

Are You a Hip Hop Apologist by Paris

Written by Paris ID3606

Wednesday, 18 April 2007 23:44 -

Since the Imus controversy recently erupted there has been a lot of finger-pointing and blame-placing as to what the root of the problem really is. Of course, we all know that racism and sexism existed before hip-hop -- that's a given. But it's completely beside the point when our (black) culture is dictated to us by white corporations. Follow me...

For the record, most folks in our communities didn't even know Don Imus before he made headlines with his slurs (and many still don't). For the most part, we remain oblivious to the tirades of him, Bill O'Reilly, Sean Hannity and others who constantly malign us and foster a climate of intolerance simply because these talking heads don't speak to US. For Imus to blame black culture as being the reason for his ignorance is both sad and backwards. He's a racist and a sexist, pure and simple, and he can't blame an art form or a culture that I'm certain he has little knowledge of for his actions. The fact that he named hip-hop "culture" as a culprit is telling, however.

If you haven't noticed by now, life imitates art -- it's not the other way around. There is no stronger cultural influence on people now than popular media, and hip-hop is at the forefront. Ask almost any child about the lyrics to a popular song or a scene from a video or movie and more often than not they will know the details better than they know their school lessons. Entertainers and the culture of celebrity that we find ourselves living in often hold more weight with kids than parents, educators, preachers politicians or even sports heroes. Can we blame some rappers for selling completely out? Of course. Be we have to look at the entire picture.

The argument is often made by Russell Simmons and others that rappers are poets who simply report on what we feel and our surroundings, and that we shouldn't be censored. On that point we partially agree -- we shouldn't be censored. But balance between the negative and positive needs to be provided, and it currently isn't. Most artistic integrity is questionable at best. My understanding is that artists are supposed to express what they believe in at all costs (if not, there's work at the post office). But most don't, and they mold their approaches to making music based on what they perceive major labels wanting. If Def Jam or Interscope or any of these other large culture-defining companies issued a blanket decree that they would only support material and artists with positive messages then 99% of those making music now would switch up to accommodate. That's real talk. I'm not saying these labels should (or would), but if they did, gangstas would stop being gangstas and misogynists would stop being misogynists at the drop of a DIME.

Many artists are like children, and most will say and do what is expected of them in order to

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benefit financially. And although there is definite self-examination that needs to take place within the artist community, the lion's share of the blame falls on the enablers who only empower voices of negativity. Record labels and commercial radio often use the excuse that they are "responding to the streets" and that they are "giving the people what they want." BULLSHIT. They dictate the taste of the streets, and people can't miss what they never knew. The fact is that there are conscious decisions made by the big business and entertainment elite daily about what to present to the masses -- and it is from those choices that we are allowed to decide what we do and do not like. Who presents the music that callers are invited to "make or break" on the radio? That callers are invited to "I vote on" on T.V.? Who decides on what makes it to the stores! shelves or the airwaves at all? Like I said, life imitates art, and pseudo-black culture is determined by those other than us every day. Walk into any rap label or urban radio station and you can count the number of black employees on one hand.

The argument in response could be made in defense of labels that if they don't respond to the streets then the music will just go underground. Huh? WHAT underground? Do you know how much good material is marginalized because it doesn't fit white cooperate America's ideals of acceptability? Independents can't get radio or video play anymore, at least not through commercial outlets, and most listeners don't acknowledge material that they don't see or hear regularly on the radio or on T.V. Very few of us are willing to actually seek out material and messages to identify with. As with anything in our fast food culture, we want our entertainment choices fast and in our collective face. For most listeners, all the rest need not apply.

What I want to know is, when did the worst in us become normal and accepted? When did it become par for the corporate course that "black man as thug" and "black woman as slut" be business as usual? Major companies now line up to profit from the buffoonery of a few...at the expense of us all. MTV, Viacom, Clear Channel, Boost Mobile, Amp mobile, Chevy, all major record labels and most video games come readily to mind, but there are many others.

I'm not a hater...although I do hate the imbalance in the industry right now and the negativity it fosters. I'm not calling for censorship. You can't lump me in with the Jesse Lee Petersons and the Armstrong Williamses of the world...bourgeois self-hating black men who demean other black people and profit at our expense. And nobody can say that I'm unqualified to speak on it, since I've contributed to the sale of just under 4 million albums independently, still run my own successful counter-establishment label (www.guerrillafunk.com) and have been embracing messages of self-esteem and self-sufficiency for years.

Like I said, I'm not calling for censorship, but I am calling for balance. I'm calling for more representation of points of view other than gangsta rap and escapism. More revolutionary

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voices. More voices of women. Where is the diversity? Music can only be kept artificially young and artificially dumb for so long before an inevitable backlash ensues, and that's what we're seeing take place now. Overall album sales for the January 1-April 2 period are down 16.6% -- with a 20.5% decline in CD album sales since last year -- and an even greater decline in hip-hop. Since LAST YEAR (and it was already raggedy last year, believe me). We're seeing the industry implode before our eyes. I heard somebody say recently that in this current era of style over substance Stevie Wonder, Parliament/Funkadelic, Earth, Wind Fire, Curtis Mayfield and others would never have been signed. Let that sink in for a second. They would never have been signed. Some of the very architects of black music as we know it would have been sidelined too, just as countless others are now, because they wouldn't have fit into white corporate America's cookie-cutter feel-good box of acceptable black behavior and appearance. Same goes for me, Public Enemy (they'll take the Flav, but not the Chuck), Kam, X-Clan, BDP, Wise Intelligent, dead prez, Zion-I, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, The Roots, Blackalicious, Immortal Technique, The Coup, T-K.A.S.H., Michael Franti and a host of others.

So how many half-naked women sipping Cris draped in blood diamonds poolside will it take before we collectively agree that shit is tired now? How many backward-ass coons with tats and plated grills and pimp cups etc. in the strip club before we all agree that enough is enough and that we need balance? When did the bar get set so low? When will we demand more? And as for Simmons' argument that "rappers are reporting what they see" etc, how are cocaine-kingpin rhymes or poolside pimp-nigga fantasies anyone's reality? Miss me with that bullshit argument. Yes, there should be room for all voices to be heard, but we have to be treated and presented equally. Now we have bitches and hos, players and pimps, gangstas and dealers -- but no kings and queens, no revolutionaries, no dissent, no political commentary and no anger -- how is that? In an era where EVERYTHING is political and people are more disgusted with the way things are more than ever? It's no mistake. Yes! I can say that we have failed, that we have allowed black culture to once again be co-opted, diluted and prostituted. Commercial rap culture is now to hip-hop is what disco was to funk. No wonder Nas is saying it's dead.

And who's to blame? Definitely not artists like the ones mentioned above. Not most artists at all, actually, because we don't control whether or not we're seen and heard by the masses. No, the blame needs to squarely sit on the shoulders of those who run the labels, the commercial radio stations, the television studios and the large corporate sponsors who reward only the worst in us and seem hell-bent on pursuing (with little success) the most fleeting, fickle demographic of all -- 12-16 year old adolescent females. You know, the demo that's the most impressionable, with the least amount of loyalty or disposable income. Brilliant.

Know that it's okay to call shit like it is and quit being cowards worrying about who we'll offend. It's okay to blame Simmons, Lyor Cohen, Jimmy Iovine, Kevin Liles, Bob Johnson, Debra Lee, Michael Martin and others of their ilk because the blood is on their hands. They are the

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gatekeepers of popular culture and they are the ones who determine what you see and hear. They can't say that their decisions are based on economics when they exclude voices of reason because there are literally hundreds of millions of people globally who feel the same way. What about that consumer base? I guess that money is no good, huh? Fuck outta here... Remember, part of the strategy of mind control is to fool the public into thinking that they have choice. We do, but the playing field is so skewed in the favor of mega-corps that the contributions of the alternatives are often viewed by most as insignificant.

So yes, there is a problem, but the fake "Kumbaya" moment on Oprah yesterday won't solve it. Are we really going to look to those individuals who have made a killing off of pushing poison to us to fix the problem? We shouldn't. Instead, we should vote with our dollars and continue the campaign of public shame until we see some concrete change. The music industry as we know it is on its death bed. People are now more tired than ever of "music business as usual" and style over substance.

Imus was an insignificant part of a much greater problem. Sure, his incident open up national discourse regarding issues of race and sex. And yes, it is now more apparent than ever that whites have a hard time acknowledging racist and sexist behavior in other whites as being solely their fault. Most black artists are not to blame, as we often can't be seen or heard without white help. But it's important to note that many of us can and should know better when saying and doing the things we say and do. It's easy to despise the indefensible, and media outlets like Fox News have made good money demonizing those with little real power.

But will we champion the good among us?

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