

Is Hip Hop Really Dead or Under Construction

Written by Tony Muhammad ID3231
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South Florida's Underground Artists Take Hip Hop Global By Tony Muhammad

The fundamental message of Nas' new album *Hip Hop is Dead* has caught the attention of Hip Hoppers worldwide and forced us all to painfully look inwards and confront reality. Has Hip Hop become so commercialized that the music no longer reflects how those that represent the culture actually live? From chat rooms to message boards, everyone from old schoolers to new schoolers to true schoolers to dirty south grilled out blingers to back packing "purists" – are all debating the question, IS HIP HOP REALLY DEAD?

A recent sign that may indeed prove that the culture is dead was an on-air (radio) argument between female rapper-turned-radio host Monie Love and Young Jeezy on December 7. What was to be an interview promoting Young Jeezy's new album on the Philadelphia-based morning show turned into a debate on whether or not street credibility or talent/creativity determines MC authenticity and whether or not Hip Hop is really dead. The heated dialogue between the two made it clear that Young Jeezy had no clue who he was talking to. Monie Love is a British-born Hip Hop veteran of over 20 years who has an undeniable and popular presence in the culture. In the end, Monie Love shut down Young Jeezy's disagreement, almost plea, that Hip Hop is alive by simply saying, "No, it's dead." It was at that point that Young Jeezy walked off of the interview and out of the studio.

It is speculated throughout the industry that it was because of this incident that Monie Love's contract with the station was not renewed (although denied by the station's reps). Rumor has it that the incident may have ruined some "payola" (money for song spins) agreement between the radio station and Jeezy's record label or management. The incident not only shows how chain-flossing new schoolers are increasingly out of touch with Hip Hop foundation layers who built the culture they profit from, but it also shows how corporations have a tight grip on what is being played on the radio and how that artist and song are represented to the public– no matter how detrimental the messages are and how influential they are on the youth. In the end, it matters less if the artist's music is or is not authentically Hip Hop, but deplorably, what matters is how much they paid to get their record played or "get on."

In South Florida's ever-fluctuating underground Hip Hop mine lurks sparkling diamonds in the rough that choose to shine on their own terms rather than move with "blinged-out" trends. They make traditional sounding east coast Hip Hop music, a style that has been downplayed since Miami was nicknamed "The Bottom," and later the "Dirty South" in the late 90s. Because of stereotypes concerning what Miami urbanites typically appreciate in terms of music selection

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since the "hey day" of Miami Bass in the 80s, their style of music has been largely ignored by commercial radio. This is of course with the exception of Hot 105.1 FM recently adding old school Hip Hop shows on Friday and Saturday nights because marketing execs finally discovered that Miami experienced a significant influx of migrants from the east coast throughout the 80s and 90s; many of them Hip Hoppers who still bump in their cars classic albums like It Takes A Nation of Million To Hold Us Back by Public Enemy and The Low End Theory by A Tribe Called Quest.

But, if we were to guide ourselves simply by what is played in the radio, we would say that that's all "old school" and no longer relevant. After all, it's being played on the station for the best in hits and OLDIES! Despite the stereotypes and despite the odds that traditional east coast style Hip Hop will ever blow up in Miami, the caliber of artists described above continue to make music in the way that they do simply because it is that particular style that inspired them while growing up. Repping "305" is not so much a priority to them as building with others, regardless of geography, who share a similar vision of success and are constantly on the grind to get ever closer to where they want to be.

Three local emcees that have been strongly building as of late, recording songs and even making whole albums are the trio of Orion, Ephnik (together known as OYE) and Omniscient of the group F.L.O.W. Official. The three collaborated on the compilation project The Movement Vol. 1, which has set the tone for the making of a Vol. 2 as well as featuring each other on their own individual projects. Reflecting on the current down state of the underground scene in Miami, Omniscient emphatically vents, "Three years ago there was a stage, a group of people ... Maneuvers, Mind Shift, Source Spoken, F.L.O.W. Official ... there were a lot of things poppin", open mics, there was SLAK in the Design District (Omniscient's own open mic spot for emcees) ... We moved on from that because people were not supporting." Omniscient, being in the game for the past 7 years, notes, "It doesn't seem like the younger ones are trying to build the scene ... they're trying to take advantage, always trying to get put on." Orion, echoing Omniscient's concerns, comments, "I feel that a lot of emcees hate on each other because of the way the scene is, it's a dog eat dog competition in Miami. A lot of emcees do not look out for other emcees."

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Omniscient describes how many of those who were building the scene several years ago have lost faith in building local unity. Several of which, he mentions, have even stopped making the traditional east coast style Hip Hop that they love and have begun making more stereotypically Miami "booty shaking" type music as an attempt to gain more commercial appeal. Not naming any names, Omniscient comments, "I don't think they really want to do that [style of music] ... the system forces you to do that. It becomes a situation where you can go the easy route or go against the grain and do it the way you want to do it." "I'm not saying it's wrong or right, I'm just saying stay true to yourself," he adds.

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Both Omniscent and Ephnik admit that they have made some compromises in the past when it comes down to making music, but it has been more on their own terms. Omniscent, who is Puerto Rican, never wrote lyrics in Spanish before until he was approached in 2005 to partake in a Reggaeton compilation distributed by Sony. Instead of rhyming about misogyny and getting drunk, as it seems like every other Reggaeton song on the compilation is about, he stood his ground and did lyrics that were more in tune with the way he actually lives his life.

Colombian-born Ephnik himself is known more for creating soulful and socially "conscious" Reggaeton. He dropped a heart aching banging joint about the birth and life of a drug dealer called Juanito on *The Movement Vol. 1*. The two are currently working on a strictly Spanish Hip Hop album to be marketed to the Latin-American audience. A snip bit of what is to be expected from the album can be heard on the extremely political, human rights anthem *Derecho Humano* off of Omniscent's just released "pre-album" *Vocal Revolution*

Orion, still hopeful about building a scene and keeping the art of emceeing alive, has started a monthly open-mic for emcees at the Saturday night venue *Catalyst* in Miami Springs. He notes, "We're trying to build a scene out here. Artists like Omniscent and Detox, whom we've worked with in the past ... We've been open to colab with ... If they have a show, they tell us about it. While there is a lot of hating, there are some who are still trying to build the scene." His partner Ephnik observes, "The people who we are working with we feel are steady with what they're doing. When we come together, we are always trying to do something positive and furthering." However, Ephnik also notes, "As far as a unification of a scene, I have really not seen the interest of people as a whole coming together in the name of Hip Hop."

The trio mentions other factors that have contributed to the decline of the scene, including a flood of people who all claim they can rhyme but do not go the extra mile to treat their craft as actual work, more or less like a hobby. Omniscent explains, "Now, the underground scene has been oversaturated with garbage, rookie emcees. Everyone has a story about how they've been writing since they were young."

Orion comments with his own experience, "There's almost a rapper on every block. Everyone I know knows someone who raps ... a cousin or a neighbor or an uncle who raps. I was out one night with some friends and they had a friend who raps. He took out his mixtapes and was giving them out for free. He was then schooling me about how I should give my mixtapes out for free, that I'm wasting my time trying to sell my music on the streets. Later on that night, on my way to the bar I sold two CDs. This kid's eyes were wide open." Orion admits that giving away

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promos is "another way of playing the game," but adds, "It does mess us up in a world where record sales aren't what they used to be." Ephnik explains further, "It's kind of like you're a carpenter and there's another carpenter across the street and he works for free, it's hurting the craft. It means nothing to try to gain mass appeal if 900 people out of 1000 that got your CD for free don't like your music as opposed to selling it to someone who likes what he heard and is going to bump it in his car and then 4 or 5 other people who hear it are going to get affected by it."

Ephnik and Orion mention how they are always prepared when they are out in the scene with a bag full of CDs and a CD player with headphones so that potential fans can sample their music before purchasing it, thus building what they believe is a stronger market for their product. Orion elucidates, "If they buy it and they like it, they're not going to throw it away, guaranteed. Promos get thrown away." "I throw away promos and I'm a music lover," he confesses. "When we take 21 tracks of original music to the streets and we sell it, people are outraged," Says Orion. The comment I receive from the majority of people out there is "Oh, you should be giving this out for free because you're nobody." The thing is you have so many rappers nowadays with CDs filled with rhyming over candy sounding radio instrumentals and giving it out for free on the streets for the sake of exposure. Meanwhile, they're spending all of their money duplicating the CD, making all of the flyers, busting their a** out on the streets giving it out to people thinking that they're playing this promotions game. Really, you're playing a different ball game. That ball game is when there is so much money behind you with a label or some investor that you are able to do that and accept the loss. It makes no sense for us to go to the streets and just give away our art, our craft," he strongly adds. Ephnik firmly notes how his goal in becoming successful is just like any other artist; commercial, underground or otherwise. "The difference is administration, marketing and discipline. Me personally, as an artist I'm tired of being associated with the word 'starving.'" I think I am a person who stands for freedom and unfortunately in this country it takes money to be free. People don't want to see that and talk all this sh*t and at the end of the day, if you want to commit yourself to something and further it, then payment has got to be part of it in order to have the time and the leisure and the equipment and the studio time, flyers and T-shirts ... money is a necessity," stresses Ephnik.

In terms of promoting themselves outside of South Florida, all three agree that MySpace has been good to them. Orion mentions how he came to learn of the Umoja Village (shantytown) in Liberty City from someone who regularly visits his web page to check out his music. Not hiding their social activist side which truly complements their socially cognizant lyrics, Orion and Ephnik mention how they make regular contributions to the cause as well as participate at positive community building efforts such as the annual Organic Hip Hop Conference put on by Urban America Newspaper and the Florida International University African New-World Studies program.

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Omniscient, who has actively participated in the Organic Hip Hop Conference since its first year in 2003, was diagnosed and successfully battled cancer in 2004. Since then, he has changed his diet and has developed a boost of creative energy and new focus as to where to take his career to become successful. He considers his battle with cancer to have been "a blessing" as it has made him more aware of the "garbage" that is put into food in this country. He mentions how because of his experience, he has been influenced to look into the richness of organic foods and the vegetarian lifestyle. Since becoming well, Omniscient has been strongly following up with other artists that are on his vibe both locally and internationally. Besides his work with Orion and Ephnik, he is currently working on several album projects. Among them is the Arrowax album with fellow Puerto Rican emcee 7 Star, who has successfully toured Europe several times. Omniscient has toured Europe himself with the revolutionary-oriented Botanica del Jibaro and is working on a solo album with a production crew he met in Spain called Strand and Tres. Besides this, he continues to work with his original crew, F.L.O.W. Official (comprising of himself, E.M.O., Priest and Sic Vic) who are planning to release a full length album later this year called Architects.

Ephnik and Orion have their fair share of business, each currently working on solo projects as well as their combined OYE album produced by Paris-based West Bert of End-To-End. Like Omniscient, Ephnik has experienced his fair share of success through touring internationally. Just this summer he completed a tour of several South American countries; the highlight in Peru where he performed for a crowd of 8,000 people while opening up for renowned Puerto Rican Hip Hop pioneer Vico C. He also had the opportunity to record with other independent artists including Umano y Mazetas, Esaac MC, Tropas Costeras and Guanaco, getting featured on several compilations. Ephnik comments about the importance of moving beyond the MySpace world and actually getting out and touring internationally, "I think it's important to hustle to get the opportunity for exposure and touring is a crucial factor in determining whether an underground artist surfaces or not."

He describes the Hip Hop scene in South America as "still underground" yet "hungry," in a way reminding him of the freshness of the Hip Hop scene in New York in the early 90s. Ephnik mentions how after several of the concerts he performed at there were workshops for the youth, educating them about Hip Hop culture. He stresses that there is a great need for this here in the U.S. since we do not have shows like Yo! MTV Raps any longer to inspire and offer guidance to the youth through Hip Hop music. Truly, it was the substance driven Hip Hop of the late 80s/early 90s that has influenced these three to become the type of artists, and overall type of intellectually mature men, that they are. Independent artists whom Ephnik and Orion are currently building with include Infinit of the group Sumthin" Else, Detox, Avitar (based out of NY) and producers Name Brand and One Take (also based out of NY). The duo is currently getting ready to do a show in Puerto Rico in late January with Name Brand.

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Besides MySpace, all three artists are currently looking to market themselves and their music in the direction that the music industry is headed – predominantly indie and on-line. Ephnik mentions how they are currently looking into getting their music on iTunes and available to download as ring tones. Again, commenting on the local scene, Omniscent says, "I don't see much happening over here, so that's why our focus is out there – the world!"

Based on the work that these highly determined artists are putting in, it can at best be said that HIP HOP IS TRULY NOT DEAD, but rather in a period of transition of re-defining and restructuring itself as the music industry and the global community currently are doing the same. In truth, their authentic and idealistic voices of truth and reason represent the future of Hip Hop, which is merely UNDER CONSTRUCTION!

For more info on these artists visit their websites and MySpace pages:

www.ephniko.com

www.myspace.com/omniscent305

www.myspace.com/ephniko

www.myspace.com/orion327

www.myspace.com/sekretservice