

# THE HIP HOP WARS

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What We Talk About When  
We Talk About Hip Hop  
—and Why It Matters

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A Member of the Perseus Books Group  
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# Introduction

*I'd like to say to all the industry people out there that control what we call hip hop, I'd like for people to put more of an effort to make hip hop the culture of music that it was, instead of the culture of violence that it is right now. There's a lot of people that put in a lot of time, you know the break-dancers, the graffiti artists, there's people rapping all over the world. . . . All my life I've been into hip hop, and it should mean more than just somebody standing on the corner selling dope—I mean that may or may not have its place too because it's there, but I'm just saying—I ain't never shot nobody, I ain't never stabbed nobody, I'm forty-five years old and I ain't got no criminal record, you know what I mean? The only thing I ever did was be about my music. So I mean, so, while we're teaching people what it is about life in the ghetto, then we should be teaching people about what it is about life in the ghetto, me trying to grow up and to come up out of the ghetto. And we need everybody's help out there to make that happen.*

—Melle Mel, lead rapper of and main songwriter for the seminal rap group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, in an acceptance speech during the group's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, March 2007

**H**IP HOP IS IN A TERRIBLE CRISIS. Although its overall fortunes have risen sharply, the most commercially promoted and financially successful hip hop—what has dominated mass-media outlets such as television, film, radio, and recording industries for a dozen years or so—has increasingly become a playground for caricatures of black gangstas, pimps, and hoes. Hyper-sexism has increased

dramatically, and homophobia along with distorted, antisocial, self-destructive, and violent portraits of black masculinity have become rap's calling cards. Relying on an ever-narrowing range of images and themes, this commercial juggernaut has played a central role in the near-depletion of what was once a vibrant, diverse, and complex popular genre, wringing it dry by pandering to America's racist and sexist lowest common denominator.

This scenario differs vastly from the wide range of core images, attitudes, and icons that defined hip hop during its earlier years of public visibility. In the 1980s, when rap's commercial value began to develop steam, gangsta rappers were only part of a much larger iconic tapestry. There were many varieties of equally positioned styles of rap—gangsta as well as party, political, afrocentric, and avant-garde, each with multiple substyles as well. However, not only were many styles of rap driven out of the corporate-promoted mainstream, but since the middle to late 1990s, the social, artistic, and political significance of figures like the gangsta and street hustler substantially devolved into apolitical, simple-minded, almost comic stereotypes. Indeed, by the late 1990s, most of the affirming, creative stories and characters that had stood at the defining core of hip hop had been gutted. To use a hip hop metaphor, they were driven underground, buried, and left to be dug up only by the most deeply invested fans and artists.

Gangstas, hustlers, street crimes, and vernacular sexual insults (e.g., calling black women "hoes") were part of hip hop's storytelling long before the record industry really got the hang of promoting rap music. Gangstas and hustlers were not invented out of whole cloth by corporate executives: Prior to the ascendance of corporate mainstream hip hop, these figures were more complex and ambivalent. A few were interesting social critics. Some early West Coast gangsta rappers—N.W.A., and W.C. and the Maad Circle, for example—featured stories that emphasized being trapped by gang life and spoke about why street crime had become a "line of work" in the context of chronic black joblessness. Thwarted desires for safe communities and meaningful work were often embedded in street hustling tales. Even-

tually, though, the occasional featuring of complicated gangstas, hustlers, and hoers gave way to a tidal wave of far more simplistic, disproportionately celebratory, and destructive renderings of these characters. Hip hop has become buried by these figures and "the life" associated with them.

This trend is so significant that if the late Tupac Shakur were a newly signed artist today, I believe he'd likely be considered a socially conscious rapper and thus relegated to the margins of the commercial hip hop field. Tupac (who despite his death in 1996 remains one of hip hop's most visible and highly regarded gangsta rappers) might even be thought of as too political and too "soft." Even as he expressed his well-known commitment to "thug life," his rhymes are perhaps too thoughtful for mainstream "radio friendly" hip hop as it has evolved since his death.

This consolidation and "dumbing down" of hip hop's imagery and storytelling took hold rather quickly in the middle to late 1990s and reached a peak in the early 2000s. The hyper-gangsta-ization of the music and imagery directly parallels hip hop's sales ascendance into the mainstream record and radio industry. In the early to middle 1990s, following the meteoric rise of West Coast hip hop music producer Dr. Dre and of N.W.A., widely considered a seminal gangsta rap group, West Coast gangsta rap solidified and expanded the already well-represented street criminal icons—thug, hustler, gangster, and pimp—in a musically compelling way. This grab bag of street criminal figures soon became the most powerful and, to some, the most "authentic" spokesmen for hip hop and, then, for black youth generally.

For the wider audience in America, which relies on mainstream outlets for learning about and participating in commercially distributed pop culture, hip hop has become a breeding ground for the most explicitly exploitative and increasingly one-dimensional narratives of black ghetto life. The gangsta life and all its attendant violence, criminality, sexual "deviance," and misogyny have, over the last decade especially, stood at the heart of what appeared to be ever-increasing hip hop record sales. Between 1990 and 1998, the Recording Industry

Association of America (RIAA) reported that rap captured, on average, 9–10 percent of music sales in the United States. This figure increased to 12.9 percent in 2000, peaked at 13.8 percent in 2002, and hovered between 12 and 13 percent through 2005. To put the importance of this nearly 40 percent increase in rap/hip hop sales into context, note that during the 2000–2005 period, other genres, including rock, country, and pop, saw decreases in their market percentage. The rise in rap/hip hop was driven primarily by the sale of images and stories of black ghetto life to white youth: According to Mediarmk Research Inc., increasing numbers of whites began buying hip hop at this point. Indeed, between 1995 and 2001, whites comprised 70–75 percent of the hip hop customer base—a figure considered to have remained broadly constant to this day.<sup>1</sup>

I am not suggesting that all commercial hip hop fits this description, nor do I think that there is no meaningful content in commercial hip hop. I am also not suggesting that commercially successful gangsta-style artists such as Jay-Z, Ludacris, 50 Cent, T.I., and Snoop Dogg lack talent. It is, in fact, rappers' lyrical and performative talents and the compelling music that frames their rhymes—supported by heavy corporate promotion—that make this seduction so powerful and disturbing. They and many others whose careers are based on these hip hop images are quite talented in different ways: musically, lyrically, stylistically, and as entrepreneurs. The problems facing commercial hip hop today are not caused by individual rappers alone; if we focus on merely one rapper, one song, or one video for its sexist or gangsta-inspired images we miss the forest for the trees. Rather, this is about the larger and more significant trend that has come to define commercial hip hop as a whole: The trinity of commercial hip hop—the black gangsta, pimp, and ho—has been promoted and accepted to the point where it now dominates the genre's storytelling worldview.

The expanded commercial space of these three street icons has had a profound impact on both the direction of the music and the conversation about hip hop—a conversation that has never been *just*

about hip hop. On the one hand, the increased profitability of the gangsta-pimp-ho trinity has inflamed already riled critics who perceive hip hop as the cause of many social ills; but, on the other, it has encouraged embattled defenders to tout hip hop's organic connection to black youth and to venerate its market successes as examples of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. The hyperbolic and polarized public conversation about hip hop that has emerged over the past decade discourages progressive and nuanced consumption, participation, and critique, thereby contributing to the very crisis that is facing hip hop. Even more important, this conversation has become a powerful vehicle for the channeling of broader public discussion about race, class, and the value of black culture's role in society. Debates about hip hop have become a means for defining poor, young black people and thus for interpreting the context and reasons for their clearly disadvantaged lives. This is what we talk about when we talk about hip hop.

### The State of the Conversation on Hip Hop

The excessive blame leveled at hip hop is astonishing in its refusal to consider the culpability of the larger social and political context. To many hot-headed critics of hip hop, structural forms of deep racism, corporate influences, and the long-term effects of economic, social, and political disempowerment are not meaningfully related to rappers' alienated, angry stories about life in the ghetto; rather, they are seen as “proof” that black behavior creates ghetto conditions. So decades of urban racial discrimination (the reason black ghettos exist in the first place), in every significant arena—housing, education, jobs, social services—in every city with a significant black population, simply disappear from view. In fact, many conservative critics of hip hop refuse to acknowledge that the ghetto is a systematic matrix of racial, spatial, and class discrimination that has defined black city life since the first half of the twentieth century, when the Great Black Migration dramatically reshaped America's cities. For some, hip hop

itself is a black-created problem that promotes unsafe sex and represents sexual amorality, infects “our” culture and society, advocates crime and criminality, and reflects black cultural dysfunction and a “culture of poverty.” As hip hop’s conservative critics would have it, hip hop is primarily responsible for every decline and crisis worldwide except the war in Iraq and global warming.

The defenses are equally jaw-dropping. For some, all expression in commercialized hip hop, despite its heavy manipulation by the record industry, is the unadulterated truth and literal personal experience of fill-in-the-blank rapper; it reflects reality in the ghetto; its lyrics *are the result of poverty itself*.<sup>2</sup> And my favorite, the most aggravating defense of commercial hip hop’s fixation on demeaning black women for sport—“well, there *are* bitches and hoes.” What do fans, artists, and writers mean when they defend an escalating, highly visible, and extensive form of misogyny against black women by claiming that there *are* bitches and hoes? And how have they gotten away with this level of hateful labeling of black women for so long?

The big media outlets that shape this conversation, such as Time/Warner, News Corporation, Bertelsmann, General Electric, and Viacom, do not frame hip hop’s stories in ways that allow for a serious treatment of sexism, racism, corporate power, and the real historical forces that have created ghettos. When well-informed, progressive people do get invited to appear on news and public affairs programs, they wind up being pushed into either “pro” or “con” positions—and as a result, the complexity of what they have to say to one side or the other is reduced. Although the immaturity of “beef” (conflict between rappers for media attention and street credibility) is generally considered a hip hop phenomenon, it actually mirrors much of the larger mainstream media’s approach to issues of conflict and disagreement. Developing a thoughtful, serious, and educated position in this climate is no easy task, since most participants defend or attack the music—and, by extension, young black people—with a fervor usually reserved for religion and patriotism.

## Why We Should Care About Hip Hop

The inability to sustain either a hard-hitting, progressive critique of hip hop’s deep flaws or an appreciation for its extraordinary gifts is a real problem, with potentially serious effects that ripple far beyond the record industry and mass-media corporate balance sheets. We have the opportunity to use the current state of commercial hip hop as a catalyst to think with more care about the terms of cross-racial exchanges and the role of black culture in a mass-mediated world. Indeed, we should be asking larger questions about how hip hop’s commercial trinity of the gangsta, pimp, and ho relates to American culture more generally. But, instead, we have allowed hip hop to be perceived by its steadfast defenders as a whipping boy (unfairly beaten for all things wrong with American society and blamed as a gateway to continued excessive criticisms of black people’s behavior) and charged by its critics as society’s career criminal (responsible for myriad social ills and finally being caught and brought to trial). Not much beyond exhaustion, limited, and one-sided vicious critique, and nearly blind defense is possible in this context. Very little honest and self-reflective vision can emerge from between this rock and hard place.

Why should we care about hip hop and how should we talk about it? Serial killer, whipping boy, whatever, right? It’s just entertainment—it generates good ratings and makes money for rappers and the sputtering record industry, but it doesn’t matter beyond that. Or does it? In fact, it matters a great deal, even for those who don’t listen to or enjoy the music itself. Debates about hip hop stand in for discussion of significant social issues related to race, class, sexism, and black culture. Hip hop’s commercial trinity has become the fuel that propels public criticism of young black people. According to some critics, if we just got rid of hip hop and the bad behavior it supports (so the argument goes), “they’d” all do better in school, and structurally created racism and disadvantage would disappear like vapor. This hyper-behavioralism—an approach that overemphasizes individual action and underestimates the impact of institutionalized

forms of racial and class discrimination—feeds the very systematic discrimination it pretends isn't a factor at all.

The public debates about hip hop have also become a convenient means by which to avoid the larger, more entrenched realities of sexism, homophobia, and gender inequality in U.S. society. By talking about these issues almost exclusively in the context of hip hop, people who wouldn't otherwise dare to talk about sexism, women's rights, homophobia, or the visual and cultural exploitation of women for corporate profit insinuate that hip hop itself is sexist and homophobic and openly criticize it for being so. It's as if black teenagers have smuggled sexism and homophobia into American culture, bringing them in like unauthorized imports.

This conversation about the state of hip hop matters for another reason as well: We have arrived at a landmark moment in modern culture when a solid segment (if not a majority) of an entire generation of African-American youth understands itself as defined primarily by a musical, cultural form. Despite the depth of young black people's love of the blues, jazz, and R&B throughout various periods in the twentieth century, no generation has ever dubbed itself the "R&B generation" or the "jazz generation," thereby tethering its members to all things (good and bad) that might be associated with the music. Yet young people have limited their creative possibilities, as well as their personal identities, to the perimeters established by the genre of hip hop. No black musical form before hip hop—no matter how much it "crossed over" into mainstream American culture—ever attracted the level of corporate attention and mainstream media visibility, control, and intervention that characterizes hip hop today. It is now extremely common for hip hop fans of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, especially black fans, to consider themselves more than fans. They're people who "live and breathe hip hop every day."

This level of single-minded investment, forged in the context of sustained blanket attacks on hip hop music and culture, makes objective critique nearly impossible. Of course, this investment is itself partly a response to the deep level of societal disregard that so many

young, poor minority kids experience. As Jay-Z says in the remixed version of Talib Kweli's "Get By," "Why listen to a system that never listens to me?" For anyone who feels this way about anything (religion, patriotism, revolution, etc.), critical self-reflection is hard to come by. The more under attack one feels, the greater the refusal to render self-critique is likely to be. But such fervor is also the result of market manipulation that fuels exaggerated brand loyalty and confuses it with black radicalism by forging bonds to corporate hip hop icons who appear to be "keeping it real" and representing the 'hood. In turn, the near-blind loyalty of hip hop fans is exploited by those who have pimped hip hop out to the highest bidder. Members of the hip hop generation are now facing the greatest media machinery and most veiled forms of racial, economic, sexual, and gender rhetoric in modern history; they need the sharpest critical tools to survive and thrive.

Another reason this conversation is important is that the perceptions we have about hip hop—what it is, why it is the way it is—have been used as evidence against poor urban black communities themselves. Using hip hop as "proof" of black people's culpability for their circumstances undermines decades of solid and significant research on the larger structural forces that have plagued black urban communities. The legacy of the systemic destruction of working-class and poor African-American communities has reached a tragic new low in the past thirty years.

Since the early 1980s, this history has been rewritten, eclipsed by the idea that black people and their "culture" (a term that is frequently used when "behavior" should be) are the cause of their condition and status. Over the last three decades, the public conversation has decidedly moved toward an easy acceptance of black ghetto existence and the belief that black people themselves are responsible for creating ghettos and for choosing to live in them, thus absolving the most powerful segments of society from any responsibility in the creation and maintenance of them. Those who deny the legacy of systematic racism or refuse to connect the worst of what hip hop expresses to this history and its devastating effects on black

community are leveling unacceptable and racist attacks on black people.

The generalized hostility against hip hop impinges on the interpretation of other visible forms of black youth culture. For instance, black NBA players are tainted as a group for being part of the hip hop generation stylistically, no matter their personal actions. The few who have committed violent or criminal acts “prove” the whole lot of them worthy of attack. In a league that has mostly black players and mostly white fans, this becomes a racially charged (and racially generated) revenue problem. Such group tainting does not occur among white athletes or fans. The National Hockey League, a league that is predominantly white (in terms of both fans and players) and experiences far more incidents of game-related violence (they take timeouts to brawl!) is rarely described as problematically violent. Indeed, no matter how many individual white men get in trouble with the law, white men as a group are not labeled a cultural problem. At a more local level, hip hop gear, while considered tame—even cute—on middle-class white wearers, is seen as threatening on black and brown youth, who can’t afford not to affiliate with hip hop style if they are going to have any generational credibility.

In short, the conversation about hip hop matters a great deal. Our cultural perceptions and associations have been harmful to black working-class and poor youth—the most vulnerable among us. The polarized conversation also provokes the increasing generation gap in the black community—an age gap that, in past eras, was trumped by cross-generational racial solidarity. But I wonder, too, if the effects of corporate consolidation—and of the new generational and genre-segregated market-niche strategies that dismantled the multigenerational and cross-genre formats that defined black radio in the past—have exaggerated, if not manufactured, the development of a contentious generational divide in the black community.

Who is hurt by our misunderstandings of hip hop? Surely, all of American society is negatively affected by both the antagonism leveled against it and the direction that commercial hip hop has taken. If we continue to talk about black people and race generally in near-

parodic terms, our nation will not overcome its racial Achilles’ heel; the American democratic promise, as yet unfulfilled, will end up an irreparable, broken covenant. The current state of conversation about hip hop sets destructive and illiterate terms for cross-racial community building. The people *most* injured by the fraught, hostile, and destructive state of this conversation are those who most need a healthy, honest, vibrant (not sterile and repressed) cultural space: young, poor, and working-class African-American boys and girls, men and women—the generation that comprises the future of the black community. They have the biggest stake in the conversation, and they get the shortest end of the stick in it.

In this climate, young people have few visible and compassionate yet unflinchingly honest places to turn to for a meaningful appreciation and critique of the youth culture in which they are so invested. The attacks on black youth through hip hop maintain economic and racial injustice. Many working-class and poor black young people have come up in black urban communities that have been dismantled by decades-long legacies of policy-driven devastation of such communities. This devastation takes many forms, including urban and federal retreat from affordable housing, undermining of anti-discrimination laws that were designed to end structural racism, police targeting, racially motivated escalations of imprisonment, and reductions in support for what are still mostly segregated and deeply unequal public schools. Very little of this history is common knowledge, and critics avoid serious discussion of these factors, focusing instead on rappers and the ghettos they supposedly represent.

The defenses of hip hop are also destructive. The same media that pump commercial hip hop 24/7 fail to take the time to expose the crucial contexts of post-civil rights era ghetto segregation for hip hop’s development. Rappers and industry moguls who profit enormously from hip hop’s gangsta-pimp-ho trinity defend their empires purportedly in the interests of black youth. The constant excuses made about sexism, violence, and homophobia in hip hop are not just defenses of black people via hip hop; they are hurtful to black people. Corporate media outlets empower these businessmen-rappers, underpromote

the more sophisticated rhymes, and play down the vigorous and well-informed analysis and criticism. Many fans consume lopsided tales of black ghetto life with little knowledge about the historical creation of the ghetto; some think the ghetto equals black culture. These decisions not only dumb down the music but minimize fan knowledge and constrain the conversation as a whole.

The public conversation is both an engine for and a product of the current state of commercial hip hop. Driven by one-dimensional sound bites from the polarized camps—a format designed to perpetuate a meaningless and imbalanced form of “presenting both sides”—this conversation is not only contributing to the demise of hip hop but has also impoverished our ability to talk successfully about race and about the role of popular culture, mass media, and corporate conglomerates in defining—and confining—our creative expressions.

Versions of what has happened to hip hop that include both the ways that hip hop reflects black and brown lived experience and creativity *and* represents market and racial manipulation have been, thus far, destined for media obscurity. It is as if the real sport of our conversation about hip hop is mutual denial and hostile engagement. Intelligent, nuanced dialogue has been drowned out by the simple-minded sound bites that sustain this antagonistic divide.

Advocates and supportive critics have made a valiant effort to participate in this conversation in complex, subtle, and meaningful ways. Many writers, journalists, poets, scholars, and activists have made important contributions to the popular, literary, and scholarly treatments of hip hop. Michael Eric Dyson, Davey D, bell hooks, Mark Anthony Neal, Patricia Hill-Collins, Cornel West, Adam Mansbach, Jeff Chang, Dream Hampton, Scott Poulson-Bryant, Oliver Wang, Nelson George, Gwendolyn Pough, Imani Perry, Jeffery Ogbar, Paul Porter, Greg Tate, Marcyliena Morgan, Lisa Fager Bediako, Angela Ards, Kevin Powell, George Lipsitz, Robin Kelley, Bakari Kitwana, Joan Morgan, and Kelefa Sanneh have all offered insightful reflections on and analyses of hip hop in their respective fields. Several others have contributed blogs and other web commen-

taries that try to sort through the current state of hip hop in a productive way. But these writers and scholars are not being relied upon to frame the mainstream conversation.

The terms of this conversation need our direct attention because they keep black youth and progressive thinkers and activists locked into one-sided positions and futile battle. If we fail to address its contradictions, denials, and omissions, we will become subjected to and defined by the limits of the conversation rather than proactive participants in shaping it. I want to delineate the key features—the broadest strokes—of this conversation, since the microstruggles in which hip hop gets embroiled usually cover up the larger terms that perpetuate tiresome and disabling conflict.

This conversation is an integral part of the current state of commercial hip hop. But to properly situate the conversation, we need to account for the larger forces driving the changes in hip hop. Why has the black gangsta-pimp-ho trinity been the vehicle for hip hop's greatest sales and highest market status? Why did a substyle based on hustling, crime, sexual domination, and drug dealing become rap's cultural and economic calling card and thus the key icon for the hip hop generation? Familiar answers like industry manipulation and racism contain important truths but gloss over five key factors that have worked synergistically to create these toxic conditions:

- New technologies and new music markets
- Massive corporate consolidation
- Expansion of illicit street economies
- America's post-civil rights appetite for racially stereotyped entertainment
- Violence and sexually explicit misogyny as “valued” cultural products

Together, these five factors explain the complicated forces that have grossly distorted the legacy of hip hop while also contributing to the conversation about it. Whereas the final three are discussed in the context of the various debates about hip hop that I examine in the



chapters that follow, the first two—the role of new technologies and new music markets and the unprecedented impact of massive corporate consolidation—have a systemic effect on the entire field of discussion, and so their inclusion in this introduction is warranted. For now, let us simply note that the debates that have played out in the hip hop wars mask the full depth of the corporate and economic circumstances that redirected commercial hip hop, with an especially dramatic turn taken in the middle to late 1990s.

### New Technologies, New Music Markets

Hip hop came of age at the beginning of a new technological revolution. After the late 1970s, when hip hop emerged onto the public scene, all forms of media technology exponentially expanded. Network television met stiff competition as cable televisions' hundreds of niche market-driven cable stations increased market share, especially as music became a predominantly visual medium (MTV and BET served as major anchors for this shift). Our listening format changed from records to CDs and computer technology. Advanced recording and digital technology became widely accessible to independent artists, producers, and consumers, changing the way music was made, purchased, consumed, shared, distributed, and stolen. Today, cell phones are MP3 players, with downloads and ringtones representing yet another expansion of the music market. These changes have made room for additional independent record labels and more local music production and distribution (at less cost and greater profits), thereby sustaining genres that might have been impossible to maintain solely with local support before this revolution took place.

Hip hop, like nearly all black musical forms that preceded it, began as a commercially marginal music that was subjected to segregated treatment and underfunding. It was characterized by smaller production and promotion budgets along with the assumption that the rap audience would be a youthful segment of African-Americans—an al-

ready proportionately small consumer market—and an even smaller percentage of whites and other ethnic groups. During the 1980s, when rap artists were developing commercial appeal, traditional but highly irregular sales measures were still being used—measures that especially underrepresented fan interest in unconventional music. As *New York Times* writer Neil Strauss described it: “Until 1991 the pop music charts were notoriously unreliable. Paying off record store employees with free albums, concert tickets, and even vacations and washing machines was the standard music-business method of manipulating record sales figures. Even the *Billboard* magazine charts, considered the most prestigious in the business, were compiled from the store managers' oral reports, which were inaccurate to begin with and easily swayed.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1991, Soundscan, a sales measurement system that tracks album purchases at their point of sale, was introduced. Although new methods of sales figure manipulation were eventually developed by record industry sales executives, new and explosive information emerged with the advent of Soundscan: Two renegade genres, hard rock and rap, came in at the top of the charts, showing the greatest actual sales and outstripping mainstream pop acts. Two weeks after the advent of Soundscan, Paula Abdul's “Spellbound” was “replaced at the top by the Los Angeles rap group N.W.A.'s ‘Efil4zaggin’,” which had appeared on the chart at No. 2 the previous week.”<sup>4</sup>

Soundscan initiated a dramatic reconsideration of what the record industry believed mainstream youth wanted to purchase; the results indicated that large numbers of young white consumers (whose consumption drove pop chart positions) wanted to hear gangsta-oriented rap music and would support it heartily. This encouraged an increase in record label investment in hip hop production, distribution, and promotion on radio, especially for gangsta rap. Radio was considered the big breakthrough for hard-edged rap. Veteran radio and music programmer Glen Ford—co-owner and (from 1987 to 1994) host of *Rap It Up*, the first nationally syndicated radio hip hop music program—draws crucial connections between

the new data about consumption and the new corporate strategy for promoting gangsta rap:

By 1990, the major labels were preparing to swallow the independent labels that had birthed commercial hip hop, which had evolved into a wondrous mix of party, political and “street”-aggressive subsets. One of the corporate labels (I can’t remember which) conducted a study that shocked the industry: The most “active” consumers of Hip Hop, they discovered, were “tweens,” the demographic slice between the ages of 11 and 13. The numbers were unprecedented. Even in the early years of Black radio, R&B music’s most “active” consumers were at least two or three years older than “tweens.” It didn’t take a roomful of PhDs in human development science to grasp the ramifications of the data. Early and pre-adolescents of both genders are sexual-socially undeveloped—uncertain and afraid of the other gender. Tweens revel in honing their newfound skills in profanity; they love to curse. Males, especially, act out their anxieties about females through aggression and derision. This is the cohort for which the major labels would package their hip hop products. Commercial Gangsta Rap was born—a sub-genre that would lock a whole generation in perpetual arrested social development.<sup>5</sup>

In 1993, Bill Stephney, a well-respected musician, producer, and promoter known for his ground-breaking work with political rap group Public Enemy, saw older teens being targeted as well. “It’s a function of the culture,” Stephney noted in connection with industry decisions that had driven hard rap’s triumph over the FM airwaves. “You now have the prime 18-to 24-year-old demographic people who grew up only on rap music, whether they be black, Latino or white. Radio has decided they want to target this generation, and that rap music is the music they’re gonna program. . . . The radio stations have had to play it; advertisers have had to deal with it; and corporate America has understood it.”<sup>6</sup> In the context of new technologies and the expansion of media markets, this new interest in gangsta rap as a

mainstream profit stream moved swiftly into a multitude of markets and related products.

### Massive Corporate Consolidation

During this same period, the consolidation of mass-media industries, aided by ongoing government deregulation, began to pick up steam. Regulations designed to prevent monopolization were overturned and large-scale consolidation in and across various media industries took place in a very short period of time. Consolidation within a given industry (when one or two record companies merge) gave way to single corporations with dominant holdings in all mass media, from newspapers, television, and musical venues to publishing houses, movies, magazines, and radio stations. As late as the early 1980s, these industries operated relatively independent of one another and encompassed many internally competitive companies. Media scholar Ben Bagdikian put it like this:

In 1983, the men and women who headed the fifty mass media corporations that dominated American audiences could have fit comfortably in a modest ballroom. The people heading the twenty dominant newspaper chains probably would form one conversational cluster to complain about newsprint prices . . . the broadcast network people in another . . . etc. By 2003, five men controlled all these media once run by the fifty corporations of twenty years earlier. These five, owners of additional digital corporations, could fit in a generous phone booth.<sup>7</sup>

Five conglomerates—Time/Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation, and Bertelsmann (of Germany)—now control the vast majority of the media industry in the United States. (General Electric is a close sixth.) Viacom, for example, owns MTV, VHI, and BET, along with CBS radio, which operates 140 radio stations in large radio markets. The four biggest music conglomerates (each made up of many

record companies) are Warner Music, EMI, Sony/BMG, and Universal Music Group. Together they control about 70 percent of the music market worldwide and about 80 percent of the music market in America. A multitude of artists have contracts with the companies that fall within these vast media categories. While rappers seem to be on a wide variety of labels and in different and competing camps and groups of subaffiliated artists, in fact many artists labor underneath one large corporate umbrella. For example, Warner Music (which falls under Time Warner) has more than forty music labels including Warner Brothers (where rappers such as Crime Mob, E-40, Talib Kweli, and Lil' Flip are signed); Atlantic (where rappers such as Flo Rida, Webbie, Twista, Trick Daddy, Plies, Diddy, and T.I. are signed), Elektra, London-Sire, Bad Boy, and Rhino Records, to name just a few. Even a high-profile "beef" such as the one between rappers The Game and 50 Cent looks somewhat tamer when one considers that The Game, whose music is distributed by Geffen, and 50 Cent, whose music is distributed by Interscope, are both included under the Universal Music Group parent company.<sup>8</sup>

Mass-media consolidation was rendered even more profound for the record industry after the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Although it enabled dramatic consolidation of ownership within the radio industry, the music industry's key promotional and sales-generating venue, the Telecommunications Act was described by many of its supporters as a telephone industry bill designed to allow Baby Bell phone companies to get into long-distance service, spur competition, and deregulate cable rates. Included in this sweeping act, though, was a nearly buried provision that lifted all ownership caps for radio-station broadcasters across the nation and permitted companies to operate as many as eight stations in the largest markets. Previously, broadcasters could own only forty stations nationwide, and only two in a given market. But now, with such limited restrictions, wealthy and powerfully connected investors were able to snap up a dizzying number of radio stations in an incredibly short period of time. By the end of 1996, ownership of 2,157 radio stations had changed hands. And as of 2001, 10,000 radio transactions worth approximately \$100 billion had taken place.<sup>9</sup>

Until this point, a relatively large network of small- to medium-sized local radio-station owners were accountable to the public and its local musical, cultural, religious, newscasting, community, and political needs. Now, our public airwaves are profoundly dominated by a small number of very large national and international corporations. According to a study published by the Future of Music Coalition, "Ten parent companies dominate the radio spectrum, radio listenership and radio revenues. . . . Together these ten parent companies control two-thirds of both listeners and revenue nationwide." Clear Channel is the mightiest of them all, owning a dramatic 1,240 radio stations nationwide, thirty times more than previous congressional regulation allowed. With more than 100 million listeners, Clear Channel reaches over one-third of the U.S. population.<sup>10</sup>

This consolidation has affected radio programming in many ways, including a higher consolidation of playlists within and across formats, higher levels of repetition of record industry-chosen songs, homogenized and in some cases automated programming, and the near erasure of local, non-record-industry-sponsored artists. Large corporations profit from maintaining high levels of efficiency and consistency, which help them maintain the widest possible market share. Both efficiency and consistency of product encourage cuts in local staffing as well as in idiosyncratic programming such as local acts and news that cannot be packaged and rebroadcast elsewhere. Commercially established major-label acts, because of their visibility and notoriety, are easily packaged for a national audience and easily transportable across regions. Thus they dominate their genre-specific playlists across the country.

Officially speaking, record stores are the primary sales venue for recorded music; in reality, radio stations and music video programs provide the bulk of music promotion and sales. Radio and music video airplay are at the heart of artist visibility and record industry profits. Record companies try to convince owners and radio and music video program directors to play their artists' music in elaborate and ever-evolving ways. Consolidation of radio-station ownership focused and consolidated the record industry's "promotional" contracts

with independent promoters, who do the radio-and television-station schmoozing and bribing on behalf of the record companies to encourage them to add their clients' songs to the stations' playlists. Instead of having to develop promotional relationships with hundreds of independent program directors, now record companies can negotiate with fewer corporate program directors who determine the playlists for dozens of stations around the country.

Industry-wide consolidation had a distinctive impact on black radio, and this in turn dramatically influenced the direction of commercial hip hop. Counting just those formats that emphasize hip hop/contemporary R&B (sometimes dubbed "hot urban" stations, with a target demographic of 12- to 24-year-olds), we find that Clear Channel, Radio One, and Emmis Radio have an astounding number of major urban markets covered. "Urban" is a euphemism for black music genres and markets. The stations listed below represent the depth of corporate consolidation of stations dedicated to playing hip hop on urban radio stations. Keep in mind that these lists comprise only the names of "hot urban"/hip hop-focused stations; other black urban music formats such as Rhythmic Adult Contemporary (with a target demographic of 18- to 34-year-olds) and Urban Adult Contemporary (with a target demographic of 29- to 45-year-olds) feature some hip hop but much more soul and R&B. Many of these other formatted stations are controlled by the same key players, however.

Clear Channel owns stations with the "hot urban"/hip hop and R&B format in nearly all major cities, many with large black populations, including Boston (94.5 WJMN), Chicago (107.5 WGCI), Columbus (98.3 WBFA), Detroit (98 WJLB), Memphis (97 WHRK), New Orleans (93.3 WQUE), New York (105.1 WWPR), Norfolk/Virginia Beach (102.9 WOWI), Oakland/San Francisco (106 KMEL), Philadelphia (99 WUSL), and Richmond (106.5 WBTJ). Emmis Radio owns 106 KPWR in Los Angeles and 97 WQHT in New York.

Radio One, the other major player in the hip hop radio market, is black owned and controls at least fifty-three urban music stations in sixteen markets, fourteen of which are hip hop focused. Radio One founder Catherine Hughes, who began as the owner of a small black

radio station, carried out the legacy of black radio as a local community service operation—one among many of her roles and capacities. Despite this legacy, Radio One—given its need to remain profitable in the context of massive consolidation—has supported the record industry's drive to promote the consolidation of programming that includes destructive caricatures of black people. Radio One owns major hip hop stations in Atlanta (107.9 WHAT), Baltimore (92.3 WERQ), Cincinnati (101.1 WIZF), Cleveland (107.9 WENZ), Columbus (107.5 WCKX), Dallas (97.9 KBFB), Detroit (102.7 WHTD), Houston (97.9 KBXX), Indianapolis (96.3 WHHH), Philadelphia (100.3 (WPHI), Raleigh-Durham, NC (97.5 (WQOK), Richmond (92.1 WCDX), St Louis (104.1 WHHL), and Washington, D.C. (93.9 WKYS).

Consolidation had an especially negative impact on black radio news programming that went beyond the drastic reduction of news on all radio stations. Historically, black radio news programs played a powerful role in gathering and disseminating information about black social-justice issues that were largely omitted from other radio program formats. Such programs comprised a vital communication network for the civil rights movement, for example. Bruce Dixon, managing editor of the *Black Agenda Report*, describes the historical role of black radio as "a transmitter and conveyor, as the very circulatory system of public consciousness in African-American communities." The deep reductions in local news programming and journalism felt nationwide in commercial radio have cut into a crucial form of black social activism not easily replaced by other news media. Indeed, it could be argued that the absence of local news reports on such activism, coupled with the expansion of destructive and simple-minded fare, has negatively affected African-American public consciousness—specifically, by reducing black community knowledge about crucial issues.<sup>11</sup>

The consolidation of radio-station ownership not only raised the stakes for getting radio stations to play record companies' designated songs; it also resulted in greater airplay on a wider network of stations. The history of payola—paying to get your song played on the

radio—is long and storied. The refusal of most people in the industry to publicly admit to it has rendered payola a shadowy but still powerful force, plied in sophisticated ways to evade payola-inspired laws. It is a crime for a radio-station employee to accept any sort of payment to play a song unless the radio station informs listeners about the exchange. Thus, record companies' direct method of paying for airplay has been replaced by the indirect method of payoff. Independent promotion firms (called "indies") are hired by record companies to "do promotion" at radio stations. As reporter Eric Boehlert explains: "In exchange for paying the station an annual promotion budget (\$100,000 for a medium size market) the indie becomes the station's exclusive indie and gets paid by the record companies every time that station adds a new song. (Critics say it's nothing more than a sanitized quid pro quo arrangement—station adds a song, indie gets paid.)"<sup>12</sup>

In the case of urban music, considered by some the wild west of an industry widely perceived as corrupt and volatile, the money is less likely to go toward the radio's budget than to end up in the program director's hands—either as cash or in some other form of gifting. This arrangement takes place in both radio and music video programming, despite public denials from corporate executives. Reports that the practice is prevalent have been made by many industry insiders, nearly all of whom want to remain anonymous. In 2001, Eric Boehlert asked an urban industry insider whether payoff-taking is widespread. The latter replied: "What do you mean 'widespread'? It's all the [urban] stations everywhere."<sup>13</sup>

Paul Porter—a former radio and BET video programmer who, with Lisa Fager Bediako, cofounded Industry Ears, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, and independent organization that focuses on the impact of media on communities of color and children—has spoken openly about how payola works both at radio stations and at music video stations like BET:

During my first week as program director at BET, I set up the playlist, deciding which videos would be played and how often. I cut

the playlist from four hundred titles to a mere eighty because they had been playing any videos a record company sent over. Some industry executives were elated because their videos got more airplay; the others were furious. And if you were a record label executive, you needed to make sure I was happy. Almost everybody in this industry takes money. If they have the power to put a song on the radio or a video on television, they've been offered money to do it—and they've taken it. Maybe it's only been once or twice. But they've done it.<sup>14</sup>

Porter admits to taking cash payments for adding songs and videos (which was standard operating procedure). He also reveals how the high cost of music videos raised sales expectations and thus expanded payoffs:

Videos became so expensive. I just started noticing all the pressure when it came to adding videos, everybody wanted to be on BET since MTV wasn't playing anything black in those days. It started small, with sending you and your girl to Miami for the weekend first class, nice hotels, tickets to Knicks playoff games, offers to big ticket concerts in Europe. Then it just became money, flat-out straight money. I went to work in New York for two years and when I came back to BET in '99 as program director, the second week I was there I was staying in Hotel George and I got a call from the promoter who said, "Hey man, I'm sending you this package," it was for Arista records, right, and I'm like "cool," I've never met the guy blah blah blah—I got a FedEx on Saturday, I got fifteen grand! In an envelope!<sup>15</sup>

In this era of massive corporate mergers, corrupt record industry promotional methods in collusion with radio stations are empowered and consolidated while independent black local musical culture and radio are subsumed or dismantled. Commercial hip hop is driven by this Byzantine system; gangstas, pimps, and hoes are products that promotional firms, working through record companies for corporate conglomerates, placed in high rotation.

While the swift consolidation and hyper-marketing of the hip hop trinity haven't entirely killed off more diverse portrayals, they have substantially reduced their space and their value. As a result, such portrayals are now harder to see, less commercially viable, and less associated with prestige and coolness. Veteran "conscious rapper" Paris was quoted as saying: "*What* underground? Do you know how much good material is marginalized because it doesn't fit white corporate America's ideals of acceptability? Independents can't get radio or video play anymore, at least not through commercial outlets, and most listeners don't acknowledge material that they don't see or hear regularly on the radio or on T.V."<sup>16</sup>

Throughout *The Hip Hop Wars*, when I use the phrase "commercial hip hop," I am not referring to any artist signed to a record company. In this market environment, nearly all artists who want to survive have to sign up to one label or another. "Commercial hip hop," then, refers to the heavy promotion of gangstas, pimps, and hoes churned out for mainstream consumption of hip hop. Powerful corporate interests that dominate radio, television, record production, magazines, and all other related hip hop promotional venues are choosing to support and promote negative images above all others—all the while pretending that they are just conduits of existing conditions, and making excuses about these images being "reality."

Challenges that emphasize the role of corporate power are on the rise. In the face of sustained protests and opposition by individuals and interest groups such as Al Sharpton, the Enough Is Enough campaign, Spelman alum and Feminist Majority member Moya Bailey, and Industry Ears, mass-media executives have remained remarkably silent. In May 2007 Marcus Franklin reported in *USA Today* that Universal chairman Doug Morris and president Zach Horowitz declined repeated requests to discuss the issue, as did Warner chairman and chief executive Edgar Bronfman, Sony chairman Andrew Lack, chief executive Rolph Schmidt-Holtz, and EMI Group CEO Eric Nicoli.<sup>17</sup>

Cowardly silence aside, these executives could not have transformed commercial hip hop into a playground for destructive street

icons alone. Clearly, the corporate takeover of commercial hip hop has also been facilitated, directly or indirectly, by artists (especially those who have become moguls and entrepreneurs) who gleefully rap about guns and bitches, liberal and conservative critics and academics, and journalists who uncritically profile these artists and hip hop fans of all races, classes, and genders. This shift was not inevitable; it was *allowed* to happen. We must be more honest in thinking about how black ghetto gangsta-based sales are the *result* of marketing manipulation and the *reflection* not only of specific realities in our poorest black urban communities but also of the *exploitation* of already-imbedded racist fears about black people.

"Mainstream" white America, black youth, black moguls (existing and aspiring), and big mass-media corporations together created hip hop's tragic trinity, the black gangsta, pimp, and ho—the cash cow that drove the big mainstream crossover for hip hop. Unless we deal with this part of the equation and see the dynamic as both new and very old—unless we acknowledge that racialized and sexualized fantasies and the money they generate for corporate mass media helped elevate this trinity in hip hop—we'll be back here again in no time, to a different black beat.

In the following chapters, readers will find the Hip Hop Top Ten: the top-ten arguments about hip hop, five from each side of the polarized debate. One way or another, the public debates about hip hop always come back to these ten issues. In each chapter, I will explore one of these favorite claims against and defenses of hip hop, challenging excesses, myths, denials, and manipulations as well as identifying the elements of truth that each argument contains.

### *Hip Hop's Critics*

1. Hip Hop Causes Violence
2. Hip Hop Reflects Black Dysfunctional Ghetto Culture
3. Hip Hop Hurts Black People
4. Hip Hop Is Destroying America's Values
5. Hip Hop Demeans Women

## *Hip Hop's Defenders*

6. Just Keeping It Real
7. Hip Hop Is Not Responsible for Sexism
8. "There Are Bitches and Hoes"
9. We're Not Role Models
10. Nobody Talks About the Positive in Hip Hop

There are two kinds of traps set by these popular, polarized, and partially true positions. I've already talked about their lack of complexity. But there is another trap: the hidden mutual denials on opposing sides of the debate. Indeed, the fact that critics and defenders share many underlying assumptions about hip hop only mires us more deeply within this conversation. In Chapter 11, I explore these mutual denials and discuss how they work to mask underlying attitudes shared by both sides. They direct our attention away from the ugly truths about ghetto fantasies and corporate influences, but also away from the kinds of progressive solutions that could nourish hip hop, open up opportunities for poor youth, and contribute to affirming multiracial vision.

Extraordinary creativity and possibility continue to come up through the narrow spaces that still remain. Not only do some artists find lyrically creative and community-affirming ways to make well-worn stories about street life seem renewed, but many brilliant artists and local community activists continue to write and perform rich, dynamic stories and trenchant political commentary, the likes of which listeners almost never hear on commercial radio. I will identify these marginalized but crucial artists and activists in Chapter 12. Among them are filmmaker Byron Hurt, director of the extraordinary film *Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, who challenges fans as well as hip hop artists and their corporate representatives in powerful and progressive ways; Raquel Cepeda, whose fascinating film *Bling: A Planet Rock* connects U.S. consumption of diamonds to exploitation and violence and poverty in Sierra Leone; and rappers Lupe Fiasco and Jean Grae, whose music is funky, lyrically sophisticated, vibrant,

and progressive. These filmmakers and artists are rarely promoted. They are given little airtime in mainstream media, and thus many readers might think they simply don't exist, might believe that the mainstream corporate rappers, producers, and promoters who support and excuse hip hop's most destructive elements are all there is to hip hop.

Hurt, Cepeda, Fiasco, Grae, and many others are part of the solution because they are developing hip hop generation-based progressive terms for the conversation about hip hop and encouraging community-affirming terms of creativity. Equally important, they are finding ways to critique hip hop without bashing the entire genre, to support hip hop without nourishing sexist, homophobic, or racist ideas or promoting economic exploitation of the communities from which hip hop comes.

Finally, if my point about our being trapped in the false oppositions sustained by our polarized conversation on hip hop has any value, it will generate some version of the following questions: What do we do next? How do we—those who have progressive visions and appreciate hip hop's gifts—participate, judge, critique, reject, and support hip hop? How can we help hip hop's youngest fans become conscious of what they are being fed and of its impact on them and their communities? How can we change the conversation and the terms of play in hip hop itself? Which position should we take up vis-à-vis hip hop, and on what should it be based?

To answer these questions, I conclude with six ideas for guiding progressive hip hop creativity and participation. So many of us are caught between rejecting hip hop and embracing it, while turning a blind eye to what has become the genre's greatest profit engines. The terms of embrace and rejection we often settle on are not clear, nor do they help us shape a progressive vision that can transform what we have now into what we might want to see in the future.

These ideas represent community-inspired standards marked by a balanced, loving, socially and politically progressive vision of creativity and black public thought, action, and reaction. Developing this vision isn't a repression of anger or sexuality or of artists telling their

truths. On the contrary, it is a vehicle for encouraging creativity that does not revolve around hurling insults and perpetuating social injustices. Countless times, in these hip hop wars, hip hop media mogul Russell Simmons has defended the right of artists to “speak from their hearts,” to tell their own truths. But do they tell all their truths in hip hop? And to what ends, to serve whom? Surely, no one wants artists to speak from a false place, but the heart is not a predetermined place: It is a cultivated one.

Communities have always set limits on the depths of self-destructive iconography, language, and action that will be allowed. This isn't a matter of invoking police or government action. It is about taking cultural control of ourselves in a society that has long been involved in the destruction of black self-love, dignity, and community survival. Operating in the larger progressive interests of the black community—and society at large—is the aim. But to fulfill this aim, we have to consolidate and illuminate the actions of those who are working toward community-sustaining goals and promote the key principles about how self-expression can be cutting-edge, angry, loving, honest, sexy, meaningful, and *empowering*, no matter the subject. Black music has always been a central part of this affirming, truth-telling process, but in this so-called post-civil rights era, it is up against new pressures and requires new strategies.

We cannot truly deal with what is wrong in hip hop without facing the broader cultures of violence, sexism, and racism that deeply inform hip hop, motivating the sales associated with these images. Yet, those of us who fight for gender, sexual, racial, and class justice also can't *defend* the orgy of thug life we're being fed simply because “sexism and violence are everywhere” or because corporations are largely responsible for peddling it. We can explain and contextualize why hip hop seems to carry more of this burden, but we can't defend it. Even if sexism and violence are everywhere (and, sadly, they are), what I care most about is not proving that hip hop did or did not invent sexism, or the gangsta figure, bitch, ho, thug, or pimp, but showing how the excessive and seductive portrayal of these images among

black popular hip hop artists is negatively affecting the music and the very people whose generational sound is represented by hip hop.

The destructive forms of black, racist-inspired hyper-masculinity for which commercial hip hop has become known make profound sense given the alchemy of race, class, and gender in U.S. society. But we shouldn't sit idly by or celebrate the fixation with the black pimp, his ornate pimp cup, and the culture of sexual, economic, and gender exploitation for which this persona stands. Understanding and explaining are not the same as justifying and celebrating, and this is the crucial distinction we must make if we stand a fighting chance in this perpetual storm. The former—understanding and explaining—are an integral part of solving the problems with hip hop; the latter—justifying and celebrating—are lazy, reactionary, dangerous, and lacking in progressive political courage. Yes, hip hop's excesses will continue to be used as a scapegoat; but we must develop our own progressive critique, not just stand around defending utter insanity because our enemies attack it. The mere fact that our enemies attack something we do does not make our actions worthy of defense.

We must fight for a progressive, social justice-inspired, culturally nuanced take on hip hop—a vision that rejects the morally hyper-conservative agenda and the “whatever sells works for me” brand of hustlers' neo-minstrelsy that have become so lucrative and accessible for the youth in poor black communities today. *The Hip Hop Wars* is a sometimes polemical, always passionate assessment of where we are, what's wrong with the conversation we are having about hip hop, why it matters, and how to fix it. Too many people on both sides of this debate seem to have lost their collective minds, taking a grain of truth and using it to starve a nation of millions.

I hope this book will help galvanize progressive conversation and action among the thousands of current and aspiring artists, fans, parents, teachers, and cultural workers—black, white, Latino, Asian, young and old, of all backgrounds, from all places and spaces. I am even hoping that various industry workers and record and television



executives will read this book, see themselves as part of the solution, and work harder to develop community-enabling ways to stay in business. This book is for everyone who feels uneasy about commercial hip hop—some who know that something is really wrong but can't name it; others who are working to make hip hop the kind of cultural nourishment it can be but are getting very little help to fix it; and still others who remain sidelined, worried that jumping into the fray means being forced to take impossible sides in an absurdly polarized battle.