



My Culture at the Crossroads

A rap devotee watches corporate control and apolitical times encroach on the music he has loved all his life. BY KEVIN POWELL



I AM A HIP-HOP HEAD FOR LIFE. I HAVE TAGGED MY moniker—"kepo1"—on walls; break-danced on cardboard; bumped elbows with fellow hip-hoppers at legendary clubs like The Rooftop, Union Square and Latin Quarter in New York City, and done everything from organizing rap shows to working as a hip-hop journalist and managing music producers. This culture has not only rescued the

lives of countless masses who look like me, but it has empowered more young, working-class black and Latino cats than the civil-rights movement.

Yet something peculiar erupts when you've been around hip-hop for a while. Although you still love it, you look at its culture from a more critical perspective, particularly if you have studied other music genres, traveled widely and reflected intensely. You realize that what began as party music track for post-civil-rights America, ban folk art, and as much an indicator of impoverished areas as bluesman Robert Johnson and Tupac Shakur, has a so-funny link between the mainstream and Eminem as innovators of black music. For sure, you wonder, loudly, if what's next and roll will happen to hip-hop, if it

That is the external battle for hip-hop: corporate control and cooptation. But there's also something going on within the hip-hop nation. Hip-hop, unquestionably, has to do with this corporate stranglehold. Part of it has to do with the incredibly apolitical times in which we live. For some white Americans the current economic boom has created the myth that things are swell for all Americans. No case: 20 years after the Reagan backlash on civil rights, the influx of crack and guns and the acceleration of a disturbing class divide in black America, hip-hop has come to symbolize a generation fragmented by integration, migration, abandonment, alienation and, yes, social hatred. Thus, hip-hop, once vibrant, edgy, fresh and def, is now as materia

Urban art: '80s graffiti. D.M.C. of Run-DMC's glasses. Powell

tic, hedonistic, misogynistic, shallow and violent as some of the films and TV shows launched from Hollywood.

It wasn't always that way. But, unfortunately, the golden era of hip-hop—that period in the late '80s and early '90s when such diverse artists as Public Enemy, N.W.A., Queen Latifah, MC Hammer, LL Cool J and De La Soul coexisted and there was no such thing as "positive" or "negative" rap—has long been dead. Gone as well is an embrace of hip-hop's four elements: graffiti writing, the dance element (or what some call break-dancing), DJing, MCing. The MC or "rapper" has been singled out to be his own man in this very male-centered arena, and the formula for a hit record is simple: fancy yourself a thug, pimp or gangster; rhyme about jewelry, clothing and alcohol; denigrate women in every conceivable way; and party and b.s. ad nauseam.



ideas didn't pump virus the planet. Or if "urban" the same 10-12 songs every magazines didn't make liquor and "niggas" un The above notwithstanding who disses for the sake has created urban misery or classism. That said, hip-hop is at a crossroads, striving, while truly creative media and Common won't the attention they deserve. Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'" rather me so much if Dead Sex" received as much as Chuck D is correct in stating internet is the great equalizer. d-be artists. But what do someboys are still screaming "bitch" for global conflict with no regard for who is sentiments?

Kevin Powell is the editor of "Step 1: World: A Global Anthology of New Black Literature," published in November 2000, and is guest curator of the Museum of Art's "Hip-Hop: Rhymes & Rage."



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lives of countless masses who look like me, but it has empowered more young, working-class black and Latino cats than the civil-rights movement.

Yet something peculiar erupts when you've been around hip-hop for a while. Although you still love it, you look at its culture from a more critical perspective, particularly if you have studied other music genres, traveled widely and reflected intensely. You realize that what began as party music has come to be the soundtrack for post-civil-rights America. You realize that hip-hop is urban folk art, and as much an indication of the conditions in impoverished areas as bluesman Robert Johnson's laments in the 1930s. Naturally, you see a connection between the lives of Johnson and Tupac Shakur, not to mention a not-so-funny link between the mainstream hyping of Elvis and Eminem as innovators of black music forms. And, for sure, you wonder, loudly, if what happened to rock and roll will happen to hip-hop, if it hasn't already.

That is the external battle for hip-hop today: corporate control and cooptation. But there is also a civil war going on within the hip-hop nation. Part of it, unquestionably, has to do with this corporate stranglehold. Part of it has to do with the incredibly apolitical times in which we live: for some white Americans the current economic boom has created the myth that things are swell for all Americans. Not the case; 20 years after the Reagan backlash on civil rights, the influx of crack and guns and the acceleration of a disturbing class divide in black America, hip-hop has come to symbolize a generation fragmented by integration, migration, abandonment, alienation and, yes, self-hatred. Thus, hip-hop, once vibrant, edgy, fresh and def, is now as materialis-

tic, hedonistic, misogynistic, shallow and violent as some of the films and TV shows launched from Hollywood.

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None of this would matter much to me if videos didn't pump visual crack into the minds of young people across the planet. Or if "urban radio" actually played something other than the same 10-12 songs every day. Or if some of our fabulous hip-hop magazines didn't make constant references to marijuana, liquor and "niggas" under the guise of keeping things real. The above notwithstanding, I am not a hater, or someone who disses for the sake of dissing. Nor do I feel hip-hop has created urban misery, racism, sexism, homophobia or classism. That said, what I do believe is that hip-hop is at a crossroads, struggling for control over its creativity, while truly creative artists like Mos Def, Bahamadia and Common wonder when they will get the attention they deserve.

In other words, Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'" would not bother me so much if Dead Prez's "Mind Sex" received as much notice. Perhaps Chuck D is correct in stating that the Internet is the great equalizer for would-be artists. But what does it matter if homeboys are still screaming "nigga" or "bitch" for global consumption, with no regard for who is inhaling those sentiments?

POWELL is the editor of "Step Into a World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature," to be published in November (Wiley), and is guest curator of the Brooklyn Museum of Art's "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes & Rage."

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