

Women's Media Center In Defense of Hip Hop

Written by Davey D / Nida Khan ID3672
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Rap needs to clean up, too - that often repeated sentiment followed the firing of Don Imus after his racist and sexist mockery of the Rutgers women's basketball team. But writer Nida Khan says any blanket assault on hip-hop is short sighted for a number of reasons. The music journalist and radio producer argues positive messages put out by many of the genre's artists are being ignored along with the role of powerful corporate media executives who traffic in stereotypical images of people of color.

The Women's Media Center was founded in 2005 by Jane Fonda, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem, who serve on the Board of Directors with Cristina Azocar, Jodie Evans, Gloria Feldt, Carol Jenkins, Pat Mitchell, Jessica Neuwirth, and Helen Zia. The WMC places female voices into the media, offers media training, and publishes original reports and commentaries as well as links to women columnists and bloggers, news organizations and journalism sources on its website WomensMediaCenter.com.

In Defense of Hip-Hop by Nida Khan

"Hip-hop is the CNN of the ghetto"—words spoken by legendary artist Chuck D of Public Enemy years before Puffy became a household name and bling a term used by actual CNN anchors. Serving as a mirror to such societal ills as poverty, injustice, drugs and violence, hip-hop - or more specifically rap music - has brought realities of urban life and mainstream systematic privilege to the forefront of discussion. MCs, aka rappers, have opened wounds that many would prefer remained covered via methods that both educate and entertain. Now this mechanism for empowerment and communication is under attack yet again.

While Don Imus searched for a defense against his use of the now notorious words "nappy headed hos" in reference to the Rutgers women's basketball team, he was successful in scapegoating the often targeted genre of hip-hop. But what Imus and the average citizen fail to grasp is the foundation of this culture or the notion that what you hear on radio airwaves and see on TV doesn't encompass the plethora of diversity within the music.

For several years I've worked within the hip-hop industry in a multitude of capacities. From my vantage point at record labels, recording studios and finally as a music journalist, I've had the honor of sitting down and picking the brains of many hip-hop poets. And poetry and expression is exactly what they produce: words and ideas conjured over the hottest beats. Rappers take

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complex ideas and transform them into catchy lyrics and rhyming sequences with astuteness and intense precision. Imagine the endless boundaries of MCs if they were all given equal access to education and opportunity that we espouse but rarely see in this country. A chance to pursue the American Dream is precisely what rappers under attack have worked to achieve. Take a look at the 50 Cents and Jay-Zs of the world. Self-made millionaires, they battled extreme circumstances and in the process established companies that employ and empower others shut out of corporate America.

In response to the ongoing controversy, several people have stepped forward. "We are proactive, not just reactive to the Don Imus so-called backlash," explains Dr. Ben Chavis, president/CEO of Russell Simmons's Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, after he and Simmons made recommendations for the recording industry to bleep the words ho, bitch and nigger on the airwaves and on clean CDs. "The truth is misogyny is not a hip-hop created problem. Misogyny is a deep-seated American society problem that is embedded in the historical evolution of the United States as a nation." The recommendations are meant, he says, to forestall governmental intrusion "on the rights of artists in a democratic society. This is important, and there are some in the media that just don't get it. Self regulation by the industry is not censorship. Good corporate social responsibility is not censorship."

The shift in dynamic from Imus to hip-hop utterly amazes me. Granted I don't condone use of words like ho and bitch towards myself or any other woman, but I understand along with Dr. Ben that rap music isn't the only forum where we see this. Why don't we target the representation of women and people of color in Hollywood? Why don't we go after the millionaire and billionaire movie directors/producers of the world who represent minority women a majority of the time as the exotic other or the overly sexualized temptress, and minority men as criminals? Before blaming everything on one facet, we need to analyze all of pop culture and media representation at large.

MCs may have an audience via their music, but until you see a Snoop Dogg or a Ludacris with his own televised programming in mainstream news you simply can't juxtapose Imus and hip-hop. Until rappers have the kind of major network platform that Imus had and will have again, they are not fair game for attack. On the contrary, we need to explore and criticize why we see so few people of color on these networks or working behind-the-scenes in newsrooms in the first place. For those that are quick to jump on the criticism bandwagon, do they first understand that rap music's foundation was a check on society? That it was a mechanism for the powerless to speak their mind? Do they understand a history of socially and politically conscious music that was designed to mobilize people? Even today, this music is a reaction to emotions of anger, frustration and inequity of mostly young minority people surviving in a society where the pendulum of justice swings away from them most of the time.

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In attempts to curb some of the criticism against this form of expression, moves by Dr. Ben Chavis, Russell Simmons and even Rev. Al Sharpton were aimed at targeting the true culprits behind negative/misogynistic music—record labels and corporations. On May 3, Tamika Mallory of Sharpton's National Action Network led a March for Hip-Hop Decency in front of Sony, Universal Records and the Time Warner building in Manhattan.

"We cannot allow people to use the concept of freedom of speech and censorship as a shield for those who seek to denigrate any members of our society," she explains. "Freedom of speech is critical to freedom but so is the responsibility that comes with it. We are not saying that rappers or anyone cannot speak in any manner they choose. We are saying that record and media companies shouldn't support it if it crosses the line of sexism, racism and homophobia."

Sounds like a wonderful idealistic thought without a doubt, except for the fact that these companies and media outlets have profited countless billions off the backs of rappers, hip-hop culture and the community. It's incredibly difficult for artist/groups with positive or socially conscious messages like a Dead Prez to get signed, and if they do, never will they see radio spins or record sales like their negative counterparts. In an industry where marketing and radio promotion departments ensure that only certain albums get proper financial backing to guarantee air play and press, many talented people simply get shelved. Radio stations themselves have specific daily play lists, in effect brainwashing the masses with the same songs and the same messages. I've had rappers straight out tell me that they wanted to go with a specific single from their album but were forced to go with something else. And others have simply said they put out a single about women and money to reel in listeners to a deeper, profound meaning on the album that might otherwise have been ignored. Interesting isn't it?

These days Don Imus is at his ranch contemplating his next move. Chances are he'll return to the airwaves in some capacity in little time, while the young woman or man using music as a means to escape the all but insurmountable obstacles set in her/his path will find it ever more difficult because the world is now watching with keen eyes. For those who are new to this genre of poetic expression, I suggest watching the new Bruce Willis/Queen Latifah documentary, "Hip-Hop Project." It beautifully captures the essence of what this culture was, is and should be about. Until critics begin to fully comprehend the many layers of hip-hop, its historical context and place in society, they should listen to what the Godfather of it all said to me the other day—the man who literally started hip-hop with two turntables—DJ Kool Herc: "Tell all the geniuses to back off of hip-hop. Leave hip-hop alone."

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Nida Khan is a hip-hop journalist working in both print and radio. She served as a staff writer for The Source Magazine in the past, and as a freelancer, she has contributed pieces to the Women's Media Center, Associated Press, Vibe.com, XXL Magazine, Rides Magazine, MTV News online, Scratch Magazine, DUB Magazine and The Ave Magazine to name a few. In addition to continually freelancing, she also helps produce the community based show "Street Soldiers with Lisa Evers" on one of New York's premier hip-hop stations, WQHT Hot 97, as well as the news/politically centered "The Week In Review" on its sister station, Kiss FM.

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