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Protest into Pop: Hip-hop's Devolution into Mainstream Pop Music and the Underground's Resistance

BY H. LAVAR POPE

Introduction

Can radical, rebellious music remain authentic and pure in the face of popularization? Or, does message content change when radical music becomes generally accepted by a mass audience? Hip-hop culture began as a politically radical form of expression by wholly rejecting mainstream society, but today, rap music is an inescapable part of our media and mainstream culture. In the process, the music and message underwent a drastic change; *as rap music became more and more popular, it became less and less radical.*

Generally speaking, rap music is created with the specific purpose of being sold to a large, young-adult—but otherwise undiversified—audience. Rap artists work with record companies (including marketing strategists) in an effort to sell massive amounts of albums, and because rap is being sold to a general audience, many rap songs today are party-based. Rap artists and labels then sell the product to consumers through marketing schemes and advertising. Today, most rap albums contain a song *designed* to be a hit single. These hit songs are usually made into a video, released to radio stations and disc jockeys, and heavily advertised in an effort to sell an artist's entire album. Rap is the most visible part of hip-hop culture because it gets the most media time and exposure.

Hip-hop music, on the other hand, is usually created by independent labels or artist-driven labels. This music is created with a small, specific audience in mind: people with a vast knowledge and understanding of the history of hip-hop culture. Because of this, hip-hop artists are not under the same constraints as their rap counterparts. As I will discuss, hip-hop artists can create politically controversial and revolutionary music because they are outside of the mainstream view and media structure. Hopefully, these differences between hip-hop and rap will become more vivid through elaboration and illustration. This paper deals with the most “political” of questions: *How can a radical sub-culture/movement gain a large audience while remaining radical and progressive?*

Hip-hop culture begins with the most basic of political questions: How do people react when excluded? Hip-hop started in the Bronx in the mid- to late-1970s amongst post-industrial ruins, political exclusion, crime, and general political powerlessness.

Some authors assert this environment was *essential* to hip-hop's birth. Early hip-hop culture takes many forms: graffiti art, breakdancing, rapping, and even personal style, and it begins as a way of rejecting a mainstream train-of-thought. Famous rapper, philosopher, and leader KRS-One was a part of the birth of hip-hop culture, and he summarized the situation in one very simple and explicit sentence. He explains: "In the beginning hip-hop was a way of saying 'I see what y'all are doing over there, and fuck all that!'"¹ In less explicit words, KRS-One is describing hip-hop as a form of expression that was unconcerned with—and rejected—mainstream tastes and standards.

Hip-hop was largely created by impoverished and excluded minorities in the South Bronx who realized the degree of their political and social exclusion, and decided to start their own place for politics and form their own identity. These pioneers started by taking elements of mainstream society and warping or modifying these elements. The first hip-hop "beats" or instrumentals were simply snippets or "samples" of very popular mainstream rock and soul songs from the 1960s. In this way, a few seconds of a song—usually the chorus—were repeated. Rapping is another way these pioneers actively rejected mainstream society. Both in form (spoken word instead of singing), and in content, hip-hop music immediately begins to challenge musical norms and, more importantly, the norms of society.

In 1982, a song was released that blatantly linked hip-hop lyrics with politics. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" presented listeners with the conditions of inner-city decay. The opening verse begins:

A child was born, with no state of mind/Blind to the ways of mankind/God is smiling on you but he's frownin' too/Cause only god knows what you go through/You'll grow in the ghetto, living second rate/And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate/The places you play and where you stay/Looks like one great big alley way...It's like a jungle, sometimes I wonder/How I keep from going under.²

This portion of the opening verse shows the collision between innocence (the child) and post-industrial, ghetto ruins. This song served two functions; it was both an outcry against oppression and a means of escaping or coping with the conditions. This is how hip-hop started.

During the mid- to late-1980s, hip-hop was deemed worthy of television and radio time. More importantly, the music becomes Music Television (MTV) ready. The impact of this cannot be overemphasized; once hip-hop music became available to mass audiences—namely, a suburban, middle-class, teenage audience—a great divide occurred in subject matter, topics, and musical style. During this period, a split in hip-hop culture began: rap music, a facet or by-product of hip-hop culture, was broadcasted to the general population while underground hip-hop music continued to remain outside of the mass market system.

The general cooptation of a part of hip-hop culture raises a more important question concerning radical art forms and political expression. How can radical musical forms remain authentic—defined by their rebellious roots—and still reach a large number of people? How can a radical and politically relevant social movement remain pure while gathering support and a mass audience?

Track 1: Rap's Death

Rap as a part of hip-hop culture is currently being challenged by many hip-hop purists. In an article entitled "Rap Music is Killing Hip-Hop culture," Rashida Restaino contends:

Hip-hop is dying, and [mainstream rapper] 50 Cent is holding the murder weapon. As a rap artist, 50 Cent's success includes being ranked No. 1 on the Billboard charts for weeks and selling more than 870,000 CDs, making him the rap equivalent of Britney Spears: Not only does he not add anything positive to the music genre, but he also exploits it for his own financial gain.³

This author describes the state of hip-hop music today. First, it is part of the mass market. Brooklyn rapper 50 Cent is selling albums like hotcakes. He has hit singles on radio, hit videos on MTV and Black Entertainment Television (BET), and, at the time of this project, he is even flirting with the idea of releasing a clothing line and shoe line. The 870,000 albums that 50 Cent sold were consumed by a very diverse and national audience. Rap is now national, global, and bought by more than just black or minority teens in the ghettos.

Second, Restaino describes the content of 50 Cent's music as uncreative and highly "exploitive" because the rapper uses the rap industry for his own personal "financial gain." The rapper makes music to sell records, and because of this, 50 Cent is unconcerned with the culture of hip-hop. So, at the height of its power and popularity, rap music has become just another musical genre, comparable to the pop music of Britney Spears.

The evidence of a lack of creativity and innovation is displayed in today's rapper's lyrics. Restaino argues: "50 cent's idea of entertaining lyricism includes a song entitled 'Bloodhound' where he says, 'I love to pump crack/ Love to stay strapped/ Love to squeeze gats you don't hear me, though.'"⁴ This is one of many examples that show the lyrical content of many rappers atop the Billboard charts today.

Many rappers are conveying very negative—and inauthentic—messages, and the remaining artists atop the Billboard Charts are part of a subgenre best described as "party rap"—rap played mostly in dance clubs, television commercials, and even, sporting events. Billboard rap music has been reduced to two circles: one that raps about drug dealing, fast cars, and money and another that brags about success (through money) and the lifestyle enjoyed from it. In other words, Billboard rap music has been reduced to "thugs" and "ballers"—people that concentrate on the acquisition of rare,

expensive, and flashy diamonds, clothes, cars, and other goods. So, the “thug” image is almost entirely negative, and the “baller” image is a form of wasteful, excessive mass consumption. In “Is Rap Dead?” journalist Walter Dawkins writes, “The only topics are bling-bling materialism, how many guns you have, and ‘ho’s’.”⁵

So why is, “Rap,” as Atlanta-based artist Killer Mike says, “[N]ear death, floating and sick?”⁶ First and foremost, creativity and innovation has disappeared in rap. Second, mainstream rap music has become a genre that recreates and reinforces the adverse effects of “ghetto” existence. When 50 Cent raps about crack sales, he is perpetuating and glorifying a drug industry that tears apart many urban communities. When other rappers talk of jewels, cars, and designer clothes, they are wildly reinforcing capitalism, the same economic system that allows for an unequal distribution of wealth and therefore, poverty in the inner-cities.

The status of rap today is incredible considering the genre’s history. Rap has flipped many of the messages in hip-hop culture. It is now helping to perpetuate the violence in ghettos rather than to attack or discuss such violence. Rap is now buying into capitalism (heavily) instead of pointing out the many ways it can destroy inner-city black and minority youth. Hip-hop culture was once a powerful, legitimate movement that resisted mainstream culture. It was an expression and an art form, but now a part of hip-hop culture, rap music, has evolved into something else. Now, rap music is everywhere. It is on MTV, on the radio, in commercials, in between plays at football games, and even in political elections. It has been captured and imitated by mainstream America by way of various techniques and strategies, and in the process, it has lost its social and political impact.

Nonetheless, hip-hop started as a revolutionary, artistic movement and it must be examined in this context. In the early 1970s, philosopher Herbert Marcuse published a work largely concerned with the place of art in revolutionary movements. This includes music, and he distinguishes between authentic forms of revolutionary music and “contrived” music. He uses the example of black rock music (“life music”) and rock music adapted by whites (“performance” music) as an example:

Life music has indeed an authentic basis: black music as the cry and song of the slaves and the ghettos...With the takeover by the whites, a significant change occurs: white “rock” is what its black paradigm is not, namely performance. It is as if the crying and shouting, the jumping and playing, now take place in an artificial, organized space; that they are directed toward a (sympathetic) audience. What had been part of the permanence of life, now becomes a concert, a festival, a disc in the making.⁷

The same process is occurring in hip-hop culture; record labels, consumers, and advertisers (all outsiders) have influenced the music and packaged it for mass consumption. When rap emerges out of hip-hop culture, there is a significant change in the performers, target audience, and goals. By using Marcuse’s model, we can trace

this change and identify the causes for the change.

Black rock music and hip-hop music are very similar. Both have roots in black ghettos and both emerged as a completely authentic and revolutionary form of expression. Both types of music are “life” music. They both deal with the immediate sufferings or pains of the given artist, and they both operate as a form of therapeutic escape from the given artist’s harsh reality.

Early rock music was an escape for the artists. It was a way to express all of the built-up anger and frustration caused by poverty, racism, and general oppression. However, non-black promoters and record company managers began to take notice of this culture and turned the musical *artform* into an *industry*. In the process, the people (mostly white musicians) changed, the messages changed, but most importantly, the rock music lost the indescribable “rawness” that it once had as “life music.”

Likewise, the hip-hop groups that emerged in the early 1980s were expressing their discontent with an impoverished, crime-stricken, and racially-biased existence through music, graffiti, and break dancing. Some songs overtly expressed this cause, and some songs were simply ways of coping with this form of living. Either way, it was always a form of escape; artists could release tension, anger, and hopelessness through music. In both cases, the target audience was minority, inner-city, impoverished youth.

Marcuse’s theory that an original, authentic form of music can be modified and warped by its descendant forms is essential to my study. Similar to his example of “black music of the slaves and ghettos” being taken over, a part of hip-hop culture—rap—has been taken over and modified. Rap music is now often played in front of a “sympathetic” audience. Marcuse also notes the artificiality in “white rock music” and the “festival” concept the music brings. Mainstream rap is no different; it is contrived for a specific purpose and audience—namely, the American youth with television sets, radios, and money to buy albums and concert tickets. Although rap concerts are often “sold out” affairs, the composition of the crowd is a lot different from the first rap crowds. The crowds in rap’s early days could relate to the message, and were part of the given environment; the crowds today are, again, the youth that watch MTV or BET and purchase the artist’s recording and concert tickets.

In a lecture at Lehigh University, hip-hop artist and hip-hop culture guru Kris “KRS-One” Parker talked about this idea and successfully summed it up in two sentences. He said: “Rap is something we do. Hip-hop is something we live.”⁸ To KRS-One, hip-hop is a politically significant movement on both a personal and collective level, but rap is merely an effect or an offspring of hip-hop.

The popularization of rap poses quite a few problems. First, the messages change. If an artist’s target audience is inner-city, impoverished and suffering blacks, one message will emerge; in contrast, if an artist’s target audience is youth America, the message will probably be quite different. The empowerment message and the revolutionary elements in rap become blunted or disappear entirely as the audience grows larger. Hip-hop that remains largely underground, authentic, and untouched by the market still remains a form of political expression and cultural resistance. The problem is that

underground hip-hop lacks the large audience that mainstream rap enjoys. This issue is more important than hip-hop, rap, music, or even artwork because it deals with cultural resistance and target audience. The general question is: can a political movement remain authentic, true to its goals, and pure and still amass a large audience?

Hip-hop as a culture is nearly thirty-years-old, and during these years, certain values and guidelines have developed. Since hip-hop culture was created out of rebellion or a general distaste for mainstream culture, authentic hip-hop or rap should also embody and convey this sentiment. For this reason, most “pop rap,” from artists like Vanilla Ice, M.C. Hammer, and most recently, Will Smith, are not considered real versions of hip-hop. Mainstream rap also treads on the history of hip-hop culture; not many songs played on MTV or BET deal with real issues facing the youth, blacks, or impoverished people. I begin my analysis in the Bronx in the early 1980s.

Track 2: Old School Hip-Hop

In a book on popular culture, Douglas Kellner discusses the social conditions from which hip-hop emerged:

The 1980s was a period of decline in living conditions and expectations for blacks under conservative administrations who shifted wealth from the poor to the rich, cut back on welfare programs, and neglected the concerns of blacks and the poor. During this period, the standard of living conditions in the inner-city ghettos deteriorated with growing crime, drug use, teen pregnancies, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, gangs, and urban violence.⁹

What was causing these conditions? Well, one reason for these social conditions is severe economic inequality and the absence of hope. Some economists argue that a movement of manufacturing jobs away from urban centers took place in the 1960s. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s, urban corporations moved from the cities to the suburbs. As a result, black and minority unemployment in the inner-cities skyrocketed. With the disappearance of legitimate jobs, some citizens turned to illegal sources of income, and the 1980s crack market became an appealing option for youth.¹⁰ Drug crime produced cities of violence and the adverse social conditions described in “The Message.”

So, one can see how hip-hop is widely considered to be a genre of music that emerged in response to inequality. Blacks and Hispanics in the inner-city of the Bronx needed an outlet or a way to express their discontent with their conditions. Many of these racial minorities turned to hip-hop music, graffiti art, and break dancing. Kellner’s quote above emphasizes the horrible living conditions which inner-city minorities faced with in the early 1980s. Kellner’s description also sheds light on the lyrics in the Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 5 single “The Message.” At the time of the song’s release, there was a general lack of opportunity, a lack of equality, and sadly, a lack of hope in inner-city New York.

“The Message” is simply one example of a hip-hop song that expressed the concerns of inner-city, minority youth; there are countless others, and many come from this time period. It is important to note that this single was also a top seller and a hit record; it was heard by people outside of the ghetto, and it introduced many people to this new form of music. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s single was creative, expressive, and highly relevant while reaching a large, diverse audience.

How effective was hip-hop as a form of resistance? First, it has a certain “shock effect” that succeeds in challenging the mores and standards of mainstream society. Rap music remains successful in this endeavor. Second, hip-hop successfully exposes problems and conditions that are often ignored or overlooked by leaders. Third, over the course of a few decades, hip-hop culture has granted minority, underprivileged, and largely silenced groups, coverage and public expression in mainstream America. Fourth, hip-hop culture deals with the power relationships. Even rap’s most violent and offensive form, gangsta rap (rap about drugs, gangs, and the violence in such a life) deals with power. In an article on gangsta rap culture, author Robin D.G. Kelley says gangsta rap, “creates an imaginary upside-down world where the oppressed are powerful.”¹¹ Fifth, we can look at hip-hop that is instrumentally political. Some hip-hop lyrics encourage or push groups to take specific political actions. This is resistance stripped of all covers, and it can inspire action. Finally, we must remember the roots of hip-hop. It emerged as way of dealing with the adverse effects of Reaganomics. It started as simply a way to escape or forget the harsh conditions of the inner-city ghetto. Herbert Marcuse talks about “internal revolution” in the context of black rock music, and he argues, “the music is body; the aesthetic form is the ‘gesture,’ of pain, sorrow, indictment.”¹² For Marcuse, even this simple form of resistance is important in inspiring revolution and social change.

Track 3: Rap Today

In 1986, hip-hop/rap group Run-D.M.C. released a single with rock group Aerosmith entitled “Walk This Way.” Almost immediately, this song topped pop charts and gained immense MTV and radio airplay. In a surprising display of swiftness, hip-hop culture became a part of the mass media and media culture.

This event changed hip-hop from a back alley subculture into a part of popular culture. *At this moment, a clear split in hip-hop culture occurred, and rap music emerged.* Rap music became a popular and mass consumed part of hip-hop culture, and hip-hop music was reduced to a largely underground and invisible (in the mass market) style of music. Of course, these two subgenres are interconnected and have the same original source, and because of this, there is not a perfect divide between them. In fact, in the late 1980s rap and hip-hop were very similar.

Yet, as the years passed, the split became clearer. Rap assumed mainstream success during the early and mid 1990s, and by 1997, rap had become part of the mass market system. According to Billboard Charts, in 1998, rap became the top-selling genre of music (replacing Country Music). Next, it gained its own category and subcategories

for award shows. While many original artists and figures were happy about this new acceptance of hip-hop culture through rap, few noticed the changes in the message or thought about the effect it would have on the culture.

Before its mainstream success, rap had some positive messages. For example, in a notorious statement, Chuck D of the politically active and radical group Public Enemy claimed that rap music was the “black CNN.” This statement works in a couple of ways. One could take the statement to mean that rap is the news source or medium for black people, that blacks—instead of watching CNN or the nightly news—turn to rap culture for recent events or problems facing their community. In this view, the music serves as an authentic source of information.

On the other hand, one could take Chuck D’s statement in a completely different direction. Rap music could also be looked at as an information source for those outside of black and minority culture. Mainstream rap videos on MTV were for some people the most readily available image of minorities. For example, a kid growing up in a rich, suburban community who was unaware of the conditions of the ghetto could turn to rap music and videos as a second-hand source. In other words, rap music, often broadcasted the problems of blacks to other racial or socio-economic groups in society.

Author of *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* Barkari Kitwana provides six specific examples of how rap music has both supported and influenced social change. The list includes: dealing with “The Haitian Refugee Crisis,” “Rappers and Mumia Abu-Jamal,” support of “The Million Man March,” support of “The Million Youth March,” ending and pacifying the “East Coast/West Coast Conflict,” and funding “Social Programs and Foundations.” These are very explicit examples of how mainstream rap has used its power in positive, community-benefiting ways. However, Kitwana fails to explain that rap also *started* the East coast/West coast conflict, a war that is responsible for the deaths of tens of artists and most notably the deaths of Christopher Wallace a.k.a. Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur.

Popular rap music used to have social relevancy, but that has changed over the last ten years. The artists are more controversial lyrically and topically, but they have grown less and less radical politically. The most effective method of showing the problems with the messages in today’s popular rap music is to analyze an album. So, I consider The Clipse’s 2002 album, *Lord Willin’*.

Buzzing off of a Top 10 summer single, rap duo “The Clipse” released their first mainstream album entitled *Lord Willin’* on August 20, 2002. There are fifteen songs on the album, and as a whole the album closely resembles a gangster film; only two topics are discussed on the album: the sale, production, and distribution of cocaine and the excessive spending of the money gained from this illicit business. The Clipse is composed of rappers “Pusha T” and “Malice” (actual brothers) and rap, pop, and rock superproducers “The Neptunes.” The Neptunes provide intense and catchy beats, while the two rappers spit laid-back, arrogant, and punch line-filled rhymes.

The album immediately starts with a rapping introduction and the opening line lets the listener know precisely what the album will be about. Pusha T raps: “Playas we ain’t the same, I’m into ‘caine and guns.”¹³ Then the rappers talk about growing up, and how they became heavily involved in the drug game. Malice explains: “I even went by the book at first/Until I realized 9 to 5 wouldn’t quench my thirst.”¹⁴ So, how did Malice quench his thirst? He says:

I chefed that soft white and pumped from her crib/Scouts honor started with my grandmamma/Who distributed yay she had flown in from the Bahamas/ Partner, please, I grinds, I hustle with ease/Can damn near eyeball any weight in my sleep.¹⁵

By “chefing,” Malice means turning pure or powder cocaine into crack rocks. This album is filled with almost every street term for cocaine and crack (the section above has three). Then, he describes his family involvement in drug dealing and his expertise and experience. The entire album is an extension of the introduction song: the same topics, only the beats change. Today, for ground-shaking and politically aware hip-hop music of old, listeners must turn to the underground or unexposed portion of the culture.

Track 4: Mass Appeal: Explaining the Changes in Rap Music

“And you’d be happy as hell to get a record deal/Maybe your soul you’d sell to have mass appeal.”

-Gang Starr, “Mass Appeal”, 1994¹⁶

I return Marcuse’s analysis as a model for describing the change in hip-hop culture. In Marcuse’s theory, two things changed in rock. There was a shift from authenticity to “performance,” and in the process, rock changed from a mode of expression (“cry and song of the slaves and the ghettos”) to entertainment (“concert, festival, a disc in the making”). The second change in Marcuse’s analysis involved the addition of an audience. As he says, in “performance” or “white rock,” the messages are “directed toward a (sympathetic) audience.” Taken together, these two shifts suggest there are social, economic, and political reasons the content in rap music is quite different from the content in early hip-hop.

SHIFT ONE: RAP AS PART OF MUSIC MARKET SYSTEM

Regardless of genre or artist, all popular videos and songs (MTV or pop-radio) have at least one thing in common: each video goes through a massive, intense filtering system. All final products on television or radio are picked from a pool of many products. The market screens products in at least two ways, and rap music, as a part of the mass market is no exception. Rap is screened first by an economic-driven filter system. Simply put, record labels want to push records that will make enormous profits. So,

naturally, certain extreme or eccentric messages will be filtered out of the system.

In the early 1970s, sociologist Paul Hirsch noticed this trend in the music industry, and he developed a model and analysis of it. The Paul Hirsch filtering system describes the manufacture of many products in our society. Some scholars, like Hirsch, contend the system even closely chronicles the process in which national political candidates are chosen. Hirsch's model is vital in understanding why certain products are endorsed and sold while others fail.

The filtering system is required because the number of products "far exceeds the number that can be successfully marketed."¹⁷ There are simply more products than available consumers. In the rap industry, there are too many artists and not enough ears. So, logically, there has to be a selection process to determine which products will be promoted and "sponsored." This is an important stage, and obviously the messages that are agreeable and understandable to mass numbers of people will be picked. Meanwhile, messages that are radical or extreme will be excluded because they have less of a chance to succeed.

In Hirsch's model, after a product receives corporate backing or sponsorship, it has to get media approval and coverage. This step involves the communication of the product to the consumer. Hirsch says: "[Products] must be 'discovered,' sponsored, and brought to public attention...before the originating artist or writer can be linked successfully to the intended audience."¹⁸ It is important to note this is the first time the product first leaves the artists' complete control. Ultimately, rap artists rely on promoters and record labels to package and sell their albums. I will discuss the implications of this later.

Even after the decision to promote the product is reached, the media still holds a certain power over the product. Disc jockeys and video jockeys can decide which records to play and which records to avoid. Hirsch describes this role as a "gatekeeper." Hirsch claims: "*The diffusion of particular fads and fashions is either blocked or facilitated at this strategic checkpoint.*"¹⁹ These people have the power to shut out the product or to promote it heavily. This can be an economic decision. For example, a disc jockey could choose to *not* play a record because he or she feels the record's unusual or non-mainstream nature would turn away listeners, radio station sponsors, and money. Economic-based filtering is one reason rap has changed.

Finally, in Hirsch's system, the product is subject to what he calls "institutional regulators"—powerful media "gatekeepers." He argues these people are supposed to base their selection of products on independent and unbiased standards, but oftentimes this is hard to accomplish.²⁰ The biggest problem is that radio and television are funded by advertising sponsors. These sponsors want the widest-ranging, largest audience possible. Because of this, disc jockeys are almost forced to play the most popular and requested songs. This process kills radical music and tightly closes the system for new sounds. This is one reason why party rap music is played on MTV and BET while authentic hip-hop is left out. So, mainstream rap is placed under these largely economic-driven limits and conditions. By the time it goes through this system, it has been changed or

co-opted to attain the largest possible audience.

In addition to the above process, radical voices are marginalized in the market by deliberate removal or exclusion. This is closely related (and often interacts) with the economic-driven process. As a record label, it is an economic risk to endorse a record. So, records with a good possibility of causing conflict or trouble are not endorsed. For example, if an emerging artist's album is likely to cause problems with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) or the government for radical lyrics, the album is not sponsored. This has been a hot topic since September 11, 2001 and the Patriot Act, and there are many recent examples of record companies removing their endorsement of albums because of potential strife.

For example, in the summer of 2001, the radical Oakland-based hip-hop group "The Coup" went to take photos for their album cover. The finished photo was a picture of the two artists detonating a bomb to blow up the World Trade Center. The album was to be released in September of 2001, but Warner Bros (the distributor), pulled the album out of production after the tragedies of September 11, 2001. The group was investigated and questioned by government officials in relation to these events.

In addition to the danger—economic or otherwise—an artist could bring to a record label, The Coup example shows another process at work. Warner Bros has a reputation at stake; as a company that owns national television networks, radio, and smaller record labels, there is a need to filter out such radical, extreme voices because they carry the label name and image.

This filter system process helps explain rap music's political death.²¹ Yes, music of The Clipse, 50 Cent, and other drug, gun, and violence orientated records are *controversial*, but these types of records are not instrumentally political (stirring action), politically radical, or politically, socially, and economically dangerous. In contrast, many voices in underground hip-hop *are* controversial, radical, extreme, and politically instrumental. As I will show, many of these underground voices critique American society, the American political system, and the American—or world—economic system. Hirsch's model of the filter system gives one answer why these voices are excluded from MTV and radio play.

With its rise in popularity, rap also became a big part of the advertising industry. This is a blatant form of co-optation, and it has an effect on the way many artists create music. With advertising opportunities on the horizon, the likelihood of a mainstream artist creating a song or record that attacks capitalism (generally or specifically) goes down. The link between rap and capitalism subdues certain messages.

Today, there are many artists that help promote products, mass consumerism, and mass consumption, and this is interesting considering hip-hop culture's past (an original challenge to capitalism) and the demographics of the artists (largely inner-city impoverished blacks). Douglas Kellner is concerned with the issue of advertising in rap. He writes:

Rap can thus easily become a commodity fetish and mode of assimilation. Rap has also been assimilated to advertising with shoes, cars, and even food storage ads (the Reynolds [w]rap campaign), have used rap techniques.”²²

Kellner noticed this trend in 1995, and in the nearly ten years after his writing, the rap-advertising trend has increased exponentially.

Rappers—like other musical artists—are now celebrities. They have “star power” and are marketable and valuable to other entertainment industries. Rappers are now sought out to do movies and television shows. This trend in itself is not dangerous, but when the music and message becomes diluted, this trend becomes a huge issue in the hip-hop culture. Rap music becomes a tool of the market and is used in selling products and accumulating wealth.

The market system also causes the product to leave the hands of the creator or artist and enter the hands of the corporation and advertisers. Today, after a rap artist creates an album, it is the responsibility of the advertisers to push the album. They can decide which songs to promote and the targets for promotion. In a critique of (what is now) early capitalism, Karl Marx noticed this trend. He says:

The capitalist mode of production, for example, rests on the fact that the material conditions of production are in the hands of non-workers in the form of property in capital and land, while the masses are only owners of the personal condition of production, of labor power.²³

So, as glamorous as their careers and lives may seem, most artists only have complete ownership of one thing: their (creative) labor power. Few rap artists have the money to promote and endorse their own products to large audiences; they need financial backing by record companies. Even in the recording industry, a small number of people control production, promotion, and final financial decisions regarding products.

This has a very big effect on the final product in mainstream rap. For example, if a record company recognizes a certain type of rap (party or pop rap) will sell to a larger, more diversified audience than conscious rap (rap about politics, identity, and race), an artist could be pressured into modifying his or her music and message. Artist resistance could result in loss of promotion, strained relationships with the record company, and loss of future contract opportunities. It is obvious, then, rap artists do not have total control over their products. This allows those unfamiliar with hip-hop history and culture to make decisions on the selection of songs, albums, and overall image of rappers and is another reason the mainstream messages in rap music have undergone a drastic change.

Rap has been standardized because certain limits and expectations have been put on it. It is no longer independent of the market or media. Rather, mainstream rap depends on these tools. It uses the market for sales and the media for promotion and airplay. In the process, the market and media judge, critique, and impose standards on rap. Now,

major radio and video stations can determine which records get airplay.

Rap has also been co-opted by the very systems it opposed in its infancy. The market and media systems now use rap music for advertising of products. Rap today even *reinforces* capitalism. When rappers speak about fast cars, shiny diamonds, and designer jeans, they are preaching mass consumerism and materialism. Rap group “Big Tymers” sums up the materialist nature of rap in a song off of their 2003 album *Big Money Heavyweight* named “Got Everything.” The chorus goes:

Got everything they ever built/Everything they ever made/And on my bed I
even got a mink spread/And all my cars gotta have spinnin blades/And all my
toys gotta have an infrared.²⁴

This new dialogue can be attributed to a few differences between rappers today and rapper of yesteryear. The most notable difference is that rappers from the 1970s to the early 1990s did not have the wealth and influence of rappers today. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five—of the 1980s—did not have the money to buy fast cars or the power to reach millions.

The biggest problem today with rap today is that it has to go through a mass reconstructive filtering system. The videos on MTV and BET are the final products and the few that were deemed airplay worthy. The problem is that politically significant rap rarely makes it through this system. It is usually filtered and thrown out. If by some incredible feat, it does make through the system, it is usually reduced or edited in message content.

SHIFT TWO: AUDIENCE CHANGE

According to KRS-One, there really was no audience in early hip-hop. At park gatherings and DJ competitions in the early 1980s everyone in the crowd was actively connected with hip-hop culture. There were (and are) four elements of hip-hop culture, DJing, graffiti art, emceeing (MCing), and breakdancing,²⁵ and according to KRS-One, every person in the crowd was a participant in one of the four elements. At park shows, people attended to breakdance, compare and talk about graffiti art or “writings,” DJ, and rap. So, everyone in the crowd was a participant in hip-hop culture.²⁶

This active, 1980s hip-hop audience greatly differs from today’s rap audience. One can define today’s rap audience by looking at concert and album sales. According to SoundScan,²⁷ in 2003, the overall top-selling album was 50 Cent’s *Get Rich or Die Tryin’*. It sold 6,535,809 copies in eleven months.²⁸ Most of these six million-plus buyers are not actively involved with hip-hop culture; they are merely consumers of a product. Rap music, as Marcuse says of the co-optation of black rock, becomes a “performance,” a “festival,” and a “disc in the making.”²⁹ In fact, in 2003, 77 plus million rap “discs” were sold, and the previous year, almost 84.5 million rap records were sold.³⁰ These numbers are astronomical and difficult to for the human imagination to comprehend, but it is enough to say that rap, as part of the pop media system,

has a new audience. The genre has shifted from active participators to people with “wallets” who enjoy hit songs, beats, and flashy videos.

What does this mean? Well, in the early 1980s, the inner-city audiences had an invested interest and hand in hip-hop culture’s development, and because of this, the musical product was controlled by relevant and radical interests. Today’s rap consumers are mostly removed from hip-hop culture and many are indifferent, unaware, or unconcerned with hip-hop’s past.

Obviously, the audience demographics have also changed. It does not take an expert assessment to show that impoverished blacks *did not* account for 161.5 million rap album sales between 2002 and 2003. Popular rappers like 50 Cent³¹ offer controversial, but ultimately, politically safe, versions of rap by talking about immense wealth and glorifying gangster drug-pushing; these rappers offer a message of rebellion to teens and young adults while remaining within the safe boundaries expression.

So, because of the market system and change in audience, rap music becomes a mere imitation of early hip-hop. On the outside, the swearing, gun-waving, and tattooed arms of rappers seem like signs of rebellion. Yet, when the political relevancy of these popular rap albums and artists is tested, they fail immensely. However, today, there are still parts of hip-hop culture that are rebellious on the exterior and radical in message content. These forms are not publicized; they are found in the underground.

Track 5: The Freedom of Underground Hip-hop

“They say hip-hop is dead/I’m here to resurrect me.”

-Common³²

While mainstream rap changes and is consumed by the mass market and media systems, underground hip-hop music remains a voice of opposition. Many hip-hop artists continue to attack capitalism in the same manner, but with more intensity, as Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s “The Message.” Some artists simply attack the social system in America today, and other hip-hop artists attack rap music and other things they see as “inauthentic.” There are reasons for hip-hop’s survival as a defiant voice in society.

First and foremost, underground hip-hop is outside the media and market system. In many ways, it is independent of commercial standards of judgment. Hip-hop artists still have the ability to speak about anything and still gain acceptance from their community. This freedom allows for creativity and innovation. Because of their target audience, rap artists do not enjoy this freedom.

Secondly, underground hip-hop music is mostly untouched by major corporations and largely unnoticed by the government. Today, most underground hip-hop artists come from independent (“indy”) labels. On these independent labels, artists have more control and influence over the promotion, sale, and packaging of their music. In a sense, underground hip-hop artists make and run their own labels. This is in sharp contrast to mainstream rap labels. Most mainstream rap sub-labels are part of large, corporate super-labels.

Anticon is an excellent example of a politically active, underground hip-hop label. The label is composed of left-wing radical hip-hop artists and DJs, and the label’s website (www.anticon.com) provides “alternative” news (such as *Common Dreams*) and information, political and social satire, lots of links to unconventional educational sites (Noam Chomsky, sites on non-violence), and links to other underground hip-hop artists and labels. The label mission statement: “Anticon is a label for a movement.”

Underground hip-hop music also remains politically and socially relevant because it does not have to go through a mass filtering system, and as a result, it remains relatively pure in message content. This allows hip-hop artists to reject capitalism, materialism, and mass consumerism. While mainstream rappers talk about cars and embrace wealth, hip-hop artists often expose—both explicitly and implicitly—the effects of an unequal distribution of wealth. On a micro and usually implicit level, hip-hop artists sometimes will talk about their everyday struggles under the social and economic systems. For example, a hip-hop artist could discuss an awful and exploitative week of work followed by a check that does not stretch far enough. Many artists have perfected this form of storytelling. Minneapolis hip-hop artist Slug from the group Atmosphere is one great example. The Atmosphere catalogue of albums forms a valid critique of American society from the point of few of the forgotten and discarded working population.

Hip-hop artists also utilize other means of attacking the economic and social systems. Some artists make a very big-picture or macro attack on the American system. Artists like dead Prez (formally Dead Presidents, a slang term for American currency) and The Coup are the most noteworthy examples of this form of rejection. Instead of the artist focusing on isolated, individualized examples of exploitation, these artists will usually point out the vices of the larger social system.

So, underground hip-hop artists offer valid opposition to powerful systems (political, economic) in our society, but hip-hop music has a major problem: it reaches a limited and small audience of people. As discussed, it does not have the large scale market or tools that rap enjoys. As a result, underground hip-hop music’s audience is often composed of the people in society that are aware and recognize the problems. In other words, hip-hop artists often deliver messages to those who do not need to hear it.

Track 7: Outro

Hip-hop culture can inspire action for individuals. Songs like Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message” shows that this type of music has the ability to raise audience awareness to social-political problems. As mentioned, an author like Todd Boyd points to early hip-hop music as a changing force in his young-adult life.³³ In today’s world, politically conscious hip-hop music could be a useful device in informing individuals about the social realities in the inner-cities, third-world countries, or of blacks and minorities in general. It could also be used as a tool in speaking out against the individual worker’s pains under capitalism.

Yet, we don't see this. Rather, the most visible rap videos are of bragging, gun-blazing, drug-slinging, inner-city minorities. Today, most mainstream rap music is composed of good, appealing beats and mindless, inconsequential lyrics. And the fans dance. And audience recites the lyrics.

Obviously, the popular music industry will not broadcast the underground hip-hop revolution. It would go against the logic of capitalism to do such a thing. It would be dangerous and possibly destructive to give stage time to radical, critical, and hungry voices. Instead, the consumerist, exploitive messages of mainstream rap are welcomed with open arms by record companies and advertising.

Like many movements, change must start from the bottom up. The listeners who are aware of hip-hop's history and power must start examining mainstream rap music and pointing out its failures and shortcomings. Hopefully, this challenge and debate will reach the millions of people buying rap records, or better, the mainstream rap artists making the records. In either case, such scrutiny could be used to change the rap music market. Rap artists would be challenged to make more creative, original records.

This process has started. In the last couple of years, many mainstream rap artists have released albums resembling underground forms of music in message content, political awareness, and creativity. One such example is Atlanta-based, duo Outkast's 2003 Grammy-grabbing, double-album *The Speakerboxxx/The Love Below*. The album is musically daring, and surprisingly, it sold millions of copies. Another example is Chicago native, Kanye West's 2004 release *College Dropout*. The rapper/producer uses soul samples, taboo political and social topics, and largely underground hip-hop messages in his album. This too is currently selling like hotcakes.

Meanwhile, the spread of underground and politically conscious forms of hip-hop music could also be a powerful tool in preserving hip-hop authenticity and, more importantly, critiquing the problems of society. The standardization of the internet in American homes can definitely help spread underground hip-hop and the ideas and literature necessary to understand the musical sub-genre. This largely eliminates the market influences that shape mainstream music, and allows for unadulterated messages to reach large numbers of people.

"If the revolution ain't gon' be televised/Then fuck, I'll probably miss it."³⁴ This is the voice of the majority of consumers today. Admittedly, it takes hard work and effort to find out the economic, social, and political truths of our society. It is easier to sit, watch, and accept what is shown to us. With rap music, it is easier to sit and watch the available list of videos on MTV and BET than it is to search out underground hip-hop music; it is easier to understand and comprehend mainstream rap music lyrics than it is to understand, comprehend, and swallow underground hip-hop lyrics. In this way, rap listeners become the type of audience that political philosopher Herbert Marcuse warned against: an audience of politically dead, passive spectators watching a performance or show.

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Endnotes

¹ Kris "KRS-One" Parker, address, Lehigh University, Bethlehem (PA), 5 February 2004.

² Grandmaster Flash and the Furious 5, "The Message," *The Message*, Sugar Hill, 1982.

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¹² Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, 114.

¹³ Clipse, "Intro," *Lord Willin'*, Arista, 2002.

¹⁴ Clipse, "Intro," *Lord Willin'*, Arista, 2002.

¹⁵ Clipse, "Intro," *Lord Willin'*, Arista, 2002.

¹⁶ Gang Starr, "Mass Appeal," *Hard to Earn* Capital Records, 1994.

¹⁷ Paul Hirsch, *The Structure of the Popular Music Industry*, Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, 1973, 5.

¹⁸ Paul Hirsh, "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 77.4, (Jan., 1972), 640.

¹⁹ Paul Hirsh, "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 77.4, (Jan., 1972), 644.

²⁰ Paul Hirsh, "Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems," *The American Journal of Sociology*, 77.4, (Jan., 1972), 654.

²¹ In *Manufacturing Consent* (2002), Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman demonstrate how the mass media protect, serve, and reinforce the agenda of the powerful and rich. They also discuss a market filter system.

²² Douglas Kellner, "Black Voices from Spike Lee to Rap," *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and Postmodern*, New York: Routledge, 1995, 189.

²³ Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program," *The Marx-Engels Reader* Ed. Robert C. Tucker, New York, and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978, 531.

²⁴ Big Tymers, "Got Everything," *Big Money Heavyweight* Universal Records, 2003.

- ²⁵ Today, MCing or rapping is by far the most visible element of hip-hop culture.
- ²⁶ Kris “KRS-One” Parker, address, Lehigh University, Bethlehem (PA), 5 February 2004.
- ²⁷ SoundScan is a division of the Nielson rating company that compiles album sales statistics.
- ²⁸ “Nielson SoundScan and Nielsen BDS 2003 Year End Music Industry Report,” *Nielson SoundScan and Nielsen BDS* 31 December 2003, 25 March 2004 <http://www.businesswire.com/webbox/bw.123103/233655222.htm>
- ²⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972, 114-115.
- ³⁰ These figures also include most hip-hop sales, but the sale of mainstream rap music almost completely accounts for the numbers.
- ³¹ SoundScan detected 359,604 plays of 50 Cent’s “In Da Club,” the second most of any song in 2003.
- ³² Kanye West, “Get Em High” (featuring Common and Talib Kweli), *College Dropout* Roc-A-Fella Records, 2004.
- ³³ See Todd Boyd, Preface to *The New H.N.I.C.: The Death of Civil Rights and the Reign of Hip Hop* New York: New York University Press, 2002.
- ³⁴ Aesop Rock, “Coma,” *Labor Days* Definitive Jux Records, 2001