

# Hip-Hop from Dissent to Commodity

## A Note on Consumer Culture

*By Robert J. Brym*

### **Music as Dissent and Consent**

Music can sometimes act as a kind of social cement. Reflecting the traditions, frustrations, and ambitions of the communities that create it, music can help otherwise isolated voices sing in unison. It can help individuals shape a collective identity. Sometimes, music can even inspire people to engage in concerted political action (Mattern, 1998).

Under some circumstances, however, music can have the opposite effect. It can individualize feelings of collective unrest and thereby moderate dissent. This occurs, for example, when music that originates as an act of rebellion is turned into a mass-marketed commodity. Music that develops in opposition to the mainstream typically gets tamed and declawed when it is transformed into something that can be bought and sold on a wide scale. By commodifying dissent and broadening its appeal to a large and socially heterogeneous audience, consumer culture renders it mainstream. The way it accomplishes this remarkable feat is well illustrated by the musical genre called hip-hop.\*

### **The Social Origins of Hip-Hop**

Hip-hop originated in the appalling social conditions facing African American inner-city youth in the 1970s and 1980s. During those decades, manufacturing industries left the cities for suburban or foreign locales, where land values were lower and labour was less expensive. Unemployment among African American youth rose to more than 40 percent. Middle-class blacks left the inner city for the suburbs. This robbed the remaining young people of successful role models they could emulate. The out-migration also eroded the taxing capacity of municipal governments, leading to a decline in public services. Meanwhile, the American public elected conservative governments at the state and federal levels. They slashed school and welfare budgets, thus deepening the destitution of ghetto life (Wilson, 1987).

Understandably, young African Americans grew angrier as the conditions of their existence worsened. With few legitimate prospects for advancement, they turned increasingly to crime and, in particular, to the drug trade.

In the late 1970s, cocaine was expensive and demand for the drug was flat. So, in the early 1980s, Colombia's Medellín drug cartel introduced a less expensive form of cocaine called rock or crack. Crack was not only inexpensive: It offered a quick and intense high, and it was highly addictive. Crack cocaine offered many people a temporary escape from hopelessness and soon became wildly popular in the inner city. Turf wars spread as gangs tried to outgun each other for control of the local traffic. The sale and use of crack became so widespread it corroded much of what was left of the inner-city African American community (Davis, 1990).

The shocking conditions described above gave rise to a shocking musical form: hip-hop. Stridently at odds with the values and tastes of both whites and middle-class African Americans, hip-hop described and glorified the mean streets of the inner city while holding the police, the mass media, and other pillars of society in utter contempt. Furthermore, hip-hop tried to offend middle-class sensibilities, Black and white, by using highly offensive language. In 1988, more than a

decade after its first stirrings, hip-hop reached its political high point with the release of the CD *It Takes a Nation to Hold Us Back* by Chuck D and Public Enemy. In "Don't Believe the Hype," Chuck D accused the mass media of maliciously distributing lies. In "Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos," he charged the FBI and the CIA with assassinating the two great leaders of the African American community in the 1960s, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. In "Party for Your Right to Fight" he blamed the federal government for organizing the fall of the Black Panthers, the radical black nationalist party of the 1960s. Here, it seemed, was an angry expression of subcultural revolt that could not be mollified.

### **Hip-Hop Transformed**

However, there were elements in hip-hop that soon transformed it (Bayles, 1994: 341--62; Neal, 1999: 144--8). In the first place, early, radical hip-hop was not written as dance music. It therefore cut itself off from a large audience. Moreover, hip-hop entered a self-destructive phase with the emergence of Gangsta rap, which extolled criminal lifestyles, denigrated women, and replaced politics with drugs, guns, and machismo. The release of Ice T's "Cop Killer" in 1992 provoked strong political opposition from Republicans and Democrats, white church groups, and Black middle-class associations. Time/Warner was forced to withdraw the song from circulation. The sense that hip-hop had reached a dead end, or at least a turning point, grew in 1996, when rapper Tupac Shakur was murdered in the culmination of a feud between two hip-hop record labels, Death Row in Los Angeles and Bad Boy in New York (Springhall, 1998: 149--51).

If these events made it seem that hip-hop was self-destructing, the police and insurance industries helped to speed up its demise. In 1988, a group called Niggas with Attitude released "Fuck the Police," a critique of police violence against Black youth. Law enforcement officials in several cities dared the group to perform the song in public, threatening to detain the performers or shut down their shows. Increasingly thereafter, ticket holders at rap concerts were searched for drugs and weapons, and security was tightened. Insurance companies, afraid of violence, substantially raised insurance rates for hip-hop concerts, making them a financial risk. Soon, the number of venues willing to sponsor hip-hop concerts dwindled.

While the developments noted above did much to mute the political force of hip-hop, the seduction of big money did more. As early as 1982, with the release of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message," hip-hop began to win acclaim from mainstream rock music critics. With the success of Public Enemy in the late 1980s, it became clear there was a big audience for hip-hop. Significantly, much of that audience was composed of white youths. They "relished ... the subversive 'otherness' that the music and its purveyors represented" (Neal, 1999: 144). Sensing the opportunity for profit, major media corporations, such as Time/Warner, Sony, CBS/Columbia, and BMG Entertainment, signed distribution deals with the small independent recording labels that had formerly been the exclusive distributors of hip-hop CDs. In 1988, Yo! MTV Raps debuted. The program brought hip-hop to middle America.

Most hip-hop recording artists proved they were more than eager to forego politics for commerce. For instance, the rap group WU-Tang Clan started a line of clothing called WU Wear, and, with the help of major hip-hop recording artists, companies as diverse as Tommy Hilfiger, Timberland, Starter, and Versace began to market clothing influenced by ghetto styles. By the early 1990s, hip-hop was no longer just a musical form but a commodity with spinoffs. Rebellion had been turned into mass consumption.

## **Puff Daddy**

No rapper has done a better job of turning rebellion into a commodity than Sean Combs, better known as Puff Daddy. Puff Daddy seems to promote rebellion. For example, the liner notes for his 1999 hit CD, *Forever*, advertise his magazine, *Notorious*, as follows:

There is a revolution out there. Anyone can do anything. There are no rules. There are no restrictions. *Notorious* magazine presents provocative profiles of rebels, rulebreakers and mavericks -- *Notorious* people who are changing the world with their unique brand of individuality.

Our goal is to inform and inspire, to educate and elevate the infinite range of individual possibility.... In essence, *Notorious* is for everyone who wants to live a sexy, daring life -- a life that makes a difference. After all, you can't change the world without being a little ... *Notorious* (Combs, 1999).

Although he says he's committed to changing the world, Puff Daddy encourages only individual acts of rebellion, not collective, political solutions. Puff Daddy's brand of dissent thus appeals to a broad audience, much of it white and middle class. As his video director, Martin Weitz, accurately observed in an interview for *Elle* magazine, Puff Daddy's market is not the ghetto: "No ghetto kid from Harlem is going to buy Puff. They think he sold out. It's more like the 16-year-old white girls in the Hamptons, baby!" (quoted in Everett-Green, 1999).

It is also important to note that Puff Daddy encourages individual acts of rebellion only to the degree they enrich him and the media conglomerate he works with.\*\* And rich he has become. Puff Daddy lives in a US\$10 million mansion on Park Avenue in Manhattan and a US\$3 million dollar house in the Hamptons. In 1998, *Forbes* magazine ranked him fifteenth among top-earning entertainment figures, with an annual income of US\$53.5 million ("*Forbes* Top...", 1998). Puff Daddy is entirely forthright about his apolitical, self-enriching aims. In his 1997 song "I Got the Power," Puff Daddy referred to himself as "that nigga with the gettin money game plan" (Combs and the Lox, 1997). And on *Forever*, he reminds us: "Nigga get money, that's simply the plan." From this point of view, Puff Daddy has more in common with Martha Stewart than with Chuck D and Public Enemy (Everett-Green, 1999).

## **Pop Culture and the Commodification of Dissent**

Hip-hop emerged among poor African American inner-city youth as a counsel of despair with strong political overtones. It has become an apolitical commodity that increasingly appeals to a white, middle-class audience. The story of hip-hop is thus testimony to the capacity of consumer culture to constrain expressions of freedom and dissent (Frank and Weiland, 1997).

Interestingly, some sociologists play a big role in this process. In Canada, for example, most of the big public opinion firms (Angus Reid, Goldfarb, and Environics) are owned and run by sociologists. One of the tasks they have set themselves is to better understand the popular culture of North American youth. By conducting surveys and regularly organizing focus groups with young consumers in major North American cities, they identify new tastes and trends that marketers can then use to sell product. The most recent report on pop culture produced by Angus Reid is available for \$20,000 a copy (Angus Reid

Group, 1999). By producing such reports, public opinion firms help to routinize the commodification of dissent.

Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Russian Revolution of 1917, once said that capitalists are so eager to earn profits they will sell the rope from which they themselves will hang. However, Lenin underestimated his opponents. Savvy entrepreneurs today employ sociologists and other social scientists to help them discover emerging forms of cultural rebellion. They take the edge off these dissenting cultural forms, thereby making them more appealing to a mass market. They then sell them on a wide scale, earning big profits. Young consumers are fooled into thinking they are buying rope to hang owners of big business, political authorities, and cultural conservatives. Really, they're just buying rope to constrain themselves.

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### Notes

\* Scholars and music buffs disagree about the exact difference and degree of overlap between hip-hop and rap. They seem to agree, however, that rap refers to a particular tradition of black rhythmic lyrics while hip-hop refers to a particular black beat (often jerky and offbeat) mixed with samples of earlier recordings and LP scratches (now largely pass ). See Mink-Cee (2000). In this essay, I use the terms interchangeably.

\*\* *Forever* is marketed, manufactured, and distributed by a unit of BMG Entertainment, the US\$6.3 billion entertainment division of Germany's Bertelsmann AG, the third largest media company in the world.

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