

Oprah Gets the Final Rap on this Hip-Hop Debate

Written by Yvonne Bynoe ID2744
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Do Blacks Really Need Oprah to be Down with HIP-HOP? By Yvonne Bynoe

Ludacris was the first to complain about Oprah. In the May, 2006 issue of GQ magazine he said that Oprah grudgingly had him on her show as a cast member of Oscar-winning film Crash. Ludacris called Oprah "unfair" and said that she edited his comments and lectured him about his music. Then 50 Cent, the crack-dealer turned rap artist jumped into the fray telling The Associated Press that Oprah rarely invites rap artists on her show. Showing his disdain for what he characterized as Oprah's old and primarily White audience he said, "[I] couldn't care less about Oprah or her show." Now, Ice Cube, the former front man for rap group, N.W.A has also expressed his upset that Oprah has not asked him to be on her show. He told FHM magazine that he's been involved with three projects that were pitched to Oprah but he's yet to get an invite. To promote the film Barbershop, Oprah only invited rapper-actress, Eve and comedian, Cedric the Entertainer. Ice Cube said that "maybe Oprah's got a problem with Hip Hop," but that can't be true since Eve was brought on.

Contrary to what Ludacris, 50 and Ice Cube have said, Oprah has had rap artists on her show, but her tastes admittedly lean more toward John Legend and Alicia Keys than to Lil Wayne and Trina. Sean "P-Diddy" Combs was on before he ran the New York City marathon to raise money for that city's public schools. Rap artist-producer, Kanye West, whose religious song, "Jesus Walks," stirred up controversy among church folks, has also been on her show. Queen Latifah and LL Cool J have also sat on Oprah's stage. More importantly rap artist-producer, Missy Elliott and the Queen of Hip Hop, Mary J. Blige were both part of Oprah's "Legends Weekend" that celebrated accomplished Black women. Earlier this month, Oprah, in response to critics, told MTV, I respect other people's rights to do whatever they want to do in music and art... She went on to say, I don't want to be marginalized by music or any form of art. ... I feel rap is a form of expression, as is jazz. I'm not opposed to rap. I'm opposed to being marginalized as a woman. If Oprah's comments need some decoding----she basically said that rap artists are free to record songs that call women bitches and 'hos and she is also free not to invite them on her show. In short, Oprah does not have a problem with rap music, she has a problem with rap that degrades women.

There is a particular arrogance that permeates Ludacris', 50's and Ice Cube's statements, as if Oprah owes them a spot on her show. It is Oprah who has issues if she will not put Black men on her show who have made millions of dollars demeaning Black women. If songs such as Ludacris' "Move Bitch", or NWA's "A Bitch Iz A Bitch" are not Oprah's cup of tea, then why should she be obligated to give these rapper-actors a platform to promote themselves or their work? This sense of entitlement is the result of years of rap artists going television on program spewing whatever ignorant and/or anti-social messages that they wanted, in the name of art. It

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does not seem to occur to these Black men (or to their supporters) that Oprah has the right not to use her show, which is seen by 21 million viewers a week, in 105 countries to promote performers whose work she personally feels is misogynistic or offensive. Oprah may not be kicking any Black feminist credentials, but rather than blindly using her influence to “help the brothers,” she is choosing not to support Black entertainers whose work denies the humanity of Black women.

The main focus of this brouhaha is not Hip Hop or rap, but the commercially successful subset of Hip Hop and rap that has transformed the public image of Black women from flygirls to bitches, tricks, ‘hos and chickenheads. This is the same sector of Hip Hop that has mainstreamed stripper culture, reduced the value of women to their body parts (remember Nelly’s music video “Tip Drill”) and mocked the importance of love. Rap music should not be banned or censured, but if living in an open society means that performers are free to express themselves, then that same freedom of expression has to be extended to folks who are not feeling them. Unfortunately among Black Americans there is little substantive debate about how popular culture affects our communities. Any criticism of rap music, however slight or legitimate, is routinely dismissed as “hating.”

In early 2004 Motivational Education Entertainment (MEE), a Philadelphia communication firm released a nationwide study of 2,000 “urban” teens. The authors of the study say that overall the teens in their survey indicated that, “Black females are valued by no one.” The vast majority of youth received many of their perceptions about life from the rap music that they regularly consumed. The study states that the one of most relevant changes in the Hip Hop generation from their Civil Rights and Black Power predecessors is the open disdain for Black women. It makes perfect sense then that Oprah, a Black woman would not want to even indirectly advance messages that negatively impact young Black women.

In his FHM interview, Ice Cube says that he deserves an invite on Oprah’s show because if he was not a “rags-to-riches story to her then who is?” Sure Ice Cube has made millions but his success is founded on rap songs such as NWA’s “One Less Bitch,” and the extremely raunchy, “Giving Up the Nappy Dugout,” a solo release. What Ice Cube fails to understand is that Oprah herself is the prototype for the “rags to riches” stories that she highlights on her shows. Oprah’s life story is a lot worse than that experienced by many rap artists. She grew up dirt poor in rural Mississippi to unwed parents and was sexually abused by a relative at age nine and repeatedly thereafter. She also endured years of bad relationships, weight problems, and a career changing demotion that moved her from her news anchor seat to co-hosting a morning talk show. Oprah credits her fortune to education and faith; her shows reflect her strong belief in self-transformation. For over 20 years Oprah has featured numerous “success” stories on her show—primarily women who become wealthy or influential through perseverance and creativity and people who have overcome adversity, tragedy or horrible abuse to produce richer lives for

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themselves, their families or their communities. For Oprah success is not predicated on amassing large sums money, it is based on the contribution that a person makes to improving his or her world.

Oprah has her detractors because she has used her show to bring attention to the subjects that she cares about. Implicit in all of the criticism from rap artists, is the idea that because Oprah is Black she is expected to push every Black entertainers' latest film or album regardless of what she thinks about it or them. The underlining sentiment is that if she is unwilling to set aside her values and opinions, then she can't be down for Black people. This position assumes that what is good for Black entertainers is good for Black folks and that notion is arguable. There are many media outlets that expose U.S. rap artists to the global marketplace. However, Oprah is virtually alone in her ability, through her selection of guests, to provide the world with a broader view of Black Americans and their achievements. For most of us, particularly Black women, who are frequently equated with the images of half-naked, gyrating females found in the rap music videos, a countervailing portrayal is welcomed. It is often said that those who control their image control their world and Harpo Studios is Oprah's world. If the brothers feel that they need more media visibility, rather than jocking Oprah, they should use their millions to finance and produce their own television talk shows, then they can have invite on whomever they wish. I am sure however that everyone would not make the cut with them either.

Yvonne Bynoe (www.YvonneBynoe.com) is the author of two books, Stand & Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership and Hip Hop Culture and the Encyclopedia of Rap and Hip Hop Culture. She is also a regular panelist on the National Public Radio program, News & Notes with Ed Gordon