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**Hip-Hop in the Crosshairs:
Pushing Back Against Corporate Order (Part 1)
The Substance of Truth
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[Happy New Year to all BlackCommentator.com readers. May 2009 yield unto you, and yours, abundance and prosperity. Amen. Ameen. Ashe.]

"Too often, hip-hop still lacks deep vision and analysis... It's too morally underdeveloped and spiritually immature... It's fun, it's entertaining, it helps sustain the rituals of party-going on the weekends, but it still lacks a deep vision... The recording industry is so interested in pacifying, distracting, and ensuring that the strength, grace, and dignity of young people are not affirmed. They would rather keep them locked into a narcissistic, materialistic, and individualist orientation."

-Princeton Professor, Cornel West, [Hope on a Tightrope: Words and Wisdom](#) (Pg. 127).

2008 was one of the most deadly and violent years in Hip-Hop history. There's a reason for that. It was also the year when many Hip-Hop fans, around the world, mourned the loss of their favorite rappers, to casualties such as homicides, drug-overdose, alcohol-overdose, ominous drug-deals, stress, paranoia, sleep apnea and cough-syrup. Though, if it were up to the Hip-Hop industry to decide, less concern would be placed on the causes of these deaths, as they happen to be isolated incidents, with no possible link to the kind of music those artists produced. However, clear thinkers must steer away from accepting or accommodating the sophistry of Hip-Hop executives, but instead, begin the process of diagnosing how vulnerable the next generation is, to the

damaging content of commercial Hip-Hop.

It must be clearly understood, that the Hip-Hop industry has neither the will nor the desire to promote prophetic voices within the Hip-Hop realm – history has taught us that bitter lesson. Hip-Hop executives, disproportionately White and over 50-years of age, would rather have mega-star puppets, masqueraded as artists, who provide comfort to White Supremacist ideologies, such as [willingly commending](#) European slave-masters, because *"without them we'd still be in Africa,"* hence, unable to *"get this ice [bling-bling] and tattoos."*

As stated above, Hip-Hop executives are overwhelmingly Caucasian, with stunning influence over content marketed for Black and Brown audiences. Power players in the Hip-Hop industry, whose decisions reflect the character and disposition of Hip-Hop artists, include Russell Simmons (Co-founder of Def Jam), L.A. Reid (Current President of Def Jam), Bryan Turner (Founder of Priority Records), Jerry Heller (CEO of Ruthless Records), David Geffen (Co-founder of Asylum Records and founder of Geffen Records), Jimmy Iovine (Chairman of Interscope Records), Monte Lipman (President of Universal Records), Lyor Cohen (Vice Chairman of Warner Music Group), Kevin Law (A&R at Universal Records), etc. The first two characters happen to be African-American, but the remainder are not. Intriguing, *ain't it?* For those familiar with Hip-Hop history, a few of those aforementioned resurrect mysterious memories that beg revisiting.

Bryan Turner, founder of Priority Records and once-distribution czar in Hip-Hop, is most famous for helping co-opt and expand small, family-oriented, black-owned record labels in the '90s. Most fascinating however, is Turner's role in the blossoming of "Gangsta Rap" in the early '90s. Helping put such acts like Niggaz With Attitude (NWA), Ice-T, Jay-Z and Westside Connection on the map, with well-paying distribution deals, it became troubling, for conscious Hip-Hop listeners, to witness Rap artists face the indomitable castigation of society, without Turner and his cohorts ever criticized in like-manner, for their culpability in providing a platform to the reprehensible contents of those Hip-Hop artists. A [New York Times op-ed](#) (1998) noted how, despite other white executives engaging in similar conduct, Turner seemed to be *"the only one willing to engage in music so extreme."*

Another is Jerry Heller, infamous for his divide-and-conquer strategy in breaking up the semi-political rap group, NWA. Heller, a white manager, had the ear of the group's leader (Eazy-E), and skillfully (many argue, deviously) *de-militanized* and *de-politicized* the once-politically conscious group. For this, exiled group-members such as Ice Cube, would later write songs of retaliation against the leverage Heller had in Hip-Hop, to begin with. In *No Vaseline*, of his second album *Death Certificate*, Cube goes as far as calling Jerry Heller a "devil," who deserves *"a bullet in his temple."*

Jimmy Iovine, chairman of Interscope Records, is no stranger to controversies. Unbeknownst to most Hip-Hop listeners / protractors / detractors / observers / fans / scholars / intellectuals / artists, Interscope Records houses a *lyric committee*, as told by the successful Rap star, Young Buck. In his latest album, *Buck the World*, Young Buck was expected to feature a song titled, "Fu** the Police" – a reprise of NWA's 1988 hit. This song was, however, omitted on the final tracklist, leading fans to question the logic involved. In a 2007 interview with Hot 97's Angie Martinez, Buck [would expose](#) the less-known "lyric committee" of Interscope Records – and perhaps every other major Record label. Buck's remarks that the lyric committee *"wouldn't let me put that record on my album"* because *"they said it was too violent,"* led Martinez to question who exactly exercises decisions over such matters. In a courageous (truly courageous)

move, Buck would respond that the "*the lyric committee*," which resides "*in [the] Interscope building*," holds prestige over issues pertaining to lyrical content.

Mind-blowing as it is – similar to Ron Suskind's [recent White-House claim](#) – more insulting is the reality that this "lyric committee" serves a not-so-complimentary function. If it were truly a moderator of civility, Iovine's *secret / special committee* would be as vociferous in curtailing the sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, ill-tempered, materialistic, chthonic lyrics of the many commercial Hip-Hop artists it houses. Certainly, Iovine is no fool. His committee would not dare challenge a Black male artist's freedom of speech right to degrade Black women. Why would it? In times of political expression, however, there arises the sudden need for Rap stars to be aware of the social ramifications of their statements. Something is out of kilter.

Jimmy Iovine is also known for having engaged in a shouting-match with popular Hip-Hop star, Busta Rhymes, earlier this year. With sketchy-details, little was made of the rumors at the time, before reports emerged, days after, that Rhymes had been dropped from the label – following the incident. Both parties denied that the rumored dispute had anything to do with Busta Rhyme's abrupt departure from the label he had been with for 4 years, but history tells us to be skeptical when an out-spoken Black man is quick to register unqualified defense of his boss – or *master*.

White Hip-Hop executives, and the Blacks who gave them access – *a la* Russell Simmons, L.A. Reid and Jay-z –, possess the power to transform this art-form into whatever they wish. Make no mistake about that. To some Hip-Hop activists, corporate-minded Black executives are even more cancerous to the culture than their White counterparts.

Russell Simmons, Co-founder of Def Jam Records, seems to fit that mold perfectly. Simmons, who believes every Hip-Hop artist is a "poet," and simply a "reflection" of the hazardous conditions of Black / Brown neighborhoods, has come under fire from activists, for his excuse of the inexcusably-crass content of commercial Hip-Hop. Renowned activist and '08 Green Party Vice-Presidential candidate, Rosa Clemente, is one of his fiercest critics. In a column from 2001, titled, "Russell Simmons You Are Not Hip-Hop," [Clemente writes](#) that the images Russell and his "*peers help to promote are the images that allow law enforcement to criminalize the Hip-Hop generation, the images you create allow for 10 year children to use the word Nigga, Bitch, Ho, Chickenhead, Dog, as frequently as they say "What's Up?"*" Simmons is also known for, amongst other things, engaging Hip-Hop minister, Rev. Conrad Tillard (formerly known as Min. Conrad Muhammad) in a public scuffle, for the latter's healthy critiques of certain rappers' promotion of violence in their songs.

The presence of acts like Russell Simmons in Hip-Hop culture / industry has helped encourage an emerging *secret-society sensibility* amongst Hip-Hop artists. They have bestowed *cloaks of infallibility* upon selected artists, and rendered them unquestionable. Though a lethal (perhaps the most lethal) threat to the communal existence of Hip-Hop, which believes in the equality of every participant – regardless of social strata –, very few Hip-Hop activists are willing to challenge this notion. An evidence of this brewing reality was documented in a [2006 on-air exchange](#) between Southern rapper, Young Jeezy and Hip-Hop legend (now a radio personality), Moni Love. In a debate over whether Hip-Hop artist, Nas, was accurate in proclaiming Hip-Hop "Dead" for its declining enthusiasm and dilapidating artistic-impulse, Moni Love, a [Native Tongues](#) member, tried to educate the up-and-coming rapper, and perhaps, convince him to inspire kids differently, through his music. [Context: From the onset, it seemed strange that Sister Love would attempt this arduous task, as

Young Jeezy, known for his *supposedly* street-conscious lyrics, was the wrong instrument to begin with. Claiming to have been a lieutenant of drug-clan, Black Mafia, Jeezy catapulted to national fame in 2004, following a "movement" he described as "Snowman." By the time it dawned on Hip-Hop activists that *Snowman* represented a successful drug-dealer, it was too late, with millions of Black and Brown kids swept up in the hysteria over wanting to be *Snowmen*, just like Jeezy]. In the "healthy conversation," Jeezy claimed that Moni Love was not affording him the respect his music deserved, and thus, irrelevant to any discussion on Hip-Hop. The "Trap [Drug dealing] or Die" rapper [would subsequently](#) discard the legitimacy of U.K. Hip-Hop, compare sales to skills, and, visibly upset, walk out half-way through the interview. A couple weeks later, Moni Love was unexpectedly terminated by 100.3 The Beat (WPHI-FM). What does this say about our beloved art-form? Is there any hope left for Hip-Hop, when a legend is fired, to comfort an upset rookie, and no outrage over this incident exceeds the occasional pithy comments on message boards and blog-sites?

Censorship in Hip-Hop music is another cause worthy of concern. As in the case of Young Buck, it's rare for Rappers to have their expression mitigated, but when they do, political concerns appear to be of top priority in record labels taking such actions. International superstar, Kanye West, is a rare example.

In 2004, West released his first major album, *The College Dropout*. With much acclaim, it soon became a chart-topper. The album included Lauryn-Hill inspired, *All Falls Down*. Released as his second single, *All Falls Down* rose to prominence and was accompanied with a video. In the official video, it seemed odd that the (M)TV version had intentionally bleeped out a non-expletive in the song. Kanye West rapped in the third verse that "*Drug dealers buy Jordans, crackheads buy crack/ And the white man get paid off of all that,*" but viewers were left to wonder which *man* really profits from the financial miscalculations of Black people. One year later, in a song titled, "Gold Digger," the word, "white girl," was bleeped out, in its official music video. Thankfully, certain Hip-hop journalists have taken note of this trend, and are beginning to speak out candidly against it.

Hip-Hop artists know when they've cross the line, which makes it easier to go as far as that line permits. This theory was affirmed in the 2008 single, "Arab money," by Busta Rhymes. In the highly-controversial song, Rhymes, who claims an Islamic identity, seemed to be undaunted in carrying water for White-Supremacist ideologies which seek to stereotype folks of Arabic descent, and demean their integrity. Award-winning Hip-Hop Journalist, Davey D, compared Busta Rhyme's actions to that of news-pundits who attempt to scapegoat the Arab world for the ongoing global financial meltdown. In an incisive piece titled, "Busta Apologized for Arab Money, But who will apologize to Black Women?" [Davey D also points out](#) that, not only do record labels censor / censure artistic expression, they often do it at the protection of special-interest groups tied to the recording industry:

"I wonder if Busta would've been allowed to do release a song called 'Jewish money'? How long do you think that would be tolerated? Folks forget that Diddy tried to flip a rhyme in his song 'All About the Benjamins' where he bragged about 'stacking chips like Hebrews'. The story goes, Clive Davis who headed up the label that distributed Diddy's Bad Boy heard it and was having no parts of it. He put a stop to that quick, fast and in a hurry. That line was omitted from both the radio edits and non radio edits of the song. I'm wondering who was the record executive who greenlit 'Arab Money'. How did that get by?"

These special-interest groups range from lobby-firms, to law-firms, but most recently,

commercial industries (Boost Mobile, Dodge, Chrysler Financial, etc.) and big-name corporations (Nike, Fila, Adidas, Reebok, Ecko, etc.). With the emerging ubiquitous presence of commercial corporations in Hip-Hop, activists must move **fast** to prevent a furtherance of corporate domination. Hip-Hop is also being [co-opted by wine and liquor companies](#) – using rappers as front-men / women for their merchandise. To reach a younger audience, these criminal corporations, with a clear history of havoc, have established their domain in Hip-Hop, among Rap's *elites*, and seek to use the popularity of these Rap-slaves to their advantage. Rappers such as Lil Wayne (Straight Up Brands), Lil John (Crunk Juice), Nelly (Pimp Juice), Diddy (Ciroc Vodka), Lil Flip (Lucky Nites), Jay-z (Ace of Spades) and Mike Jones (House of Dobbe) are just a few of the many who have partnered with established liquor companies. Considering the fact that such artists host fan-bases as young as 9-years-old, something must be done **fast**, to prevent an inevitable catastrophe. In fact, recent developments might delineate the [beginning stages](#) of an impending calamity.

Though it seems despondent, and often insurmountable, hope resides in the courage certain Hip-Hop scribes have displayed over the years. A few mainstream artists have maintained a healthy stamina of internal critique of Hip-Hop *minstrelism* and docility. Successful artists such as Nas, Canibus, MF Doom, Common, and Pharoahe Monch have steadfastly registered their displeasure with the direction Hip-Hop has taken in the last two decades. Their courageous voices are an everlasting inspiration to those fighting against forces of evil in Hip-Hop today, and beyond:

*"Rappers only talk about ki's [kilos of coke], it's all poison/
How could you call yourself MC's? You ain't poison/
Think about the kids you mislead, with the poison."*

-Nas, *What Goes Around (Poison)*, Stillmatic (2001).

*"I'm convinced now that more than truth is at stake/
Where people create language that pretends to communicate/
Euphemisms are misunderstood as mistakes/
But it's a bi-product of the ghetto music we make/
From an extroverted point of view I think it's too late/
Hip-Hop has never been the same since '88/
Since it became a lucrative profession, there's the misconception/
That the movement in any direction is progression."*

-Canibus, *Poet Laureate II*, Rip the Jacker (2003).

*"... Since when lyrical skills had to do with killin a cat?/
What type of chitlins is that?"*

-MF Doom, *Old School*, The Mouse and the Mask (2005).

*"... If I may interject/
Rap these days is like a pain up in the neck."*

-MF Doom, *Benzie Box*, The Mouse and the Mask (2005).

*"I wonder if these whack nig*** realize they whack/
And they the reason that my people say they tired of rap/
... A black figure, in the middle of chaos and gunfire/
So many raps about rims, surprised nig*** ain't become tires."*

-Common, *Chi-City*, Be (2005).

"Y'all don't listen/
Y'all just wanna shine/
Y'all just wanna glisten/
Floss, knowing that the soul is still missing/
... Rap's fatally ill, please get concerned."


-Pharoahe Monch, *Desire, Desire* (2007).


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BlackCommentator.com Columnist, Tolu Olorunda, is an 18-year-old local activist/writer and a Nigerian immigrant. Click [here](#) to reach Mr. Olorunda.

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