

Trials of a Hip Hop Educator: Old Culture Going Out, New Expression Coming In. Does The Music Industry Need A Bail Out Plan? - Part I by Tony Muhammad

As we anxiously await the passing of a \$800 billion stimulus package deal by the Federal Government that promises the creation and maintenance of jobs in the midst of a crippled economy 11 trillion dollars deep in debt, we notice that just like almost all other forms of business, the music industry is suffering. In the past decade major record labels have reported several billions of dollars in losses and have laid off several thousands of employees. A number of of these labels have consequently merged as a means of survival. Some of the most noted mergers during this span include Sony and BMG in 2004 and Capitol and Virgin under EMI in 2007. Analysts argue that this trend will most likely intensify within the next few years as the economy is expected to get worse before it gets any better. However, the reasons why the music industry is suffering are much more profound than just simply music lovers deciding to purchase less CDs all of a sudden due to a crunch in their pocketbooks. The problem is also much deeper than a decade-long worth of consumers engaged in a free alternative; downloading music on peer-to-peer file sharing Internet networks. The problem, in fact, is the reason why many choose to download rather than support and purchase an album. It is because corporations, including major record labels, have made music itself disposable in its mass production of demographic research-based monotony and as a result worthless. No other musical expression fits this description best than Hip Hop, especially in its most popular "gangsta" and "blingy" forms.

In its pop-cultural orientation, Hip Hop is not treated as an art form. It is instead a mere tool, or rather a hoar, used and abused in order to sell other products at the expense of Black culture, Black dignity and Black circumstance. The same can be said about Latinos and the now defunct Reggaeton movement, however, the level of Black exploitation far exceeds that of any other. The intent of making music on this level has been to maintain a mindless consumer culture. Since parents nowadays typically work long hours and are not able to give them much attention while growing up and public education has done very little to cultivate their full potential, the masses of the youth have been easily led through the music to focus on buying material items that (in their minds) make them appear more noticeable or attractive. These luxuries include designer apparel, jewelry, flashy cars or even bottles of liquor.

The influence that popular Hip Hop artists have on the habits of young people was clearly demonstrated in how Seagram's Gin became popularized in early 1990s through the Snoop Doggy Dogg song Gin & Juice. Is there any coincidence that Carl Horton, one of the liquor industry's top Black executives, was overseeing the sale and marketing of Seagram's Gin at that particular time? Also, considering that Edgar Bronfman, Jr. once had a long family history

amassing wealth in the liquor industry (through Seagram), would it not lead us to question if it has influenced him in how to market Hip Hop music as (at one time executive and now) vice chair of the Board of Directors of Vivendi Universal (which is over Universal Music Group) and CEO of Warner Music Group? What ties or stakes does he still have to the liquor industry? What friends does he owe favors to? Is there any coincidence that the "Crunk" or "Dirty South" sound dominated Hip Hop in much of this past decade? The Southern Crunk sound is in fact a musical frequency that activates the emotions (lower desires) of its listeners and compels them to, among other things drink heavily, especially in club type atmospheres. In fact, producer and artist Lil Jon, who is credited with originating the sound, is quoted by Scratch Magazine that while developing the "Crunk" sound he "was inspired by the synthesizer sounds of rave/dance music he heard playing in Atlanta strip clubs." Is there any coincidence that he is signed to Universal Republic Records (which is owned by Universal Music Group)?

What about special relationships between music executives and investors in the prisons? Do they exist? I pose this question because it seems like besides the military, the prison system is the only other industry that is currently making a lot of money. In the United States business leaders go by a certain motto, "If it doesn't make money, it doesn't make sense." And if the music industry is losing more money than its making, then certainly there must be other endeavors that major record label owners and executives are investing in that make money for them. Would it be too far fetched to believe that the prison industry would be one for many of them? After all, rhymes of violence and the "thug" image have been regarded as very "marketable" in Hip Hop music since the early 90s. The intent here however would not be to make money off of album sales, but rather make money based on the amount of youth (especially Black and Latino youth) going to prison.

Now mind you, I am not the type to argue a cause and effect relationship in these matters (i.e. that "gangsta" rap drives young Blacks and Latinos to commit crimes). What I will say out of my own experience in the classroom, in schools and in the street that the type of music that our youth listen to does indeed have an influence over their dress, posture, demeanor and behavior. I have witnessed students make drastic changes in the middle of the school year because now they maybe listening to some new rapper who has made a strong impression on them whom they consider being "gangsta." All of a sudden they begin to wear their pants loose down to their butt cracks, tip their fitted caps sideways and begin acting like nothing could faze them, including the authority of teachers, administrators or even their parents. Soon after the transformation, in the school environment they become the first to be suspended and the last to be counseled.

Again, in respects to all of the above said I would not argue that there is a direct cause and effect relationship between the music we listen to and our behaviors, but when we consider the following statistics we could most surely say that so-called "gangsta" rap has not helped in the

matter:

From 2000 to 2007 there was a 40 percent increase in the murder of young Black males ages 13 to 17 nationwide.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Nation-wide, Black youth under age 18 comprise of 15 percent of the juvenile population but disproportionately "make up 26 percent of juvenile arrests, 31 percent of referrals to juvenile court, 44 percent of the detained population, 34 percent of youth formally processed by the juvenile court, 46 percent of youth sent to adult court, 32 percent of youth adjudicated delinquent, 40 percent of youth in residential placement, and 58 percent of youth in state adult prisons."

Also according to the U.S. Department of Justice, youths of color accounted for approximately 32 percent of the U.S. juvenile population, but disproportionately represent 58 percent of youth in juvenile facilities. Likewise, more than half of all girls in juvenile facilities are of color.

In order to be able to begin turning these numbers around truly new standards needs to take shape both in the areas of entertainment and education. With the ever increasing financial crunch of the music industry, we can now expect independent artists both on a national and local level to make fewer strides to "get a deal" by a major record label as they will realize that it would be more fruitful for them to remain independent. No longer feeling the need to compromise and sound like "what's hot" according to corporate demographic charts, the most conscientious artists will spearhead a new expression within the culture with a level of intelligence and wisdom that eclipses the level of consciousness of past ages. In fact, if you've noticed old exploitative expressions are already dying out. The music industry as we know it is quickly crumbling and it should be allowed to do as such with no hope of any sort of bail out plan. As it was in the early days of Hip Hop in the Bronx in which the pioneers made something out of nothing and made it big, with a lack of resources in these rough economic times, it will force the cultural activists of today to become very creative. It will be this movement in the arts that will once again give voice to the voiceless and will be the true catalyst of change in this country and in this world as it is prophesized by various cultures throughout the world. As KRS-One put it himself in Fourth Quarter Free Throws in I Got Next (1997):

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Thursday, 19 February 2009 01:13 -

The next age will be the age of the water-bearer

It's called the Age of Aquarius

When logic and truth will take care of us

So in this age, of spiritual dignity

You'll see a rise in femininity

and creativity, meshed with masculinity

More to discuss next time, Allah (God) willing!

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