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*Black Hip Hop History
by Akweli Parker
Guest Commentator*

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Before anyone tags me a race traitor, Uncle Tom, O'Reilly–phile, Wanksta, Cosby Jr., or any of the other sundry slurs reserved by blacks, for blacks who commit the street sin of not keepin' it real, let me say this: I love hip–hop music: The way BB King loves Lucille. The way the "silly rabbit" loves Trix cereal. From *the hip–the hop–the hibby–hibby hop* of Sugar Hill Gang to the near existential ruminations of Black Thought and the rest of The Roots, the art form has taken its place as a bona fide American cultural gift to the world.

But as we reflect on African Americans' achievements this February during Black History Month, I find myself wondering just a bit more than usual, and a little more angrily than usual, What in the *hell* is going on with our music? It's been hijacked by one–dimensional caricatures who stand to significantly retard, if not outright roll back, the progress African Americans have made in the past half–century. True hip–hop "artists" – and yes, you EZ 101 listeners out there, such a thing exists – today mostly find themselves preaching to a like–minded but small choir of educated, socially conscious listeners who must actively seek out their message at live performances or online. But don't try to find such artists on prime time, over–the–air radio, a lowest–common–denominator trough where crudity, not quality, equals cash.

What *does* sell en masse and gets radio airplay in a cycle of reciprocal financial fellatio, is sonic sewage from the likes of the currently red–hot 50 Cent and his G–Unit cronies, materially–obsessed Nelly, the decreasingly relevant Ja Rule and a Great Migration's worth of unintelligible rappers from the South. Coming from this writer, an avid N.W.A. listener back in the day, and someone who can nearly out–*muthafucka(!)* the late Richard Pryor, readers should find the fact that even *I'm* saying "whoa," at the current state of affairs, to be quite troubling. My objections are hardly puritanical. After all, cursing, screwing and killing have provided fertile soil for our musical heritage pre–dating Rock & Roll. No, friends, my boxers are all in a knot because of modern–day minstrels who are having the same effect as Pied Pipers, leading our children – particularly at–risk black kids – further into ignorance, poverty and self–destructive behavior.

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The evidence of this becomes personally apparent when I see my cousin's thugged-out chums, doing little with their lives but getting high, occasionally getting arrested, and encouraging him to stagnate along with their lifestyle of failure. And it's obvious at a distance, when I ride the commuter rail through Camden, N.J., "America's Most Dangerous City." There, I hear my socially and economically ill-equipped fellow young passengers speak a language best described as Ebonics, squared. Ebonics is fine, but when it's all a young person knows, and they see it sanctioned by pseudo-cool depictions of drugs and guns pumped out (pimped?) by MTV, BET and their advertisers, something's seriously wrong.

According to the Department of Justice, among males age 25 to 29, 12.6% of blacks are in prison or jail, compared to 3.6% of Hispanics and about 1.7% of whites. Racist enforcement and fewer legit opportunities for us are no doubt partially to blame, but here's a controversial thought – how about if we simply avoided doing crime in the first place? Yeah, I realize many of our brothers are born into poverty and despair, with seemingly few options besides "the trade" or other underground economy activities. But how do you explain immigrants of color who come to this country with less than nothing, and parlay it into the American Dream?

I have a theory: it's that black peoples' most visible role models are entertainers and athletes, admirable folks, but not the true bedrock of the upper middle class – that would be engineers, doctors, businesspeople and intellectuals.

No one in their right mind, yours truly especially, wants to be seen as a hater – someone who belittles others' success out of petty jealousy. That's not where this piece is coming from; in fact, I find some consolation knowing that the rest of America has finally embraced a musical style that I and millions of others grew up with and supported long before so-called validation by "the mainstream." (i.e. Kanye West and his multiple Grammy awards/nominations.)

Nope, for any of the sheep, um, fans of the rappers discussed herein that might take offense, it ain't hate, ya'll. It's tough love. A reality check for the rhyme-sayers who sold their souls and sold out their own people for fat paydays. Blinded by the fast cash, the parade of ass, and the phalanx of bootlickers that come standard with modern celebrity, it appears none of these brothas stopped to question what their so-called music was doing to the 'hoods from whence they came. And if they did suffer such a microsecond of spinal integrity, they must have concluded that: Hey, since the sleazy, greedy record company rep gave me a clean bill of moral health, (and oh that nice, six-figure signing bonus) then it must be OK.

Oh sure, Fiddy's G-Unity Foundation doles out \$20,000 here, \$50,000 there, to worthwhile causes, such as fighting homelessness. And Nelly's just the regular 'round town philanthropist in his home city of St. Louis. That's to be commended. And it's way more than I give. But can these pinprick gestures of charity compensate for the expansive cancers of gun violence and economic illiteracy (to name just a few social ailments) that their songs perpetuate in black communities?

Can they make up for the thug-updated "Black Savage" regard in which the rest of the world holds African Americans, thanks to historical racism amplified by the global reach of MTV?

OK, I've been delaying this part as long as possible – "getting my affairs in order" before e-mailing this article to the editor at The Black Commentator. Lest I wake up one night with a red laser beam in my face (in gangsta rap, that's the last thing 'bitch-ass niggas," and snitches – i.e., folks like me – see before getting a one-way ticket to meet Lucifer, St. Pete, or Allah).

In the real-life soap opera of the rap game, artists often squabble over grade-school-style grievances called "beefs." They're usually along the lines of, "you can't rap." These insults get immortalized in songs of murder fantasy that sometimes come tragically true.

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Hoping not to incur that last outcome, I nonetheless submit two of my beefs with a couple of the Modern Minstrels of rap.

50 Cent, a.k.a. Curtis Jackson: If you haven't heard the following factoid about him, you must be a just–returned Y2K survivalist. He recovered from being *shot 9 times*. His undeniably incredible life story received the Hollywood treatment last year in *Get Rich or Die Tryin'*. He stars in a video game in which the object is to kill your human enemies in as many creatively spectacular ways possible. His songs mock those who'll never know the adrenaline rush of *movin' weight* with your soldiers, who will never shoot another human being or be shot, who can't afford the symbols of conspicuous consumption that he worships. For this, poor and middle–class critics are dismissed by 50 with a contemptuous snicker, as piddling Wankstas and Window Shoppers.

Mr. Jackson, if you're reading this, contrary to your Window Shopper lyrics, I for one am not "mad as **** when (I see you) ride by." I don't begrudge either your vast wealth or your harem of beautiful female admirers. It's good to see a fellow Black Man getting' paid. But c'mon, *Brah*, where do you get off poisoning kids, especially black kids born in this country automatically disadvantaged by awful schools, poverty and racism? Fr'instance, with wack bullshit like this:

*You can find me in the club, bottle full of bub
Look mami I got the X if you into taking drugs
I'm into having sex, I ain't into making love
So come give me a hug if you into getting rubbed*

(from the hit, "In Da Club")

Kids hear those lyrics on the radio and sing them. Their parents sing them. Hey, even I'm guilty. But even moral relativists must admit, promoting drug abuse on the radio (again, to kids) is flat–out reprehensible. Like fattened Romans thronging to the Coliseum, we've let ourselves be lulled into complacency and willing exploitation at the hands of the powerful. Our tastes have devolved into a bacchanal of pure indulgence and entertainment. So perhaps the public is also a bit to blame for its apparent suspension of common sense in wolfing down such aural junk food.

Call me naïve, but whatever happened to the quaint notion of conveying some type of pedagogic message in urban storytelling? MC's like Grandmaster Flash, KRS–One, Public Enemy and Eric B. had it down.

Somehow, they collectively managed to portray the gritty misery and violence of the streets, the sensuousness of black sexuality and that indispensable rap staple, shameless self–promotion, *without* promoting self–genocide.

Speaking of genocide, Cornell Haynes Jr., a.k.a. Nelly, deserves some credit for not falling in with the Glock and UZI–worshipping "I'ma wet you up, fool!!!" crowd. But young Mr. Haynes should have to answer for the completely idiotic "Grillz." The premise of this ear–assault masquerading as song: he and his posse are so stinkin' wealthy that they must put their money where their mouth is, literally. They brag of multiple sets of dentures, made of gold, platinum and diamonds. As far as I can tell, it is not intended as parody.

Like most Nelly songs, "Grillz" glorifies the type of live–for–the–moment materialism that keeps the government statistics mill churning out reports on the lower all–around achievement of blacks in education, personal wealth, longevity, you name it. Some call it "feel–good music." I call it "in debt" music. Thanks in large part to images in these videos, we do the backstroke in bad credit, hopelessly trying to live an unsustainable lifestyle of spending.

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And so I make this simple plea: White people, since you are purportedly the largest purchasers of rap music – stop worshipping 50 and the nihilistic narcissism of his music; same goes for other artistically devoid rap cartoons. Otherwise you're encouraging them and setting back hard-working blacks. There are better rap acts more deserving of your money. Certain Black people and anybody else who may be in denial – wake up, ya'll. We're raising a generation of clueless kids who think Thug Life and fortuitous superstardom, not intellect, *legal* entrepreneurship and academic achievement, will lead them to success.

There was a popular saying back in the Golden Age of Hip-Hop, "Fuck the Dumb Shit." Well the Dumb Shit is back. It's a cruel, cynical trick played on our youth by profit-hungry corporations at the top and morally compromised artist puppets at the bottom. Wake up people... Lastly, legit rappers, you've done it before in songs like "Self Destruction," it's time once again to speak the fuck up. Thank you.

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