

Hip Hop Hysteria

By Salim Muwakkil

Serious social critics could once dismiss hip hop's purveyors as a bunch of crude vulgarians extolling ghetto-centric lifestyles. No longer. Hip hop has become one of the most influential U.S. cultural exports. In virtually every city on the planet, there are hip hop communities that not only have adopted the percussion-heavy music and spoken-word vocals, but have appropriated the sartorial and attitudinal style of the black and Latino youth who created the genre.

Perhaps the most exportable aspect of hip hop is its existential sensibility—its celebration of place, despite limitations. With verbal dexterity, hip hop's creators transformed themselves from ghetto dwellers into esteemed characters involved in complex narratives. Hip hop infused their neighborhoods with cultural currency and mythical resonance. If not a Shangri-La, then at least a "Shaolin"—the name the Wu-Tang Clan conferred on their poverty-ridden neighborhood on New York's Staten Island. Hip hop culture renamed and reimagined.

Some 25 years after its birth, the genre has become a \$5 billion industry but remains troubled at home. Beset by a growing chorus of critics who charge that its glorification of the "Thug Life" promotes misogyny, violence and crime, hip hop's advocates are on the defensive. This is not a new position; since its emergence from the ghettos of New York City in the late '70s, many mainstream critics have deemed hip hop a dysfunctional element of pop culture—a soundtrack for sociopaths. The violent murders of some of hip hop's most popular artists give its detractors a powerful argument.

A dedication to authenticity, or "keeping it real," is an important value that requires hip hop artists to stay close to the fears and aspirations of the community that birthed them. But since murder remains the leading cause of death for young black men, hip hop may be keeping things a bit too real.

Commercial motives have warped and corrupted the genre. The record industry uses personal rivalries between

rappers as marketing tools to ratchet up sales. Rap "beefs" may reap profits, but they also wreak havoc. Carlton "Chuck D" Ridenhour, frontman of the influential group Public Enemy, blames the East Coast-West Coast beef that virtually paralyzed the rap world in the mid-'90s on a "climate of violence" perpetrated by the record industry. "I think the culture has been mishandled by putting out violence," he told *Newsday* following the October murder of Jason "Jam Master Jay" Mizell of Run-DMC in his Queens studio.



Most famously, many attribute the unsolved 1996 murders of two of hip hop's most iconic rappers, Tupac Shakur and Christopher "the Notorious B.I.G." Wallace, to a feud between rival record labels. In a two-part September series in the *Los Angeles Times*, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chuck Philips provided ammunition for those who link the murderous scenarios of many rap lyrics to the lifestyles of its major players. He reported that Shakur's killer is a gang member whom the rapper had assaulted in Las Vegas earlier that night. More explosively, Philips

claims that Wallace paid a bounty for the hit and supplied the murder weapon.

But Philips' conclusions are disputed in *Biggie and Tupac*, a new documentary by Nick Broomfield. The film, based heavily on a book by Randall Sullivan called *Labyrinth*, points to Marion "Suge" Knight, CEO of Death Row Records (recently renamed Tha Row Records), as the guiding hand behind both murders. Broomfield and Sullivan speculate that Knight ordered the killings because Shakur was going to sue Death Row for unpaid royalties, and Wallace's death would make the first murder look like part of the bicoastal rap feud.

Like Sullivan's book, much of the film is based on the allegations of former L.A. police detective Russell Poole, who says he was discouraged from following solid leads on the case because they pointed to police involvement. One of the most provocative aspects of Broomfield's film is the allegation from Wallace's mother that the FBI had both rappers under surveillance at the time of their murders. "It surprised me that Biggie and Tupac had been under surveillance for so long—for months, particularly in Biggie's case," Broomfield told the *Village Voice* in September. "He wasn't considered a political person, but he and Tupac and rappers in general were regarded by the FBI as focal points of potential political unrest."

Some claim that federal forces are instigating hip hop beefs in the same way COINTELPRO operatives kept militant black organizations at each other's throats during the '60s. "The only way to get to the top and bottom of both murders is to find out once and for all what the U.S. government knows about them," writes Cedric Muhammad of Blackelectorate.com, a Web site that has featured several articles alleging a COINTELPRO-style campaign is in play against rappers.

The *New York Times* revealed the existence of a special NYPD unit designed to focus specifically on the hip hop industry, investigating violence and other crimes and consulting with "detectives who do similar work in places like California and Florida."

The FBI is investigating whether Jam Master Jay's murder is linked to organized crime, reports the Ananova.com news service, and "federal authorities say several unnamed stars from the rap industry are under the microscope for possible criminal conspiracies."

If the FBI is indeed sowing the seeds of division, the hip hop community is fertile soil. Though these murders provoked temporary spasms of remorse and public gestures of self-reflection, little seems to have changed in the brutal, materialistic core of rap culture.

Ironically, one of the most socially conscious corners of hip hop is now coming under increased scrutiny from federal authorities because of alleged ties between the "Beltway snipers" and an Islamic group known as the Five Percenters. Certain phrases and symbols used by sniper suspects John Muhammad and Lee Boyd are common jargon of the group.

Known as the "Nation of Gods and Earths" to insiders, the Five Percenters were founded in New York by Clarence "13X" Smith in 1964. Smith, a migrant from Danville, Virginia, had joined the Nation of Islam during the heyday of Malcolm X and rose to become an official at the NOI's Harlem Temple. He was excommunicated in 1964 and quickly formed his own organization based on aspects of NOI philosophy. Smith later assumed the name "Father Allah" and set up shop in Harlem, where he taught for five years until he was murdered (theories have linked both the NOI and the NYPD to his killing).

Smith's esoteric street science revolves around the notion that the universe operates by mathematical principles, and that the key to success (both personal and collective) is understanding them. Once a man achieved mastery of self, he became a God, the "sole controller" of his destiny. (Five Percenters refer to men as "Gods" and women as "Earths.") The group's name derives from a belief that 85 percent of humanity is bent on self-destruction due to ignorance of their own divinity. The next 10 percent have self-knowledge, but use it to exploit and manipulate the 85 percent; they are referred to as the "blood-suckers of the poor." The remaining 5 percent are those "poor righteous teachers" who have self-knowledge (that is, they are aware of the divinity at the core of their identity) and teach "freedom, justice and equality to all the human family." Much like the Nation of Islam, Five Percenters place a strong emphasis on family, education and self-reliance. Although the doctrine lacks the NOI's restrictions on intoxicants, it extols self-control and forbids "uncivilized" behavior.

Some of hip hop's most important innovators are Five Percenters: Rakim (whom some still consider hip hop's best lyricist) is a member, as are rappers Nas and Busta Rhymes and singer Erykah Badu. Numerous rap groups, including Brand Nubian, Gang Starr, Mobb Deep and the Wu-Tang Clan, are also affiliated. Much of the hip hop vocabulary ("word is bond," "represent," "show and prove," "dropping science," "cipher," "seeds," and "G") is rooted in Five Percent ideology.

Ted Swedenburg, a University of Arkansas anthropologist who has studied the Nation of Islam and its offshoots for many years, has compared today's "Islamic

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rap" to the the spread of Afrocentric ideas during the days of Marcus Garvey and Noble Drew Ali in the early 20th century. But through music, the Five Percenters' influence has been much greater. "What is interesting here is the fact that these heretical, esoteric teachings have been propelled, from their heretofore obscured places of origin, to the center of global culture," Swedenburg wrote in a 1997 paper titled "Islam in the Mix: Lessons of the Five Percent."

But with greater visibility comes increased scrutiny. Corrections departments in New Jersey and South Carolina have labeled the group a "security threat" and treat it like a gang. There are several court challenges to that designation, but as long as the group clings to its black nationalist doctrine, there's little chance that its public image will be altered. What's more, since there is no stringent membership process, some may use the group's ideology to perpetrate, and even justify, illegal acts. The Five Percenters' race-themed gnosticism also is interpreted as black supremacy by some followers, which further taints the group. The alleged connection to the Beltway snipers is sure to increase the scapegoating.

Although black nationalist ideas form a strong part of hip hop's foundation, today's most influential rapper may be a white man. White rappers have always had some input in the culture, from the Beastie

Boys and Third Base to House of Pain and, most infamously, Vanilla Ice. But Marshall "Eminem" Mathers has become the genre's bestselling artist in history.

White artists historically have benefited from expropriating African-American art forms and, in that sense, Eminem simply conforms to that traditional pattern. But unlike many of his predecessors, he is recognized for his mastery of the form. He initially gained fame—and respect—in the non-commercial precincts of the hip hop underground, where lyrical complexity and rhythmic flow are the highest values. Hip hop fans generally applaud his rapping talent, and they don't begrudge his mainstream success.

Eminem, rumored to be a choice for *Time's* "Man of the Year," also has been acclaimed for his acting debut in the movie *8 Mile*. His cinematic persona is attractive for many of the same reasons he is such a successful recording artist. He projects an image of vulnerability and authenticity at the same time. Instead of emulating the thematic threads favored by black rappers, Eminem crafts lyrics from his own personal history. His forthright way of confronting the "white Negro" conundrum has won both white and black fans. He adapted hip hop's celebration of situation to the trailer park and found success.

Although his rise to fame repeats a traditional pattern, it also exhibits major differences. He was "discovered," cultivated and tutored by Andre "Dr. Dre" Young, a successful African-American rap producer. Eminem also remains respectful to the African-American culture that inspired him and has devoted considerable resources to assisting the black rappers who supported him during leaner times in his Detroit hometown.

The Eminem saga is yet another lesson about the potential power of hip hop. Like the legion of other whites, Asians and Latinos who embrace hip hop, Eminem has a relationship with black culture that is so far removed from racist traditions that it creates new possibilities. That's the promise of hip hop: creating new possibilities.

This musical genre dreamed up on the streets of New York has become one of the planet's most powerful—and enthusiastically embraced—forces of globalization. If hip hop's originators can harness just a portion of the genre's creative power to address the issues that uniquely beset them, hip hop can redeem its promise. ■

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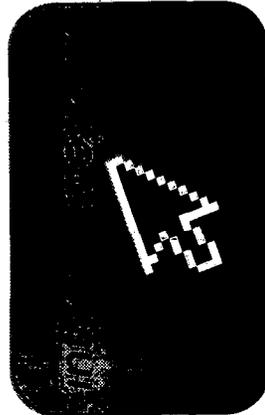
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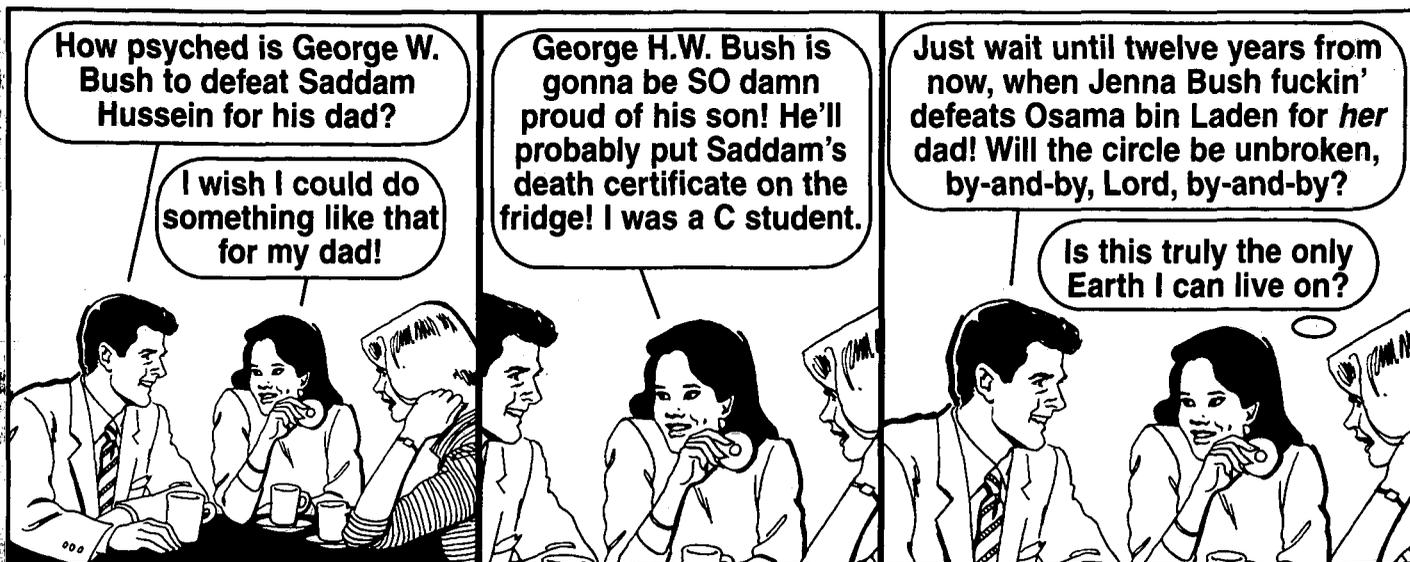
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continued from back cover

That first night I did the strip, I was thinking to myself, "O.K., when I was in high school, my friends and I would play our little punk rock music and sing and yell about Ronald Reagan. But if there has ever been a time in my life to create something about what is happening in the world, now is that time."

What kind of stuff had you been doing before?

Just totally, apolitical, absurdist, profanity-laden, crazy clip-art comics that don't have anything to do with reality whatsoever. *Get Your War On* kept the profanity and the clip-art imagery, but I wanted to focus on what I felt were screamingly obvious truths and just express them as directly and with as much force as I could.

So after the comics went online, how long did it take before more than the dozen people you e-mailed the link were looking at the site?

Probably three or four days. I still have the bar graph that I printed out from my Web host that week. When you look at that graph, it's just flat and then it leaps up. It was like "600,000 hits today? How do I take it down? This is too much. Am I going to get bricks thrown through my window?"

It was crazy, just crazy. This was something that was so personal and dark, I couldn't believe so many people were getting something out of it. I got all these e-mails from people that were so personal and sincere and grateful. What I had to do was go through this shift in my mind where I said, "OK, this is no longer going to be private and personal. From now on, there is going to be an audience."

For me, this year has been a struggle between trying to do something that's very personal and yet knowing that a lot of people are looking to you to say what they're feeling—that's a lot of pressure.

When you say "a lot" of people, what's "a lot"?

It's really hard to tell. I got 25 million hits in the last year. But 25 million hits isn't 25 million people. It's probably more than a million visits to the Web site, but half those visits are probably me and my mom.

How did knowing that all of a sudden it wasn't just you and your mom looking at the site affect the actual process itself?

For a while I don't think it affected it much because the process itself—this rush of realizing I could say whatever I wanted, and I could make myself feel better by making this strip about how dark I had been feeling—was just so new and exciting. But after a while, I felt like the cathartic element was diminished. It was more about making another strip, so maybe I'd feel better, and a lot of other people would feel better, too.

I know they made me feel better. It felt like no one was saying the stuff you were saying. The mainstream media have become so neutered.

I don't think neutered is the right word. You watch CNN, and they have a huge fucking hard-on for a war with Iraq! But I know what you mean. Once I started the comic and people started reading it, I felt like, "What the fuck, I'll just keep saying it." The whole thing to me when I started making it was to read something that I wished somebody would write. And so last fall, it was like, "O.K., I'll say it." Like saying, "Dick Cheney, oil industry bitch motherfucker." It felt good.

You were saying it, but you were also able to say it in a way that exposed the absurdity of the situation.

Well, what else are you going to do, man? One of the reasons I made the strip is because people like [*Vanity Fair* editor] Graydon Carter would come out and say things like, "This is the end of irony, we're entering this new phase." They were so eager to tell us not only what was and was not appropriate in terms of a response to September 11, but what was and was not even possible. And that I found just so appalling, condescending and, frankly, un-American. I was like, "You think we can't make a joke about it or be ironic about it? Watch me, you assholes." ■

Daniel Sinker is the editor and founder of Punk Planet magazine. A longer version of this interview will appear in Punk Planet #54.



bombs away!

An interview with *Get Your War On* creator David Rees

By Daniel Sinker

It would be easy to get lofty when talking about David Rees' Web comic *Get Your War On*. It would be simple to say how it exposes the absurdity of the war on terror; how his stark, repetitive approach to the strip (it's all told using clip-art images) boils down the horror of the past year's news reports, and lets you laugh in the face of your own mortality. But it's way easier to cut to the chase and say this: *Get Your War On* is fucking funny.

"The best way to dominate a situation or to own it is to make a joke about it," Rees explains. "And not to make a joke about how Osama bin Laden has sex with a camel, because that joke is not funny. You have to really dig. You have to get dark."

The darkness that fuels *Get Your War On* (www.mnftiu.cc), which Rees has updated on a sporadic basis for more than a year now, is the darkness of today—of a time when you half-expect George W. Bush to "fuckin' rip his face off and it's gonna be Ming the Merciless up under there" or for Dick

Cheney to be "the last man walking the scorched, post-apocalyptic earth." And in exposing that darkness so directly, Rees makes it a little easier to bear.

I found it hard to do work about 9/11 and the war on terror. You not only did work, but downright hilarious work. How did you manage it?

I had to get this off my chest. Late one night I was going to update my Web site with the regular, apolitical comics, and it just struck me that I just couldn't continue with business as usual. Since I was sitting at my computer with the clip-art open, it was like, "Hell, I'll make the clip-art characters say what I'm actually feeling." It wasn't like I was sitting around thinking, "God, I have to come up with a really powerful anti-war tool." I'm not an activist. I'm not coming from that background. But after September 11, I really had to come to terms with my own death—what felt like an imminent death—because I live in New York City.