

Hip Hop and America's Racial Politics

Written by Matt Birkhold ID4126
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Last week Thursday I was in Philly handling a few personal things and discovered that Wu Tang Clan happened to be in town that same day. A good friend of mine was going to the show so I decided to go as well. Before the show I went to the box office to reluctantly slide my fifty dollars under the window and get a dollar and my ticket back. As I walked towards the train, I thought to myself, "I ain't never paid fifty dollars for no concert... It's the Wu, though. It'll be dope. Plus, if all eight or nine members show up, that's only like 6 dollars per member." Unfortunately, I was wrong. While the show wasn't bad, I couldn't help but think about how bad hip hop's racial politics are.

My first hip hop memory involves sitting on the couch at my neighbor's house waiting for Kool Moe Dee's "Wild Wild West" to come on TV. It was 1987 and I was seven or eight. My second memory is when my neighbor's brother bought NWA's Straight Outta Compton. It was '88 and I remember thinking to myself, "This shit is crazy." A love affair with hip hop began that day and took me many places. For years I was a DJ, I wrote graffiti, and even made a five-song tape some time around 1998. Right or wrong, like an interracial relationship, my love affair with hip hop was hard because it was a black thing.

That's no longer the case. Thursday's Wu Tang show was the first hip hop show I've been to in four or five years. Frankly, my love affair with hip hop ended in 2003 when Joe Budden, on a mixtape remix to Usher's "Confessions," decided it was best to punch his pregnant "jump off" in the stomach to terminate the pregnancy she was determined to keep. My loss of interest in hip hop also resulted from it no longer being a black thing. For some people, this is positive.

Two years ago, on a panel at the University of Illinois, two of my co-panelists, both black men, argued that the economic realities facing whites as a result of deindustrialization and outsourcing had finally caught up to the economic realities of black Americans. Consequently, they argued that working class whites, with hip hop-assisted insights into black consciousness, would begin to identify with black politics.

In *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Bakari Kitwana takes this idea a step further and argues that white kids' relationship to hip hop is indicative of a new racial politics. According to Kitwana, five primary factors have created this new racial politics, "the rise of a global economy and a resulting sense of alienation among young whites in the 1980s and 1990s; significant ruptures in the popular music scene; a further shifting American economy at the turn of the millennium, which was accompanied by a declining sense of white privilege; the institutionalization of key aspects of the civil rights movement; and finally the sociopolitical range of post-1960s Black

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popular culture." Taken together, these five individual factors are responsible for white youth's discontent with the American political system and create the potential for hip hop to become an integrated human rights movement.

I really want to agree with Kitwana but I can't. Despite our involvement in hip hop, white people still don't care about black people. At best, only a handful of the white kids at that Wu Tang show in Philly who sang along with Raekwon's line, "sticking up white boys on ball courts," would be willing to walk the blocks that Wu Tang is from. This is because they believe that black men are who they portray themselves to be on record. While there is no question that the way race is lived in the US has changed over the last fifty years, as long white interactions with black folk occur through stereotypes, America's racial politics will stay the same.

Matt Birkhold is a Brooklyn based independent scholar, educator, and writer. His work appears regularly in *Wiretap* and has also appeared in *The Nation* and *Mother Jones* in addition to several other places.

He is founder of Political Education Outreach Collective and editor of the forthcoming National Hip Hop Political Convention publication, *Elements*.

He can be reached at

BIRKHOLD@GMAIL.COM