

Danceable Capitalism: Hip-Hop's Link to Corporate Space

by

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Abstract

The article discusses hip-hop's progression from communal art to commodity and argues that the change is attributed to the lack of strong social justice activism in the years the music became popular, a lack of communal critique; the change from an industrial to the postindustrial economy, and the ongoing commodification of Blackness that predated the hip-hop era. Thus, these factors combined with an aggressive corporate sphere have led to a music that reflects mainstream values, even when representatives of that system say otherwise.

Introduction

Technological advances, and the impact these changes had on labor, led to incredible changes within the music industry. The increase in leisure time that came in the industrial age resulted in the creation of the record player, commercial radio, television, etc. for a growing population of consumers with surplus capital. These and other inventions became a means through which music entertainment could be delivered to the consumer. The music industry mirrored all other capitalist American enterprises in its quest for efficiency, profit, and the delivery of goods and services to the widest audience possible.

The messages in hip-hop, and all forms of popular music existing within the America project can expect to be affected and for the most part controlled by corporate machinery. In fact, it is the will of the corporation beyond the innovation of the artist that must dominate the relationship in order for that relationship to exist at all.

The Business of Hip-Hop Music

The American music business is an industry that has always existed in a state of flux. It changes as genres emerge, become popular, and fade. In addition to being controlled by the tastes of the intended audience, the industry itself becomes a tastemaker as particular artists are chosen and promoted at the expense of others. In recent years the consolidation of music companies, radio, and television interests has resulted in an even greater role of the music companies as engineers of what is or is not considered worth purchasing by the consumer.

Exploitation has been a part of the American music industry since its founding. During segregation, Black musicians and singers were routinely cheated out of profits by white record company executives, and those from their own community (Neal, 1997). The difference between the two areas is in the, “artistic integrity, creative autonomy, communal input and general aesthetic quality” of the product (Neal, 1997, p.123). This was noticeably different dependant upon which era is examined. Segregation demanded a musical “product” that was more “centered” or “grounded” in the Black musical tradition. This grounding was established in the segregated dancehalls and theaters where Black music-makers were showcased. This introduction of artists was followed by the manufacturing of records, often on regional, independent Black record labels. These labels were able to “feel the pulse” of their intended market. The Black record label owner was often as exploitative of their artists as was their white counterpart, the main difference being that they knew what sounded good, and more importantly, what would sell, based on their own personal experience, shared with the prime consumer of the art.

Although Black artists have been produced on white-controlled labels, there still existed a space where popular Black regional, national, or even international talent was exposed on Black-owned labels such as Motown. As the profits of these companies began, dramatic change began to occur in the industry. In the 1970s white record companies began to create Black music divisions. These divisions had a high degree of autonomy initially. There was a degree of independence here, which fluctuated over the years as genres, and sub-genres were introduced and “mainstreamed” through exposure to larger consumer bases. The difference between these divisions and the Black-owned record companies lay in the commitment to Black music itself. Keith Negus asserts:

The music industry is a notoriously insecure place to work, but Black music divisions can be particularly unstable. For as long as they have been in existence, the variously named r'n'b [rhythm & blues]/Black/urban divisions have been continually closed down and reopened as a way of dealing with financial booms and slumps; staffed and re-staffed as senior management have continually changed their thinking about how to deal with r'n'b (1999, p. 495).

Having Black music produced within white dominated business structures does not in and of itself result in the music being neglected or the artists treated poorly. One could assume that as long as profit was being generated, Black music-makers would be permitted to “do their thing.” This conclusion does not connect with reality however. Even in a market where Black music has been a growth industry, the Black music divisions have been reduced or eliminated often to make room for white cultural trends such as Seattle “Grunge rock” or “College rock” or any number of sub-genres more culturally connected to the white community (Negus, 1999, p. 494). Separating Black music into seemingly autonomous units has resulted in the “ghettoization” of Black music within the industry. It is regarded as a cheap moneymaker that can be supported, adjusted, or eliminated depending not only on whether it is profitable, but whether there seems to be a future role for its presence. Although Black music has been the most popular form of American music, and by some accounts the only form of uniquely American music (Baraka, 1963) it has routinely been marginalized and/or ignored within the mainstream music industry.

When hip-hop emerged in the 1970s it mirrored the path of earlier genres of Black music. It was regionally based, with a great degree of African American artistic, and to a lesser but significant extent, industry control. This situation was a direct result of the importance of the independent record label. These labels could quickly discover, sign, and market talent with a minimum of bureaucratic restrictions. This often resulted in the signing of horribly exploitative deals by inexperienced performers, but also delivered relevant, immediate, danceable music to the largely Black consumer base that was the hip-hop audience in the early years.

Early hip-hop recording artists became popular largely through word-of-mouth, and small regional touring and performance. The audiences were largely Black or Latino, but the clubs were not always Black-owned. Regardless of who owned the club, these small venues allowed new artists to test their skills in “moving a crowd.” The New York City metro area became the center of hip-hop music and culture in the early 1980s having spread from its source in the Bronx. Clubs such as: Disco Fever, Harlem World, Club 371, Ecstasy Garage, The Dixie, and the T Connection became the proving grounds for the stars of early hip-hop (Skillz, 2005).

To make it in the industry in the early days, one had to be able to convince the party-goers who frequented spaces similar to the ones mentioned above, that you were worthy of their respect. Artists such as: Kurtis Blow, Run-DMC, Grandmaster Flash, and Afrika Bambaataa, became popular largely due to proving themselves in these live venues.

It has been offered that hip-hop differs from other genres of Black music because it lacked a “communal critique from the formal and informal structures of the traditional Black Public Sphere” (Neal, 1997, pp. 133-134). Although it differed from other genres in many ways, its introduction to the Black audience was largely similar. Blues and Rhythm & Blues spread slowly over time starting with clubs and small gathering places before moving into larger communal spaces. This early club culture allowed Black and Latino youth to shape the hip-hop aesthetic in meaningful ways.

This largely working class and poor community was similar in terms of class to those that had been innovators in the earlier African American musical genres. The difference was in the economic and social conditions that enveloped the group versus that which impacted the innovators of early blues for example. The isolation of poor Black communities through the flight of the Black middle-class, the criminalization of Black men and the militarization of policing to control them, and the transformation of the economy, all occur as the hip-hop aesthetic is taking shape. Although, traditional forms of critique from say the Black middle-class or older generation were not happening, youth-based critique, heightened as a result of the absence of adult leadership, was still viable. The hip-hop club, and DJ and MC battling, replaces the introduction of new Black music genres in the “Showtime at the Apollo” mold, or even through Black radio stations that during the early years largely ignored hip-hop.

Hip-hop has always moved in conjunction with advances in technology, and thus its popularity and reliance on the sample, followed by the drum machine, to the present-day usage of computerized music production technology such as “Fruity Loops” both embraced tradition and rejected it. While the music produced still needed to connect with Black musical sensibilities, the collaborative effort of music production present within jazz and rhythm and blues was replaced by a solitary one. Having a ghostwriter to create or help you create songs was taboo, although this was not the case in the soul era where many of the more popular performers were not songwriters themselves. DJ’s and hip-hop producers spent countless hours alone in their “beat labs” creating the sounds that they hoped would later move the hip-hop audience. There was always a connection to the larger Black community in this process, but it was vastly different from the comparatively crowded (e.g. Motown) production styles of the previous generation. This embrace of technology and its reduction in workforce mirrored what was happening in America’s worksites. Automation had reduced the need for labor both in and outside of the music industry.

Radio and Music Video

As hip-hop became more popular, largely through the grassroots methods detailed above, the radio industry that awaited the finished, commercial product was being transformed. At this point, the transformation of the industry does not have an immediate impact on the art for one important reason. When hip-hop was first introduced, radio largely ignored it. Nevertheless it is important to summarize the changes in what had traditionally been the music industry's most important means to move their product. Hip-hop music in the Pop Era demands an exploration of the function and importance of commercial radio.

Popularity alone or cultural connections to a particular audience are not enough to get a recording played on American commercial radio. More important than either of those factors is capital. Money must be paid to the radio station in order for a record to be played. Further, the corporate consolidation of America's airwaves has resulted in less choice for the radio listener. Eric Bohlert in an article entitled *Pay for Play* (2001, March 14) asserts:

Small wonder that the industry for decades has used money in various ways to influence what radio stations play. The days are long gone when a DJ made an impulse decision about what song to spin. The music industry is a \$12 billion-a-year business; today, nearly every commercial music station in the country has an indie guarding its playlist. And for that right, the indie shells out hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to individual stations—and collects a lot more from the major labels.

Indeed, say many industry observers, very little of what we hear on today's radio stations isn't bought, one way or another.

The indie promoter was once a tireless hustler, the lobbyist who worked the phones on behalf of record companies, cajoling station jocks and program directors, or P.D.s, to add a new song to their playlists [...]

In the 1990s, however, Washington moved steadily to deregulate the radio industry. Among other things, it removed most of America's decades-old restrictions on ownership. Today, the top three broadcasters control at least 60 percent of the stations in the top 100 markets in the U.S.

The industry has always treated popular music as a commodity, as it had to in order to ensure profit. Recent developments however, including the above, have increased the business motive far above any artistic or cultural considerations. The autonomy of the radio DJ, having been on the decline for decades, was essentially eliminated in the 1990s by the corporate behemoths that controlled the industry. Instead of following instincts developed through a personal closeness to regional trends, the radio DJ was forced to play music that made sense to the record company executives who held a vested interest in pushing their products. At one time it was possible to hear local artists played prominently or at least occasionally on local radio. With corporate consolidation of radio holdings, a radio play list in Philadelphia might sound no different from one in Jackson, Mississippi, although both locations continue to produce talented local music artists.

Hip-hop's acceptance within the system was not immediate. For the better part of the first decade of its commercial existence, the music was largely ignored. Increasing record sales throughout the 1980s made it very difficult for this to continue however. Artists such as Run-DMC, Jazzy Jeff & the Fresh Prince, Public Enemy, and L.L. Cool J for instance began to receive regular radio play several years after the genre's founding. Their popularity however, did not diminish in any significant way the audience for regional artists such as MC Shy D and Success N Effect from Atlanta, Ultramagnetic MC's from the Bronx, Schoolly D and Freshco & Miz from Philadelphia, or MC Breed and Awesome Dre from Michigan. The regional acts were able to maintain a local following and even occasionally receive some attention nationally. As the rules for radio ownership were changed and fewer locally owned stations were in operation, the diversity in what audiences were able to hear on radio changed in the 1990s. Those artists who recorded or were in some way affiliated with major labels were given radio exposure. Those who did not have a major label backing them were shut out of the system. These changes made it harder than ever before for an artist to receive radio exposure. It effectively placed commercial radio wholly beneath the umbrella of the large music corporations. If an artist was not in some way affiliated with these groups, it was very unlikely that they would be heard.

Music videos became an increasingly important factor in music artist promotion in the 1980s. Initially, the major video networks, MTV and BET, ignored hip-hop entirely preferring to support rock & roll and rhythm & blues artists respectively. Hip-hop was viewed as faddish, unsophisticated, ghetto music enjoyed by the lower classes. This denied the influence and participation of middle-class hip-hop artists and audiences that gravitated toward the form even in the early years. The video music channels in many ways reflected the tastes and strategies of their record company counterparts. MTV and BET were attached at the hip to corporate controlled music companies that supplied them with their visual images. As was the case in the recorded music industry, Black artists were allocated far fewer resources towards the production of their music videos.

Black artists on major labels such as Prince had music videos that were little more than poorly filmed concert footage or depictions of a stage performance in the early years (George, 1998, p. 99). The white rock bands at the time were given story lines and special effects in the crafting of their videos. The success of both Michael Jackson's *Thriller* album and its accompanying music videos opened the door for greater investment in Black music videos.

Hip-hop artists eventually were brought into the music video era. As had been the case with other methods of musical delivery, they were given far less to work with. Hip-hop music video budgets were extremely low initially, but still remained valuable in that they exposed a national and international audience to a music that had been largely regional and withheld from traditional outlets of exposure by both the older white and Black music industry tastemakers. There was a wealth of images being provided to the hip-hop fan and to the curious visitor to the culture through the video music medium. These images were varied and at times conflicting. The videos were largely set in two venues.

The first location was the postindustrial city--the 'hood. Within the first space, the artist introduces the viewer to both the social and economic factors that contributed to the creation of the music. Whether that space was one where poverty was met by activism or nihilism depended on the hip-hop sub-genre attached to the artist and the timeframe of the song's production. There was a brief moment in the 1990s where images of Black Nationalism were broadcast simultaneously with the traditional party scenes or the newer scenes of Black on Black violence or gangsterism.

As hip-hop became a fixture in music videos, there existed less space for a multi-layered depiction of Black life. In terms of the work world, choices were certainly narrower. This can be illustrated through a comparison of an early hip-hop music video from 1988--Biz Markie's *The Vapors* versus Three 6 Mafia's 2005 produced video for their single *Stay Fly*. Both videos highlight a featured artist and his affiliates, but only one offers a multidimensional depiction of their lives.

Biz Markie's video begins on a yacht where he and his crew are celebrating their success in the rap game surrounded by reporters, and members of the old neighborhood. This life of luxury is nothing new for the music video, but the story that follows explains the struggle against the limitations of the postindustrial city that often serve as a driving force for the hip-hop fame narrative. The video depicts how the featured artist and his friends and fellow music-makers overcame rejection to become successful music artists. The first story addressed is that of disc jockey TJ Swan, a UPS deliveryman who is romantically rejected by a neighborhood woman who chooses a drug dealer as her mate. This is followed by the story of fellow rapper Big Daddy Kane who is scorned by the older generation, depicted as Black middle-aged couple living in the same apartment building. They believe that he will be relegated to a life of crime and offer nothing in the way of assistance to counter their assumptions.

Next is Cut Master Cool V who simply wants to be given an opportunity to work at a local record store, but is denied an interview, passed over by more “appropriately” dressed young Black men and women. The video closes with the story of Biz Markie who aspires to be a member of a neighborhood rap group called the “Source Crew.” The characters’ encounters and triumphs over rejection, lead to the development of a personal drives that take them far beyond their initial desires. The Horatio Alger style storytelling is nothing new here, what is worth noting is the richness of Black life depicted in this short vignette. All are members of a firmly established, visible Black community larger than the “rap world” itself. The working class figures prominently in this depiction of urban life. This representation declines considerably in more recent videos.

With the exception of the record storeowner, everyone in this milieu is African American. The struggle here is less about race or class, but perception. All are depicted as “losers” essentially, and they only overcome that label by challenging the boundaries of the postindustrial space that they have been assigned to. They are not trying to escape Blackness or working class status, but merely the lower rungs within the segregated hierarchy that they find themselves in within the postindustrial moment depicted.

Seventeen years later, Three 6 Mafia engages a similar tale of success with some very significant differences in their video for *Stay Fly*. Visually the video is quite stunning. The production values are noticeably greater than that of Biz Markie’s. The video is simultaneously innovative and derivative as it travels the path of one night in the life of rap music industry “players,” but does so with more style than can be usually expected from what has become a very tired formula for the rap video since the mid-1990s. The story begins in the hotel room of crewmember Juicy J where he has just finished entertaining two female associates. He leaves the room as the camera tightly follows him, as he quickly moves through what appears to be a five star hotel. The camera shot is unbroken for the first minute and a half of the video, which is unusual in a medium known for quick cutting and editing. This African American male’s walking and gestures alone are deemed to be more “exciting” than the special visual effects that normally dominate the music video introduction. Swiftly striding down the hall, Juicy J passes an elderly white couple who cower in fear while simultaneously gazing in awe at this rapidly moving, rapping, African American male who meets their stares with a grimace that both validates their fears and offers a rebuttal to their unspoken assumption that he should not be in the same spaces they occupy. This is a brilliant moment that captures the fear, and fascination with the African American dominated hip-hop genre and more importantly the Black male himself. Moving through the lobby, Juicy J enters a limo, after which the setting and the innovation within the video come to an abrupt end. What follows is a standard depiction of champagne-popping rappers surrounded by light skinned and biracial models posing as club patrons and fans.

The setting here and in countless contemporary hip-hop videos is grounded in something called the “rap world.” This is a fictional setting where even newly signed artists are living in mansions and driving the most expensive cars produced by the automobile industry. The rapper is most often depicted as extremely wealthy, residing in exclusive neighborhoods, but yet is still able and willing to move through the streets of postindustrial America, openly flaunting his wealth without fear of reprisal from those less fortunate than himself. Life is a series of flights on private jets, drives in expensive vehicles, endless nightclub attendance, and trysts with scantily clad mostly biracial or light-skinned women. There is seldom a depiction of actual work besides a few moments where the artist exhibits what appears to be anguish as he struggles to engineer the next hip-hop “masterpiece” in the recording studio. The artist is depicted as having total artistic control and the presence of a largely white corporate management is seldom seen. Contemporary hip-hop videos combine images of ghetto struggle, extreme wealth and conspicuous consumption, irresponsible sexual behavior, naked machismo and masculine posturing, sexism, endless club life, and the occasional love story. What is lacking in most of these depictions is a sense of community outside of this “rap world.”

Hip-hop videos at present are for the most part, pure escapism. One could argue that all music videos have largely been that since the medium became popular, the difference is that now the world depicted is completely devoid of any sense of reality. The world of affluence visualized through the hip-hop video is largely out of reach for the vast majority of its viewers. This is not a depiction of middle-class living; rather it is one of elite status more akin to the upper classes where very few African Americans exist.

The conspicuous consumption and lavish lifestyles offered in the hip-hop music video were not created by the hip-hop generation, but had been established long before through the vision of the “Camelot” presidency of John Kennedy and the conservative pro-business, anti-poor excesses of the Reagan administration (Phillips, 2004). White America had arguably been looking for an excuse to create a vision of royalty that connected them with Europe, but did not give credit *to* Europe. They found it through an acceptance and embrace of excess. The gaze of the white actress directed at the rapper in the *Stay Fly* video is partially one of anger that Black people should attempt or succeed in “outshining” those who had so long held complete and unquestionable economic superiority. Claiming that it is these rappers alone who are “poisoning” the youth with foolish and destructive materialism places great power in the hands of a group who neither endorsed, financially supported the creation of these images, or were the driving societal force for their emergence.

The success of the music video has raised the expectations for the live hip-hop audience. They expect the constant visual stimulation supplied in these mini-features. They are often disappointed when they are left with only the lyrical content to hold their attention during a live show. The new audience is either unaware or uninterested in the original elements of hip-hop showmanship--lyrics, DJ'ing, graffiti, and break dancing. Many within the audience have fallen in love with the image of the wealthy, playboy gangster--an image easy to pull off in a music video, but harder to reproduce on stage. As a result of the overemphasis on the music video as a means of artist exposure, there has been a devaluing of the live performance aspect that had been the means through which African American music makers built relationships with the Black community in prior generations.

African American Message Music in the Pop Era

Bruce Jackson's assertion that southern whites allowed Blacks to "sing things [they were] not permitted to say [...] as if sung words were not real" (Jackson 1999, pg. 30) relates to the general disconnect between the functional and entertainment within the European world view. There was very little music industry objection to the Black Nationalism of Public Enemy or the analysis of the militarization of policing offered by N.W.A. or Ice-T in the late 1980s and early 1990s. All three were commercially viable, appealing to Black youth, liberal whites, and those who wanted to gaze upon what they perceived as naked, Black male aggression. There was no accompanying social movement to turn the artists claims into action, and therefore the industry did not see this moment as a threat. In addition, allowing Black artists with militant or oppositional messages to record mainstream music, gave the record companies the appearance of balance, just as say the Wolper Group and Warner Brothers release of the 1972 films *Wattstax* and *Malcolm X* respectively, gave legitimacy to them. These messages were highly sought after by Black audiences, but once "mainstreamed" through white corporate structures, Black art was at the mercy of what had first appeared to be a benevolent, liberal, white corporate system. As has been previously noted, Black art is often the first to be sacrificed for financial or political reasons. What was a comparatively balanced rap music scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s where gangster rap (such as N.W.A.), middle-class suburban party music (e.g. Jazzy Jeff & The Fresh Prince), Lyric-driven MC'ing (such as Rakim or LL Cool J), and Black Nationalism (e.g. X-Clan) all simultaneously existing; was replaced by a unified contingent of players, gangsters, and pimps in the commercial hip-hop scene that followed.

These images were comfortable spaces for an increasing white audience engaged in what Black popular culture critic Kevin Powell refers to as a “cultural safari” (Samuels, 2003). This vision of Black lawlessness, sexual irresponsibility and hedonism was a space White-America was comfortable with. It offered no challenge to their dominance and was entertaining. That it was not functional or in any way connected to reality did not matter, as their own music had not been connected to the strictly functional since before the European Renaissance (Baraka, 1963, p. 29).

The wide acceptance of this “Stagolee” image of “bad” Black manhood could be easily connected to the nightly news reports of Black on Black violence leading the local newscasts even in years of reduced violent crime in America. According to data supplied by the Federal Bureau of Investigations and the National Crime Victimization Survey, the two sources used most often by criminologists, violent crime in America dropped 54 percent between 1993 and 2003 (Marks, 2003, August 25). These years encompass the current “pop” era of hip-hop where white corporate control dominates the genre. Although violent crime actually decreased throughout America, one would never know this from listening to many of the “mainstreamed” hip-hop artists or local and national news reporting.

The political and social critique offered in early 1990s hip-hop was altered, in part, due to alliances between conservative whites and middle-class Black factions who saw this music as a threat to their dominance. Rap music was labeled as immoral just as Rock & Roll and Blues had been in previous generations. The difference in the contemporary moment can be found in the neoconservative slant of government largely supported by Christian fundamentalism. Any liberal objection to the attack on Black music was perceived as ungodly, soft on crime, or any number of other “traitorous” acts. What is interesting is that the only casualty of the cultural “rap wars” seems to be the mainstreaming of African -American political dissent, as there has been no reduction in Black on Black violence, profanity, sexism, or homophobia in corporate controlled hip-hop recordings.

Before one is able to conclude that that the era of “message music” has ended in hip-hop one would need to be specific in terms of categorizing what message they are referring to. It is true that Black Nationalist sentiment within popular hip-hop has faded, but the message of Black capitalism has (not surprisingly) increased over the last decade. To discount the validity of capitalist sentiment one would have to ignore the rise of prosperity ministries within the Black church, the increase in Black business ownership, and the high percentage of Black college students enrolled in business programs. An assimilationist embrace of European capitalist practice has coexisted (if uncomfortably at times) with programs based wholly within the African American community.

Rapper 50 Cent's message of "get rich or die trying" is based in a long history of capitalist struggle, one that fits very comfortably within the conservative and neo-conservative orientation of American economics and politics in the last quarter century. There is no shortage of "messages" within hip-hop at present. What is in short supply is a diversity of theoretical frameworks from which to choose. Individualistic pursuit of capital and pleasure has replaced most notions of community in the Pop Era.

The element of functionality within hip-hop not only demands that art reflect Black "reality", but that it also reflect the *personal* experience of the writers themselves. This was a burden that Teddy Pendergrass, Patti LaBelle, Al Green and other Black music makers from one or two generations removed did not have to worry about. "Black authenticity" had to be reflected in the lyrics *and* personal actions of the creator of the art within hip-hop. With these boundaries in place, anything uttered by the hip-hop artist could be interpreted as "real." Whether that "reality" came from their experience or from the mind of their management was immaterial.

Hip-Hop's "Golden Age" where mainstream lyrical mastery, innovation in beat production, and diversity of style and content within the music, had ended by 1995. The major record companies dominated the industry; either directly producing the most popular forms of hip-hop, or entering into lucrative distribution deals with independent labels. Although mostly Black, male artists still heavily represented hip-hop, its largest American audience was white. The music became dominated by "party music" once again. The political engagement that occasionally made its way onto the airwaves or video music shows via Public Enemy, X-Clan, Paris, and others was eliminated seemingly overnight.

The Pop Era that followed was a success for a few Black entrepreneurs such as Sean Combs, Russell Simmons, Master P, Dr. Dre, and 50 Cent. They were able to further aid in the commodification of the music resulting in great financial rewards for themselves, and thus their commercial success was pointed to as a triumph for the Black music artist, although their individual financial gains seldom trickled down to other hip-hop artists affiliated with them.

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