

Should We Celebrate Hip-Hop Turning 30

Written by Greg Tate ID796

Sunday, 30 January 2005 23:28 -

We are now winding down the anniversary of hip hop's 30th year of existence as a populist art form. Testimonials and televised tributes have been airing almost daily, thanks to Viacom and the like. As those digitized hip-hop shout-outs get packed back into their binary folders, however, some among us have been so gauche as to ask, What the heck are we celebrating exactly? A right and proper question, that one is, mate. One to which my best answer has been: Nothing less, my man, than the marriage of heaven and hell, of New World African ingenuity and that trick of the devil known as global hyper-capitalism. Hooray.

Given that what we call hip-hop is now inseparable from what we call the hip-hop industry, in which the nouveau riche and the super-rich employers get richer, some say there's really nothing to celebrate about hip-hop right now but the money shakers and the moneymakers—who got bank and who got more.

Hard to argue with that line of thinking since, hell, globally speaking, hip-hop is money at this point, a valued form of currency where brothers are offered stock options in exchange for letting some corporate entity stand next to their fire.

True hip-hop headz tend to get mad when you don't separate so-called hip-hop culture from the commercial rap industry, but at this stage of the game that's like trying to separate the culture of urban basketball from the NBA, the pro game from the players it puts on the floor.

Hip-hop may have begun as a folk culture, defined by its isolation from mainstream society, but being that it was formed within the America that gave us the coon show, its folksiness was born to be bled once it began entertaining the same mainstream that had once excluded its originators. And have no doubt, before hip-hop had a name it was a folk culture—literally visible in the way you see folk in Brooklyn and the South Bronx of the '80s, styling, wilding, and profiling in Jamel Shabazz's photograph book *Back in the Days*. But from the moment "Rapper's Delight" went platinum, hip-hop the folk culture became hip-hop the American entertainment-industry sideshow.

No doubt it transformed the entertainment industry, and all kinds of people's notions of entertainment, style, and politics in the process. So let's be real. If hip-hop were only some static and rigid folk tradition preserved in amber, it would never have been such a site for radical change or corporate exploitation in the first place. This being America, where as my man A.J.'s

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basketball coach dad likes to say, "They don't pay niggas to sit on the bench," hip-hop was never going to not go for the gold as more gold got laid out on the table for the goods that hip-hop brought to the market. Problem today is that where hip-hop was once a buyer's market in which we, the elite hip-hop audience, decided what was street legit, it has now become a seller's market, in which what does or does not get sold as hip-hop to the masses is whatever the boardroom approves.

The bitter trick is that hip-hop, which may or may not include the NBA, is the face of Black America in the world today. It also still represents Black culture and Black creative license in unique ways to the global marketplace, no matter how commodified it becomes. No doubt, there's still more creative autonomy for Black artists and audiences in hip-hop than in almost any other electronic mass-cultural medium we have. You for damn sure can't say that about radio, movies, or television. The fact that hip-hop does connect so many Black folk worldwide, whatever one might think of the product, is what makes it invaluable to anyone coming from a Pan-African state of mind. Hip hop's ubiquity has created a common ground and a common vernacular for Black folk from 18 to 50 worldwide. This is why mainstream hip-hop as a capitalist tool, as a market force isn't easily discounted: The dialogue it has already set in motion between Long Beach and Cape Town is a crucial one, whether Long Beach acknowledges it or not. What do we do with that information, that communication, that transatlantic mass-Black telepathic link? From the looks of things, we ain't about to do a goddamn thing other than send more CDs and T-shirts across the water.

But the Negro art form we call hip-hop wouldn't even exist if African Americans of whatever socioeconomic caste weren't still niggers and not just the more benign, congenial "niggas." By which I mean if we weren't all understood by the people who run this purple-mountain loony bin as both subhuman and superhuman, as sexy beasts on the order of King Kong. Or as George Clinton once observed, without the humps there ain't no getting over. Meaning that only Africans could have survived slavery in America, been branded lazy bums, and decided to overcompensate by turning every sporting contest that matters into a glorified battle royal.

Like King Kong had his island, we had the Bronx in the '70s, out of which came the only significant artistic movement of the 20th century produced by born-and-bred New Yorkers, rather than Southwestern transients or Jersey transplants. It's equally significant that hip-hop came out of New York at the time it did, because hip-hop is Black America's Ellis Island. It's our Delancey Street and our Fulton Fish Market and garment district and Hollywoodian ethnic enclave/empowerment zone that has served as a foothold for the poorest among us to get a grip on the land of the prosperous.

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Only because this convergence of ex-slaves and ch-ching finally happened in the '80s because hey, African Americans weren't allowed to function in the real economic and educational system of these United States like first-generation immigrants until the 1980s—roughly four centuries after they first got here, "case you forgot. Hip hoppers weren't the first generation who ever thought of just doing the damn thang entrepreneurially speaking, they were the first ones with legal remedies on the books when it came to getting a cut of the action. And the first generation for whom acquiring those legal remedies so they could just do the damn thang wasn't a priority requiring the energies of the race's best and brightest.

If we woke up tomorrow and there was no hip-hop on the radio or on television, if there was no money in hip-hop, then we could see what kind of culture it was, because my bet is that hip-hop as we know it would cease to exist, except as nostalgia. It might resurrect itself as a people's protest music if we were lucky, might actually once again reflect a disenchantment with, rather than a reinforcement of, the have and have-not status quo we cherish like breast milk here in the land of the status-fiending. But I won't be holding my breath waiting to see.

Because the moment hip-hop disappeared from the air and marketplace might be the moment when we'd discover whether hip-hop truly was a cultural force or a manufacturing plant, a way of being or a way of selling porn DVDs, Crunk juice, and S. Carter signature sneakers, blessed be the retired.

That might also be the moment at which poor Black communities began contesting the reality of their surroundings, their life opportunities. An interesting question arises: If enough folk from the "hood get rich, does that suffice for all the rest who will die tryin"? And where does hip-hop wealth leave the question of race politics? And racial identity?

Picking up where Amiri Baraka and the Black Arts Movement left off, George Clinton realized that anything Black folk do could be abstracted and repackaged for capital gain. This has of late led to one mediocre comedy after another about Negroes frolicking at hair shows, funerals, family reunions, and backyard barbecues, but it has also given us Biz Markie and OutKast.

Oh, the selling power of the Black Vernacular. Ralph Ellison only hoped we'd translate it in such a way as to gain entry into the hallowed house of art. How could he know that Ralph Lauren and the House of Polo would one day pray to broker that vernacular's cool marketing prowess into a worldwide licensing deal for bed sheets writ large with Jay-Z's John Hancock? Or that the vernacular's seductive powers would drive Estée Lauder to propose a union with the House of

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P. Diddy? Or send Hewlett-Packard to come knocking under record exec Steve Stoute's shingle in search of a hip-hop-legit cool marketer?

Hip hop's effervescent and novel place in the global economy is further proof of that good old Marxian axiom that under the abstracting powers of capitalism, "All that is solid melts into air" (or the Ethernet, as the case might be). So that hip-hop floats through the virtual marketplace of branded icons as another consumable ghost, parasitically feeding off the host of the real world's people—urbanized and institutionalized—whom it will claim till its dying day to "represent." And since those people just might need nothing more from hip-hop in their geopolitically circumscribed lives than the escapism, glamour, and voyeurism of hip-hop, why would they ever chasten hip-hop for not steady ringing the alarm about the African American community's AIDS crisis, or for romanticizing incarceration more than attacking the prison-industrial complex, or for throwing a lyrical bone at issues of intimacy or literacy or, heaven forbid, debt relief in Africa and the evils perpetuated by the World Bank and the IMF on the motherland?

All of which is not to say "Vote or Die" wasn't a wonderful attempt to at least bring the phantasm of Black politics into the 24-hour nonstop booty, blunts, and bling frame that now has the hip-hop industry on lock. Or to devalue by any degree Russell Simmons's valiant efforts to educate, agitate, and organize around the Rockefeller drug-sentencing laws. Because at heart, hip-hop remains a radical, revolutionary enterprise for no other reason than its rendering people of African descent anything but invisible, forgettable, and dismissible in the consensual hallucination-simulacrum twilight zone of digitized mass distractions we call our lives in the matrixized, conservative-Christianized, Goebbelsized-by-Fox 21st century. And because, for the first time in our lives, race was nowhere to be found as a campaign issue in presidential politics and because hip-hop is the only place we can see large numbers of Black people being anything other than sitcom window dressing, it maintains the potential to break out of the box at the flip of the next lyrical genius who can articulate her people's suffering with the right doses of rhythm and noise to reach the bourgeois and still rock the boulevard.

Call me an unreconstructed Pan-African cultural nationalist, African-fer-the-Africans-at-home-and-abroad-type rock and roll nigga and I won't be mad at ya: I remember the Afrocentric dream of hip hop's becoming an agent of social change rather than elevating a few ex-drug dealers' bank accounts. Against my better judgment, I still count myself among that faithful. To the extent that hip-hop was a part of the great Black cultural nationalist reawakening of the 1980s and early '90s, it was because there was also an anti-apartheid struggle and anti-crack struggle, and Minister Louis Farrakhan and Reverend Jesse Jackson were at the height of their rhetorical powers, recruitment ambitions, and media access, and a generation of Ivy League Black Public Intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic had come to the fore to raise the philosophical stakes in African American debate, and speaking locally, there were protests organized around the police/White Citizens Council lynchings of Bumpurs,

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Griffiths, Hawkins, Diallo, Dorismond, etc. etc. etc. Point being that hip-hop wasn't born in a vacuum but as part of a political dynamo that seems to have been largely dissipated by the time we arrived at the Million Man March, best described by one friend as the largest gathering in history of a people come to protest themselves, given its bizarre theme of atonement in the face of the goddamn White House.

The problem with a politics that theoretically stops thinking at the limit of civil rights reform and appeals to white guilt and Black consciousness was utterly revealed at that moment—a point underscored by the fact that the two most charged and memorable Black political events of the 1990s were the MMM and the hollow victory of the O.J. trial. Meaning, OK, a page had been turned in the book of African American economic and political life—clearly because we showed up in Washington en masse demanding absolutely nothing but atonement for our sins—and we did victory dances when a doofus ex-athlete turned Hertz spokes model bought his way out of lethal injection. Put another way, hip-hop sucks because modern Black populist politics sucks. Ishmael Reed has a poem that goes: "I am outside of history . . . it looks hungry . . . I am inside of history it's hungrier than I thot." The problem with progressive Black political organizing isn't hip-hop but that the No. 1 issue on the table needs to be poverty, and nobody knows how to make poverty sexy. Real poverty, that is, as opposed to studio-gangsta poverty, newly-inked-MC-with-a-story-to-sell poverty.

You could argue that we're past the days of needing a Black agenda. But only if you could argue that we're past the days of there being poor Black people and Driving While Black and structural, institutionalized poverty. And those who argue that we don't need leaders must mean Bush is their leader too, since there are no people on the face of this earth who aren't being led by some of their own to hell or high water. People who say that mean this: Who needs leadership when you've got 24-hour cable and PlayStations. And perhaps they're partly right, since what people can name and claim their own leaders when they don't have their own nation-state? And maybe in a virtual America like the one we inhabit today, the only Black culture that matters is the one that can be downloaded and perhaps needs only business leaders at that. Certainly it's easier to speak of hip-hop hoop dreams than of structural racism and poverty, because for hip-hop America to not just desire wealth but demand power with a capital P would require thinking way outside the idiot box.

Consider, if you will, this "as above, so below" doomsday scenario: Twenty years from now we'll be able to tell our grandchildren and great-grandchildren how we witnessed cultural genocide: the systematic destruction of a people's folkways.

We'll tell them how fools thought they were celebrating the 30th anniversary of hip-hop the year

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Bush came back with a gangbang, when they were really presiding over a funeral. We'll tell them how once upon a time there was this marvelous art form where the Negro could finally say in public whatever was on his or her mind in rhyme and how the Negro hip-hop artist, staring down minimum wage slavery, Iraq, or the freedom of the incarcerated chose to take his emancipated motor mouth and stuck it up a stripper's ass because it turned out there really was gold in them thar hills.

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