

Black Music as a Reflection of Black Life: Black Political Music, Hip Hop & the Changing Same

Derek J. Evans

“The most expressive Negro music of any given period will be an exact reflection of what the Negro himself is. It will be a portrait of the Negro in America at that particular time. Who he thinks he is, what he thinks America or the world to be, given the circumstances, prejudices, and delights of that particular America. Negro music and Negro life in America were always the result of a reaction to, and an adaptation of, whatever America Negroes were given or could secure for themselves.” (Jones 1963, p. 137)

Within a decade of the release of the first rap record, rap music had solidified itself as a commercially successful commodity form. As artists were selling out record store shelves and concerts worldwide, those immersed in hip hop culture began making claims that rap had become the political “voice” of Black youth. Early political rap releases by artists like Kurtis Blow and Grandmaster Flash & The Furious 5 opened doors for the late 1980s success of political rap groups like Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions. Public Enemy front man Chuck D has since labeled rap the “Black CNN”, suggesting it is one of few ways that people could get informed about Black life in urban America. (256). Boogie Down Productions rapper KRS-One would later say that rap is the “last voice” of Black people in America (Toop xix).

These claims that rap is the “last voice” can be read in two ways: 1) as an assertion that it is the *only remaining* outlet for articulating messages about Black political realities in America and 2) that rap is the *most recently* employed means of communicating Black political discontent. Perhaps rap is both. By no means, however, is it the *first* “voice” of Black Americans. In *Black Noise* (1994), a pioneering scholarly work on rap and hip hop culture, Tricia Rose opens

the chapter on the politics of Black cultural expression with a brief examination of the Public Enemy song “Prophets of Rage”. In “Prophets...”, Chuck D raps “To the poor I pour it on in metaphors / Not bluffin', it's nothin' we ain't did before”. Rose points out that the lyrical passage “It’s nothin’ we ain’t did before” is a recognition by Chuck D of the “long history of black cultural subversion and social critique in music and performance” (Rose 1994, p. 99) – resistance, she further explains, that emerged as a response to the similar social situation of generations of Blacks living in a white supremacist society. In this paper I explore this relationship between the lived reality of Black Americans and the characteristics of Black American political music, then conclude with a brief section on rap music's unique place in post-Civil Rights politics.

Black Music as a Reflection of Black Life

It might be inaccurate to suggest that the current subordinate social location of Blacks in America is the same as Blacks' past subordinate social location. However, it would be equally inaccurate to suggest that they are not comparable. No doubt there have been huge transformations in the lived realities of Blacks in America, but as Howard Winant (2004) explains these changes have been marked with, at worst, the same goal of domination and, at least, the same resulting racial inequalities. Centuries of slavery gave way to emancipation to be followed by Jim Crow disempowerment. Decades of “separate but equal” gave way to the “great migration” of Southern Blacks to the to prosperous industrial North...and the creation of largely black urban ghettos. White racism weakened after World War II as anticolonial and antiracist movements strengthened and worldwide demographic shifts led to a browning and yellowing of US citizens, both of which set the stage for the Civil Rights movement. Yet, Winant argues, the Civil Rights movement took a number of “accommodationist” stances by 1) failing to push for

more sweeping policy and 2) acceding to many of the more “moderate” movement demands. In sum, while racial politics changed drastically, the underlying objective of domination remained intact.

Amiri Baraka (as LeRoi Jones) has argued that the styles and sounds of Black music evolved in response to transformations in the social world, including changes in the way Whites continue to dominate racial minorities. For example, he suggests that many African customs, philosophies, and ideas brought to America with the first generation of slaves had survived well into the 20th century as a result of new genres and artists borrowing elements from older musics and making them their own (Jones 1970, Ch. 5). For Baraka, there aren’t “new” Black styles of music. Rather, Black music changes as Black reality changes and remains a reflection of “consistent attitudes within changed contexts” of Blacks in America (Jones 1963 p. 153). He refers to this process as “the changing same”.

The earliest Black music in America had its roots in West African worksongs and religious music. Once Blacks were brought to America, such songs were suppressed by White slave owners and “after a time changed into other forms that weren’t forbidden in contexts that were contemporary” (Jones 1963 p. 20). The slaves incorporated “acceptable” European secular and religious traditions into their own, creating a European/African “hybrid” music. This hybrid served as the immediate predecessor of later generations of slave music, including the spirituals and early rural blues.

In antebellum America, music served a number of emancipatory and political functions. The slave folk songs and spirituals were “the first cultural form of both resistance and affirmation of identity by oppressed blacks in U.S. history” (Pratt 1990, p. 53; see also Jones 1963 p. 42). Slaves were typically kept from engaging in any sort of independent activity,

individually or as a group, outside of those permitted by their masters. For example, the slaves, stripped of their native religions, were only allowed to openly follow Christianity, albeit a very narrow interpretation which seemed to condone the social standing of both master and slave.

This does not, however, mean that such social critique was not shared in the face of the powerful. Slaves used music as one way of responding to the control imposed upon them.

Directly under the noses of the overseers, slaves would sing religious/Christian songs that could be interpreted as showing reverence for and submission to the God of the dominant culture, thus providing “proof that their [masters'] socialization efforts were having desired effects” (Neal 1999, p. 38). In reality, however, they were often singing about things like escape to the North, revolt, or they were sharing information about the Underground Railroad (Ellison 1989, p. 49-52). These calls of resistance were camouflaged through the creation of what Mark Anthony Neal calls “metaphoric landscapes” through the use of “mystified language” (Neal 1999, p. 2). The use of disguised messages found in the spirituals was one way that the slaves could create an additional social space wherein they had the power to denounce their oppression in the immediate presence of their oppressors.

“Emancipation” also created the conditions for the emergence of a Black Public Sphere that included social sites where emancipatory music could flourish. After emancipation, Blacks continued to be denied access to white social spaces, from public schools to places of business, and were often threatened with or experienced physical violence when they attempted to enter them. Out of necessity came the creation of covert, yet social, Black Public Spaces to counter this constraint and provide alternatives to the isolation that came with it (Neal 1999, p. 4).

A few of the more notable such spaces could be found within institutions where music was at the forefront of the social experience. For example, the Black church was a

“quintessential institution” around which the Black Public Sphere emerged before and after the Civil War (see also Jones 1963 p. 48). While Black slaves were critical of the brand of Christianity being forced upon them by their White owners, many accepted some of the basic tenets that coincided with a version of American democracy that they sought, one where “all ‘men’” were created and treated equal. While the slaves were covertly singing about freedom from white domination, the formation of the Black church after the Civil War allowed for a site where Blacks could openly sing the same songs.

There were, however, divisions within the newly emerging Black Public Sphere as the Black church often “privileged the sensibilities of the liberal bourgeois” (Neal 1999, p. 6). Amiri Baraka (Jones) (1963) argues that this schism became wider in the post-bellum South, a time when, he claims, “the Negro...stood further away from the mainstream of American society than at any other time” (Jones 1963, p. 59). Not only did Blacks continue to be segregated from Whites as a result of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, but lower-class Blacks grew further away from many middle- and upper-class Blacks attempting to assimilate into the larger White society. The status of the Black church as the definitive site of the Black public sphere diminished as the larger population of lower-class Blacks resisted bourgeois criticism and authority and attempted to create social sites that privileged working and lower class sensibilities, hidden from both the Black church and the larger White public sphere. What emerged were informal and “underground” jook-joints, honky-tonks, and after-hours clubs – spaces where musicians refrained from imitating the music of the Black church, which itself had begun to imitate European musical forms, and instead borrowed more readily from African call-and-response and shouts creating an early version of what we today know as the blues (Jones 1963, Ch. 5; see also Pratt 1990, Ch 4).

Soon after “Emancipation” gave poor Southern Blacks the “freedom” to compete economically with poor Whites, Jim Crow stacked the deck against them. Many Blacks were forced to travel across the South in search of work, often times alone, navigating the social terrain as an individual as opposed to part of a slave collective. Being required to participate in a (Western) social reality that demands individuals look inward, Baraka (1963) argues, directly influenced the focus of Black secular music to change from that which highlighted the “exploits of the social unit” to that which drew attention to “the life of the individual and his individual trials and successes” (Jones 1963, p. 66). Coupled with the increased leisure time of many post-slavery Blacks and the growing use of instruments like the guitar and harmonica, the blues increased in popularity over the course of the latter decades of the 19th century.

Early blues and jazz soon became popular in Southern cities, but it too was transformed as a result of control from above. In New Orleans, for example, light-skinned Black “Creoles” were allowed to play jazz-like instrumental tunes (with a decidedly heavy European influence) and entertain in public spaces even before Emancipation. Shortly before the turn of the century, however, de jure segregation put a number of these entertainers, many of whom were working for whites, out of work. Blacks were divided – again – along class/status lines and these early instrumental performers separated themselves from the growing number of blues performers that were beginning to play in the urban saloons and jook-joints. While divided, Jim Crow required that both groups be in close physical proximity to each other (and away from whites), which led to the formation of more modern jazz as the European-sounding “instrumental blues” blended with classic blues.

Later, Black public spaces began to emerge in cities of the urban North – first Chicago and, later, cities like Saint Louis, Kansas City and New York. When poorer Southern Blacks

migrated in the early 20th century, they brought with them the same blues and “dirty” jazz that was met with disapproval by the Southern Black bourgeois and lighter skinned musicians. The response by the emerging middle-class of Northern Blacks was similarly unwelcoming. The separation of this segment of the Black Public Sphere allowed Blacks to continue their critiques of the social world, though changes in their social realities resulted in changes to the objects of criticism. Whereas “country blues” criticized inequitable treatment by slave owners and landlords, the new “urban blues” brought to light issues concerning unemployment and ghetto living conditions (Ellison 1989, p. 3).

During the first decades of 1900s, what became known as the “classic blues” had flourished in the Northern cities, spurred in part because of the attractive mobility narratives found within such songs. By the 1920s, blues and, especially, its Europeanized offshoots like jazz and ragtime had become increasingly popular, helping to spur the development of the recorded music industry which, in turn, helped propel the radio industry as white businessmen began to realize the commercial potential of narrowcasting to niche Black markets and Black-culture voyeurs (Neal, 1999). Nelson George (1988) notes that during the “Roaring Twenties” and the Interwar Period, jazz and “white jazz”, or swing, became so popular among Whites that they were actually seen by their fans as “white music”. Most, however, considered it “race music” and despite its increasing popularity it was met with still more criticism from above. White cultural critics especially and Whites more generally branded jazz as “vulgar, filthy, and suggestive”. Black elites, ever aware of the images of blackness made visible to whites, agreed and felt that such displays by Black jazz performers “hindered the advancement of the race” (George, 1988 p. 8).

The Great Depression and World War II put a halt to the success of “race” recordings, but

relative prosperity following the war put radios in a large number of lower-class Black homes allowing popular Black music – now repackaged as “rhythm & blues” – to thrive. Initially, R&B remained “underground”...popular, but still outside of the larger commercial market for swing music which, by now, had according to Amiri Baraka “submerged all the most impressive acquisitions from Afro-American musical tradition” (Jones 1963, p. 181). Repulsed by the increasingly watered-down (white) sound of swing and other popular Black genres, many artists began producing music that intentionally sounded much more abrasive (Jones 1963, p. 188). Bebop and hard-bop, for example, took on a “willfully harsh” and “anti-assimilationist” sound as young musicians reacted against the “sterility and formality of Swing as it moved to become a formal part of the mainstream American culture (Jones 1970, p. 16). Bebop and R&B musicians were “reclaiming the critical edge of black communal expressions from the arms of mass consumer culture” and “recreating the vitality of the covert spaces of the rural South and 20th century urban North” as they toured the Chitlin’ Circuit, a network of venues that provided the only outlet for Black musicians playing this brash new sound. Opponents, once again, “descended on the new music with a fanatical fury” (Jones 1963, p. 188). Members of the emerging Black middle class were quick to express their disdain. And for the first time, white music critics and writers were voicing their negative opinions of bebop not simply because it was a Black music, but because of the sounds and the content of the music. They failed, Baraka argues, to examine the music outside of “white middle-brow standards of excellence” and question bebop’s “social and cultural intent” or the reasons why the particular sounds and content existed at all (Jones 1970, Ch. 1).

As the Civil Rights movement gained steam and the political terrain changed in the 1950s and 1960s, so did the nature of Black popular music. Attacks against Black leaders, artists and

intellectuals led to a reemergence of the Black church as a dominant (and safe) institution of Black expression. In turn, gospel music fused with rhythm & blues, linking the spiritual with the secular to form what would later be called “soul” music. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s Black artists on record labels like Motown and Stax found great success singing slick and “soulful” pop songs. But by the latter part of the decade, soul music had undergone a transformation that mirrored the changing and increasingly political rhetoric of the Black public sphere - “as the organized struggles for African-American empowerment intensified...the black popular music tradition began to convey the urgency of its historical moment” (Neal 1999, p. 62).

During the late 1960s artists like Curtis Mayfield, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown released Black protest music to both critical and commercial success. Neal (1999) argues that this segment of the Black Arts Movement culminated in the release of Marvin Gaye's album “What's Going On” in 1971. The reign of the Black Arts Movement would be brief. “What's Going On” was released in the wake of seemingly unrestrained state repression against a number of Black political groups, exemplified by COINTELPRO's (an FBI counter-intelligence program) surveillance of Martin Luther King and its infiltration into (and attempts at destroying) the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party. In addition, the years that followed saw a rise in corporate involvement in Black artistic expression and an ensuing depoliticization of popular Black music and art. That the content of Gaye's 1973 album “Let's Get It On” was overtly sexual and almost devoid of the political messages found on his album released just two years prior only makes sense given the larger social context, a “logical manifestation[s] of the effects of pervasive state-sponsored violence aimed, successfully, at destabilizing the most radical elements of the black protest movement” (Neal 1999, p. 66).

The increasing influence of corporate radio on Black music led to the beginning of what George (1988) described as the “death” of rhythm and blues and the reign of the “crossover” artist. By the early 1980's only a select few “urban contemporary” (Black) artists were garnering commercial success. Most of America, however, was unaware that for nearly a decade teens in New York were shaping the contours of an artistic subculture that featured its own brand of musical expression. Hip hop culture gave birth to rap music, a genre that, in the span of only a few years, would become a worldwide phenomenon and provide a platform for a Black (and Brown) underclass to tell their story.

Black Noise – The Rise of Hip Hop

Tricia Rose (1994) has suggested that part of the primary context for rap music’s creation lies within Afrodiasporic artistic and expressive traditions. Many of the sounds of rap are similar to and can be rooted in West African forms of musical expression (Rose, 1994; Keyes, 2002; George, 1998). Words are recited in a poetic fashion with the cadence of the rapper’s speech set to the heavy instrumental rhythms. Melody takes a back seat to drum beats, while singing is usually reserved as accompaniment. Rap is sometimes used to tell long stories or cautionary tales, a practice that some have traced back to West African griot storytellers. The African and early African American practice of “playing the dozens”, where men boast about their masculinity and trade insults, today takes the form of the “battle rap” where rappers verbally spar to show their rap skills. “Toasting” or chanting rhythmically over instrumentals is a practice that can be traced back to early African-American slaves.

In addition, the urban context of New York City during the 1960s and 1970s also played a unique role in the creation of hip hop culture and rap music. In the 1950s government funding was approved for the creation of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, a thoroughfare intended to

provide a route from New Jersey to Manhattan by cutting directly *through* heavily working-class areas of the Bronx. By the late 1960s, many working class Blacks and Hispanics were forced to relocate south of the expressway to the increasingly deindustrialized South Bronx. Within the decade, the South Bronx would lose hundreds of thousands of jobs, income would dip to alarmingly low levels and youth unemployment would top 50 percent. Deteriorating housing projects were often burned to the ground by slumlords hoping to collect insurance money as post-Great society funding and services to aid those left in the aftermath had disappeared.

While the government and the outside world had become engaged in such “politics of abandonment” (Chang 7) of the non-White youth in New York City, the developing hip hop culture provided an outlet that helped lead many of them through the rough times. Disaffected youth flocked to parties where the earliest hip hop DJs, armed with two turntables and a crate of records, would provide b-boys and b-girls (“break dancers”) and their audiences hours of relief from the dire realities of the streets of New York. By the late 1970s, DJ performances became increasingly more complex and entertaining, leading some to enlist the help of emcees to redirect dancers' attention from the turntable acrobatics to the dance floor. Charismatic members of a DJs crew would hop on the microphone and sing, lead the crowd in call-and-response chants and perform rhythmic rhymes over the percussive breaks of the records being spun. In 1979, The Sugarhill Gang released the first successful rap album and by the late 1980s, groups like Run-D.M.C and The Beastie Boys. were multi-platinum superstars. As the turn of twenty-first century approached, rap music would become one of the most successful of all commercial music genres.

Rap Music and the Changing Scene

Not only did the urban context of New York spur the creation of rap and hip hop, but the larger post-Civil Rights context contributed to the development of what I call a Hip Hop Generation

political standpoint. The idea that there exists within generational groups a particular political standpoint is similar in many respects to the ideas put forth by feminist standpoint theorists. Patricia Hill Collins, for example, argues that “group location in hierarchical power relations produce(s) shared challenges for individuals in those groups” (*Fighting Words* 201). Subordinate group standpoints emerge not simply because members of a group share a particular demographic, but, she continues, because their shared challenges – products of their shared social locations – help create “similar angles of vision” (25) about the world around them.

While serving as editor of The Source magazine in the 1990s, Bakari Kitwana began applying the “Hip Hop Generation” label to Black Americans born between 1965 and 1984. As a group, he argues, they have shared experiences that have contributed to the creation of a specific set of attitudes, values, and understandings about the world. While the Civil Rights generation formed their values and identities around “traditional” institutions such as family and the church, today’s Black youth are more likely to look to global images of (American) blackness in film, TV, and especially music (7). However, Kitwana also suggests that “the global corporate structure that gave young Blacks a platform [via hip hop] was the driving force behind their plight” (*The Hip Hop Generation*, 11). Increased visibility of pop-culture representations (and stereotypical misrepresentations) of Blackness in mass media since the 1960s occurred alongside and contributed to the development of new, covert, “colorblind” racism (Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy & Racism* 89-136; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* 1-8; Brown et. al. 36-43; Winant 39-49; Wise, *Between Barack* 83-110; Wise, *Colorblind* 63-152) and White backlash to increases in Black political power (Steinberg 97-164), both of which continue to create and reproduce racial inequalities. Kitwana proposes that these developments, coupled with the effects of post-Civil Rights era deindustrialization – increased unemployment, a rise in drug and

gang activity, and increasingly harsh policies aimed at curbing criminality – were catalysts for the creation of this generation's worldview (*The Hip Hop Generation* 25-83).

Much of the earliest rap records are littered with references to political issues associated with the Hip Hop Generation Standpoint. By the end of the 1980s, messages raps like The Stop The Violence Movement's "Self-Destruction" and Public Enemy's "Fight The Power" were topping Billboard's Year-End rap charts. These artists were some of the first in the Hip Hop Generation to grow up in a post-Civil Rights America and, thus, some of the first to recognize the Civil Rights Movement was not without its failures. Frustrated at their parents generation for being hyper-critical and out of touch with the realities of the post-Civil Rights era, early political rappers were, in fact, providing a voice for young Blacks, often times to audiences of millions.

The music industry was providing an opportunity for such artists to broadcast their views around the world. However, the same industry was also constraining in a number of ways. Criticisms of the status quo could only go so far before powerful interests would attempt to quell expressions of discontent. Following the release of N.W.A.'s 1989 song "F*ck The Police" and Ice-T's 1992 song "Cop Killer" - songs that paint a highly unfavorable view of law enforcement treatment of Blacks – both groups became involved in high-profile censorship battles. The group N.W.A. was even placed on an F.B.I. watch list. Meanwhile, industry analysts finally recognized that rap music had the potential for huge crossover appeal among whites and began heavily courting artists and offering them record deals.

My own research reveals that within 15 years, the political aspects of the most popular rap songs had become almost non-existent. For example, there were significantly less – only one (Chamillionaire's "Ridin'") – songs on Billboard's Year-End rap charts in 2005 and 2006 that addressed political issues to any significant degree. Over a dozen songs addressing political

issues were present on the 1989 and 1990 charts and many address these issues throughout. Further, political songs were relatively more successful during rap's commercial infancy. The #1 song in 1989 was the aforementioned "Self-Destruction" and the #4 song was "Fight The Power". Lastly, while a few recent popular songs address political issues, only the Chamillionaire song did so more than just in passing.

There are at least a few possible explanations for this decline in the presence of politics in popular rap music. For one, the success of rap singles depends, in part, on decisions made by music industry gatekeepers; these decisions follow a particular economic and cultural logic and are informed by a number of value judgments and cultural beliefs" (89) that can include stereotypical understandings of Black. Keith Negus suggests that music business personnel are often "uncomfortable with the politics of black representation" (86) and uneasy with artists that "keep it real" by writing lyrics littered with profanity and candid discussions of politics. As a result, powerful industry executives will often promote only those rap songs that are "safe" and non-controversial.

Further, early in rap's commercial ascendancy white audiences had become a majority of rap's buying audience. In an era of post-Civil Rights racial politics and colorblind racism, many Whites are convinced that racism is a thing of the past and believe, for example, that because slavery is over the *plight* of Blacks in America is solely the *fault* of Blacks in America (Bonilla-Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism* 137-166; Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* 75-101). It would make sense, then, that some Whites – even fans of rap music – might be uncomfortable listening to songs that, for example, address racism they believe does not exist. Record labels hoping to score a popular hit might, thus, prioritize "safe" rap songs featuring themes most White and Black Americans can relate to – dancing, sex, consumerism, etc. – over songs

featuring, for example, counter-hegemonic themes that will resonate with a much smaller percentage of consumers.

Changes in the structure of the same music industry that gave rappers the opportunity to voice their opinions must be taken into account as well. Since the 1980s, all forms of mass media have come under the control of fewer and more powerful owners – from fifty corporations in 1980 to five massive global conglomerates by the turn of the 21st century. As a result, some suggest the range of political ideas that are readily available to the public, including those within popular rap music, has become increasingly narrow (Bagdikian 11-26; McChesney 2-7; Klinenberg 20-24). During the 1980's, many major labels failed to sign rap artists because they did not see them as guaranteed profit-makers. As such, independent labels like Tommy Boy, Profile, and Sleeping Bag were responsible for many of the era's most successful releases, perhaps providing for a greater diversity of rap messages than in later years when major labels controlled a greater bulk of rap's releases (Negus 84-103).

So, to argue that rap was and remains a political voice requires at least a few qualifications. The most popular rap music does not address political issues to any great degree. If Baraka's concept of "The Changing Same" is still applicable, one might examine popular rap music and conclude that it is reflecting a Black reality where political dissatisfaction is absent and money, cars and sex with an endless number of beautiful women are present. As I explained above, it is a bit more complicated than that. Black reality is, perhaps, being distorted by a commercial music industry that acts as a carnival mirror. Meanwhile, the context of rap production continues to evolve. Underground "scenes", wherein rappers are able express themselves without the music industry intervening, exist in cities large and small all across the United States. The networking capabilities of the Internet have allowed for rappers to create

music in the privacy of their own homes and broadcast it to a potential audience of millions. As well, the POST-Hip Hop Generation will be coming of age in a few short years. This is a generation that will have experienced the optimism that may have come from the election of the United States first Black President as well as the pessimism resulting from growing up during the worst economic recession in 80 years. Only further research on the increasingly complex character of rap music will be able to determine the nature of its relationship to (or even the applicability of) the concept of The Changing Same.

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