

Is Sexism at the Heart of Hip Hop Today

Written by Jeffrey Boyette ID3379
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Beyond Beats and Rhymes, directed by Byron Hurt, featuring Mos Def, Fat Joe, Chuck D and Busta Rhymes.

IT WOULD be hard not to notice the violent, misogynistic and homophobic content of mainstream hip-hop.

For some critics, this content is enough to dismiss rap as infantile, but for devout fans critical of oppressive social structures such as Byron Hurt, director of the documentary Beyond Beats and Rhymes, hip-hop deserve more consideration.

As Hurt explains in the beginning of Beyond, he was forced to question the content of hip-hop after seeing the effects of sexism while working as a mentor in violence prevention. Intent on finding a mediating analysis that could either justify or finalize his love for hip-hop, Hurt sets out to unmask the finest details within the culture and industry.

Beyond features interviews from a collection of professional and street hip-hop artists, hip-hop historians, activists, fans and industry big wigs that, all together, provide a greatly needed analysis of hip-hop culture that is neither condescending nor glorifying.

Most commendable is Hurt's ability to sidestep dismissive moral criticism and place hip-hop within the context of a racist, corporatized music industry and a society entrenched in violence, sexism and homophobia.

Hurt begins his excavation of rap with hip-hop historian Kevin Powell who recounts how hip-hop began as a reaction to systemic violence against Blacks following the decline of the civil rights movement. Economic disinvestment in the South Bronx and other Black neighborhoods in New York exacerbated urban poverty to extreme levels.

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A generation of marginalized Black youth responded through graffiti, dance and rap music. Since this early hip-hop culture thrived through direct interaction of artists and fans in the Burroughs of New York, its content was defined by common resentment to systemic racism and poverty rather than product appeal.

Whether or not the music was explicitly political, it held a particular political significance as a form of unification against repression. Today, it would seem that little of this early world of hip-hop still exists.

In *Beyond*, Hurt takes particular issue with the redundant themes of hyper-masculine “thug” violence and women’s degradation that dominate nearly every rap song on the radio.

In one interview, Fat Joe explains to Hurt that in rap today “everybody wants to be hard.” This attitude leads to the all-too-common image of next-to-nude women and male rappers flaunting cash or guns.

While these images put forward sexist and sometimes violent attitudes, Hurt’s interviewees, however, remind viewers that sexism and violence are by no means isolated to rap. This point is well illustrated with images from mainstream politics and pop culture of explicit violence and sexism, including clips from the Iraq war and Arnold Schwarzenegger mocking political opponents as “girly men.”

Singling out hip-hop against this broad backdrop of violence and misogyny can be seen as a form of racial scapegoating that ignores the actual roots of social repression. While *Beyond* reveals severe sexism and homophobia among hip-hop artists, it makes clear that the persistence of these ideas is not the fault of individual rappers.

Instead viewers see that the representation of Black culture in hip-hop is constructed by the often white CEOs of corporations like Clear Channel or BET. The result is a projection of Black culture onto society that contradicts the actual experiences of Blacks in America. This false image can then be used by politicians and right-wing ideologues to justify the marginalization of Blacks.

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Though some artists such as The Coup and Dead Prez continue to produce music that challenges racism and the status quo of state repression, they lack legitimacy because of their exclusion from the dominant record labels. Beyond does a great service by giving audiences from both within and without the world of hip-hop a lens through which to view misogyny in mainstream culture.

Hurt is currently touring Beyond Beats and Rhymes on college campuses across the country. Check out www.bhurt.com for details.