The Success Of Rap Essay, Research Paper

The Success of Rap:

Possible Only With African American and Caucasian Involvement.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of rap and hip-hop is created by African Americans, the success of this extremely popular type of music is directly linked to the involvement of white people in the industry. As ironic as it is, rap music is fueled by white consumers, and in all reality relies on them to sustain its profitability continue to expand. Where would rappers today be without seventy percent of their record sales, bought by white people? Those who at one point were rebelling against white people (the government, corporate America) through protest rap can give thanks directly to those oppressors (white people) in general for their success in the music industry. Furthermore, the cooperation between the beat makers and the rap star producers has allowed big record companies to benefit from this booming section of the recording industry.

Support by those you oppose. This can be seen as the basic summary of white consumption of rap and hip-hop, which really began to skyrocket with the group Public Enemy. An explanation for this great Caucasian support of early rap is rebellion. The buying of rap by white people, specifically teenagers, was and is seen as rebelling against parental figures and mainstream society (rap is becoming more mainstream so maybe this aspect doesn t hold true so much anymore). While being completely rebellious through buying and listening to rap, many probably did not realize that much of the music is anti-white. A friend of mine recently told me during a conversation we had about Public Enemy that, yeah, I was a huge PE fan, I listened to them all the time; but I cut down when I realized that they used extremely anti-white lyrics! This early protest rap did not contain much support of white America, but was supported by their teenage offspring. This rap seen through the eyes of white America back then can be seen (not necessarily accurately) in a spoof on protest rap in Howard Stern s movie Private Parts. Stern says, posing as a black weatherman, kill, kill, kill, the white man. This rap was more or less eaten up by those rebellious white teenagers to a certain extent, which tried to identify or feel sympathy for the rappers and rebel. Did they know that they were buying anti-white music (in such cases as Public Enemy)? That didn t matter, more importantly: did they care that it was anti-white? No, they were excited about being rebellious and consequently listened and supported the music.

Specifically regarding the monetary aspect of making and selling rap, white people made rappers rich. As seen in a study briefly summarized in a book by Tricia Rose, blacks share albums and make copies of them instead of buying individual ones at the store. It is thought that black people have a higher pass-along rate of music and other mediums . It has been estimated that the sharing of the magazine The Source (a publication pertaining to rap and hip-hop with a predominantly black audience) resulted in seeing a pass-along rate of approximately 1 copy bought for 11-15 people that end up seeing the material. This estimation of pass-along rates supposedly holds true with sharing rap albums. If this theory of high pass-along rates for music has validity, then for as many as fifteen to twenty African-American listeners, only one album has actually been purchased. The low number of albums bought within this demographic group is most likely due to the availability and decreasing prices for recording machines to make bootleg copies of albums to sell in the ghettos. This affects rap groups ability to be successful on the sole support of the constituents of their communities: the ghettos. This creates a music form that cannot sustain itself only with its own people; there is the need for some outside influence in order for rap and hip-hop artists to be successful in the recording industry. Being successful meaning not only with having your music heard in a myriad of venues but also having the cash flow to continue a career and achieve the what most artists want to do: make more albums. This is where the upper classes, non rap-making people (white people) come into the picture.

Whites affect rap in a few ways: they are becoming a bigger part of rap s audience and the white-run record labels have cooperated to get rap labels under their penumbra. In general, whites influence record sales by buying more individual albums while sharing less. Additionally, they do not exchange bootlegs as much as blacks do. By purchasing more of their own official albums (not bootlegs), whites are relied upon for the profitability of a rap group. This group of consumers has proven to be necessary to the African-American music makers. Besides the consumer-end of the market, whites have given rappers national exposure in places they otherwise would not have been seen (or heard). Early on, successful rappers were under independent, smaller labels like Tommy Boy, Def Jam, and Profile. There were two major problems with these two systems (independent and big name labels): 1-independents couldn t get the national exposure that the big names had, they couldn t get on the shelves of the majority of CD/record stores; 2- the big name labels couldn t get in with the urban scene that was owned by the independents. Major labels realized the growing importance of rap and hip-hop in the recording industry yet they didn t have the local knowledge of the culture that these independent labels had. The groups that signed with big name labels didn t fare nearly as well (in sales) as those who signed with the independents. The knowledge and understanding that the independents had gave them the ability to sign specific acts that big labels couldn t touch. The general trend of these artists became signing with independents. Consequently, major labels began buying out the independents while letting them continue to function as they did before. The difference, however, was increased exposure for acts under the smaller labels. Artists under the independents now had their albums being sold in places that previously wouldn t consider carrying their music. The big parent labels now also had their foot in the door of this ferociously growing form of music.

Unlike the way it was a decade ago when black artists made rhymes for a black audience, today, black artists recognize that when they make an album, only a certain percentage which is well below fifty percent in most cases will be consumed by African Americans. This brings up the question of whether or not rap s target has been shifted from what it was when the audience was homogenous to the artist. Is rap becoming a type of music that is made for white people. This question should be asked when examining the extremely popular Puffy Combs (Puff Daddy), called the New King of Rap by Rolling Stone magazine. Puff has admitted that he is not a rapper, but a hit-maker who has sampled such songs as Every Breath You Take by the Police, and The Message, by Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five featuring Melle Mel. Puff uses other people s rhymes and beats in his own type of music that differs from rap. A friend of mine calls this music hip-pop: not pop, not hip-hop, but a combination of different music that is more mainstream and less like rap. Puff, and similarly hip-poppish Mase, throws in lyrics about his riches and flashy lifestyle in addition to the lyrics written by the original makers of the songs he signifies. Is the emergence of this hip-pop a response to the big audience of white people or just another twist in the rap/hip-hop scene? It is very possible that these artists are looking at the economics-side of this industry and targeting white audiences. In comparing the albums of Puff and Mase to that of Wu-Tang s most recent: Forever, the music of Puff and Mase does seem like white rap. It would be my guess that the yet another increase in the number of white consumers will be seen with the popularity of such artists as Puff and Mase.

This issue of an increasingly white rap audience is becoming more and more of an issue for artists trying to continue the tradition of producing rap targeted for African Americans. This topic of the importance of white audiences was addressed in an interview last year with rapper Coolio, regarding about his new album, My Soul, that was released in 1997:

“It’s funny that I’m a black man but white stations add my music before

black stations do,” Coolio says. “My music has attracted a lot of people,

but the hardest audience to reach is the hardcore hip-hop audience that

listens to Wu-Tang, Ice Cube, and Snoop . . . I think this album will

reach them.”

Today, reaching this hardcore hip-hop (black) audience has become something that rappers strive for. Personally, I think that Coolio will consider his efforts somewhat of a failure if this album that he speaks of doesn t become popular within this specific hard to reach audience. Personally, I don t think Coolio s album will do what he says, that is it will not become popular within the hardcore hip-hop audience. The definition of successful rap albums could be changing in front of our eyes from the number of albums sold to the ability of the artist to reach the hard core fan base that once constituted all the rap fans that existed. The monetary effect of white peoples support of rap without a doubt is enjoyed by rappers, however, they would probably rather it be more popular within African American ghettos.

An example of a group that has a huge Caucasian fan base is The Fugees and the more recent release under Wyclef Jean featuring the Refugee Allstars. This group is the first one that pops into my mind when one mentions the phrase white rap. This isn t an opinion held only by me. I went to a big concert at the Shoreline Amphitheater two summers ago in which the Fugees played. When I described the concert to a friend, which consisted of other acts similar to the Fugees (not hardcore rap), they replied, so, you re going to a concert of white rap . I could see this within the make-up of the audience at this event. From looking at the audience alone, this could have been an alternative rock or pop concert. The crowd was predominantly Caucasian, however there were plenty of African Americans. The ironic part of the existence of a large white group of Fugees fans is that the group is definitely anti-white. Just last week, I heard a clip of an interview with Wyclef Jean, where he is basically stating a twist of a Martin Luther King Jr. speech, a harmonious statement urging peace among all people. Yet, it was rumored that during his recording sessions in Los Angeles a couple of months ago, he was clear in requesting that none of the cops providing security around the studio could be white. The Fugees as a whole are one of the most anti-white groups around, yet they have one of the largest white fan bases. There was another highly publicized rumor made by a female member of the Fugees, Lauryn Hill. The gist of statement was that she would rather see children die than have white people buy her albums. What effect did this have on record sales? I m guessing that it had no huge effect, but it does make you question the individuals you listen to; is their music intended for you?

An interesting phenomena seen in the hip-hop world is the emergence of some white rappers in the 90 s such as Snow and Vanilla Ice. The latter, Vanilla Ice, was impressively successful in selling albums of a traditionally black-ruled type of music. Vanilla claimed to be from the ghetto and tried to identify with typical African-American rappers, growing up in difficult conditions. However, his story has been questioned with evidence that he grew up in a middle class area under all but none of the conditions he claimed. Vanilla Ice is most likely one of the many white rebellious fans who took his interest in the music to the next level: making his own rap. He is the product of the constantly increasing white hip-hop audience. Since Vanilla Ice, who was a one-hit-wonder, there haven t been any equally successful white rappers.

Whites and blacks are both necessary for the continuing success of rap and hip-hop (and hip-pop). Additionally, rap has influenced Cuacasians to the extent that some of them have put out albums themselves (Ice, Ice, Baby). The history of rap music shows that the two groups are jointly responsible for making rap as popular and nationally successful as it is today.