Hip Hop is Now: An Evolving Youth Culture

Carl Taylor and Virgil Taylor

Emerging from Rap music, Hip Hop has become a lifestyle to many modern youth around the world. Embodying both creativity and controversy, Hip Hop mirrors the values, violence, and hypocrisy of modern culture. The authors dispel some of the simplistic views that surround this evolving youth movement embraced by millions of young people who are struggling to find meaning in communities that too often lack hope and pathways to purpose.

Recently during a focus group interaction, a young college woman was asked what Hip Hop was. This young neatly dressed, articulate student thought for a moment before responding in a way that was very matter of fact. "Hip Hop is now; it's in your face, and it's real and honest." When asked what separated herself and her peers from adult culture she pondered for a moment and then responded, "We're not all that different from older adults except that ya'll were punks and we're not." Punks! The adults in the discussion did not like being referred to as punks but managed to contain their composure in order to try to understand the meaning behind this young woman's words.

Hip Hop, the latest form of youthful expression by thousands of young people around the world, has evolved over the last twenty years. Once exclusively related to rap music, this form of expression has now become a lifestyle. The influence of Hip Hop can be seen in fashion, electronic design, auto design, movies, music, literary works, and hundreds of other mediums in every facet of modern society.

The idea that older adults are "punks" revolves around the belief that adult culture is hypocritical, that older adults did the same things that young people do now but were afraid to admit their indiscretions. Compounding the problem is the fact that indiscretions committed by adults, not only in the past but also including current sins, are routinely focused on in the news and in historic accounts of individuals' pasts. Hip Hop is a vast and varied collection of ideas and values that are continuously fueled by new truths as well as misinformation and lies, rhetoric, and ever changing ideology and concepts that are relayed in the varying forms of Hip Hop music.

Throughout urban America, Hip Hop has become the standard that many young people live by. It is reflected in their manner of speaking, the way they dress, the types of music they listen to, and the cars they drive—flamboyant, aggressive, frequently rude and inconsiderate, and, as the young woman in the focus group said, "In your face." Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Hip Hop culture is its proclivity towards violence and self-destruction. A well-known Hip Hop term is "blazing." While the origins of this term in Hip Hop lingo are questionable, it is widely used with regard to acts of violence. "I'm gonna blaze dat fool" is a term frequently heard on the streets by young people, and interpreted it means "I am going to hurt that person." It is further noted that in Hip Hop culture, "hurting someone" usually means gun violence.
The question is frequently asked, "Why are young people today so violent and disrespectful?" During frequent discussions and interviews with young people, it has been discovered that their motivation for most behaviors stems from examples they have seen. The tremendous impact of their personal eco-systems is profound; their views are based on exposure to things realized in many and varied forms. The media provides a macabre and often distorted fantasyland whereby reality is blurred with extraordinary fictional tales, as well as glorified heinous acts that include but are not limited to warfare, fiduciary misdeeds of business persons, celebrities and politicians, and so forth.

To further compound the problem, we must recognize the tremendous impact of negative (but frequently lucrative) influences. The young person from humble beginnings who is not extraordinary in any particular talent is continually shown that he or she can be important by adorning oneself with materialistic trappings. Beautiful cars, expensive clothes, and other material goods are items of status in a capitalistic society. In the streets, such items determine a person's worth and therefore are so coveted that the means of obtaining them becomes less important than their acquisition. Selling drugs, robbery, breaking and entering, shoplifting, and prostitution are all reasonable means to an end for many young people throughout America.

When asking how young people can be so devoid of common decency, one must remember what their influences are. The young people immersed in Hip Hop culture are not ignorant as many might claim; quite to the contrary, they are highly evolved, intelligent people who have refused to accept what they view as blatant hypocrisy by adult culture. In righteous indignation, adult culture will sometimes argue that decent society behaves according to a system of standards and values established and maintained by rules and laws.

Hip Hop culture does not accept the truth of such claims as undeniable nor as unfaultable. One example of this dichotomy is demonstrated in the words of a young man during a recent discussion: "Man, I ain't feeling the government, I mean they be lying and they be fake. Look at how they do all the time, like wit the lottery and everythang. If somebody play numba's on the street that be illegal but they go and have the lottery and don't nobody even know where all the loot be going, they foul dog."

The viewpoint of this young man is a constant theme throughout Hip Hop culture. The mirroring of adult culture by youth culture is sometimes an unabashed, raw reflection of things adults would prefer not to admit, but for the young person this is, as they say, "real."

Another question frequently asked is "Why is Hip Hop so vulgar?" It would be wise to first of all remember that Hip Hop is not a monolithic voice or idea. There are many vestiges of the originating theme derived from early rap music and break dancing. The essence of modern Hip Hop does indeed seem to stem largely from current Hip Hop music which is still largely rap; more importantly, a primary influence over recent years has been what is called gangsta rap. Gangsta rap is intricately woven into the fabric of gang culture, particularly that of West Coast ethnic gangs, with the two largest being the Bloods and the Crips.

The emergence of the now famous (or infamous) rap group NWA (Nigga's Wit Attitude) during the 1980s spurred an evolution in rap genre music. To the dismay of the establishment (particularly law enforcement), this group coined the term "f@#k the police." In light of reported police corruption and misdeeds throughout recorded history and in view of certain tactics and trends routinely reported in the media, this concept of publicly denouncing law enforcement and blatantly disregarding police and government authority became vogue. Not only did gangsta rap defy
authority; it flat out challenged it and refused to acknowledge it as legitimate. With this viewpoint rapidly establishing itself in urban communities, being an outlaw became not only acceptable but also noble.

The use of profanity and vulgarity in Hip Hop culture is prevalent because, as with most aspects of this culture, it represents disdain for established norms and rejection of what "decent" adult culture declares is acceptable. While some terms are normalized in Hip Hop culture, some are used seemingly because it is accepted that they are offensive.

There is wide speculation that all Hip Hop oriented youth are drug abusers or sellers; again, this common belief is a misconception. It is acknowledged that many young people who embrace Hip Hop culture use or deal in the sale of illicit drugs, but there are many that do not. Another common theme with regard to Hip Hop culture is the widely held belief that marijuana is not a drug. In Hip Hop culture, marijuana use is typically as acceptable as the use of alcohol is in adult culture. Once again, when this issue is debated, young people in Hip Hop culture point to what they cite as hypocrisy by adult culture. The finger is frequently pointed during discussions at the prohibition era and how "the people" during that time refused to give up their liquor. Repeatedly the comparison is made to how so-called decent members of society use and abuse alcohol while claiming that marijuana is a drug.

While we ponder the ideas of Hip Hop and consider the disturbing behaviors that are frequently demonstrated by many who embrace it as a lifestyle, we must consider the Hip Hop view of sex. Again we must remain mindful that this is not one fixed idea but a menagerie of ideas that are in a constant state of flux and perpetual change. One predominant theme in Hip Hop culture is that sex is a commodity with typically little appreciation for the notion of romance or fidelity. This idea is exacerbated in modern movies and throughout most Hip Hop music. There are exceptions of course; there are young women and men who spin tales of romance and love, fidelity and morality in their music, but they are in the minority. Glamour sells, violence sells, and graphic sex sells. More disturbing is one particular concept that also sells and is widely accepted in Hip Hop culture. That concept is the exploitation of women; in Hip Hop culture, the terms "bitch" and "ho" (a synonym for whore) are widely used. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the use of these words and concepts is their acceptance by young females.

While adult culture is appalled by this behavior, we must remember that Hip Hop culture again is a reflection of the larger society manifested without the sophisticated filters of what some might call hypocrisy. The terrifying impact of Hip Hop culture ignoring the rules of fidelity and morality are realized in the form of dreadful sexually transmitted diseases and violence against women. Again we rely on the words of a young man during a recent group discussion; this particular young man is a college athlete and good student. He reported that during a spring break party, ten of his close associates had group sex with one young woman.

The term for this act is "running a train." While this concept may be abominable enough in and of itself, it becomes more horrifying when he goes on to tell how this was done with none of the participants using protection. While many in the group sat stunned at these words, he further revealed that this was not a rape but a consensual act on the part of the young woman as well as all of the young men involved. When asked what was on the minds of these young participants the young man stated "they just don't give a f@#k; they don't care about nuthin' man."

What could possibly cause young promising people to so easily play Russian roulette with their lives? This is the obvious question. Throughout America as well as in other regions around the globe, many young people seem to have lost hope. They live in the moment and believe that it is normal to die young. Frequently they view dying young as not only acceptable and expected but as glamorous. Perhaps nowhere is this truer than in the urban communities of America, and perhaps therein lies the problem.

Once upon a time in America, young men and women held to a belief that no matter what their circumstance, there was a way to move up. There was a time when people valued jobs that held promise of a decent if not lavish lifestyle, but today these truths do not hold. There appears to be little opportunity for the young person born into poverty, for the child
born to a drug addicted parent (or parents), the odds are seemingly overwhelming. The delicate balance of the urban eco-system is like a planetary system under attack from a constant barrage of meteor showers. Learning to survive in such dramatically changing and violent arenas causes any person to change, particularly a young person in the early stages of development.

Hip Hop culture represents some ugly truths about everything society is and is not. The words of songs created by young people make millions of dollars annually, and this is because they are saying something about the reality of their world. It can be argued that this is a distorted reality, but for the young listener it is a reality nonetheless.

In order to deal effectively with Hip Hop, it seems it is imperative that honesty be used as the steel against steel. Hip Hop is engaging, inquiring, and ever ready to challenge anything it believes is not real. For the professional who endeavors to work with young people in the Hip Hop world, the worst possible thing to do seems to be to enter the realm as a foreigner. Hip Hop is a complex and potentially dangerous arena for the novice; for those with preconceived notions and fixed opinions, it is a world in which they will quickly find themselves ostracized and excluded.

**Carl Taylor**, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Sociology at Michigan State University, East Lansing. He can be contacted by phone: 1-517-353-9237 or e-mail: taylor36@msu.edu

"Bring the Real Me Up"
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