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Who's Pimpin' Who?

The Hip-Hop Generation's Need to Rename (Reclaim) Itself
by Marjorie Fields Harris, Esq. with Reverend Darren Ferguson
Guest Commentators

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There's nothing like a bit of controversy to get Black folks talking about a revolution. Let there be one incident of a non-Black person attempting to justify calling us nigger and we flood the telephone lines on every Black radio program. Let there be a shootout between rival musical artists outside of an arena or the introduction of another reality show depicting us as bumbling minstrels and we send out so many emails that we end up spamming each other.

So it came as no surprise that when the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences announced its candidates for outstanding performances in film for 2005 and the lone African-American nominee in the performance by an actor or actress category had gone to an otherwise prolific and talented actor for his portrayal of a pimp, we whined. Then we discovered that not only was the actor-from-the-pimp-movie nominated, but the song from the film that decries the life of a pimp – where one of the lines in the song says, "I got a snow bunny/ and a black girl too/ you pay the right price/ and they'll both do you" – was nominated for best song. Oh, did we cry! And we moaned and locked arms everywhere except at the box office.



For the cognoscenti who believe that African-American actors are only nominated for playing roles that reflect disparagingly upon our culture – for instance, Denzel as a wayward law enforcement officer, Halle as a less-than-chaste grief stricken mother – this was the latest slight to our community at the event commonly referred to as the Oscars. For the greater community, the one that extends from Compton to Conakry, this was a further abridgement of our recognition as Garvey-esque leaders and DuBois-type thinkers to a subculture that glorifies the lives of the scourges of civilized society. Where was this sense of outrage when MTV launched a program called "Pimp My Ride" and hired an African-American rapper to host the program, which is about "pimping out" beaten down cars? Who's pimpin' whom here?

Every revolutionary can rhythmically chant, "it's not about what they call you it's about what you answer to," but when we answer to so many different names these days – pimps, ballers, and shot-callers – the concept of self-definition proves elusive. Take for instance, the name "hip-hop." There exists a hip-hop label for the generation that seemingly extends to everyone from 15-year-old acne-faced adolescents to the 45-plus-year-old entertainment guru, Russell Simmons. There are efforts to register "hip-hop voters" – that nebulous demographic of 18 to 35 year olds who move easily within a universe of blogs and bottled water. But the true essence of hip-hop lies in more significant numbers – specifically, numbers totaling 500 billion. As in 500 billion US dollars. According to a new report by MarketResearch.com, that is how much young Americans who identify with the hip-hop culture spent on merchandise – from music to clothing to jewelry.

According to the report's publisher, more than 24 million Americans aged 15 to 29, or 39% of the entire age group, identify with hip-hop culture. Of this number, according to the U.S Census Bureau, roughly 5.7 million people, the buying power of non-Hispanic Blacks was \$105.1 billion or \$18,406 per capita. These numbers overall, the study continues, are expected to grow to 25 million Americans by 2010, with an increased disposable income of \$644 billion.

But how much of that revenue is actually being returned to the community that gave birth to the cultural movement? More importantly, with the dire plight of young African-American youth, particularly males, worsening – in 2004, 72% of African-American black male high school dropouts in their 20's were jobless; that is, unable to find work, not seeking it or incarcerated – can we afford a "bling-bling" mentality? (See "Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn" New York Times, March 20, 2006.) As a community – a nation – African-Americans are the greatest exporters of commodities that benefit other communities who demonstrate their gratitude by charging us back for the use of our talents and efforts. Metaphorically, it is akin to siphoning crude oil from an outside nation and then charging them triple the cost for the use of the gasoline.



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How did we allow our culture, in particular the hip-hop culture, to be morphed from its roots in rap music, specifically an artistic form of social protest in urban communities, into a ubiquitous commercial industry that not only *rejects* civil remonstrance but also glorifies the very characters that the originators of the culture rejected? Was integration good for rap or hip-hop? Where are our stories being told today in music? Where is the diversity reflected in the culture that has generated such venerable musical art forms as jazz, rap and arguably, rock and roll? More specifically, should we continue to call ourselves members of a hip-hop nation if the tenets of this culture no longer represent us?

In the mid to late 1970s, America witnessed the beginning of an empire. For the first time since Michael, Marlon, Tito, Jackie and Jermaine took the stage, young African-American males and eventually females, had heroes that they could identify with. When the young men and women from neighborhoods in the Bronx and Harlem developed their own musical style – which was a mix of rhythms from existing records with their own creative poetry – "hip-hop" was born. Hip-Hop – as distinguished from Rap, which is a part of hip-hop ethos – had the effects of a genuine culture. The music, the style – tennis shoes, jeans, mock turtleneck sweaters and Kangol hats – and even the language (B-Boy, MC and DJ) defined the Zeitgeist. Hip-Hop icons such as Kool DJ Herc, Grand Master Flash, Grand Wizard Theodore, Afrika Bambaataa and Kurtis Blow walked the same city streets, witnessed the same poverty and shared the same unique vernacular with young people in urban areas.

With the crossover appeal of "Rapper's Delight" by the Sugarhill Gang in 1979, and then the success of "Rapture" by the white group, Blondie, rap music – which by now was utilized interchangeably within the music industry with hip-hop music – moved from the fringes to a wider appeal among audiences. This spawned interest and participation by groups such as the Beastie Boys and the rock group Aerosmith. Then there is the chronology of emerging artists and popular styles – from the highly politicized sounds of Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions to the gangsta rap of Niggaz With Attitude (N.W.A.); from the strong sista' styling of Queen Latifah to the G-rated rap of DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. The Fresh Prince would eventually morph into the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air as a television sitcom and then Will Smith, Academy Award nominated actor. This same concept of metamorphosis is significant in hip-hop or rap music, because it gets back to those same numbers – \$500 billion. In three short decades, this genuine art form that began as a positive "affect" for so many urban youth, has become a commercial monstrosity that in "effect" has attempted to negatively redefine the culture while contributing less than 5% back to the community which gave it birth.



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Ever since the Brooklyn Dodgers recognized the profitability in dismantling the increasingly popular Negro League and integrating its ranks with a player named Jackie Robinson, mainstream America continues to utilize the integration umbrella to integrate African-American people into an erstwhile nonexistent "mainstream" for its own profit. Where was the cultural "mainstream" before hip-hop? Were Guns 'N Roses fans or even the AC/DC or Fleetwood Mac listeners really clamoring to hear lyrics about young, single African-American mothers on government assistance whose boyfriends were "slinging rocks" to pay for diapers? We submit that as a culture, African-Americans, particularly young African-Americans who identify themselves as part of the "hip-hop" nation, have been lulled into an "MTV-Cribs" fantasy by a commercialized scheme that does not care for and does not speak for their culture, heritage, or interests. Again, who's pimpin' whom?



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Movies, television and music are now peppered with Black and Brown faces that America has deemed "marketable." This marketability that was once based on looks and talent now uses a measuring stick of outrageous and denigrating behavior. Today, young brothers and sisters coon, clown, preen and grin for a moment of fleeting fame, which in today's market can mean millions of dollars for the proverbial 15 minutes. You don't have to have any real talent. You don't have to sing or dance. Hey, you don't even have to look good. You can be a marginally talented, uncreative high-school dropout if you know how to call your women ho's and roll "nigger" off your tongue on top of an infectious beat. From the window to the wall, you can party like it's your birthday, sport a grill and fall in love with a stripper. Forget about the cost of the Cadillac Escalade (manufacturer's suggested retail price \$57,280) or that Bentley (average cost of a 2006 Rolls-Royce Phantom is \$320,000, roughly, \$4995/month). You are a part of the "hip-hop" generation. You are contributing to the \$500 billion pot. Sit back and enjoy the fruits of your labor.

This month, the National Action Network, the civil rights organization headed by Reverend Al Sharpton will host its 8th annual national convention in New York City. Each year around the commemorative time of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the convention brings national delegates from the organization's 30 chapters together with business and community leaders, national figures and elected officials to address the prominent global issues affecting people of color. For several years, Mrs. Coretta Scott King was the keynote speaker at the gala dinner.

This year, one of the larger panels, "Has Hip Hop Gone Too Far? Are we Getting Rich or Dyin' Tryin'" will focus on three key areas: (1) the effect that today's version of hip-hop has on young people in America; (2) whether or not hip-hop stars have a responsibility to present positive images/messages; and (3) can the African-American community continue to claim hip-hop if it caters to mostly nonwhite suburban youth? In addition, the discussion will consider the viability of developing an alternative musical market that is genuine in its approach to today's young people; and, if it is developed, how to nurture and satisfy this new industry. Most importantly, however, this panel will attempt to accomplish something that most do not: solutions. That is, solutions in the form of a "self-help" guide for African-American youth who identify as the hip-hop nation. Solutions such as, "How to Move Your Money from a Grill to a G.E.D." and "Pimps Don't Have 401 (k)'s." This type of dialogue between the activist civil rights community and young people will be the only way that this precious demographic will begin to recognize that the community cannot afford to continue to export its greatest resource – themselves – for such little return. This will be the only way that they will learn, indeed, how to rename or if needed, reclaim their names for themselves.

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