

I never really thought my opinion was all that important. Time and experience have proven otherwise.

Here, I will state my opinion in as few words as possible on rap and the direction I see it headed in.

When I was still an undergraduate in college, I heard someone use the phrase “rape culture.” I had no idea what they were talking about, and to be honest, I still don’t know because the phrase itself is too gruesome to look into. However, I realize that rap music, by some artists, in certain tracks, actually does condone rape. It also just so happens to be the case that I’ve been watching a series by an author I’ve grown to appreciate, named Margaret Atwood, that happens to be centered on the problem of rape, and how laws have historically made women out to be property, worth little more than their flesh. It disgusts me.

When I was 16, I discovered, through a close friend of mine, what people call “Underground Hip-hop.” I listened to a bunch of artists... Greenhouse Effect, Pharcyde, KRS-One and a few others... but then, I heard the music by Atmosphere, Brother Ali, and Immortal Technique. These artists I felt were different. The first track that really caught my attention was “Always Coming Back Home to You.” The melody of the song wasn’t like most other raps. That was the first thing I always noticed about music – the sound. Then the lyrics were even better. It was almost like one or more people mapped out their experiences, living a really humble life in Minneapolis... A place I’ve only ever seen through the windows of an airport... or on the news. The hidden track that comes on after the actual song, however, caught me off-guard. Here was a rapper talking about appreciating the place you come from no matter how lame other people say it is. A sense of loyalty and an appreciation for the simplest things in life... the basics; the fundamentals... When I was very young, I’d skip this latter part of the track. But the more I listened to Always Coming Back Home to You, the more I realized this “hidden track” was just a more transparent side to how the artist sees things. Something that could be passed on to a son or daughter to inherit a perspective worth honoring. The love of simplicity.

The other place I found that particular perspective of honoring simple things was a poem by Plato... It opens: “Beauty depends on simplicity – I mean the true simplicity of a rightly and nobly ordered mind and character.”

You see, great minds think alike, and here we have, millennia apart, two artists speaking the same truth. Honor and appreciate the simpler things in life. This was what drew me into hip-hop. Not the mainstream garbage that often spews one hateful statement after the next: focusing on guns, drugs, and misogyny. “The extra strength felt weak” – that line was real to me – more so than any line about twenty fo’s or 44s. Presenting itself to my young mind was a culture that can build on itself, rather than leave a people in ruin. “If I was Santa Claus I’d fight for the cause and wouldn’t expect nothing in return.” That, to me, sounded like the kind of sincerity that exists alongside meaningful purpose. “I’d find a point that rests a couple of feet above your head and figure out how I could try to help you reach it...” That, to me, sounded like community building... like mentorship in a cold world that consumes the young before they learned anything of who they truly are or what potential they have at their disposal... as Chronos would do in the Greek Myths...

Picket Fence, by Brother Ali was another favorite. “The grown folk don’t see it but the babies do...” Brother Ali’s music was always, in my mind, a thing centered on compassion... And how could it not be when this man grew up with countless growing pains. Never met him, but I can’t think of a song where he felt the need to embrace violence. This is very unlike mainstream rap culture where bragging about

guns galore is the first thing on the menu. Cowardly, in a sense, to drive fear into an audience for a career. But this is not what I found in these artists. Ali's song "Damian," centered on a violent moment or two is actually a lesson about non-violence. In this song he describes how a man crosses another in an alley way and pummels him... only to find out that he was attacking, and actually killed, a distant relative. "He looked at the program..." he understood the nature of his mistake. A lesson in patience, felt lyrically.

Similar to this is a song that a friend once asked me about... A song that I only listened to enough to hear the lyrics and then never again. This particular song by Immortal Technique similarly poses a warning about grasping for power at the cost of someone you love. The name of this particular song is something that makes me not want to mention it and the lyrics are even more graphic than the name; but the point is clear... try to make strong ties with people you don't know and it could cost you more than you ever knew you could lose.

"Choose love" is a saying I've heard in response to my own thoughts on influence... Frankly, this was just a matter of influence over a classroom for me, because I never thought my influence would ever become as far-reaching as it has. It's far better to choose love than the kind of power that comes from people who don't know the first thing about you. Love and respect are earned... Fear is manufactured and can also lead to retribution against you. Far better then, if possible, to inspire with love, passion, and sincerity than drive an agenda with fear, which only pushes people apart rather than bring them together.

And on that point is this other song by Immortal Technique that talks about a woman who passes away from a fatal illness. The artist writes about how he wonders why they never had a chance to be close, but in the end learns that it was her compassion for him that kept them apart. Porcelain by Tone Def is another song that deals with love and power. The power the woman has over him, but also the fact that his popularity is all she wanted the person for in the story.

You see, these songs are not like mainstream rap music. There are moral lessons in them and the foundations of a culture.

Yet, while the beginnings are humble and mild, the lyrics transform over time. And, to be fair, there was always a brutal aspect to be found in some songs, even in the earliest recordings. As an adolescent I just dismissed this as a part of rap music... but as I've gotten older and learned more about life, I realize this is a part of the culture as well.

This is, more or less, my opinion on the state of the art. However, the way things are isn't the way they ought to be. Why must there be a violent aspect to a culture that could be used to promote a better way of being? Do these artists not recognize the fact that many people listen to their music and have their worldviews fundamentally transformed by the nature of these lyrics? Why are there songs that involve fear at all? The song Dark-skinned White Girls by Murs has no fear in it at all but is an enjoyable song because it's hip-hop that actually advocates for women while simultaneously advocating for blurring the lines between races. That's a masterpiece in the form of influence.

If one thinks honestly about the notion of music being laced with fear, it becomes apparent that this never used to be the case. Could one imagine an orchestra that intimidates its audience? Or a pianist

threatening to kill someone as a random add-in to the vocals? Or how about Jazz with a dash of “I’mma kill you”? Just doesn’t seem right, does it? But, never fear, rap music is here.

The first rapper I ever listened to was DMX... may he rest in peace. It’s sad to learn that his life was so riddled with drugs. Like invisible bullets that inch through one micrometer a month... it was a matter of time, but no one saw it coming. As a child, how could I know how real his lyrics may have been to him? How could I know not to rap his lines or that there’s something wrong about a child enjoying the violent undertones that frequented his tracks? Or how serious a drug habit he had? A child can’t fathom these things...

By the time I was 16 years old, it would be the first time it occurred to me to seriously harm a person. It’s not a moment I’m proud of, and thankfully, I walked away. But even as I did so, my blood was still boiling... and I was freshly trained in martial arts and other athletics... Arguably at my physical peak, which I’m a far cry from today. I would walk around on a regular basis thinking how to swiftly knock someone unconscious if they crossed me. At this same stage of my life, I said one of the most bizarre things I would ever utter... I looked a close friend in the eye and reasoned with him that it is better to lead by fear than any other way... I don’t remember my exact words, but I was sure of it. He quietly changed my mind. This would be the same friend that would introduce me to underground hip-hop.

And so, you see, the experience comes full circle. Here I am, writing about why musicians shouldn’t lead with fear, when I was the very same one who learned this through the culture of the musicians that I write about. But there remain two sides to this coin: a side of brutality and a side of compassion against brutality.

The mainstream media is just as guilty... Show me an action film that doesn’t make violence look fun. Heaven knows I once believed the best way to live a life is to end it “like a G...” In retrospect, that’s such a childish thought. I would watch those Hollywood films of badass shoot ‘em ups and see how the hero dies, simply not giving a shit about themselves... this would become the archetype that was fed into my young mind. Essentially a “how to not give a shit about yourself” and look cool at the same time. Such foolishness. Yet, the film industry is just as two-sided as what I’ve experienced with underground hip-hop. You will find some instances where compassion shines through and other instances where even self-compassion is an alien concept.

At the end of the day, “the media” simply represents that which people put forth as their art. It thus becomes the imperative of the artists to consider how they channel their influence. They will always have their audience dialed into their art... sometimes that’s a group of people in the thousands, sometimes a group that numbers in the millions... at the end of the day, one must acknowledge that their power to influence is a matter of deep responsibility.

... I never really thought my opinion was all that important. Time and experience have proven otherwise. And I hope that, as artists, members of the media, or however you serve as an influencer – even if that’s just among the handful of people that know you – I hope you acknowledge that you also share this responsibility over catering to the young minds, as well as the older ones.

Nic Chong