

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

**Hip-Hop in the Crosshairs:  
Voices in the Wilderness (Part 2)  
The Substance of Truth  
By Tolu Olorunda  
BlackCommentator.com Columnist**

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At this crossroad, Hip-Hop is confronted by a plethora of problems. Though many critics are quick to heap scorn and castigation upon the culture, such analysis often fails to keep track of the best of what it has to offer. Internal critique of Hip-Hop, within the artist community, is not a contemporary phenomenon. From its inception, various artists, of all stripes, have always brought critique to bear, when needed. I recently had the distinguished pleasure of speaking with three Hip-Hop artists who are displeased with certain elements within the culture today, and are speaking out about it. More importantly, all artists acknowledge that the creation of solutions yields more importance at a time such as this.

## **NYOIL:**

[NYOIL](#) is a New York-based Hip-Hop artist, lecturer and activist. A legend in the game, NYOIL rose to national prominence, in 2006, through a controversial song titled, "Y'All Should All Get Lynched." In the song, NYOIL called for the correction/erosion of certain pathologies in Hip-Hop (and Black) culture. As a fire-breathing Emcee, NYOIL has been very critical of commercial Hip-Hop artists' expressions of misogyny, patriarchy, gangsterism, etc., in Rap songs. NYOIL's long-awaited album, [Hood Treason \(Deluxe 2 CD Edition\)](#), was released in June 2008. His latest single, [Father Father](#), celebrates the responsibilities of fatherhood. I recently spoke with NYOIL on some of the more pressing issues facing Hip-Hop:

**Thanks for joining us, NYOIL. In your opinion, what is the fundamental problem with Hip-Hop today?**

We are entering a space and time where there is no level of morality, and our children are going to be the ones who would suffer the consequences of our failure to act on it. What most troubles me about Hip-Hop, right now, is that we [the Hip-Hop community] haven't established any institutions. Institution-building is important in maintaining the sanctity and authenticity of a culture. If we don't have any level of control over the way our culture is controlled, it's going to be taking away from us – with people taking over it and revising its history.

### **What role does the industry play in an artist's decision-making process, and does it bend artists against their will?**

At the end of the day, signing to a major label – or any label for that matter – puts a demand on your music – which is to sell. Right now, the record industry is running around with its head chopped-off. They have no idea where to go – as far as selling music. So, they want anything that sells – they're not really bothered about being inventive or creative. I think, at the end of the day, artists have to decide what they want to do. What I'm here to do, is uplift the conditions of my people, to make sure that my music is thought-provoking and challenging. I make music that ensures that when I'm done with this [making music], my legacy is something to be proud of.

### **How do you assess the ubiquitous presence of corporations in Hip-Hop culture today?**

The industries aren't in Hip-Hop culture. They're marketing their products, through Hip-Hop artists, for Black people. It's a big difference and distinction. I don't think that Hip-Hop artists should be concerned, in a negative fashion, that corporations are getting involved. I think Hip-Hop needs to utilize it, do smart business, and utilize this opportunity to change the power-relations.

### **What challenges have you faced as a progressive/prophetic force in Hip-Hop?**

There have been moments where I have seen a concerted effort to keep me from achieving any level of success. But I don't really want what they [major labels] have to offer me. I don't believe in the record industry. I'm trying to set up my own infrastructure, and make avenues for independent artist that make sense.

### **At what point did Hip-Hop become a synonym for misogyny, and who is responsible for this reality?**

I think that when you look at a male-dominated sport, such as Hip-Hop, what do you expect to come out of these men's mouths, but for them to verbalize their condition, as they've experienced it? Born in this society, there's a level of misogyny that is inherent in it – just as a level of racism is inherent. It's almost genetic. Misogyny in Hip-Hop has been inherent since Hip-Hop really got its feet planted – even in songs like "Rapper's Delight" – because it is reflecting the minds of a people who are suffering those exact maladies: self-hatred, self-loathing, disrespect of women, low self-esteem. All those things are inherent in our people, since slavery. Because of this, young ladies are now out of control – selling their bodies for anything.

### **What would you like to see changed in Hip-Hop in '09?**

I think that a lot of the things that happened in '08 were good things, in their own way. As much as we had a lot of concern about where Hip-Hop went, we also had a break-out for artists like myself and [Jasiri X](#). I think the best thing that we can possibly do, in '09, is work really hard to put together the institutions – where people can build

systems that the community can connect with. We have to build institutions, and work together. I think that's a big problem – for people to come together. If we had a little bit of that, we would be all right. Also, if we can figure out new approaches to marketing, in this new media, and developing a way of emphasizing that, we'll be all right. It's not a small task; it's a marathon, not a sprint – and I believe that I'm one of those people that can help make it happen.

### **How do you plan on using your influence to promote this change?**

By developing [Petroleum Empire Media Group](#) (P.E.M.G.); and creating room for conscious, cultural, and independent artists to make a consistent income. Also, by setting up the institutions that are going to change the way this music is made and what it means. Through my company – P.E.M.G. – I'm in the process of doing that. But most importantly, by continuing to be consistent with my message, and telling the truth – as I know it to be.

### **AMIR SULAIMAN:**

[Amir Sulaiman](#) is a renowned poet, activist, recording artist and 2-time [HBO Def Poet](#). Sulaiman is a household name in the world of Spoken Word Poetry. Amir has performed – and still performs - at countless colleges, universities, high schools and community centers around the world. A member of "Youth Speaks," in the Bay Area, California, Amir also works in mentoring and teaching kids, by way of spoken word, with a focus on the union of art and education. In June 2007, Amir released his major-label debut, [Like a Thief in the Night](#). Celebrated, wildly, as one of the best albums of '07, Amir Sulaiman is gearing up for his follow-up album, "The Meccan Openings." I spent some time speaking with Amir Sulaiman on the problems and solutions Hip-Hop is currently challenged by:

### **Thanks for being with us, Amir. In your opinion, what is the fundamental problem with Hip-Hop today?**

The short answer is: What's wrong with *the people*. Hip-Hop is reflecting the virtue and vices of the people. We live in a society where vice is very attractive – particular the diseases of the heart (arrogance, death, physical crimes, misogyny). In one way, society looks down upon these attributes, but then, our actions speak another perspective. So, in Hip-Hop, in its reflecting the hardships of the people, it began to think that that is its role. So, we began to reflect the worst of the human conditions, and celebrate it – as if that is what Hip-Hop is for. Frankly, the 'hood' is not as they [commercial Hip-Hop artists] are describing it. So, to 'Keep it Real' now means to deal with something without its beauty – to fundamentally take the beauty out of it. So, I can talk about my wife, and our relationship, but when they say, "Keep it Real," and "Keep it 'Hood'," that means I have to start talking about what's wrong with my wife.

### **What role does the industry play in an artist's decision-making process, and does it bend artists against their will?**

Right around the time when crack was introduced to L.A., and NWA (Niggaz Wit Attitude) were on the national scene, their first album had a pseudo-political (almost Black Pantheresque) sentiment to it. After that, the labels said, "Okay, this is hot. So, just take out all that political stuff, but keep the 'Nigga stuff,' and we're going to push that."

### **How do you assess the ubiquitous presence of corporations in Hip-Hop culture today?**

As we know, the corporations are slaves to money, so they go wherever the money is – most of them are not trying to save or destroy Black people. And, I'm of the opinion that if we, as artists, can create content that is irresistible to the human spirit, and corporations like it, we can make money, while staying true [to the essence].

### **What challenges have you faced as a progressive/prophetic force in Hip-Hop?**

I'm really searching to be a better and broader artist – music that connects to more people, like Bob Marley did. I'm trying to tap into that common thread that binds all of creation. I feel closer and better at it, but I still have a long way to go.

### **At what point did Hip-Hop become a synonym for misogyny, and who is responsible for this reality?**

I'm not sure, exactly. I would have to contribute it to the early '90s. There's something about that post-crack era that just created such a severe dysfunction. Around that time, the music became very ill-spirited and misogynistic, but to tell you the truth, I don't know how it made its way into the culture – to the point that it's now the norm.

### **What would you like to see changed in Hip-Hop in '09?**

Some of what I'm seeking [to change] is happening. It's not that all the music is becoming more righteous, but other voices are beginning to be allowed to speak. For example, Kanye West's new album is not a Rap album. It reflects the pain he went through after the unexpected death of his mother. That takes a kind of bravery that 'art' requires – that has been basically neglected for the notion of 'Keeping it Real.' What he's showing is a level of sincerity. Hip-Hop artists also have to grow up, mature, and be adults.

### **How do you plan on using your influence to promote this change?**

My biggest concern is to create really great art. My main objective is to show, by action, what is possible.

### **INVINCIBLE:**

Invincible (Ilana Weaver), is a Hip-Hop artist and community organizer. As a relentless activist, she has helped mobilize community members against displacement and gentrification. In 2008, Invincible produced an award-winning song/documentary, *Locusts*, which shed some much-needed light on the effects of gentrification in Detroit (Watch [Locusts here](#)). Notorious for turning down major Record-Label deals, she founded [Emergence](#), an independent music label which promotes positive and progressive music. In June 2008, Invincible released her critically-acclaimed debut album, *Shapeshifters*. Invincible is also a member of the all-female group, ANOMOLIES, which seeks to erase misogynistic narratives in Hip-Hop by reflecting, musically and beyond, true womanhood. I recently engaged Invincible in dialogue on some subject matters other Hip-Hop artists fail to address:

### **Thanks for joining us, Invincible. Is there a fundamental problem with Hip-Hop, and how do we, as critics, address – if there is – this problem in a constructive fashion?**

We can't shun people that aren't progressive enough, or call them out for their contradictions – in a way that would push them away. As an activist, I have to look at it in the way that I do outreach – for anybody to get involved in the community. When

I'm doing community organizing, and there's a youth in the group who's uninterested, I don't just tell him/her to "leave," or try to lecture them – that's never going to reach them. I have to talk in a way that is relevant to them, and they can relate to. I think a lot of Hip-Hop artists have been calloused by the hardships they've been through, and feel that change is not possible. So, it's our job (those who believe that change is possible, and believe that change begins with each person) to figure out what their strength is, and bring it to the table. When we push them away because they're not progressive or active enough, it creates an 'us vs. them' mentality.

### **What role does the industry play in an artist's decision-making process, and does it bend artists against their will?**

No label has the full power to control an artist, but at the end of the day, it's about how much leverage you bring to the situation. As an artist, if you sign to a major-label without an established independent foundation, they're going to try to create one for you, and most of the time – unless you're signed to a progressive major label (with a forward thinking A&R) – they might not know how to market you, and usually rely on gimmicks and formulas. Therefore, you're given short-sighted advice, and end up making short-sighted decisions. It's important to create viable options, and make it accessible to people. Most people don't know about the independent route, or what to demand of a major-label. I started my own label, Emergence, which is focused on co-operative economics. You also have to look at who's funding you, and how they think you should be marketed – because, they hold the purse-strings. These labels are desperate, right now. Sales are very different than they used to be. So, this is a huge opportunity for us to create alternative models to how the music industry has been functioning.

### **How do you assess the ubiquitous presence of corporations in Hip-Hop culture today?**

It's a difficult thing to assess. I'll put it like this: Personally, I prioritize working with small businesses, independent businesses, and businesses in general that share my value systems. I do think that there can be effective co-operation between businesses and artists. The problem with transnational-corporations is that most of them don't share the values of the community. This also applies to community-organizing. If you have a non-profit, and receive funding from foundations, nine times out of ten, the foundation dictates what to do with the money it funds you, and that limits your ability to effectively meet your community's needs. We have to make the corporations accountable to our community – if we work with them – but more importantly find self-reliant ways for people and businesses in the community to fund and support their art in a way that actually sustains it. It also depends on the way an artist is marketed. We have to create new ways to be released, marketed, and promoted – that is in alignment with our values.

### **At what point did Hip-Hop become a synonym for misogyny, and who is responsible for this reality?**

Hip-Hop is a reflection of society, and society is misogynistic in general. I don't spend a lot of time, or waste my breath, talking about misrepresentations of women in Hip-Hop.

### **Why not? When we look at the effrontery of some male artists, and the chauvinism and patriarchy they champion – especially regarding Black Women – shouldn't it be addressed?**

All of that is true, but the way I and my crew, ANOMOLIES, approach it is by first

acknowledging that there are misrepresentations of women in Hip-Hop, but at the same time, our main focus is creating an answer and a solution. And the ultimate critique – of misrepresentation of Women in Hip-Hop, and Hip-Hop as a whole – is to create viable solutions. Actions obviously speak louder than words, so I spend my time creating and promoting material that highlights women with skills and nuanced perspectives, rather than the typical two dimensional ways we are typically shown. Also, if we ask rappers to be less concentrated on violence and misogyny in their music, we have to ensure that there is a whole machine and structure in place to support them, when they do.

I'm also a big believer in transformative-justice, so I support giving people the space to transform their mode of thinking. We need to have one-on-one conversations first, where artists can be given more space to think through the ways their music might be destructive and violent, and also ways that they can counter-act it. So, if it takes them hearing some [domestic violence] survivors speak, or having to volunteer at a shelter – to see it first-hand – I think artists need to be given a process to develop and grow, as people.

### **What would you like to see changed in Hip-Hop in '09?**

[I would like to see] more quality, innovative music, and new perspectives being supported, so they can get their proper shine and move to the forefront. You want good music, you got to support it!

### **How do you plan on using your influence to promote this change?**


By releasing several video projects over the next few months, including one that highlights women in independent Hip-Hop; continue supporting [Detroit Summer's youth leaders](#) to create their own media; promoting music as organizing tools against injustices in the schools; and evolving a successful cooperative economics approach to Hip-Hop, through [Emergence](#).


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**The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog**

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

[Contents of Issue Menu](#)  
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