



"Moving from Complaint to Possibility...from Planning to Implementation"

**A Historical Perspective of Rap Music As it Relates to the
Violence in the African American Community.**

By Steve Johnson

Music has always touched hearts and minds. People have expressed the social ills of their particular era through popular music, from jazz to rock 'n roll, to country. In the late 1970s, inner city youth (mainly African American and Latino youth) embraced a new culture and consciousness called "Hip Hop" with its innovative art, clothing, and music. The elements of Hip Hop included dee-jaying, graffiti art, break dancing and other dance forms, as well as emceeing or "rapping" over beats, and disseminating knowledge. Groups such as KRS-1 and Afrika Bambaataa with the Zulu Nation intended for rap music to be a tool for teaching the youth in a positive way. Rap lyrics were filled with messages about the realities facing many inner city youth, such as gang violence and drugs. Yet messages about love, unity, justice, respect, and responsibility were also incorporated in the music. During the mid 1980s, groups like Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions and X-Klan, Queen Latifah, and Salt 'n Peppa carried on the tradition of positive teaching through their music. With one or two exceptions, rap artists were mostly African American and a few Latinos.

From its beginnings, older people, both Black and white, viewed rap as an art form that would not last. While the artists were mostly youth of color, rapping about inner city life, the music was being purchased by more young White men, living in suburban and rural areas, than any other group in the US population. Seeing the huge potential for making millions by exploiting the Hip Hop musical form called emceeing or "rap," the major music and advertising agencies seized the opportunity to capitalize on this gold mine and the Rap Industry was born. In the early 90s "the industry labeled this new music form "Gangsta Rap." One of the first groups to receive world-wide attention under this new "genre" was called NWA (Niggas with Attitude) from Compton, California. NWA gave "voice" to inner city youth, who lived the thug life, because they incorporated messages about police brutality, poverty, and crime – issues inner city youth face everyday. The message might have been about the realities of life, but the sexually explicit and violent images to which youth were being exposed from the "Gangsta Rap" videos held implications that could be seen as being potentially harmful to the "hearts and minds" of the youth. Capitalizing on the huge popularity of the particular form of music, the record labels, the movie and TV entertainment industry, as well as the advertising industry began to invest millions into promoting those artists with gangster material. Quite often, artists with more positive messages were ignored. Many of the Gangsta and the Crunk rappers have written more socially conscious music, as well. Yet, it appeared that artists who glorified the thug or player life-style received the greatest exposure from the music industry. It was during this period in history that youth gangs began to rise in many of the inner cities. Rap became an issue of national security when the rapper Ice T wrote "Kill the Police" and Gangsta Rap became part of the national consciousness. Congressional hearings and boycotts of the music were called to protest the dangerous messages being espoused by many rappers. It did not matter that the music was the "voice" of many youths, who clearly understood the impact of poverty, police brutality, under-employment and mis-education on their daily existence.

The music corporations must have understood the effects that this music would have on the mentality of the community, especially the youth, but chose instead to keep getting rich. Music label executives and artist promoters heavily pushed "Gangsta Rap," often to the exclusion of other forms of rap, thereby creating a new culture and mindset. Whether the rap artists actually lived the lives they spoke about in their music, they felt that to be hugely successful, they had no choice but to do "Gangsta Rap" if they expected to survive in the industry. Moreover, many of these rappers actually believe they are giving a positive message through their music when they give their personal testimonies about the realities of their lives. However, when they fail to see, or either choose to ignore the trap being set for them by the industry, such artists are only brainwashing themselves into believing the "hype" set forth by the record labels. Furthermore, many rappers glorify the "skewed" messages about power and wealth gleaned from mainstream movies, such as Scarface and other gangster movies. In recent years, "Beef" CDs or DVDs have become very popular. Rappers "go at" each other to prove how much tougher they are than the next guy. These so-called "feuds" between rap stars may be a marketing ploy to drive up sales, but they also send a potentially dangerous message to the youth. These so-called "Beef" CDs are another brainwashing tool, and the youth are not aware of what is happening. Far too many music albums, music videos, video games, movies, and other forms of media perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans and other people of color. Today's youth are seeing a skewed view of life and are receiving mixed messages that are potentially damaging to their healthy development and well-being. Not only are young men receiving mixed messages about their manhood and their place in society, the messages about women are also potentially damaging because they tend to show women as objects. The

music glorifies the gangster life as well as the pimp life with its fixation on fast cars, fast women, and big money. Furthermore, many adults are fearful that our Black youth are being brainwashed into thinking that they must be “gangster” in order to survive, or that one must be a “pimp” to get the woman and the money. This brainwashing may be evident in the state of young Black America today when two-thirds of the youth in prison are Black. This may be evident in the Pittsburgh region where the majority of homicide victims of gang-like or “drug-war” violence are Black. What children hear and see shapes their growth and development. “We are all a product of our environment,” say the rappers.” However, not everyone in the inner city, or from the ‘hood’, is a gangster or a gang member, a “player”, or a “gold-digging” woman. Nevertheless, many youth try to emulate their favorite rap artists who glorify these things. This music also exposes young children to sexually explicit lyrics, curse words, and messages that glorify the “fast life.” Young people internalize the images and messages they receive from the music, and can become desensitized to the real consequences of violence when they are exposed to too many videos or movies with violent themes.

Rappers and the music industry both reap huge financial benefits, but do so at the expense of the “hearts and minds” of millions of youth. As stated previously, White males buy more rap music than any other group in the United States, approximately 80%. Furthermore, rap music is all over the world; youths from Russia to Africa, from Brazil to Europe are getting their blueprint from watching American videos and listening to rap music. Millions of young people think that all Black youth in America are pimps, players, gangsters and prostitutes, for these are the images they see. Moreover, millions of African American youth and children internalize these negative images. Add this to the effects of internalized oppression from racism, and even sexism, on Black people in this society. One might be tempted to conclude that youth violence in the African American community may be one of the effects of too much exposure to negative music.

Major corporations continue to invest heavily in “Gangsta Rap” or its latest incarnation known as “Crunk Rap,” artists with more conscious or positive messages receive less exposure or airplay. Unfortunately, radio stations all across the country will choose to play a song like “Pop, Lock, and Drop It,” with its sexually explicit lyrics, over a song like “I Know I Can” an anthem of self-esteem and self-determination. More often than not, many of the more conscious artists must turn to the music “underground” to get their music played. The major music networks such as MTV or VH1 show all kinds of music, including Crunk music. However, until recently, BET, the “Black” network, had a late night rotation which featured the uncut, unedited and so-called more adult and sexually explicit versions of many of the videos shown on other times of the day. Furthermore, there are also websites, featuring the uncut or unedited lyrics of this music, to which even children can have access. Do the rappers understand this or even care how our children and youth are affected by their music? Do the mostly White producers and executives understand or even care if the music they sponsor glorifies and perpetuates negative stereotypes? Do parents know exactly what their children are listening to on the radio, or seeing on TV? Is this music a contributing factor to the violence that permeates the streets of many African American communities?

Everyone – the music executives and promoters, the TV music and radio network heads, parents and the community – must take responsibility for what our children and youth are seeing and hearing. If this music is a contributing factor to the violence that permeates the streets of our communities, there has to be a change.

Steven Johnson is the author of *Wake Up Young Black Males: Life Is What You Make It*.

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