguing that hip-hop is invisible in the world of politics, some argue that it *should not* play a political role. They argue that a lack of experience in social action, knowledge of how the political process works, and their lack of credibility in the larger black community and mainstream America would render them ineffective in the political arena (Bynoe, 1990). On the other hand, Bynoe (1990) argues that the notion that, "the work of defining and implementing a political agenda, should be left to post Civil Rights activists, organizers, and politicians," is simply problematic. It represents a value-laden analysis of what people offer social and political action efforts. It implies that the creation of political agenda happens in a vacuum, and suggests only a chosen few should be granted purview over the political agenda of many. This sentiment is at the very root of why some overlook significant social action efforts that have involved hip-hop artists and/or their productions.

From its inception, this music held a particular consciousness and resistance quality. The earliest ad hoc concerts were met with police oppression, as young people held parties on public property, rigging street lamps to accommodate the makeshift sound systems hip-hop disc jockeys and emcees (masters of ceremony or rappers) used to entertain audiences (Fernando, 2000). Even as the 1979 release of Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" emerged as an immense commercial dance hit and flexed rap music's commercial promise, hip-hop music was anchored by a critical social and political consciousness that had been well-received by wider audiences and was a mainstay for many. Brother D and the Community People's "How We Gonna Make a Black Nation Rise" is an example of such. Released in 1979 – the same year of Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" – Brother D's production became a significant hit. It drew acclaim for both its beat and bite. A Village Voice music critic exclaimed, "Not since Stevie Wonder's 'Black Man' has a party jam been so unabashedly didactic or single-mindedly intelligent" (Berman, 1980). Brother D, a young math teacher named Daryl Aamaa Nubyhan, recorded this song to reflect the philosophy of a cultural organization he called the Nation Black Science (Toop, 1991). The track made a consistent plea for the black community to "agitate, educate, organize" and attempted to warn its audience of the price paid when the importance of organized politics is overlooked:

As you're movin' to the beat in the early light/The country's moving
too – to the right/Prepare now, or get high and wait/Cause there ain't
no partying in a police state (Brother D/Community People, 1979).

The track was released on Clappers International, a black-owned record label that endorsed the premise that music should not be used solely for entertainment purposes. The label's stint in the industry began by "releasing anti-corporate artists' controlled reggae." On the jacket of its first compilation, *Black Slavery Days*, Lister Lowe, owner of Clappers Records, proclaimed, "Clappers Records were never meant to be entertainment, it's a weapon without compromise" (Berman, 1980).

While the politics of Nubyhan's Nation Black Science organization are obscure, his effort speaks volumes. The suggestion that his production was an element of a wider approach to addressing issues salient to black communities implies an activism not often associated with commercial rap acts. Despite the excitement surrounding hip-hop's early commercial success, Brother D's production suggests a felt need within the hip-hop community for socially conscious and critical music. Such a production speaks to the distinction made by early audiences between conscious hip-hop music – "music with a message" – and commercial rap, which, some argue, is often co-opted by white-owned record labels (Simmons, 2001). Brother D's noncommercial production exemplified a freedom via its lyrics and connection to a philosophy around art and politics.

Hip-hop pioneer, Afrika Bambaataa, suggests that hip-hop music's emergence – in part – is linked to an “anti-disco movement,” supported by hordes of blacks and Latinos “who couldn't afford the discotheques,” and who were growing tired of what they interpreted as a lack of innovation on behalf of the disco genre (Adler, 1983; Toop, 1991). The dying of disco culture contributed to the success and popularity of not only artists like Brother D, but also of places like Disco Fever – a Bronx nightclub which served as a hub for folks who did not feel connected to the disco scene. Disco Fever was the center of the South Bronx's nightlife during the early 1980's. Its location and \$5 admission per person ensured that it was accessible to “a community where nearly 55 percent of the total population [had] been officially unemployed for so long that they [were] no longer considered part of the work force” (Adler, 1983). During its reign as “the” hot spot, it was “packed six nights a week” (Adler, 1983). It “emerged as the headquarters of rap music, which was usually heard on the streets,” and accommodated an audience often alienated from other centers of nightlife (Adler, 1983). While Disco Fever was clearly driven by entertainment, its patrons also had a relationship with “The Fever,” which reflected their sense of community solidarity and a need to bring about social equality. For example, in 1982, the “community minded club raised \$8,000 for the United Negro College Fund.” It celebrated the 1983 Easter holiday with its community's youngsters by “open[ing] its doors to some 250 persons... for an Easter party with free admission, refreshments and gifts” (Adler, 1983). In suit with a demonstrated concern for young people and the community, the Fever's staff along with volunteers also made attempts to support families. Together they “organize[d] bus rides to local prisons so that families and inmates from the neighborhood” could maintain contact (Adler, 1983).

Hip-Hop & Black Politics

The early 1980's stand as an important period for activism in the hip-hop community. America's minority communities were at a crossroads of sorts with the waning of the Civil Rights and Black Power eras and an increasing negative reaction to the “gains” made by African-Americans and other minorities as a result of the 1960's and 1970's freedom struggle. This reaction, or “white backlash,” was undoubtedly egged on by the domestic social and economic policy of President Ronald Reagan, and would stretch through George W. Bush Sr.'s administration. “Reaganomics” rejected an agenda “which sought black social and economic advancement through government sponsored social programs” (Franklin, 1992). Reagan, particularly, became a target of criticism for many, as his program cuts seemed to have had clear negative ramifications for inner-city youth and minority communities. In addition, Reagan's anti-black and anti-minority posture – many thought – stretched beyond his policy directives. During his run for presidency in 1980, he said of the South Bronx, “I haven't seen anything as bad as this since London after the blitz!” (Adler, 1983). Needless to say, such comments, though they were made before he actually was elected president,

put him under a particular scrutiny amongst America's minority communities.

By the time the campaign cycle for the 1984 presidential election picked up steam, the potential of electing Jesse Jackson as the democratic presidential candidate provided enough of an antithesis to Reagan for his detractors to support. Rap artists offered some commentary, which spoke to this. Melle Mel, co-author of the "Message," released a pro-Jesse Jackson cry entitled "Jesse!" Melle Mel's (1984) message was clear:

Everybody get up and vote . . .
Brothers stand together so everyone can see/Our brother Jesse Jackson go down in history
30th day of September/Is the day everybody will remember
He's changing our condition/So join the Rainbow Coalition.¹

The hip-hop community's relationship to social/political action would continue to flourish through the mid-1980's with the development and popularity of the Universal Zulu Nation (UZN), under the guidance of Afrika Bambaataa (Bam). While Bam's emergence as a leader was linked to his involvement in the Black Spades (one of New York City's largest gangs during this period), his leadership style was unique and reflected his generation's proximity to Black Power, as well as its often scathing critique of Civil Rights era leadership (Hagler, 1984). Bam's direction helped some re-channel the sense of unity and belonging nurtured by groups like the Spades, into more constructive activity, sponsored by the UZN.

Bam's depth and vision for his cohorts seems to have been understood on some level. While some labeled Bam's sect, The Black Spades, as "heartless lunatics," Bam was always clear that the Spades were not just about fighting (Hagler, 1984). He argued that the Black Spades also helped the community through its fundraising for sickle cell anemia and getting people to register to vote (Hagler, 1984). Bam described the Spades' involvement in the community as such: "A lot of times there were no jobs for youth, no trips happening in the community centers, so the gangs got them there" (Toop, 1991). This suggests that the members and leadership of the Spades were at least somewhat conscious of social inequality and the implications of their actions

¹ Melle Mel, "Jesse," Sugarhill Records, 1984. Other artists would also support Jesse Jackson. While Melle Mel's production represents a more mainstream artist's attempt to do so, many local artists did the same. Isaac Fergusson spearheaded the Brooklyn-based artists' collective "Starship Rainbow Coalition" in their production of two "pro-Jesse" rallying cries: "PUSH" and "The Ballad of Jesse Jackson" (see Noel, Peter, 1984. "Starship Rainbow Coalition" New York Amsterdam News, 11: 38).

on the daily lives of residents in their communities. Later it would be this energy that drove UZN existence as an extended family of sorts. Through UZN, hip-hop artists and fans were connected by a love for the culture and a belief in the importance of humanism, wisdom, spirituality and peace. In 1982, UZN sponsored its third annual Black History Month celebration at the Bronx River Project Community Center – the former site of the Black Spades’ sponsored youth field trips and parties (Hagler, 1983).

Hip-hop activism continued to thrive through the late 1980’s. Its tradition as well as the social and political climate of the late 1980’s fed its activity (Bohlen, 1989; Halasa, 1990). Public Enemy’s (PE) ambitious effort to “inspire 5000 potential black leaders,” to “advoca[te] for people whose voices are not heard,” by their distribution of Afrocentric literature prior to the release of *Fear of a Black Planet*, and Chuck D’s participation in the Student Call to Washington March, represents hip-hop activism during one of its finest hours (Azerrad, 1988; 1990a; 1990b; Anonymous, 1990; Wye, 1990; Sanchez, 1990). PE’s activity represents a continuum within the hip-hop community of artists and audience members getting involved and/or finding ways to voice their opinion on social/political issues. Similarly, rap group X-Clan participated in voter registration drives for David Dinkins’ successful campaign as New York’s first black mayor in 1989 (Halasa, 1990; Celestine, 1989; Lynn, 1989). Further, X-Clan’s participation in the “Day of Outrage Protest,” their relationship to Black Nationalist and Civil Rights activist Sonny Carson (a.k.a. Abuubadika, Mwlina), and to the Committee to Honor Black Heroes also indicates their commitment to challenging elected officials and the mass public to recognize and work to reduce social inequality in this country (Halasa, 1990). The involvement of groups like Boogie Down Productions working in collaboration with the National Urban League Stop in the Stop the Violence Campaign further supports hip-hop’s role in engaging in consciousness-raising activity that has the potential to mobilize poor black communities for social action.

Conclusion

While those that laud hip-hop artists’ activism sometimes go overboard in essentializing these persons as political leaders, critics often fail to give credit for the social-political consciousness-raising that some artists inspire. Research in hip-hop and activism needs to ensure that the stories of artists’ civic participation – in the variety of ways it manifests itself – are not lost. It is also important that the neighborhood-based social change efforts involving artists or the ways by which artists’ politics are articulated through their music are not wholly dismissed as insignificant. When we become diligent to this end, we may discover ways to socialize a generation of youth that some have written off as apathetic about the importance of civic activism on a local, national, and even international scale.

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