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WHERE THEY'RE CALLING FROM: CULTURAL ROOTS OF RAP

by Jimmie L. Briggs, Jr.*

With a certain degree of ambivalence and frustration, I agreed to write this essay. In some ways it is an untenable position to defend rap music against its numerous detractors. Most discussions of rap music are rife with misconceptions, exaggerations, and fear. I emphasize the last because that's really what the whole brouhaha over the music is about. The music was around years before Dan Quayle memorized how to spell "family values" and will be around long after the NRA has ensured everyone the right to shoot each other with automatic weapons.

The point is, rap music scares the hell out of people. Primarily seen as unredeemable, nihilistic agitprop, it gets dissed from all quarters whenever possible. I am a twenty-three-year-old, black male writer from a middle-class background, with a college education and a great disdain for the "mainstream." Having written at and observed places which are considered a part of the mainstream, I can now say, with great fervor and sincerity, they "suck." Their sole purpose lies in promulgating an agenda which doesn't address any sort of reality—at least not the reality that those disillusioned with the American Dream see. It is there that rap musicians "call from"¹—the voice from which they speak.

Many Americans, white and black, are comfortable with Arsenio Hall, En Vogue, or Bill Cosby on their radios and televisions. Artists such as these are more palatable and non-threatening than rap musicians because they don't address questions of black-on-black crime, police brutality, misogyny, or drug abuse. We can all get along and some day, somewhere over the rainbow, everything's gonna be alright. Rap doesn't come off like that. It's confrontational. It's honest. It's dynamic. Rap is part of the best in the oral storytelling tradition of black music in this country and the African diaspora.

I truly believe that this music has significant merit as a means for tearing down the status quo, as a voice for the disenfranchised (i.e. blacks, Hispanics, gays, et al.), and as a portent of what should hopefully be the last phase of the civil rights movement. Rap is rebellion, and the diverse listeners are party to that rebellion. Beneath the overblown machismo and braggadocio, there are cries of despair and stories of struggle being told. Most importantly, boundaries are being torn down, whether they are musical or socio-political.

I. THE RAP ON REVOLUTION

To take part in the [African] revolution it is not enough to write a revolutionary song; you must fashion the revolution with the people. And if you fashion it with the people, the songs will come by themselves, and of themselves.

Sekou Toure²

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¹ Taken from the Raymond Carver novel, *Where I'm Calling From*.

² FRANZ FANON, *THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH* (1960) (quoting Sekou Toure).

The notion of the artist as antagonist is nothing new. In his pivotal treatise on rebellion, *The Rebel*, French existentialist Albert Camus described what he called the “metaphysical rebellion,” in which the individual rebels against his very existence, as well as the conditions of that existence. In the context of the United States, the myriad of social and economic barriers which often sentence people of color to the depths of the underclass give cause for such a rebellion.

It would not be presumptuous to identify the inherited legacy of the present “hip-hop generation” as bearers of the civil rights torch. Franz Fanon noted in *The Wretched of the Earth* that “each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.” The present generation of black Americans is fractured to a certain degree—some subscribing to the American Dream in search of their slice of the pie and others struggling to retain some sense of ethnic heritage, racial dignity, and loyalty. The all-important question is whether or not the struggle for true civil rights is to be won through universal cooperation, or by intra-racial development and organization.

Revolution is a widely misunderstood and abhorred concept. Often, the word itself raises images of destruction and death. This connotation is not always necessary if one defines “revolution” as a complete change from a previous state or condition. Change is simultaneously welcomed and feared. In bringing about change the sense of familiarity and predictability is lost. We are more comfortable with confronting relatively certain futures or known outcomes than with the sudden or the unexpected.

I would submit that in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp, Solzhenitsyn, and Nietzsche, rap music has carved out a niche for itself as a guerilla aesthetic, aimed at tearing down the conventional and freeing minds along the way. Rap music is, and always has been about uplift and expression. As Gil Scott-Heron said in naming a song and an album: “the revolution (will) not be televised.” It’s booming out of car stereos, being danced to in the clubs, and laid out in the studios.

II. SKETCHES OF SPADES

To be a black man is to be a shadow, a nightmare, a statistic. . . . It’s being painted in by numbers—the numbers of unemployed, drug-addicted, incarcerated, dropped-out, murdered.³

A. *On Black Rage*

Admittedly, there is a certain anger fueling the music which offends and disturbs so many. It sprouts, I believe, from growing up and living in a society which places race and economic class as predeterminates of whether one will maintain dignity, hope, and mental stability in one’s lifetime. Rap music tells white America how it really is. Now is the time to let it all hang out. All the kowtowing, “yessuh-bossing,” and wide-grinning, “we are the world” crap is in fact a bold-faced lie. Black people don’t love white people and if any destinies were manifested, it wasn’t ours. This is not to say that rap music buys into the victim mentality of the “white man’s burden.” Blame is accorded to all quarters. The drug dealer who destroys his neighborhood and the misogynist who forgets he has a mother are criticized and scrutinized. Better than any other song since its release, the seminal-rap anthem, *The Message*, looked at the life of black youth, often discussed by the so-called experts and politicians, but rarely understood:

³ NELSON GEORGE, *BUPPIES, B-BOYS, BAPS & BOHOS: NOTES ON POST-SOUL BLACK CULTURE* (1992).

Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge
 I'm trying not to lose my head
 It's like a jungle sometimes, it makes me wonder
 How I keep from going under.

GRANDMASTER FLASH AND THE FURIOUS FIVE

The Message

THE MESSAGE

(Sugar Hill Gang, 1982)

A principle of thermodynamics roughly states that “for every action, there is a reaction.” Everything happens for a reason. The simmering emotions which rest within rap music are not spontaneous. To at least get a sense of what it's all about, one has to look at the fertile groundwork beneath the lyrics.

B. TRICKLING DOWN

Financial leprosy
 We got to get up
 And wait in line
 For the soup, toilets
 And things to read
 Fill out 11-0-1's
 And take a seat.

DISPOSABLE HEROES OF HIPHOPRISY

Financial Leprosy

HYPOCRISY IS THE GREATEST LUXURY

(25th & Broadway, 1992)

Governing all matters of race in black or white, one color reigns supreme—green, the color of money. Money is the ultimate common denominator affecting state-of-living, social class, and self-determination. During the years in which rap music achieved its greatest prominence, the Reagan-Bush era, black Americans in general slid further down the economic ladder and as a result, remain in a state which would be considered “depression-level” if society as a whole experienced them.

As highlighted by the Urban League in its *State of Black America Report: 1993*, the most harmful cutbacks inflicted on the black population were to the equal opportunity and affirmative action programs, which were almost completely dismantled under Republican rule and Democratic compliance. According to the report, education of blacks has reached a crisis with thirty-three percent of black males and females not graduating from high school and only twelve percent finishing college. Obviously this means that many black youths are relegated to traditional avenues of black advancement, such as the armed forces, civil service, vocational professions, or low-level unskilled trades. The rest fall by the proverbial wayside explaining why, at any given moment, more black males are in prison than in college.

One of the most frustrating aspects of the economic situation of black people in America is that they constitute one of the biggest consumer groups, but have the least in terms of business ownership or any other type of economic empowerment. While discrimination and prejudice contribute significantly to this paradox, much of the blame can be laid at the feet of the black community itself, which lends lukewarm support to black enterprises in general. As a firsthand observer, I know of the prevailing mindset, which guides people into believing that products and services provided by black people

do not meet as high a standard as those of other groups. Ironically, when another people of color step in to fill the entrepreneurial void in a black community, resentment grows. Immigrants and Americans of Asian descent are the most popular targets of this resentment. West Coast rapper Ice Cube received a great deal of scrutiny upon the release of *Death Certificate*:

Pay respect to the black fist,
Or we'll burn your store down to a crisp.

ICE CUBE

Death Certificate

BLACK KOREA

(Priority Records, 1992)

Sadly, many Korean stores were destroyed in the Los Angeles riots months after the album's release. As a result, many businesses abandoned the South Central neighborhood and other areas hit hard during the uprising, leaving behind unmet commercial needs and creating conditions much more dire than they were previously.

C. PIGS

I spoke against some of those rap songs that talk about killing law enforcement officers. Good taste and decent people ought to know better than to permit those things to be aired across our country.

(former) President George Bush

Press Release, July 1992

You can kill the messenger, but the message will live on. Police brutality does exist.

the National Black Police Association

Despite widespread criticism and scrutiny, rap music has been up front in addressing commonly held views and perceptions of law enforcement officers. In a February 11, 1993, USA Today/CNN poll, of 840 adults questioned, seventy-four percent of white respondents felt the police do a good job in serving their community, compared to forty-eight percent of the black respondents. Additionally, only fifty-two percent of the blacks polled were likely to believe police on trial, in contrast to seventy-six percent of the whites. For as long as I've been around, black people in general have always held a certain amount of animosity toward the police. Aside from a documented propensity toward expressing unnecessary brutality toward people of color and the poor, police officers are viewed as protectors of the status quo, or "establishment," rather than the communities they're sworn to serve. They frequently seem to be corrupted by the uniform, in their "don't f--- with me" attitude and self-perception as untouchable mavericks. Yes, the job is potentially dangerous and stressful, but it is just that—a job. No one is drafted into law enforcement, and like soldiers in combat, certain risks and drawbacks are part of the deal.

Like many Americans, I became a voyeur of the notorious George Holliday videotape depicting the attempted lynching of Rodney King. The images displayed in those seemingly eternal eighty-one seconds were graphic and appalling, but to many young black and white Americans they seemed all too familiar. We'd seen beatings like it before from firsthand experiences, but there was never before tangible proof like this video. A complaint or lawsuit has an air of pointlessness. Without numerous witnesses, reasons

such as resisting arrest, suspected drug influence, or in the case of King, “extraordinary strength” can be used as an excuse for sending someone to the hospital. But a videotape existed, and no matter what he’d done, being pummeled fifty-six times by four grown men with batons, combat boots, and a Tazer gun was unwarranted. They had to be found guilty. An Amnesty International report completed just four months prior to the beating, showed that nearly 869 lawsuits were pending against the Los Angeles Police Department for incidents of excessive force or unlawful death. The Los Angeles Sheriffs’ Department additionally faced similar charges. When the “L.A. Four” wound up with acquittals, whatever flames of hope for justice and equality remaining in the hearts of black people burned a little less brightly.

I suppose how one views the police depends on one’s economic and cultural status. For areas such as Simi Valley and other upscale, middle-class environs around the country, the men and women in blue may be a welcome sight as defenders of prosperity and gatekeepers to screen out undesirable elements. Conversely, residents of Compton or East St. Louis would probably view the police as an invading force, not to be reckoned with or relied upon. Those pioneers of the gangsta-rap movement borne out of Compton, California, Niggas With Attitude (NWA), made their feelings known long before the present backlash against rap for its commentaries on cops:

Fuck tha police comin’ straight from the underground
 A young nigger got it bad ’cause I’m brown
 And not the other color
 Some people think
 They have the authority to kill a minority
 Fuck that shit ’cause I ain’t the one
 For a punk motherfucker with a badge and a gun
 To be beaten on and thrown in jail
 NIGGAS WITH ATTITUDE
Fuck tha Police
 STRAIGHT OUT OF COMPTON
 BMI Records, 1988

(Author’s note: R.I.P. Eleanor Bumpurs, Michael Stewart, Hong Pyo Lee, Pascual Solis, Malice Green, et al.)

III. THERE’S A RIOT GOING ON

A. *Music Of The Masses*

That’s what revolution is! It isn’t everybody standing here on an intellectual high. And it isn’t meeting people and starting from where they are not. It’s starting from where they can see.

Melvin Van Peebles, filmmaker (quoting BUPPIES, B-BOYS, BAPS & BOHOS:
 NOTES ON POST-SOUL BLACK CULTURE)

Throughout the history of black people in this country and in Africa, music has played an integral role in the evolution and reaction of societies toward their condition. The most obvious link rap music has to Africa, and which still exists, is the West African “griot” tradition. Griots are storytellers or praise musicians who document a culture’s history, as well as honor royal leaders and figures. Ghanaian griots are the most well-known purveyors of the art. Further influences include the gospel spirituals and Delta blues which came out

of slavery as a way of communication amongst slaves and release for the frustration and spiritual desolation inherent in their plight. The tradition of oral history or storytelling is a common legacy of black people in America as so few could read or write until the earlier part of this century.

An often unattributed debt is owed to black comedy. Stemming from the late vaudevillians to the scathing social critics of today, black comedy has played an integral role in the maturation of present-day rap. Early black humorists such as Pigmeat Markham, Moms Mabley, and Redd Foxx delivered lyrical and occasional musically-backed sets in the comedic-chitlin circuits which existed thirty and forty years ago. And of course, the craziest ni---r ever, Richard Pryor is often sampled⁴ among rappers of today as the epitome of the battered (comedic) warrior who never left his people.

More so than anything else, it was the musical and lyrical creations of the tumultuous '60s and early '70s which brought "rap" as it is known today to fruition. The recognized pioneer of the form, Gil Scott-Heron, first coined the saying, "The revolution will not be televised," and wrote and performed self-described compositions, including: *No Knock, Lady Day and John Coltrane*, and *Home Is Where The Hatred Is*. Groups such as Sly and the Family Stone (*Stand, Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey*), War (*Low Rider, The Cisco Kid*), and Parliament/P-Funk (*Maggot Brain*) provide fertile sampling ground for many rap musicians.

B. *Turn on, Tune In*

Across the face of Babylon, a mood spreads, sets in and gels in the hearts
of black Americans everywhere.⁵

According to a survey of 700 black teenagers done last year by Philadelphia-based MEE Productions, entitled "Reaching The Hip-Hop Generation," rap artists are "the only public figures still respected by black youth." Too often, respected leaders and role models fall short in their eyes, and youngsters are left saying, "(they) too wear no clothes." Where is the Malcolm X of today? Who will take Martin's place? Where do we go from here?

Despite the conventional wisdom, rap is here to stay. Nevertheless, raised public ire and political manipulations last year cast an indelible blight upon the industry as a whole, exemplified best in the Sister Souljah and Ice-T imbroglios.

Widely applauded, but sorely misrepresented was presidential candidate Bill Clinton's lambasting of comments made by female rapper Sister Souljah in a *Washington Post* interview following the riots in Los Angeles. His allegations of "indefensible" racism were nothing more than deceptive political ploys given the forum at which he voiced his criticism (a Rainbow Coalition conference) and the target-voter group he needed to win over for the November elections (Reagan Democrats). To set the record straight, Sister Souljah did not call blacks to arms with the purpose of starting a race war. What she did was identify the reasoning (or lack thereof) of those who rioted in Los Angeles more honestly than many commentators on the subject. Yet, the generally perceived image of rap music as violent and irresponsible lent more than enough credence to Bill Clinton's cheap shot at Sister Souljah.

⁴ Sampling is a process whereby rappers take pieces of other artists' music or monologue and incorporate them into their own.

⁵ ELDRIDGE CLEAVER, *SOUL ON ICE* (1968).

The major conflagration though didn't occur until late summer when attention turned to the infamous *Cop Killer*, released by Body Count, the heavy-metal band fronted by Ice-T. One can only wonder why attention from the police, interest groups, and politicians turned to this song which had debuted a year earlier when Body Count performed at the inaugural Lollapalooza tour. Again, public perception was manipulated and distorted as the artist entered the mind of someone who is arguably sociopathic to illustrate the emotions engendered within some citizens by the police. An obvious explanation for the heightened sensitivity to the explicit lyrics would have to be as a way of shoring up support for law enforcement agents at a time when charges of police brutality and inaction were at its peak (i.e. Rodney King beating, Crown Heights and L.A. riots, Malice Green shooting, et al.). Otherwise, inconsistent inaction to Bob Marley's *I Shot The Sheriff* and the Dead Kennedys' *Police Truck* would have to be explained.

Contemporary happenings always inform the tone and the tempo of rap music. Virtually anything of importance to the black community, as well as to Americans in general, finds its way into lyrics. Public Enemy addressed the death of Yusef Hawkins in *Welcome To The Terrordome*, Cypress Hill illustrated the homicidal tendency in *How Could I Just Kill A Man*, and Grandmaster Melle Mel explored the *White Lines* of cocaine in the early '80s when crack was starting to take over the streets. Last year, the L.A. riots proved to be a creative impetus for rappers such as Ice Cube, Da Lench Mob, and OFTB, who went on at length about the riots themselves and the preceding trial of the "L.A. Four." On his latest release, *The Predator*, Ice Cube warns in his dizzying *Wicked*:

April 29 was power to the people
And you might just see a sequel!
(Priority Records, 1992)

C. *Guess Who's Coming To Dinner?*

We're in the final stages of the revolution now. We're in their homes and they don't even know it."

ICE T

(statement made at a concert at the University of Maryland, Ritchie Coliseum, November 24, 1992)

What is heartening and somewhat surprising is the massive crossover appeal rap music has for suburban white youth. Last year's *Totally Krossed Out* by Kriss Kross and Ice Cube's *The Predator* served time atop *Billboard* magazine's "Top 200" chart, and not by accident. The overwhelming turnout of white onlookers puts rap concerts at the fore of revenue sales; their embrace of the hip-hop aesthetic as realized in a defined urban dress and demeanor keeps companies such as Nike, Girbaud, and CrossColours in the black (no pun intended). White rappers have had a mixed reception amongst seasoned fans and musicians, although I think the sincerity and universal respect of an MC Serch or Pete Nice more than makes up for a Vanilla Ice or Marky Mark. I don't subscribe to the notion that white people can't rap (or jump), but a displayed reverence and knowledge of the music separates the real mccoys from the pretenders.

One of my biggest concerns is that rap will go the way of jazz in becoming a sacrificed legacy in black American music. During the peak of jazz's popularity, blacks supported and nurtured it, but eventually blacks found other musical forms to enjoy and develop, while leaving jazz to the white aficionados and students. This is why many black hip-hoppers can identify even the most obscure of rap musicians, but have never heard of Dizzy Gillespie's *A Night In Tunisia*. The sad truth is that black people bury their

treasures, instead of maintaining that which made them great in the first place. Yet, I do agree that if anything can bring whites and blacks together it is certainly music. Rap is special because it strokes the mind and the spirit. Many white (and black) youngsters are provided with a history lesson of race relations and blacks in America which has been lacking in schools for so long. They may not understand why things are the way they are, but at least they'll know where the mistakes were made.

I chose to look at rap music from the perspective of a black American because that's what I am and that is where the music originated. Rap is universal in appeal as well as target, and an able tool with which to fight the specter of censorship and free-speech restriction. What is subversive, racist, misogynistic, or homophobic? It's all subjective and even if it weren't, who cares? What is the matter with saying anything you want about anybody? It's only a brief step from thinking something to saying it, so if one already had the thought or impression in mind, saying it isn't any worse. I would like to believe that not everyone is so weak-minded as to shoot a cop, kill themselves, or rape someone because of a song. In truth, I don't think people are. There are a multitude of other factors which manifest such actions, and are rarely discussed or recognized. It is always easier to deal with the symptoms of an ailment than to find the causes and treatment. This is why rap and other so-called "hate music" genres are under attack. They bring to light the very things which society strays from addressing with any import, but leaves to fester and spread.

George Orwell's *1984* was dismissed as paranoiac propaganda, but how far off was it really? Book banning still exists and free speech is constantly under attack. If the United States of America is to continue to pass itself off as a defender of democracy and freedom, it's time to truly walk the walk. Presciently, Ice T made a song about freedom of speech in 1990 which ironically would apply to him three years later:

Your opinion is yours, my opinion is mine
If you don't like what I'm sayin' fine
But don't close it, always keep an open mind
A man who fails to listen is blind
We only got one right left in the world today
Let me have it, or throw the constitution away.

ICE-T

Freedom of Speech

THE ICEBERG/FREEDOM OF SPEECH

(EMI Music, 1990)

Enough said.