

Black and White Separation in Music: Marketing or Racism?

Over the years people have had mixed opinions about the nature of our culture. Are we, as a nation, a melting pot in which all our differences are somehow combined into one homogenized culture, or are we more like a salad bowl, each of us maintaining our own distinctiveness, yet still contributing to the whole? On the one hand, we equate separation with segregation; on the other, we celebrate our differences, particularly in the media. When, for example, Kendricks (1998) says, "The African-American experience in film goes beyond the '70s blackploitation era and the more recent wave of gritty, urban dramas spawned by John Singleton's 'Boyz N the Hood.' It stretches back decades before filmmakers such as Spike Lee ('Do the Right Thing'), Charles Burnett ('The Glass Shield') and George Tillman Jr. ('Soul Food') even dared to dream of getting behind a movie camera," he tacitly acknowledges a negative aspect of this separation ("blackploitation"); at the same time, he also affirms that some media products are aimed specifically at black audiences.

Of course, the very nature of "black" films and organizations such as the Black Entertainment Network raises the question, "Are media products produced by or featuring a preponderance of blacks aimed *only* at black audiences, or do they also target white audiences?" This question is even more relevant to the music industry, where "race music," as rhythm and blues was often called, was combined with "white popular," folk, jazz, and country music to form what we now know as rock music.

For most of the youth of America in the 1950s, both black and white, the new rock 'n' roll was simply the music of the new generation. For some adults, however, it was further evidence of the degradation of American society. For some African Americans, the new music was a betrayal of its historic black roots and was being cheapened because white audiences were perceived as unable to truly appreciate the black

experience so integral to rhythm and blues. Yet, for record companies, the new music was simply an additional genre that could be sold in order to generate more income.

THE ROOTS OF SEGREGATED MUSIC

Rock music grew out of a combination of five distinct music genres: rhythm and blues, country and western, white popular, folk, and jazz. The musical genres contributed various elements, as outlined:

- Rhythm and blues: brass instruments, a driving beat, and a frank approach to sex in lyrics.
- Country and western: different guitar styles and earthy topics for lyrics
- White popular: sentimentality (boy meets girl), a history of economic success in the marketplace, and technical expertise in production and engineering studio recordings
- Folk: rebellion against authority and singer-songwriters performing their own works
- Jazz: highly skilled musicians and racial integration

In addition, changes in the licensing structure that determines how songwriters are paid affected the development of rock 'n' roll. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s the major moneymaker for record labels was white popular music, with the music being licensed to radio stations by ASCAP. The economic catalyst for the birth of rock 'n' roll was ASCAP's 1941 doubling of licensing fees it charged radio stations to play music from ASCAP's catalog. In response, many radio stations refused to play songs created by ASCAP songwriters, which in turn left a large "hole" in the broadcast day. To fill the void left by the ASCAP boycott, radio stations began to use artists who recorded songs not licensed by ASCAP, basically songs sung by artists not signed to major labels. Since at that time ASCAP represented predominately mainstream pop songwriters, stations turned to the two music genres outside ASCAP's domain: rhythm and blues, or R&B; and country and western, now known simply as country.

It should be noted that radio was racially segregated until rock 'n' roll became a major economic force: Stations that played R&B were "race music" stations directed toward black audiences; whereas popular stations, like their rural country and western counterparts, were marketed to white audiences. (Note: country and western has become known simply as country.) In the early stages of rock 'n' roll, it was not uncommon for a song to be released to R&B radio stations and later recorded and

released to white radio stations by a different band. The second recording, called a "cover" of the original, often sold many more copies than the R&B version. Thus white-oriented stations played "race music" that had been picked up by white artists such as Bill Haley (he covered "Shake, Rattle and Roll," originally by Joe Turner) and the Crew Cuts (they covered "Sha-Boom," originally by the Chords). As pop radio audiences became familiar with "race music" songs covered by white artists, radio stations experimented with playing the original recordings made by black artists. Gradually, white stations began to play the original R&B recordings of songs that appealed to both black and white audiences.

Another phenomenon, called a "crossover hit," emerged as mainstream white radio stations felt more comfortable expanding the rub of music they programmed. A crossover is a song intended for one radio market (e.g., country and western), that is subsequently getting airplay on another station format (e.g., Top 40). At the beginning of the 1950s, several R&B songs "crossed over" into the popular charts. These included "Earth Angel" by the Penguins and "Cryin' in the Chapel" by the Orioles. Thus, in the early 1950s artists began to merge various elements of rhythm and blues, white popular, and country and western, and in 1951 Alan Freed, the Cleveland disc jockey who is credited with coining the term "rock 'n' roll," began to play a mixture of white popular (Frank Sinatra and Al Martino) and rhythm and blues. He also sponsored dances that featured all-black entertainers that attracted large numbers of white teenagers.

Then, in 1954 Bill Haley and the Comets made the final fusion of the three genre with a song that is generally considered the first rock 'n' roll hit, "Rock around the Clock." The song combined country-and-western instrumentation, a hard-driving beat (R&B), and the dance theme so popular in white popular. Even as Haley was hitting the pop charts with his derivative of black music for white audiences, he was also going the other way. In 1955 he released "Dim, Dim the Lights," a pop tune that made it onto the rhythm-and-blues charts, "a particularly unusual phenomenon because 'white' records rarely appeared on the R&B charts" (Stuessy, 1990, p. 34).

Gradually, racial integration of the airwaves became the norm, much to the chagrin of segregationists and adults who objected to the lyrics, beat, or message of the new rock 'n' roll (see Chapters 2, 3, 5, and 10 for examples of reactions to rock music). Through the early years of rock 'n' roll, white artists such as Elvis Presley, Jerry Lee Lewis, the Everly Brothers, and Buddy Holly sang music that had unmistakable rhythm-and-blues roots. In addition, these artists opened the way for acceptance of black artists by white audiences: Little Richard, Larry Price, Fats Domino, and most important, Chuck Berry. Of course, other forms of music were

also undergoing transformation as genres were merging and realigning themselves: "Entwined in the music and words of folk-rock are the segregated field of race music, white rock and roll, pop music values, and the protest singers and songs generally associated with the student movements of the 1960s" (Dunson, 1966, p. 13).

From this brief history we can see that even from the earliest days of rock music there has been a racial divide between "black" and "white" music and black and white audiences. Even as the racial barriers of radio formats began to fall, however, record companies created their own forms of segregation within their own organizations. Major labels have had many euphemisms for African American music divisions: black, soul, rhythm and blues, and most recently, urban. One must ask, Does such categorization promote racial segregation, or is it a valid form of marketing segmentation necessary to sign artists and sell recordings?

THE BIRTH OF RAP AND GANGSTA RAP

Depending on whom you ask, rap music began in either the early 1970s or the late 1970s, was itself an outgrowth of urban hip-hop culture, and was seen as a lifestyle as much as a form of music. As with so much popular culture, however, rap did not develop along clearly defined lines in any linear manner. Generally speaking, hip-hop is the overarching umbrella that comprises rap, break dancing, and graffiti. Rap itself has been defined as music with a hard-driving beat, perhaps a reflection of its roots in rhythm and blues, plus spoken or chanted rhyming words instead of sung lyrics (Nazareth, 1999, p. S6). Hip-hop and rap are often used interchangeably; but in the eyes of most musicologists, rap is the musical art form.

Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash, and Kool Herc—three inventors of what we now call rap—are often referred to as the "old school" or "first wave" of rap. Early rap artist Bambaataa used the term "hip-hop" to refer to his dance gatherings, called jams. "I started naming my jams, 'hip-hop' jams," said Bambaataa (Perkins, 1996). While DJs were mixing and scratching records to create a danceable instrumental background, persons began to step forward to boast about themselves and to talk about the other dancers. Those early front persons became known as MCs and, later, as rappers.

Most sources acknowledge the early contribution of Jamaican music to the development of rap. One early rap artist, Kool Herc (aka Clive Campbell) moved from Kingston, Jamaica, to the Bronx in 1967. He brought with him the tradition of Caribbean ska and reggae beats with the raplike style of Jamaican singers. Some authorities on rap music's origins credit Kool Herc with inventing rap and the hip-hop culture of the Bronx (Perkins, 1996). Then, in 1979, the rap act Sugar Hill Gang

released "Rapper's Delight," considered by many to be the first rap single, "a joyous confection of party lyrics and music based on Chic's 'Good Times.' It was good dance music and the accompanying patter over the track (the 'rapping') seemed like an interesting novelty" (Muwakkil, 1998). By the early 1980s hip-hop came into its own with Grandmaster Flash, one of the first technologically savvy rappers. Unlike Herc and Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash was able to garner financial success for his music. His 1982 single, "The Message," recorded by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five (featuring Duke Bootee), was certified gold.

Rap music was not generally embraced by major labels in the 1970s and early 80s, however. After Run-D.M.C. attained commercial success with their debut album *Rock Box*, thanks in part to MTV exposure, labels started to think more seriously about rap as a commercial genre. It was the collaboration of the heavy metal band Aerosmith with Run-D.M.C. that produced the first major hit for a rap album. The instant success of the single "Walk This Way" helped propel the album, *Raising Hell*, to sales of 3 million units.

As major labels began to sign rap acts, rap producers found themselves in an enviable position: There was very little competition from rock producers who weren't familiar with rap. Rap continued to develop its sales base for recordings and concerts throughout the 1990s. Paradoxically, many journalists have criticized the recording industry for transforming rap from a street-based artform to entertainment. While executive editor of Third World Press, Bakari Kitwana criticized commercially successful rap because the artists have "been altered or constructed around being rewarded financially—not for being true to themselves, the artform or rap origins, but to the white corporate elite interest (that which is in the best interest of increasing sales rather than elevating the artform)" (Kitwana, 1994).

Despite any precise definition of rap music, one should not think that rap encompasses just one kind of music. To ~~facts~~ ^{fact} of rap, there are numerous stylistic differences—subgenres—within the rap genre. For example, rappers from the East Coast have tended to use more intricate wordplay, and the words tend to be very fast. Rappers on the West Coast, in contrast, are more likely to use more melodic lyrics. Of course, the same differentiation was once made about jazz: West Coast jazz was seen as "cool," and East Coast jazz was sometimes referred to as "hard bop."

These stylistic differences aside, and even though rap music grew out of African American themes in urban settings, white American youth have adopted rap as their own. Said Bob Santelli, the vice president for education and public programming for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio: "If you look at American culture today, what is it? It's hip-hop culture. . . . The average kid who buys a hip-hop

record is more likely than not to be young, white and suburban. [Hip-hop] is far more than a ghetto phenomenon. . . . This is mainstream American culture" (Santelli, quoted in Nazareth, 1999, p. 56). Noted scholar of rap Nelson George stated his belief that rap was never exclusive to African American audiences: "It is a fallacy that there ever existed a time when hip hop buyers were exclusively black. The first rap hit, 'Rapper's Delight' 1979, was voted single of the year by the National Association of Recording Merchandisers, hardly a collective interested in celebrating singles sold just to black teenagers" (George, 1998, p. 60).

One of the most controversial aspects of rap, the apparent glorification of violence, was launched by the group Ice Cube with their 1989 work *Straight Outta Compton*. The album originated in the wake of the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles, particularly in the Watts and Compton areas. No other aspect of rap music has created more debate than that of gangsta lyrics, particularly anger directed toward authority.

THE IMPACT OF GANGSTA RAP

The violence in much of rap (particularly gangsta rap, a sub-genre of rap very often containing violent themes also called "hard core rap" or "reality rap") is said to be an outgrowth of two different cultures, again, one on the West Coast and the other on the East Coast. In the east, the birth of gangsta rap was attributed to gang violence between African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latin gangs in New York. Rather than engage in self-destructive violence, rappers began to "fight" their battles through rap music (Muwakkil, 1998). Still others, such as rapper Kurtis Blow, contend that East Coast rap was mild and that the more violent gangsta rap sprang directly from the urban ghettos of the West Coast:

Well, at first, rap was fun. It was something that we did as a means of expression in the early days of rap. And then it just progressed.

Each time a rapper would come out, he felt that he would have to outdo the next one. And they started getting harder and harder. The lyrics became more street-oriented. And . . . it was selling. Yes, most definitely. And you know, you had the West Coast come into the picture, and that's when the lyrics really became really hard and a lot of profanity and they were kicking lyrics from the ghetto and from a ghetto mentality, and that's where gangsta rap started. (Blow, 1997)

Whichever coast one believes was the birthplace of gangsta rap, the fact is rap's violent offspring grew out of the urban areas of America's large cities. Because media messages reflect the environment in which they are created, rap's offspring, gangsta rap, reflects dissatisfaction of young



adults with the world around them—a world of depressed urban areas. The music thus provides an outlet for the anger of African American youths.

At the same time, rap provides what some critics call a cultural mythology. As stories, through songs, continually reinforce often repeated themes about police brutality, drug use, and gang warfare, they become more believable. In other words, there are those who believe rap lyrics project ideas onto urban youth. Others believe that rap music is the contemporary urban form of journalism: "What we need to realize about gangsta is that while it has been accused of celebrating gang violence, it is also accurate reportage" (Gibb, 2000). Robert "Scoop" Jackson stated in his book *The Last Black Mecca: Hip-Hop* that music does not necessarily change behavior, but it "does 'spark curiosity' and instigate attitudes. The racial attitude in America right now is very tense. Rap music did not cause this, but 'reported' on it" (Jackson, 1994). Both Gibb and Jackson, it seems, believe rap lyrics reflect, rather than create, what is going on in urban settings.

Obviously, the direct impact of gangsta rap is open to debate. In Chapter 2 we discussed the projective-reflective theory of mediã, which asks, Do the media project a particular point of view on society (and thus lead society in that direction), or do media messages merely reflect what society is already doing? The problem is, violence in predominantly black urban areas was present long before gangsta rap was born. It thus appears that it is the "reflective" part of the theory that is at work.

Nevertheless, there are those who see rap, particularly gangsta rap, as both a symptom and a cause of degradation and violence. Said C. Dolores Tucker, chairwoman of the National Political Congress of Black Women, and William J. Bennett, author of *The Book of Virtues* and co-director of Empower America:

Newspaper editors and television producers veto even the expletive-deleted versions of these lyrics because they are so offensive and obscene. This speaks volumes about just how bad they are.

"Artists" sing about dismemberment and cutting off women's breasts.

This is fair game for an audience of 12-year-olds?

The sponsor behind this kind of music is often Time Warner Inc.

In fact, Time Warner Inc. recently increased its investment in "gangsta rap" and now owns 50 percent of Interscope Records, the record label behind such "artists" as Snoop Doggy Dogg, Dr. Dre, Nine Inch Nails and Tupac Shakur—whose songs of violence are notorious . . .

We are not calling for censorship. We are both virtual absolutists

on the First Amendment. Our appeal is to a sense of corporate responsibility and simple decency. There are things no one should sell.

We met recently with Time Warner executives to outline our concerns. Our recommendation was straightforward: Time Warner should stop its sponsorship and promotion of lyrics that celebrate rape, torture and murder.

Thus far, the appeal has fallen on deaf ears. When we read the lyrics to Time Warner executives and asked if they thought them offensive and ought not to be sold to children, we were told that it was a "complex issue."

It is not a complex issue. There are things on which reasonable people will disagree. But some lyrics of these songs are beyond the pale. (Bennett and Tucker, 1995)

When labels respond to criticism of music lyrics, they typically respond by saying, "It is the parents of children who should determine what music their kids listen to, not record companies." In reality, parents have a very difficult time policing the music their children listen to. Parents must be alert to radio, cable television music videos, films, and recordings.

On the surface, labels have addressed this issue, but in reality, it is a "bait and switch" situation. Rap singles are often released in two forms. One form, without any profanity, is released to radio as the "clean" version. The other version, complete with profanity, is called the "explicit" version. Therefore, parents might listen to the clean version on the radio and agree to let their child buy the album. Then the child could come home with an explicit version that most parents would have banned from their household had they known more.

Another critic of gangsta rap, Stanley Crouch, has said: "I dislike the side of rap that encourages violence over trivia, theft, drive-by shootings, misogyny, the side of rap that gives young women the impression that in order to rebel, they should become sluts. These things have had a very destructive influence on our society" (Crouch, quoted in Gibb, 2000). Although it is difficult to create the scientifically controlled environment necessary to accurately test the influence of rap lyrics on young listeners, recent abuse of prescription cough syrup may be an example of gangsta rap's perverse effect. After Memphis rap group Three 6 Mafia released its single "Sippin' on Some Syrup," the federal Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) noticed "soaring sales" of prescription cough syrup. The agency also noted an increase in stolen prescription pads from physicians' offices (Jones, 2000).

Of course, record executives are responsive to market forces. A record company is, after all, a business. Labels typically acknowledge that rap



C. Delores Tucker of the National Political Congress of Black Women holds a copy of the cover of Tupac Shakur's album *Makaveli* during a Washington news conference Tuesday, December 10, 1996, to discuss gangsta rap. Tucker, along with former Education Secretary William Bennett, said the album's distributor, MCA/Universal Records, violated a commitment not to distribute profane or violent music. (AP/Wide World Photos)

music contains violence and misogynous messages, but they cannot "censor" an art form that has so many customers. This stance has led to what seems to be a dual standard: Columbia Records refused to distribute the band Slayer's *Reign in Blood* album because of references to the infamous doctor Joseph Mengele, whose Nazi war crimes were still painful memories for many Holocaust survivors in the United States and Europe. One might wonder why Slayer's music was simply "unacceptable for distribution" by Columbia, whereas other albums with lyrics extolling violence against African American women were apparently quite appropriate for distribution. Likewise, Warner Brothers gave mixed messages when the label pulled a Michael Jackson single that was offensive to some members of the Jewish community, yet released "Smack My Bitch Up" by the British group Prodigy in spite of repeated protests from feminist organizations.

Although it may be true that gangsta rap is brutal, supporters contend it is so only because the culture out of which it grew is brutal. However, there is also concern that the lyrics are not merely reflective of a particular society; they are in fact glorifying that society, in which violence plays so large a part:

The brutality of the music and lyrics undoubtedly reflects the culture from which it comes, which is what makes gangsta rap such a direct and powerful form of communication. Authenticity is all. But when that form of self-expression became big business, the market selected only the most extreme versions. It's a form of cultural cross-breeding that encourages brutality over intelligence, crudity over imagination. . . .

The gangsta identity is deliberately constructed from all the things that scare white America. Yet the unintended result was to provide the perfect soundtrack for white teen rebellion. (Gibb, 2000, p. 5)

One can build a case that some rappers speak from personal experiences with violence and escapist sexual promiscuity in inner-city housing projects. But can one also defend music by white rappers Eminem, Kid Rock, Beastie Boys, and Vanilla Ice as "street journalism" of our day? Perhaps record labels struggle to find any intellectual justification for music that sells many units. And, of course, the ultimate defense of music, no matter how offensive, is the need to protect freedom of expression at any cost.

THE ECONOMICS OF RAP MUSIC

That a major corporation will give up any profitable music genre unless outside pressures are unbearable is unlikely. Figures show that in

would need to be extremely great to cause record labels to restrict their output of rap records, no matter how violent and misogynous they might be.

Perhaps the best (or worst) example of the linkage between white executives and rap music is in the person of Michael Ovitz, one-time president of Disney. After leaving Disney in a deal that included a \$90 million golden parachute, Ovitz formed Artist Management Group to manage high-visibility (and high-paying) Hollywood talent. In January 2000, having "seen the future, and the future is hip-hop" (Morris, 2000), Ovitz formed an "urban entertainment division" at AMG, saying, "I want to try to learn this whole urban marketing situation. . . . I see big crossover potential in films, in sports and everything else" (Morris, 2000) "Urban," in case you were wondering, is marketing speak for "African American." To answer the question, "To whom is rap music being aimed?" we must recognize that any major label is going to promote any given act where that act will make the most money. After all, the object of marketing is to generate enough money to show a profit.

Another aspect of the issue is that production and distribution are, in fact, two different areas of the recording industry. This dichotomy can lead to confusion. For example, Death Row Records was a black-owned business, but its music was distributed by Interscope Records, a division of media conglomerate Time Warner, a record distribution entity that employs mostly white executives and handles mostly white artists. Other rap artists affiliated with Interscope include Snoop Doggy Dog, Dr. Dre, and until his murder, Tupac Shakur.

As rock, and its derivative subgenres such as alternative rock, continued to dominate the recording industry, a new form aimed at black audiences was emerging: rap, and its subgenre, gangsta rap. But then something interesting happened: White audiences—predominately teenagers—began to listen to rap music and to take it as their own. As one might imagine, record companies took notice. So, just who was rap supposed to be for: black audiences, white audiences, or both? In today's marketing environment, is any media product, including music, really created for a specific audience, or is it simply one more product to be sold to anyone who will buy it, listen to it, watch it?

Some critics believe that white listeners and performers cannot appreciate the true spirit of rap music. Moreover, they think members of the white majority can never become a part of the hip-hop milieu. Persons taking the opposite viewpoint feel that efforts to exclude whites from rap amount to racism in the guise of Afrocentrism. Their arguments tend to revolve around hypothetical "tables turned" scenarios: If white label heads proclaimed that African Americans would be considered unacceptable artists or audiences for a particular genre of music, would we not cry foul? In other words, reverse discrimination is still discrimina-

tion. Such discussions surrounding the alleged separation of "white music" from "black music" characteristically acknowledge historic patterns of racism and their impact on the music industry. One might conclude that the industry was carved into racial divisions by white executives and that things have never changed. However, rap executives should probably not rely on that rationale to justify keeping rap a "blacks only" art form, since that argument is the same as the justification used to maintain segregation in the South, namely, that "It has always been that way."

Another issue that has haunted rap music since its inception is the disparagement of women—misogyny—frequently evident in rap lyrics. Some prominent women's organizations have chastised labels for making money from music that denigrates black women. Misogynous rap lyrics typically take the form of sexual conquest of women, who are often called "Hos"—street vernacular for whores. One might ask, Are labels profiting from rap music at the expense of females?

In addition to misogyny, one can usually notice lyrics that glorify violence in rap music. Male bravado is a popular theme championed in hip-hop culture. It is not uncommon for rap music to sound as if it condones gang warfare, violence directed at police, use of drugs, and treatment of women as objects rather than as human beings. It must be noted, however, that anti-social themes such as anger toward police, use of drugs, and treatment of women as sex objects is not unique to rap music. The rock band Rage Against the Machine and their fans have consistently criticized law enforcement officials. A review of music videos on MTV or VH1—cable channels known for rock and pop rather than rap—frequently portray women as sex objects.

First Amendment rights and the theories discrediting how music affects behavior notwithstanding, one must ask if there are boundaries past which an entire genre of music should not pass. Should we, as a society, cry out against music that is for some people a public form of sexual harassment? Or must society change the conditions described in rap music in hopes that contemporary balladeers—**rappers**—will change their lyrics accordingly?

Media companies are, of course, concerned with the bottom line and generally less concerned about why white audiences would buy music ostensibly intended for black audiences. Record company executives know a good thing when they see it. And the sale of rap to white audiences is, for the companies involved, a very good thing: It has been estimated that 60 percent of the sales of gangsta rap is to white listeners (Muwakkil, 1998):

Despite the high profile of black music business executives . . . a shrinking number of multinationals control the business, and their higher echelons remain predominantly white. As is the audience

which buys hardcore rap's tales of bitches, blunts, beatdowns and AK-47s. . . . Once this credibility is established, then white-owned companies can market young black men and women to the voyeuristic suburban white teens who keep the entertainment industry buoyant. Rappers resent it . . . but the dollars keep flowing. (Morris, 2000)

Said Chuck D, founder of Public Enemy, "It's still being controlled by a bunch of white guys in business suits sitting around a conference table. . . . When it comes to where the music is going, it's not in the hands of people of color. I feel there has to be a balance" (Chuck D, quoted in Nazareth, 1999).

Lingering racial stereotypes seem slow to die in the music industry, even though it is generally thought of as a liberal industry. Audio engineer Tony Shepperd, who has worked with artists such as Whitney Houston, Al Jarreau, and Madonna, recalls an embarrassing moment during a visit to Nashville. As he began to enter the control room, he was told that singers should go through the other door to the studio floor. Of course, the person advising him never imagined an African American gentleman would be an audio engineer (Daley, 1998). Unfortunately, racial stereotypes in the music industry cast African Americans as singers, instrumentalists, songwriters, and producers. Whites are, in contrast, more often seen as engineers, label executives, managers, agents, and entertainment attorneys.

There has also been something of an economic backlash against the violence in rap music revealed in, of all things, country music: Some people who market country music have credited rap with past increases in country music listenership. Jimmy Bowen, former president of Liberty Records and Capital Records Nashville, felt that many young people were turned off by the negativity of rap in the early 1990s and began listening to other genres of music, including country. He believed that country replaced pop and rap music for many youths during the early 1990s, when country artists like Garth Brooks and Reba McEntire soared in popularity. "I hope rap keeps getting stronger and more violent, because it is sending me [country music] customers!" Bowen said in candid sarcasm (Bowen, 1992).

Wayne Halper, general manager for DreamWorks Records, Nashville, had similar feelings, but he emphasized the role of parents in controlling what music their children listen to. The point he makes is that if parents instill a sense of values in their children, they will distinguish between the fantasy of entertainment and reality. Furthermore, he felt that parents should definitely pay attention to what music their children purchase. Said Halper, who noted that his label is predominately country, "The marketplace should be controlled by parents. I don't have a problem

with lyric warnings on albums. It could even be a good marketing tool [for country music]" (Halper, 1999).

Further, what makes the distribution of rap music to white audiences even stranger is that the music often deals with places and events middle-class white youth have little or no knowledge of. Gangsta rap tends to focus on fairly specific cities and locations, often referred to as the "hood." Even the rappers themselves acknowledge this somewhat schizophrenic state of affairs. For example, on Mos Def's album *Black on Both Sides* is a cut called "Rock n Roll," which contains the line "Elvis Presley ain't got no soul/Bo Diddley is rock 'n' roll." Interestingly, the album was released by a New York company, Rawkus, which is partially owned by white media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who has even deeper connections to rap. The entrepreneur had a stake in the Warren Beatty movie *Bulworth*, about a fictional character who begins rapping following a breakdown. Here was a rich white man taking on the verbal trappings of the ghetto.

THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF RAP

Rap is probably the only genre of music in which the angst of song lyrics is played out off-stage by performers and business executives. There are those who claim the violence in rap music is a deliberate marketing ploy; it not only pits blacks against whites, but also the East Coast against the West Coast, not only in corporate boardrooms but also in the streets:

You don't have to watch many rap videos on MTV to spot the direct challenge of the "Westside" hand signal—index and third finger crossed over to create a "W"—which shows how the mainstream media has been drawn into this running feud. The coastal conflict has famously spilled over into actual violence; no other musical genre has lost so many of its stars to violence, notably in the murders of big names Biggie Smalls and the late Tupac Shakur. (Gibb, 2000, p. 5)

Others are not so circumspect:

Many attributed the two murders, which remain unsolved, to an East Coast/West Coast feud, presumably between Wallace and Combs, owner of New York's Bad Boy Records, and Shakur and Marion "Suge" Knight, owner of Los Angeles' Death Row Records. Few deny that considerable hostility existed between the two camps. . . . "I hadn't realized that despite the calm, there were many people still seething about Tupac's death," says Davey D of KMET.

FM, a popular hip-hop station in Oakland. "Here in the Bay area, kids were actually celebrating Biggie's death." (Muwakkil, 1998, p. 12)

Thus, many people are concerned that white record executives are capitalizing on black rage and thereby trivializing it and profiting from its chaos. Even worse, they are marketing this rage to an audience that has almost no connection to the environment portrayed by the songs and therefore cannot appreciate what the songs are saying. Of course, this situation raises questions about the *purpose* of any given song and whether the listeners' purpose in listening is the same as the artist's purpose in singing or rapping. These questions are not unique to rap music, and in the early days of protest songs there was concern: "Left-wing critics of rock 'n' roll . . . have pointed with horror to teenagers and young adults dancing to civil rights and anti-war songs such as 'Blowin' in the Wind'" (Denisoff, 1972, p. 140).

It must also be noted, though, that rap artists themselves have taken part in what many people consider the American dream of making lots of money. Acts such as Master P, Russell Simmons and Sean "Puff Daddy" Combs are millionaires with their own lines of clothing and restaurants. Roxanne Shante sells soft drinks on television, and Combs has been on the cover of *Fortune*. There is also the indirect financial gain of those involved in subsidiary levels of the industry. Said noted author Nelson George, this money is going directly into black neighborhoods:

Bad Boy (Records) had 20 to 30 [black employees] inside the office in mail rooms, as secretaries and assistants. Street teams plaster the street with fliers and stickers. On the road, stylists, makeup artists and truck drivers. Not all [those jobs] go to black people but a lot of them do. . . .

Master P. employs people. A black woman manages his recording studio. No way that happens if Puffy [Sean Combs, aka Puff Daddy] doesn't exist. He owns a restaurant now—more jobs. Next year a clothing line. Russell Simmons employs people in jobs that wouldn't exist without the music. . . .

There are young black attorneys, black accountants. You notice it more and more. You forget how much money is spilled off by success. (George, quoted by Lewis, 1998, p. E3)

Yet some see gangsta rap as just another form of exploitation of black Americans. Said Stanley Crouch, music critic for the *New Republic*: "The people who are in it are the same kind of people who were in the slave trade. I mean, if Russell Simmons and those same people had been Africans 300 years ago, they would have been selling slaves. And so what

they're doing is they're selling these vile images of black people" (Crouch, 1997).

The equation of black artists, white distributors, and white audiences has become even more confused with what is being called "white rap." Artists like Eminem, Kid Rock, Limp Bizkit, and Korn "have discovered the merits of grafting hip-hop trappings onto rock's power chords" (Dollar, 1999, p. K1). Other white rappers include what is perhaps the original white rap group, Beastie Boys, Everlast (formerly with the Irish American gangsta rap group House of Pain), who do "hip-hop for the coffeehouse crowd" (Dollar, 1999), Eminem (discovered by black rapper Dr. Dre), Warped Tour, and Insane Clown Posse. Said Leslie Farn, program director of WNNX-FM, Atlanta, in an interview with Steve Dollar of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*: "I haven't seen anything like this since the early grunge days when Nirvana came out of nowhere. . . . It's the biggest phenomenon. Limp Bizkit sold 22,000 records in Atlanta in less than three weeks. Its album (*Significant Other*) debuted at No. 1 and stayed for three weeks against mass appeal acts like Ricky Martin" (Dollar, 1999). In fact, some authorities, such as Jim Kerr of *Radio and Records*, see rock's grafting of rap as a major shift in the music.

There's nothing artificial about this. Anyone younger than 24 has pretty much lived their entire conscious life with hip-hop. . . . Rock as a genre has transformed itself and embraced a new point of view by including hip-hop elements. Rock has gone through grunge and the corporate rock of the '80s and punk, but it's all various shades of angry vocals over guitar, bass and drums. You haven't seen a whole lot of stylistic change since the Beatles. Nothing in terms of genre-bending has happened to rock like we're seeing now. (J. Kerr, quoted in Dollar, 1999)

As might be expected, however, black rap artists are cool to the idea that white artists can perform "real" rap. Said Chuck D, with a certain degree of frustration: "I don't know why people keep talking about it. When MTV did 'Yo! MTV Raps' back in the '80s, that right there told us white kids love rap. They didn't put that show on for black kids. So, the white kids tuned in, they've bought into the culture and now people are trying to emulate, do it, incorporate it into their music. What?" (Chuck D, quoted in Dollar, 1999). The questions being raised, however, are far from academic; they affect both the culture and the bottom line. After all, hip-hop and rap ultimately come from an African tradition that white performers cannot possibly internalize. So what happens to the cultural identity of rap when it is appropriated by white performers or affected by white audiences? Are these phenomena adding to the culture or taking something away from it?

At another level, one of the foundational premises of rap is that it is "real," in the sense of a reflection (rather than a projection) of life in predominately black inner-city neighborhoods. Yet, perhaps there are also some unintended consequences to the reality of gangsta rap: For white audiences, the only contact they may have with tough urban life is through this music. Further, if this is the only message they are getting, it is also the only view white youth will have. Thus, in this case, in addition to reflecting a particular viewpoint, the producers will also be projecting that view, however stereotypical it might be, onto the white audience. Thus, "the music's blunt lyrics and cinematic qualities offer a vicarious thrill to the millions of whites who buy it" (Muwakkil, 1998).

However, we could ask a similar question of any African American rap artists who make it to the big time: Are they not disavowing the true roots of rap? And is the cross-pollination from one musical genre to another really anything new? Not according to W. T. Lehman, Jr., of Florida State University:

As soon as whites could observe blacks dancing and singing along the coasts of the new world, they started grabbing those moves, talking and dressing black, and promoting that culture—as the ne plus ultra [highest attainable point] of authenticity. . . . The whole concept of white trash and disdained black forms has been the generative swap meet for Atlantic popular culture since the 1830s—since the onset of the Industrial Revolution. (Lehman, quoted in Dollar, 1999)

CONCLUSION

The Reverend Jesse Jackson spoke what might be a prophecy in 1989 when he told MTV viewers, "Rap music is here to stay, and to see the youth pick up the bits and pieces of life as it is lived, and transform mess into a message, and be able to uplift people, is a phenomenal art form" (Jackson, 1989). He might not be as supportive of rap in the new millennium, however, if lyrics continue to grow more offensive to the general public.

If rap continues to disparage women, the gender that represents over half the popular and the majority of record buyers, will the industry feel a backlash against labels that distribute it? Even some rap artists and urban label executives think that gangsta rap has gone too far. Joseph "Run" Simmons of Run-D.M.C. said, "When N.W.A. started talking about killing prostitutes on 'One Less Bitch,' it got stupid. It ain't funny no more" (Duggan, 1993).

Perhaps labels have begun to listen to women's groups, concerned parents, and legislators: By the year 2000 most labels had a system of internal censorship in place for rap. In an effort to prevent retailers and

radio stations from banning singles or complete albums, labels remix rap recordings to mask certain words or phrases. In order to make Eminem's album *The Marshall Mathers LP* more palatable to the public, his label deleted entire tracks from the album his producer submitted. In addition, the lyrics were "extensively edited—up to 60 times in a single song—to eliminate references to drugs, violence, profanity and hate" (Strauss, 2000). Although most labels have screening committees to recommend changes to rap recordings, few if any executives will admit to self-censoring music.

Will rap continue to grow as a commercially viable genre in the new millennium? If so, debates over whether rap should be an exclusively African American artform will likely continue. If rap continues to dominate album sales, the validity of categories such as "black music" or "urban music" will come under question. If rap becomes the highest-selling genre of music in the United States, and hence the most popular music sold, shouldn't it then be called the new "popular music" or will the industry feel compelled to categorize as "black" any music of predominantly African American origin?

Whatever its category, labels will package, promote, and distribute rap as long as it continues to attract youthful fans. As labels market rap more aggressively, some critics will condemn the industry for profits they will no doubt earn from hip-hop culture. For good or for ill, the thing we know for sure is that rap, and the hip-hop milieu, have made an indelible imprint on American culture.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What moral and cultural limits have been blurred by rap music? By gangsta rap?
2. Can white audiences really "understand" rap and gangsta rap? Why or why not?
3. Several rap and gangsta rap songs have been criticized for their offensive lyrics, yet the songs themselves contain prosocial messages. Can you justify using "dirty" words to promote worthwhile causes?
4. Women seem to buy rap music in spite of the disparaging terms it often uses to describe females. Why do you think females do not turn away from this genre of music? Do you think rap contributes to degrading stereotypes of women in society?

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