“The Massacre” by 50 Cent sells 4 million copies: Why does social backwardness achieve such success? Part 1

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This is the first article in a two-part series

Though rap music has produced a variety of sub-genres in the last 25 years, it has recently divided itself into two general currents. The first is so-called Conscious Rap, which is characterized by lighter, jazz-influenced beats and lyrical content that, while much less violent and misogynistic than most rap music, is often informed by a deeply black nationalist and/or Christian outlook. Mos Def, Common and Kanye West are the most notable artists associated with this current. The political tendencies of these artists do merit some attention, but in most cases, their politics and class origins are readily apparent in their lyrics and video imagery.

Although Conscious Rap has developed a significant following—mainly within the striving black and Latino petty bourgeois—it has not achieved the overwhelming popularity of “gangster rap.” Gangster rap is the catch-all term applied to rap music that is characterized by the glorification of money worship, misogyny, mindless violence, sexism and innumerable forms of social garbage. The enormous and widespread popularity of gangster rap can be seen in the recent success of rap artist 50 Cent.

50 Cent’s latest album, *The Massacre*, has already sold 4 million copies and is likely to be the biggest-selling CD of the year. A representative for Billboard, Ray Waddell, says “It’s hard to get any hotter than 50 Cent is right now.” When asked about the summer tour in which Eminem and 50 Cent are headlining, Wadell responded, “You’ve got to say they’re totally mainstream; they’ve gone far beyond the rap audience. It’s a very powerful double bill.” Eminem and 50 Cent have taken turns at the top of album sales charts, track-download rankings and radio playlists in the last few years.

Since 1999, the two artists combined have sold nearly 40 million albums, nearly 3 million single downloads and have reached more than 150 million listeners via radio play of their most popular singles “In Da Club” (50 Cent) and “Lose Yourself” (Eminem). This figure indicates that almost half of the US population has been exposed to these artists at one time or another. The 15-to-25-year-old audience demographic is saturated by these artists through every conceivable form of media: movies, videos, cameo appearances in other artists’ videos, video games, DVDs, endorsement deals and commercials.

50 Cent was born Curtis Jackson and first arrived on the popular music scene in the fall of 2002, as a protégé of Eminem. His first single, entitled “Wankster,” was a meticulous character assassination of another rapper, Ja Rule, whom Jackson ruthlessly unmasked as a “studio gangster”—or one who feigns a criminal history in order to garner the street credibility that sells records.

Shortly after “Wankster,” Jackson released the aforementioned single, “In Da Club,” in which he boasts of his favorite club activities: selling the drug Ecstasy and looking for girls on whom “to rub.” The single was Jackson’s most successful to date, and, besides being a rhythmic boast about drug dealing and murder, it elevates Jackson’s past to mythical proportions by pre-packaging a romanticized version of his experiences as a teenage drug dealer—one who was shot nine times and survived—for mass consumption.

While Jackson has some talent for rhyming and his album contains a few catchy beats produced by gangster rap guru Dr. Dre, his rise to the top of the pop charts is largely predicated on his criminal or “thug” (which oddly enough, is now a term of great respect within hip-hop circles) persona.

Jackson was first encouraged to put his energy into making rap music by former Run DMC DJ, Jam Master Jay. Jay—who was undoubtedly motivated to some extent by the great commercial success of other violent criminals turned rappers such as the Notorious B.I.G. and the rap group N.W.A—taught Jackson the basics of rap music production.

Jackson eventually signed a $65,000 deal with Columbia Records, but continued to sell crack. In the spring of 2000, he was shot at close range in the face, hand and legs by a man (presumably a rival drug dealer) with a 9-millimeter. As mentioned, he survived a total of nine bullets.

Needless to say, all the sordid and tragic details of Jackson’s tumultuous life are prominently displayed on his promotional website, which at one point playfully jokes with the reader, “That’s not a dimple on 50 Cent’s face, that’s a bullet wound!” Deeply affected by his experiences, Jackson currently takes a three-man security team with him everywhere he goes, religiously wears a bullet-proof vest and drives a specially equipped, bullet-proof SUV.

Jackson says of himself, “With some artists, people look at them and wanna be that artist. I don’t think people wanna be me. I’m still searching for my purpose. I do have defects of character. When I get mad, I get mad. I can do things and say things that aren’t nice. And people, they look at me and they go, ‘Well, he’s crazy.’ I’m all right with that.” This statement seems more than a little disingenuous considering the pains with which Jackson has tried to communicate and glorify his homicidal tendencies to his young fans.

The chorus of his most recent single instructs the listener, “Clickity clank, clickity clank the money goes into my piggy bank Clickity clank, clickity clank the money goes into my piggy bank, I’ll get at you, my knife cut ya skin, I’ll get at you, blow shots at ya man.” While such murderous threats are hardly uncommon in most rap music, the simple and almost child-like chorus gives one the impression that he is not only homicidal, but emotionally stunted as well.

Sadly, this is a fairly representative sample of Jackson’s lyrics, which are daily piped into the American cultural landscape by some of the largest and most powerful media corporations in the world such as Infinity Broadcasting, Clear Channel and Time Warner. Like most of the best-selling rappers, Jackson’s music is a litany of homicidal threats and many

other retrograde tendencies, set to an infectiously catchy pre-programmed beat.

While it is easier to understand why someone who hadn't witnessed all the poverty, desperation and violence of the inner city could so effortlessly make a Faustian pact with the record industry to glorify poverty and social backwardness, one has to ask: How can Curtis Jackson so uncritically glorify the exploitive conditions that tore his family apart, ultimately led to his own near-fatal shooting and now compel him to wear a bullet-proof vest every day just to feel safe?

One suspects that he is probably totally unconscious—no doubt aided by copious amounts of alcohol and marijuana—of the forces that have pushed and pulled him through his life. I'd like to call him a "sell-out," but I suspect he was never really "down" in the first place.

Industry cash for chaos

Considering how degenerate and mindless most rap music has become, many would like to dismiss it—and the predominant gangster genre especially—as some sort of cultural aberration. However, the overwhelming popularity of 50 Cent makes clear that gangster rap is a cultural phenomenon that requires a deeper analysis.

As the numbers indicate, gangster rap is currently embraced in the US and around the world by an economically diverse and multicultural fan base. The most gruesome of rap tunes entertain shoppers at the mall, pre-teens at suburban slumber parties and students at universities all over the country. According to the Recording Industry Association of America, hip-hop and rap music officially became more popular than country music for the first time in America in 2001. The American music market was worth $14.3 billion in 2001. In 2003, rap sales accounted for 13.3 percent of the total market share.

Gangster rap's popularity, in particular, has soared to levels not seen since N.W.A. (Niggas with Attitudes) helped invent the genre 15 years ago. Although the real-life tragedies of 50 Cent fit nicely into the popular, cartoonish image of the black ghetto experience, the profit motives of the record industry, not ghetto life, have played the definitive role in the construction and development of the genre. 'If an artist makes more money talking about being a thug and his realness in the street, then he's going to do more of that because that's where the success is," said MC Search, best known from the group 3rd Bass and now a radio DJ in Detroit. "They will do what sells."

The record industry routinely attempts to exculpate itself for the rise of gangster rap by arguing that it is just passively providing the consumer with what she or he desires: murder, sexual exploitation and humiliation, proud ignorance, racially stereotypical behavior and attitudes, etc. (more about why it sells, later). Yet, by promoting gangster artists with its billion-dollar marketing machine, the industry plays a massive and undeniable role in creating and fostering the tastes of the youth market. If profits can be boosted by putting on a pedestal the perspectives of the most thoroughly ruined and exploited social elements of the inner city, the record industry won't hesitate.

Doubtless, there are many unscrupulous record executives who would probably market 50 Cent's music to toddlers if they could make an extra nickel per unit, but it must be made plain that the gangster rap phenomenon is not the result of a conscious plot to corrupt the youth of America.

Obviously, neither the record industry nor the rappers invented poverty, drugs, pimps, guns or killings. These phenomena have their roots in social conditions. The content of gangster rap merely reflects the most individualistic and primitive reaction—manipulated by definite social interests—to these harsh economic realities.

In the late 1990s, recording industry giants bought out or lured gangster artists away from most of the original, smaller peddlers of gangster rap. Independent labels such as Death Row records, which made its name and fortune by packaging and marketing romanticized images of the inner-city criminal lifestyle, were closely analyzed and eventually overtaken by industry executives.

Some of these smaller labels hastened their own demise by making use of the violent practices recounted in the songs of their top artists. The tragic culmination of these practices was seen in the murders of Christopher Wallace and Tupac Shakur in 1996. Shug Knight, then-owner of Death Row records, has been linked to the killings. In fact, Wallace's mother alleges that off-duty Los Angeles Police Department officers were involved in the murder of her son—several of whom moonlighted as Shug Knight's bodyguards at the time.

While there were many sober admonitions against gang violence following the murders, major labels wasted no time snapping up as many unsophisticated independent gangster labels and rappers as they could in the aftermath. Since then, the once-underground gangster rap phenomenon has been almost completely absorbed into, and centralized under, the command and guidance of corporate conglomerates.

Rap is now big business, and young rappers stand to make as much as star athletes in some cases. Rappers Jay-Z, Sean Combs, Snoop Dogg and Master P have all made hundreds of millions of dollars selling the ghetto cartoon to America's youth. Consequently, more and more aspiring rappers are tailoring their songs to fit the gangster mold, whether they have lived that life or not.

"A man who is starving will say anything and do anything to get on," explains MC Serch. Since most gangster rappers aren't starving in the first place, it must be added that a man who simply desires to be rich and famous may also "do anything to get on." The result: the vast majority of young rappers take record industry cash to vigorously encourage and glorify social chaos.

What is the social content of gangster rap?

Gangster rap, like all forms of rap, is apologetically portrayed by an army of liberal intellectuals and black nationalists as nothing more than a reflection of the poverty and violence of inner-city life. A piece in the *Guardian* describes how deeply these views on rap have been accepted and promoted by the intelligentsia: "The lyrics of Tupac Shakur are dissected in university classrooms; former Public Enemy front man Chuck D has a political talk-show on the radio. Among professional African-American intellectuals, big names such as Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West sing hip-hop's praises. Literally so with West, a Princeton University professor and probably the best-known black intellectual in the country, who last year cut his own rap and poetry album, 'Sketches of My Culture.' "

There is a widespread belief amongst hip-hop devotees that they are taking on a political perspective by listening to the music. This raises the question: Does rap have any real political content, or is it just recreational oppositionalism? To answer this question, one must look at those to whom rap appeals. Who buys gangster rap and why?

The popular notion that rap reflects—in an unadulterated manner—the poverty and violence of inner-city life is only partly true, at best. There is no denying that the black community in the US suffers—and has historically suffered—an inordinate amount of crushing poverty, but rap isn't just a simple reflection of this reality, as the liberal intelligentsia would have us believe.

The sentiments that originally animated the gangster rap genre were derived from the perspective of the weakest and most backward sections of the inner-city lumpen proletariat; a perspective that is characterized by a thoroughly anti-social and anti-working class reaction to the ravages of inner-city life. This ultra-individualistic and confused point of view places animalistic hedonism as its top priority and rejects everything that stands in the way of immediate satisfaction. The lumpen proletariat does not, in fact, have any independent interests or ideological expression. This seriously damaged or even destroyed layer generally copies in a particularly crude manner the behavior and outlook of the most predatory bourgeois elements.

The sentiments of poor inner-city inhabitants, struggling to raise their kids, pay ever-increasing bills, and scrape out a living are not reflected in most rap music and certainly not in gangster rap. So, gangster rap only reflects the reality of the ghetto from one narrow perspective. While this perspective has never been a complete or accurate reflection of ghetto life (a fact widely acknowledged, at least in rap circles), it has always drawn an audience.

But the violent lumpen layer is just a subsection of a single social layer. By no means could such a small segment of the population buy enough records to fuel the record-breaking sales posted by 50 Cent.

A 2003 *Boston Globe* article excitedly reported that "Today 70 percent of hip-hop is bought by white kids." The rap industry is increasingly aware that their audience is not just black city-dwellers, as pointed out by Erik Parker of *Vibe* magazine: "You don't necessarily need the white face to cross over to the non-urban audiences.... Before you had Eminem as a huge success because he's a great rapper and he's white. Justin (Timberlake) is a great singer and he's white. Now you have Nelly and Lil Jon crossing over—black artists doing black music. I do think that rappers are more conscious of a growing market and they're creating records to accommodate that market." Despite the fact that rappers are just now becoming conscious of their audience, the audience has been influencing rap music's content for some time.

Since the *Globe* cited that statistic, MRI researchers have changed their methods and no longer decide for themselves the race of their respondents. In fall 2004, using the new method, MRI found that 60 percent of rap buyers are white. This leaves a full 40 percent of rap consumers who, at least, do not identify themselves as white. Although the racial demographics of rap consumers are currently en vogue, they only provide limited insight into the phenomena of gangster rap. Every race group contains within it antagonistic socioeconomic classes. While not perfect, one's social class is a much more reliable indicator of behavior.

The fact that gangster rap has a racially diverse audience and enjoys enormous sales indicates that, although the impetus and content of gangster rap may have originated in the desperation and backwardness of the inner-city lumpen population, it has won an audience with youth from many distinct racial and, more importantly, class backgrounds. This begs the question: What do young people from so many different backgrounds all find attractive about gangster rap?

To be continued