The effects of “Gangster Rap” on the African American Identity in the 90s

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A: Plan of Investigation

To what extent did the rise of rap music in America contribute to a negative stigma towards African-American identity in the late twentieth century?

The late twentieth century saw the rise of rap, a new music genre punctuated by its hip-hop beats and rhythmic vocals. Deeply rooted in inner-cities, this genre was heavily criticized for its lighthearted portrayal of crime, sex, and drugs, and as a misrepresentation of black culture. This investigation will cover the perceived negative messages in rap music, their effect on black culture, and the extent of their contributions to the public view of black culture. The purpose of this historical investigation is to analyze to what extent the rise of rap music in the late twentieth century contributed to a negative stigma towards African American identity in America. Research will be done with primary sources, such as an interview with influential rappers and important music from the period, as well as reflective journal entries and articles analyzing the negative effects of rap music on black culture and perception of it.

B: Summary of Evidence

Negative Messages in Rap Music:

* Violence has always been a common theme of rap music, and became increasingly more so in the late twentieth century. By the nineties, studies showed that 60% of popular rap songs had some form of reference to violence. In rap culture, violence was promoted as a sign of economic and social status. (“Changing Images of Violence in Rap Music Lyrics: 1979-1997” Herd, 2009)
* Drugs, while not initially being a huge theme in rap music, became a mainstay in the lyrics of popular rap music. By the late nineties, 70% of the top rap songs had a reference to drugs. Mentioning drugs in lyrics became a key ingredient to success in the rap world. (“New Study Finds Glamorization of Drugs in Rap Music Jumped Dramatically Over Two Decades.” Yang, 2008)
* Gangsta rap depicted rape as an everyday occurence, treating convicted rapists like heroes. Women were depicted as objects, with their only value being in their bodies. (“Niggas with Beatitude” Simmons, McDaniels, and Linden, 1993)

Rap’s Effect on Black Identity and Culture:

* Gangster Rap presents a culture of defiance and resistance. It embraced the American connection between blacks and crime, and presents a society where whites are on top, and blacks can only succeed through crime. This gave blacks a sense of empowerment and identity in American society but promoted crime and alienated honest work. (“’Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary’: Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity.’  Michael Quinn, 1996.”)
* Rap music had significant influence on the actions and words of blacks, and in some cases caused them to commit the crimes and make the mistakes depicted in its lyrics. Rap music was used as an excuse for violent and criminal behavior. (“Gangsta Rap Made me do it.” O’Shea Jackson, 2008)
* From the 1970s to the 1990s black on black violence almost doubled. The probable cause of this was a change in black culture towards messages of violence and delinquency, spearheaded by the negative messages of rap music. (“‘Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary’: Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity.”  Michael Quinn, 1996.

Rap’s reinforcement of negative black stereotypes:

* Rap music encouraged and caused its listeners to act like thugs, especially influencing youth. This hooliganism satisfied stereotypes in America that the black community had fought for years to escape, inhibiting the growth of black identity. (“How Hip-Hop Holds Blacks Back” McWhorter, John H.)
* Reinforcement of black stereotypes in rap music gave America an incorrect look into inner-city life. Rap music restored and reinforced the image of “the nigger” in white households, an archetype of all of the negative stereotypes of African American’s. This image entertained white America and helped to create a negative stigma towards blacks. (“From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The ‘Nigger’ as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment” Kheven Lee Legrone, 2000)
* The criminal undertones in rap music appeal to America’s fear of crime, and causes crime to be associated with blacks and their culture. This association lead to a fear of blacks and said culture, enhancing America’s negative stigma against blacks. (“Tragic Narratives in Popular Culture: Depictions of Homicide in Rap Music.”)

C: Evaluation of Sources

LaGrone, Kheven Lee. “From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The ‘Nigger’ as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment.” *Journal of African American Men*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2000, pp. 117–131.

“From Minstrelsy to Gangsta Rap: The ‘Nigger’ as Commodity for Popular American Entertainment,” was written in 2000 by Kheven Lee Lagrone, a black scholar, for *Journal of African American Men*. During the time of its publication, gangster rap was in its golden age, which inspired Lee Lagrone to reflect on African-Americans in entertainment. Lagrone wrote this journal article to reflect on the stereotyping of African-American’s for entertainment purposes throughout history, discussing the personification and commodification of the African American man for entertainment in different times and ways. This was intended for those studying the racial dynamic between whites and blacks in American entertainment, a field dominated by whites. This source is integral towards understanding American relation with black entertainment in that it highlights the stereotyping of the black man in America that entertainment like rap exemplifies. It claims that rap promotes a negative image of a black man for the purpose of entertainment, definitively answering the question. Lagrone’s claim that this stereotyping in entertainment has occurred throughout history, and not just through gangster rap makes this document unique. This article is limited by Lagrone’s focus on oppression. While partially correct, his lack of consideration of other elements of black and white relation makes his argument one-dimensional.

Quinn, Michael. “‘Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary’: Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity.” *Cultural Critique*, no. 34, 1996, pp. 65–89.

“’Never Shoulda Been Let out the Penitentiary’: Gangsta Rap and the Struggle over Racial Identity” was written in 1996 for *Cultural Critique* by Michael Quinn*.* Writing during gangster rap’s golden age and noticing rap’s criticism for its negative messages, Quinn was inspired to reflect on the cultural significance of these messages. Quinn wrote this article to reflect on the resistance culture that he feels spawned rap music and rap music’s effects on both white and black understanding of African American culture. It was intended for those unsure about whether rap music has been a positive or a negative force in America. This article provides evidence for an answer to the question, prolongedly talking about and citing the mass fear and distrust of blacks that rap music contributed to spawning in American culture. On a broader scale, however, it provides a complex analysis on America’s feelings towards rap music, using statistics and discussing rap music’s effect on American culture. A self-proclaimed “white scholar”, Quinn’s views on rap music, while profound, come across as a little detached from the gritty urban world of rap music because of his background, preventing his argument from fully resonating.

D: Analysis

The monumental rise of “gangsta rap” music in America during the late twentieth century was a significant event in the development of African-American culture and contributed to a large shift in the perceived African-American Identify. This rise was highly controversial, with some claiming it contributed positively to the African American identity, but others claiming that it harmed it. The genre was praised as a form of rebellion against the historical white control of blacks in pop culture. However, it was criticized for its depiction of violence, drugs, and sexism as staples of black culture.

While promoting negative images, rap music and its creators were defended as “born in black militancy” (Legrone, 200), or as a voice of black defiance against white oppression. These negative messages were defended as a defiance to the American norm rather than a promotion of crime. The lyrics “invert a power relation in which whites are on top, and blacks are on the bottom, the latter only being able to succeed illegally” (Quinn, 71). In this way, the messages in gangster rap can be interpreted as not only a cry of defiance, but as a call for help and change as well. These lyrics, when interpreted as the defiant voice of a population appear exponentially more beneficial to African American Identity.

However positively the lyrics are interpreted, their literal meanings still remain the same “violent, nihilistic, lyrics” (McWhorter, 1). As one of the first wholly African-American pop-culture productions, rap music served as America’s glimpse into African-American culture. However, America, then seeing messages of violence and drugs as a result of their one true look into African-American culture, developed a “negative attitude towards African Americans… and perhaps fear of African American men” (Hunicutt, 613). Rap music’s ability to dramatically undercut and build a stigma against African-American identity is indicative of it being a negative effect on said identity.

An argument that can be derived from the information given is that rap music significantly harmed the development of African-American identity in America. As stated above, rap promoted negative images such as violence, sexualization, and drug abuse, which likely lead to a stigma against the culture of African-Americans, and African-Americans themselves. Rap music also contributed to a rise of violence and crime in the late twentieth century. As popular rapper “Ice-Cube”says in one of his hit songs, “I can act like an animal. Ain’t nothing to it. Gangsta rap made me do it. (Jackson Sr., 20). Rap music not only built up a stigma, it also influenced its own fanbase, primarily African-American, to “act like hooligans” (McWhorter, 1). This hooliganism, justified by the provocative lyrics of rap music, was another large factor in the construction of an American stigma against African American identity.

The contradictory argument derived from the given information is that rap music contributed to the development of African-American identity during the late twentieth century in America. As stated above, it was argued that the controversial lyrics of rap music were defiant and part of a “counter-culture” against white dominance of African-Americans in pop-culture. As Michael Quinn asserts in “Never Should’ve Been Let out of the Penitentiary”, “It is possible to argue that Gangsta Rap is a form of resistance, however misguided, to economic and cultural marginalization, empowering black youths” (Quinn, 72). The defiance of rap music can be interpreted as a proclamation of the collective strength of a minority so abused throughout American history. This declaration of strength could be extremely empowering to the black youth, explaining rap’s popularity with that demographic.

E: Conclusion

The rise of gangster rap music in America during the late twentieth century did not have a wholly negative or wholly positive effect on African-American identity, but rather had a partial positive and partial negative effect. The controversial and provocative lyrics of rap music can be interpreted as messages of resistance and empowerment in a historically hostile society. From this interpretation, it can be concluded that these provocative messages are just a means of getting the real message of rap across, one of inspiration and empowerment. However, the lyrics can just as easily be interpreted as messages intended to incite violence and crime in America, harming the American image of the music, its fans, and its creators. For this reason, the lyrics can present a defiant but strong African-American culture, or a violent and hostile African-American culture. Because of the duality of the lyrics and their interpretations, it is not possible to definitively say whether the African-American identity has been harmed or helped by rap music’s rise.

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