

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

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It is important to consider rap in its process of development. While the original inspiration for the content of gangster rap may have come from the (mostly black) inner-city, lumpen proletariat, many of the first “gangster artists” themselves came from relatively privileged backgrounds.

As mentioned, the members of the rap group NWA are popularly credited, within rap circles and the music industry in general, as the founders of gangster rap. Yet, at least two of its most prominent members—Dr. Dre and Ice Cube—came from relatively privileged, middle class backgrounds. Ice Cube (O’Shea Jackson) was born into an upper-middle class family. Both of his parents worked full time at the University of California at Los Angeles—although their job titles are conspicuously omitted from all biographies—and he himself studied architecture in Arizona at the Phoenix Institute of Technology one year before he decided to become a “gangster.”

Before Dr. Dre (Andre Young) dressed in all black outfits and Raiders caps, he was a moderately successful rap and R&B artist who performed in disco-era sequenced jump suits. He, too, is from a middle class family.

Considering the wide appeal of 50 Cent’s album, there is no question that many working class youth are attracted to, and buy, gangster rap. Why? In a recent WSWs article, Marc Wells wrote about Eminem’s appeal, “His music influences great numbers of teenagers who are responding to a common condition: life in a highly alienating society, where social and political forces tend to exploit or misguide the most genuine aspirations of youth. There is no doubt that Eminem, as a member of this society and as a product of American reality, expresses many frustrations that are common among young people. They arise in many cases from growing up poor, in extremely disadvantaged social conditions, surrounded by crime, where education, decent housing and health care are luxuries afforded by fewer and fewer people. These are real stories of American life.”

For lack of any real alternative, rap is rebellion for many politically unconscious, working class youth. Gangster rap, in the cultural vacuum of modern American life, seems like the only musical form with an even vaguely rebellious or class conscious message. Many young people are attracted to it because it purports to express, although in a deeply distorted form, a total distrust of, and rejection of all forms of bourgeois rule and authority. The illusion of revolution is cynically manipulated by many rap artists who regularly make cryptic references to nonexistent political movements like: “the struggle” or “the hip-hop nation.”

Gangster rap also frequently expresses anger with the police, the courts and other socially repressive institutions of class domination. While most of this anger on the part of rap artists is unprincipled and often based on a

simple desire to sell drugs in peace, many young people can relate to it on some level. As traditional part-time and summer employment opportunities have dried up, significant layers of working class youth become lumpenized for longer and longer stretches of time and, as a result, are more frequently herded and harassed by police.

It is also likely that working class youth are attracted to the populist tone of rap. There is a general anti-elitist sentiment underlying most rap songs, and especially gangster rap, which likely appeals to those seeking to define themselves as a group distinct from the decadent and privileged layers they see in their communities and on television. Again, in the absence of any musical form that draws such class distinctions and with a total lack of any genuine class-consciousness, many young people seek out rebellion in a pre-packaged, synthetic and ultimately benign form.

The manner in which rap offers its backwardness as a token of class credibility is probably its most insidious and disgusting trait. Rap originally distinguished itself from bourgeois culture by its irrepressible character and egalitarian style of performance and presentation. Anyone with the desire to rap could grab the microphone and spit out a “stream of consciousness” rhyme to the audience, who would then decisively approve or disapprove of the performance: an art form open to all daring enough to participate.

However, with advanced forms of marketing employed by the record industry, rappers have become increasingly conscious (although very slowly) of their anti-establishment appeal. This greater consciousness and the enormous financial incentives for creating a hit record have greatly encouraged rappers to emphasize their distinction from bourgeois society.

But now, instead of rejecting the needless formalities, hierarchy and the emotional repression of bourgeois culture, rappers increasingly seek to create an anti-establishment image by making a greater and greater show of their backwardness and pointless criminality. As a vindication of race, gender and social prejudices, such displays have found a growing audience within the narrow-minded and reactionary layers of American society.

In the end, no one is fighting the system here. No, the ambition is to have cash, cars, girls, houses, pools, etc. Sadly, it’s just the people at the bottom imitating those at the top. Or in the case of Dr. Dre, Ice Cube and other “studio gangsters”: those at the middle imitating those at the bottom in order to get to the top!

There is, doubtless, a considerable section of the rap audience that enjoys the music on a different level altogether. In gangster rap, the backward youth (black or white) can find all of his/her stereotypes about men, women, life and even blacks, validated. The gangster is the rugged individual who wins at the end of the movie, he solves his problems with mindless and brutal violence and is greatly respected for it by his community; he treats women like dogs and they love him for it and, most

importantly, he values wealth and power—and gaudy displays of it—above all else. He is a reactionary myth.

Racial stereotypes are also nourished by gangster rap: one sees an endless parade of ignorant, chauvinistic and criminal black men, great sources of entertainment, but in the end, only worthy of distrust and quiet resentment. As mentioned, gangster rap's appeal as a validation of one's racial prejudices is just as strong for the children of the self-loathing black bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie, who—because of their relatively privileged social position—oftentimes fancy themselves to be the exceptional element of an otherwise flawed community.

While the inner-city lumpen layers and the well-heeled, suburban petty bourgeois seem to represent opposite poles in American society, their social existence is similar in certain respects. Generally, each layer is largely alienated from the productive process, isolated to the point of cultural stagnancy within its own socioeconomic and racial communities and frequently desperate to escape the drudgery of its existence on the outskirts of society.

While gangster rap originally emerged as an expression of the degenerate element of the ghetto there is a strong possibility that—by means of the record industry—it has molded, and in turn been molded by, the narrow-minded American suburbanite. In this sense, gangster rap may have become a means of communication by which the urban lumpen layers and the striving, suburban, petty-bourgeois youth create and influence each other's attitudes and behavior and thereby establish a common perspective. This possible connection deserves further attention.

Concretely, we have seen, for example, in the most recent period, the emergence of the 311 Boyz (upper-middle class kids responsible for a rash of violent beatings in Las Vegas this summer, inspired by both the Ku Klux Klan—K is the eleventh letter in the alphabet, hence 311=KKK—and gangster rap) and so many university frats around the country which abuse women, attack fellow students in packs and love gangster rap.

Party music origins

Rap music wasn't always so backward. There are many divergent explanations of its origins, but the most reliable finds the roots of rap music in the toasting and dub talk-over elements of reggae music. In the early 70s, a Jamaican deejay known as Kool Herc (Clive Campbell) moved from Kingston to the West Bronx of New York. He incorporated a Jamaican deejay style, which involved reciting improvised rhymes over the dub versions of his reggae records.

Since reggae had not yet attained great popularity in New York, Herc adapted his style by rhyming over the instrumental or percussion sections of the popular songs of that era. Because the beats were relatively short, he developed a technique to extend them for longer periods of time by using an audio mixer and two identical records. With these tools he was able to continuously replace the desired segment of the song.

Most who attended Herc's deejay shows participated by reciting popular phrases and slang over the sampled bits of pop music. As this phenomenon evolved, the party shouts became more elaborate and deejays began to incorporate a few simple rhymes. At the time rap was not yet known as "rap" but rather "emceeing." As Herc progressed, he put greater attention on his deejay duties and let two friends, Coke La Rock and Clark Kent, handle the microphone. This was, arguably, rap music's first emcee team.

From simple origins, rap quickly expanded. Instead of the individualistic idol worship of pop music, young New Yorkers found in rap an opportunity to freely express themselves and develop their own cultural community. It was originally accessible to all alike; anyone could

participate in one way or another regardless of their personal wealth or privileged upbringing. Moreover, you could practice rapping almost anytime and anywhere. With no set rules, except to be original and rhyme in time with the beat, anything was possible. A long, long way from the massive corporate operation it has become.

A few of today's rap artists have adhered closely to rap's original spirit as an egalitarian party music. Outkast and Black Eyed Peas are two examples that come to mind. These artists, and a few others, are largely supported by a fan base that consciously rejects the backwardness of gangster rap. In these artists, many fans find some continuity with the fun-loving and community-oriented origins of rap.

However, the simple fact that these artists are not glorifying all the social excrement of modern American society is not enough to make the music revolutionary or even political. Party music generally abstains from taking an overt political stance and—as the degeneration of rap music over the last 25 years clearly demonstrates—is vulnerable to infection in a reactionary climate.

What can be salvaged?

Considering the enormous popularity of the gangster genre, it is difficult to even talk about rap as a force for revolutionary cultural change and keep a straight face. Yet, MTV—the largest purveyor of bourgeois pseudo-rebellion and consequently the sworn enemy of revolutionary consciousness in the youth—runs a romantic account of rap's "revolutionary history" and "deep political roots" at least once a month. No matter how low rap goes we are constantly encouraged by the corporate culture machine to entertain the idea that it could be reformed.

Can rap be reformed to become a truly revolutionary cultural movement? There is a possibility, however slight, that those artists who have stayed true to rap's inclusive, party origins can progress beyond simple party music, to a form of music with a genuine social conscience. With such a conscious change, the now rotten art form may begin to heal itself.

However, a total directional shift of this nature would require rappers to become more than just empty ciphers of the world around them. No longer would rappers be able to just report on poverty and street violence as though they were mere video cameras. They would have to take a position on it and make sense of it for their listeners. For instance: draw a distinction between genuine acts of self-defense against the police and the unprovoked beating and murder of innocent bystanders and members of the community.

A group of class-conscious rappers would have to emerge, prepared to build an inclusive, street-level, musical community for all those suffering under capitalism, regardless of their nationality, race, gender or sexuality. Such a cadre would have to steel itself against the record industry; deliberately rejecting the idea—with both their music and their professional decisions—that self-enrichment is most important.

To do this, rappers will have to begin by politically educating themselves beyond the racist identity politics of buffoons like Luis Farrakhan, Al Sharpton and further still beyond the class collaboration preached by rap's multimillionaires, like Russell Simmons and Sean Combs. Can anyone point to a rapper or group of rappers that are willing or even capable of doing all of this?

Even if a conscious awakening could come from within rap, there is still the question of form. The form of artistic expression can drastically limit its content. For example, if there were a new musical genre in which one could only use foul language, the expression of the artists involved, despite their good will, would inevitably be stunted and socially inert.

While rap is not (yet) bound this tight, it does have major limitations of form.

Almost all rap music is extremely repetitive. In most cases, the same sample is played over and over, which forms the rhythmic backdrop to the lyrical performance. Many of these samples are extremely catchy and the sample arrangements can be—at times—complex, but most are nonetheless, monotonous and lethargic. The lyrical virtuosity of the performers is amazing in some cases, as seen in artists like Eminem, Twista and E-40; each able to attain a startling speed and accuracy of delivery. With the same speed, many rappers are able to spontaneously produce entire rhyming stories with seemingly little difficulty.

These feats are very entertaining, but this element of “time pressure” is so common in the production and live performance of rap music that it can be said to be a component part of rap’s form, one which militates against thoughtful reflection. Also, as a general rule: the harsher a rapper’s delivery, the better it is received. Tupac, Ice Cube, Method Man and Mystikal are just some of the most successful rappers, who employ an almost abusive tone in their raps. In this tone, even a love song can sound like serious threat.

The combination of driving beats, repetitiveness, hurried and aggressive delivery give the most popular rap songs a distinctly martial character. The music sounds like a drive to war, not a genuine reflection of our complex social reality. It may invigorate the listener for a moment, but does it tell him who/what he is fighting and for what purpose?

So—aside from the pressure that the profit motives of the record industry and reactionary elements within the hip-hop community exert on content—we can see that the musical form of rap itself is a relatively limited medium of expression. Could it be that anything which goes into this rigid form—no matter how well-intentioned—will come out musically and socially stunted? Can thoughts and sentiments like tenderness, compassion or social insight be expressed in this repetitive, abrasive form? One must at least begin to ask these questions.

Although limited in form, it must also be acknowledged that the egalitarian and makeshift forms of rap have struck a cord with youth around the world, and to some extent, a global music culture has developed. Globalization has projected rap music around the world. It has enjoyed tremendous popularity in many countries and has spawned rap groups and subgenres in China, Japan, France, Mexico, Cuba, Israel, England, Palestine, Argentina, etc. While this music culture is deeply disoriented, it could provide the rudiments of an adolescent world culture in which youth from every nation can find common ground.

There is almost no country in which some significant section of the youth is not totally enamored with the musical culture of rap. Many around the world will uncritically consume just about anything the American cultural machine spews out, but still there are millions internationally that are genuinely attracted to rap because of its open, informal, inclusive and egalitarian roots. They see a great potential in rap music.

Whether a reforming force can rise out of the filth and rot that rap currently finds itself in is deeply uncertain. Whether social reality can be accurately reflected in such a limited and martial art form is also an open question. What is certain is that the predominant, actual manifestation of rap music is a socially regressive force.

Whatever the answer to these questions, working class youth must be ready and willing to throw off the rebellious-looking chains of rap’s influence at a moment notice, for it has clearly revealed its weakness and is by no means the last word in the development of a revolutionary cultural movement. We must at least accept the possibility that rap as a form of expression may, in fact, represent one of the biggest obstacles to such a development.

It’s worth remembering that youth—in America especially—is incredibly flexible and adaptive. A new cultural wind will always pass through. The

more talented elements in rap music—and the more conscious rap fans—may eventually take a different artistic direction, one they cannot even imagine today.

Concluded



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