

Notes from the Underground:

H i p - H o p ' s I N C R E A S I N G R E L E V A N C E

IVOR MILLER

The following is based on a multi-media presentation sponsored by the New York University Institute of African American Affairs and Africana Studies Program on 22 November 2002. Thanks to Jeremy Brecher, Yesenia Cardona, Christie Z-Pabón, Chino (The Source), CRASH, Jill Cutler, C. Daniel Dawson, DOZE, Peter Hobbs, IGTimes, Joe Janecek, Robin Kelley, Kyle-Style, Jayne Lovett, MICO, Laura Rice, Ted Sammons, Helen H. Tanner and ZEPHYR.

“you know the motto /
stay fluid even in staccato.”

Mos Def

Like any youth-oriented movement, what has become known as Hip-Hop is dynamic and full of contradictions. My recent book *Aerosol Kingdom* documents major figures in the evolution of early aerosol writing in New York City, an element in the culture that came to be known as Hip-Hop. Originating as a recreational activity, Hip-Hop became a means of resisting segregation and social invisibility. These objectives became obscured as Hip-Hop became packaged, international, commercial, and suburban. Although the power and joy in the forms originally created by teenagers became lost as the various elements of Hip-Hop began to be managed by media and other business interests, in fact Hip-Hop remains an expression of cultural resistance and rebellion. Aerosol writing may be the first art form created by and for youth. One of the artists, SPAR, commented: “In a world that said, you’ve got to do it *my* way, we found a way to do it *our* way.”

The process of research for *Aerosol Kingdom* revealed three major lessons: 1) Poverty is not a barrier to artistic creation. 2) Joint artistic activity without adult supervision can enable young people to overcome social prejudices. 3) The relationship between young people, urban culture, and advertising is a complicated mix in which one is often reflected in the other.

The impulse to create is so strong that even those with few resources can create art that communicates across language and geography. While we are taught to think of art as solely occupying the realm of the cultured elites, aerosol has taught us to think about the creative process in new ways.

By publicly announcing perspectives based on their own experiences, Hip-Hop artists have become heroes in their own communities. When VULCAN and SPON painted “Roughneck Reality” with gun-toting children, they were articulating things that were real to them. [see image 1].

Young people have the ability to create multi-ethnic, -gender, and -racial alliances that powerfully resist our national inheritance of class prejudice, segregation, and xenophobia. When WEST, a.k.a. JEW, and ARAB painted warfare in Jerusalem with reference to Hebraic, Arabic, and Wild Style writing, they demonstrated the power of art to transcend social conflict. [see image 2].

In the early movement, because many writers from around the city could only communicate through their paintings on the trains, one writer often had no idea what the other looked like, nor was it important to know. In fact, the mystique of not knowing became important. Writers became legendary figures to each other, which only contributed to their

self-esteem. As they met and formed crews, style innovation became their main focus and aspiration, enabling them to organize talented artists from diverse backgrounds. As many told me repeatedly, race and gender were not determining factors; talent mattered.

Artists like Mos Def not only embody the multi-ethnic dimensions of our society to which urban art forms are a response, but also are knowledgeable and proud of them. In the context of quoting Sly Stone, the work chant from the "Wizard of Oz," and a police radio alert, Mos Def ("Rock n Roll") raps:

"My grandmomma was raised on a reservation / my great grandmomma was from a plantation / they sang songs for inspiration / they sang songs for relaxation / they sang songs to take the minds off all that fucked up situation / I am, yes I am the descendant / of those folks whose / backs got broke who / fell down inside the gun smoke (Black people!) / chains on their ankles and feet/ I am descendants / of the builders of your streets / tenders to your cotton-money / I am Hip-Hop."

Mos Def insists on Hip-Hop as a form of multi-ethnic cultural resistance tied to a long history. By referring to one ancestor on a reservation, another on a plantation, Mos Def alludes to Native American and African-American mixed communities common in the past. Dr. Helen Tanner (p.c. October 2002) estimates that 90% of U.S. blacks have native American ancestry. She told me that "after 40 years of research, all black Americans—whose ancestors lived in the USA in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—that I have



Photo: Ivor Miller

1. Design by VULCAN, characters by SPON. "Roughneck Reality," 1993. Mural at the Graffiti Hall of Fame, New York City. Spray-paint on concrete wall. The top panel reads VULCAN. The mural refers to the accessibility of guns to youth in urban centers around the globe.

contacted, have described to me their Indian ancestry. In every North American Indian tribe whose history I have researched in the Great Lakes Region and eastern North America, I have found evidence of blacks living amongst them in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century" (for more, cf. Tanner. 1995: 54-55).

Many Hip-Hop artists are very aware of their own history, and the history of marginalized urban people; and they recognize the importance of that history as a basis for interpreting and understanding the brutal realities of lower class urban life. Making connections between the past and the present is a first step in raising social consciousness.

In some ways unique and contemporary, the story told in *Aerosol Kingdom* is also related to themes in twentieth century American history: popular resistance to racial and economic segregation; inadequate schools; struggles for economic justice, freedom of expression, and identity and representation in social spheres.

The evolution of Hip-Hop resembles that of jazz: it too is a means of communication

emerging from multi-ethnic urban settings. In the process, it has created an aesthetic reflecting that communication. Early jazz innovators Jelly Roll Morton and Sidney Bechet told how their music helped bring a diverse group of people closer together:

"We had all nations in New Orleans," said Jelly Roll; "But with the music we could creep in close to other people," adds Dr. Bechet "...Jazz was the hybrid of hybrids and so it appealed to a nation of lonely immigrants. In a divided world struggling blindly toward unity, it became a cosmopolitan musical argot" (Lomax 1973: 100).

Various ethnic groups in New Orleans were able to interact in positive ways because they shared a common reference point: syncopated rhythm as well as call and response interaction. The musical blending that created jazz answered in part to the need for community among immigrants. This is precisely the role

that carnival has played in many Caribbean societies: communal interaction among the descendants of Africa, Europe, Asia and Native America, through the vehicle of rhythm, call and response, and visual artistry.

The emotional possibilities of jazz—its format of individual expression within a group—made it meaningful to communities in all nations and of all creeds who now make jazz, blending it to suit their diverse needs and realities.

In the same spirit, the present generation is using Hip-Hop. Reports from Senegal hold that young Muslims are currently creating 90% of the local Hip-Hop music. In Cuba, the form has been used to express ancestral traditions from Yoruba-derived religion (*Orishas* 2000). Its genius is a simplicity allowing innovators to draw from earlier genres, fusing them and Signifying upon them while making their own statement, not unlike a historian who cites earlier works in a scholarly argument.

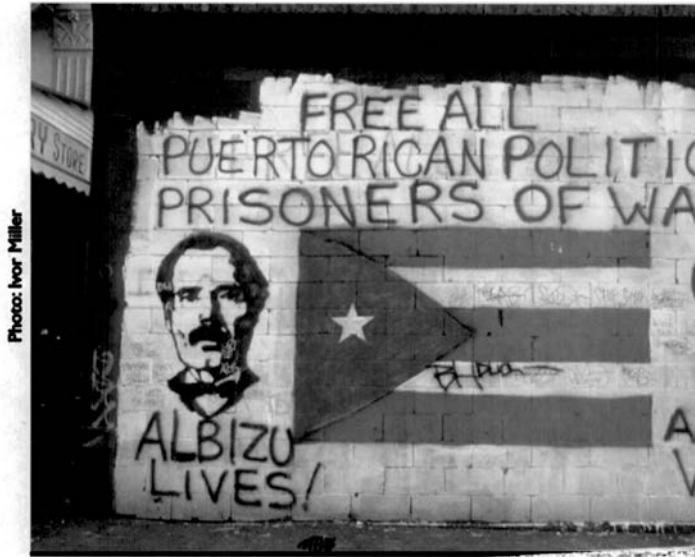
The internationalization of aerosol art has allowed its leading artists the recognition as professionals often denied them at home. The greatest public response to exhibitions in recent years has been among European museums showing works by major aerosol artists.

Among the extraordinary achievements of this community of urban artists is to have created a space for themselves in leading international galleries and museums; influenced mainstream artists like Keith Haring, Frank



Photo: Ivor Miller

2. By DOC & WEST ONE, TC5. JEW, 1993. Detail of a mural on 161st Street at Yankee Stadium, The Bronx. 15' x 40'. Spray-paint on brick wall. The aliases ARAB and JEW writ in "wild-style" lettering are superimposed on Hebrew lettering and the message "a'salaam a'lekum" (Peace be with you) in Arabic, pointing to "wild style" lettering as a cognate of earlier forms.



3. "Free Puerto Rico." Harlem, 1990s.

Stella, James Rosenquist, Roy Lichtenstein; created a global aesthetic movement transforming the very look of many cities; and inspiring the emergence of a multi-billion dollar music and fashion industry.

The careers of the original artists indicate that the relationship between young people, urban culture and advertising is a complicated mix in which one is often reflected in the other. Tagging refers to abbreviated signatures usually spray-painted on public surfaces, most often buildings, buses, trains, subway stations and highway embankments. COCO explained that "tagging" emerged in the late 1960s from politically motivated paintings insisting "Buy Black," and "Free Puerto Rico." [see images 3 and 4]

This is a marked contrast to James Baldwin's observation in "Nothing Personal"

of the empty content of advertising that promises to fulfill desires. In their rebellion, early writers used stylistic ideas from advertising but inserted their own content; they used advertising spaces to realize their work, sometimes even re-facing (painting over) advertisements.

As styles became more complex through intense competition for style mastery, the relationship to advertising remained. MITCH, for example, used its surfaces and riffed on its designs, while erasing it. [see image 5] PHASE 2 took a further step by using a billboard over the Williamsburg Bridge to contain his

work, as if he were advertising. [see image 6] One writer who found success in a leading art gallery attempted to outdo Madison Avenue by inserting his style and identity in the same contexts as corporate America. CRASH designed an illuminated sign of his name that was blazoned above Times Square in 1982. [see image 7]

If urban rebel style (in dress, speech, writ-



4. Untitled by MICO, early 1970s. Note the artist's use of the Puerto Rican and Garveyite flags

ing, movement) is an attempt to triumph over dehumanization, one can grasp how unreadable, artistic subway paintings are inherently political acts. Those disappointed that many "graffiti" messages aren't direct political state-

ments (as in MICO's "Hang Nixon", or LEE's "Stop the Bomb"), are challenged by the multi-layered letter structures that seem to camouflage more than they reveal. Unreadable names and messages with bril-

liant Vietnam War. To "bomb the system" was to saturate MTA subway cars with one's signatures. In the 1980s, certain writers were identified as "bombers," because they had mastered all disciplines of the form: insides, throw-ups, window-downs, top-to-bottoms, whole-cars, and wild-style burners, and they were "bombing the system" with their skills.

Since the 1980s, there has been reciprocal activity through advertising campaigns writers call "corporate bombing." Multi-national corporations now bomb moving vehicles, covering entire buses and train cars with their ads. [see image 8]

Some idealists—disturbed by the emergence of Hip-Hop as a commercial product—have said that Hip-Hop has become irrelevant. Perhaps the commercial product has become so; but from other sources emerge new paintings, dances, or sound tracks that knock us off our feet. Like a repeatedly rising phoenix, Hip-Hop has a way of remaking itself: when one tries to pin it down, or dismiss it, it becomes something other than what we thought. Part of this ability is related to its nature as a communal expression; if one artist lacks commitment, another will come up with fresh ideas.

Responding to the ubiquitous use of their ideas and techniques by advertising agencies, many of the artists have organized. After learning that school trained designers hired by advertising and fashion companies were using their ideas, even copying their work outright, and that companies would not hire them because they lacked art school degrees, many are creating their own companies to control their own products. Although Gap and Levi

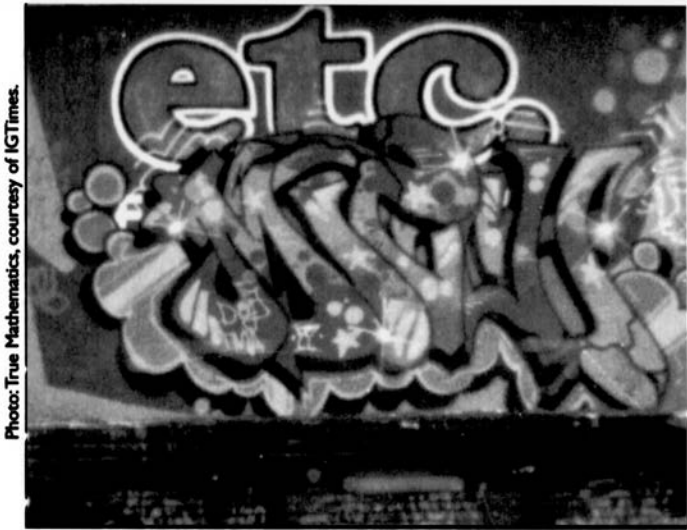


Photo: True Mathematics, courtesy of IGTimes.

5. MITCH ad image ("MITCH 77", NYC 1977).

liance of style and color affirm the success of writers in establishing a public persona impenetrable to criminological forces that would define, contain, and evaluate them as a sociological problem.

The affront to authority that the visual art represents has been met harshly by the government of New York City. Instead of working with the creative energies of the leading painters, city authorities viewed them as invading vandals who were arrested and incarcerated. Their criminalization encouraged even greater acts of rebellion in an epic battle of Third World artists against corporate America.

Early writers coined the term "bomb" to describe their activities. Bomb: To go "all out" while painting in order to acquire fame; synonymous with "damage." LEE associated the term with "saturation bombing," from the

Strauss & Co. are manufacturing Hip-Hop fashions without involving their creators, many artists like FUTURA, WAYNE, and WEST have created their own companies, where they are designing and marketing their own clothing lines.

Recordings by the Last Poets in the early 1970s were foundational to the emergence of socially conscious Hip-Hop music. In a recent recording by this group, Abiodun Oyewole (1997) declared:

We can no longer wait and contemplate
About the fate of our state
It's time to take what we make
Everything we create for our sake

Since advertisers co-opted their styles, and the mainstream media has censored perspec-



7. Crash above Times Square, 1982,

tives that reflect their experience, Hip-Hop artists attempt to control the material and content of their products.

Owned by a few wealthy companies, the news media gives us official views, or views of



6. PHASE 2. (Untitled: Billboard), 1989. Brooklyn, New York. Spray-paint on canvas. Courtesy of IGTimes. By painting in the context of a rented, thus legitimate billboard, PHASE 2 provocatively displays his work as public art.

officials, but perspectives from below are rarely heard. Current Hip-Hop music attempts to fill that gap, or at least keep the issue of information censorship alive. For example, a recent recording by Michael Franti deals with the issue of capital punishment, using the fictitious case of a black woman executed for manslaughter, who is later proved innocent. Franti protests capital punishment, as well as the content of the news media. In one track, a pirate radio station announcer whose location is unknown questions the ability of our news media to provide the information we need to understand the issues of our day. Using a funky horn-section and a latin tinge of timbales, Franti chants:

"Live and direct we come and never prerecorded
/ With information that will never be reported / disregard the mainstream, media distorted / we comin' listener supported..."

It's the same recorded message you've been singing all along/ keep handing us the bible while

you walkin' off with all the gold / the bureaucratic office sends you merry-go-rounding / while the KKK police the streets by blood hounding / interest on the credit card just keeps compounding / but the FCC can never shut this pirate sound down."

Recordings like these show that Hip-Hop is still able to speak to the realities of urban life and offer interpretations of history rarely heard in the media.

With this aim, Abiodun Oyewole is producing and distributing his own recordings, most recently *Omi Tutu* (Fresh Water 2002). By avoiding binding contracts with large companies, some artists control the content of their work. For example, Abiodun's response to post-9/11 events will not be played on commercial airwaves:

America is a terrorist
Killing the natives of the land
Killing and stealing
Has always been America's Master Plan...
Giving blankets
Contaminated with small pox
To the natives who were here
The beginning of germ warfare
The beginning of White Fear.
No respect for the land
The trees or the air we breathe
And Christianity was an excuse
To bring others to their knees...

Regarding the tendency in national politics to blame foreigners for acts of terrorism, Baldwin (1985: 387) wrote: "it is reassuring to feel that the evil came from without and is in no way connected with

the moral climate of America; reassuring to feel that the enemy sent the assassin from far away, and that we, ourselves, could never have nourished so monstrous a personality or be in any way whatever responsible for such a cowardly and bloody act. Well. The America of my experience has worshipped and nourished violence for as long as I have been on earth." Like Baldwin, artists like Abiodun express their own convictions based on their personal experiences.

Many tracks on *Omi Tutu*, including the above quoted history lesson, "Reign of Terror," work to provide information about our contemporary predicaments and how to confront them intelligently. As a method of communication used to comment upon unhappy social realities, Hip-Hop maintains its relevance. Counteracting the Hip-Hop produced by big business with its negative stereotypes, promotion of violence, racism, degradation of women, and the worship of



8. Sony advertisement on CTA train, Chicago, 2002.

money, artist controlled productions are giving highly personal and intelligent messages. Here, individual achievement is cele-

Photo by Ivor Miller.

brated within group solidarity, and the ultimate goal is education as a tool for liberation.

Hip-Hop is transformative ritual, but it cannot be relegated to the Department of Religion. Rappers today are praising their ancestors in the form of sampling earlier musicians; they pay homage to African and Native American deities. They refer to great works of literature, for example, in his composition "Hip-Hop," Mos Def mentions the novels of Ralph Ellison ("Invisible man got the whole world watchin'") and Richard Wright ("Native son, speaking in the native tongue"). They offer political analysis and critique the race and class structures of our society, as well as affirm the humanity of those who, being the descendants of slaves, continue to live at the economic bottom of our society. In short, they have created a culture, and are committed to preserving it.

From the "Temple of Hip-Hop" in New York City, KRS-ONE (2002) spoke about the discipline and morals of hip-hop and its future:

"This is Hip-Hop's spiritual base, and as a spiritual base, we look to guide the youth in that discipline. No culture is a culture unless it has principles, unless it has morals, unless we are unified, in some sort of principle, something we are not willing to step beyond, something that defines us... think about your role in Hip-Hop. Think about what you do everyday in Hip-Hop, this is not about right now, it's about twenty years from now... the tapes are rolling, the notes are being taken, this is the type of thinking we have to get into if this is going to survive. Hip-Hop appreciation week is a time of self-reflection; a time for Hip-Hoppers to ask "what am I doing to preserve the culture?"

Hip-Hop has already proven its relevance through longevity. Now into its third decade, the guidance of its leaders becomes increasingly meaningful as youth seek to understand the issues of our day as well as express their creative gifts.

SOURCES

Abiodun Oyewole & Don 'Babatunde' Eaton. 2002. "Reign of Terror." Omi Tutu. New York: Fresh Water Productions. 110 Morningside Drive, Apt. 41. NY, NY 10027.

Baldwin, James. 1985. "Nothing Personal." *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Nonfiction 1948-1985*. New York: St. Martin's/Marek. Pp. 382-393.

COCO 144. 2000. Tape recorded interview. Fairlawn, NJ. November. Revised and authorized by COCO, February, 2001.

KRS-ONE. 2002. "Preserve the Kulture." *The Mix Tape*. Koch Records. KOC-CD 8458.

The Last Poets. 1997. "Down to Now." By Piper, Hassan, Oyewole, Chuck D. *Time Has Come*. Mouth Almighty/Mercury Records. USA 314-534-467-2AD CD.

Lomax, Alan. 1973. *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and "Inventor of Jazz."* [original 1953] Berkeley: U of California Press.

Michael Franti & Spearhead. 2001. "Listener Supported." *Stay Human*. Six Degrees 657036 1048-2.

Mos Def. 1999. "Hip-Hop"; "Rock n Roll." *Black On Both Sides*. New York: Rawkus Records.

Orishas: A lo Cubano. 2000. Miami: Universal Music Latino.

SPAR. 1988. 2000. Tape recorded interview. New York, NY. December. Revised and authorized by SPAR, January, 2001.

Tanner, Helen Hornbeck. 1995. "Chained to the Colonies: Africans and Indians in Louisiana, 1768-1800." In *The Settling of North America: The Atlas of the Great Migrations into North America from the Ice Age to the Present*. Helen H. Tanner, Ed. New York: MacMillan. p. 54-55.

—. 2002, p.c. Senior Research Fellow, The Newberry Library in Chicago. October, personal communication.

CONTRIBUTORS

Charlie Ahearn is the director of *Wildstyle* and co-editor of *Yes Yes Y'all: The Experience Music Project Oral History of Hip-Hop's First Decade*.

Regina Austin is William A. Schnader Professor of Law at the University of Pennsylvania Law School. She thanks Arthur Luk for his research assistance and Manthia Diawara and Gera Peoples for their helpful comments.

Ingrid Banks is Assistant Professor of Black Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Stacey Floyd-Thomas is Assistant Professor of Ethics and Black Church Studies at Brite Divinity School, Texas Christian University.

Donette Francis is an Assistant Professor of English at Binghamton University, where she teaches African American, Caribbean, and American Immigrant Literatures. She is currently working on a book-length project about the erotics of history—focusing on the body, sexuality and citizenship in the novels of contemporary Caribbean Women writers.

Thomas Glave is the author of *Whose Song? and Other Stories* (City Lights, 2000). An assistant professor of English and Africana Studies at SUNY-Binghamton, he is presently completing a novel

and editing an anthology of contemporary Caribbean l/g/b/t/“queer” writing.

Robert Hinton is Associate Director of Africana Studies at New York University.

Toni Irving is Assistant Professor in the department of English at the University of Notre Dame. Her forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Going Public: Sexuality, Citizenship and the Black Female Subject*, focuses on the relationship between black female sexuality and the public constitution of entitlement.

Ivor Miller is Visiting Professor of African and Black Diaspora Studies at DePaul University, and is author of *Aerosol Kingdom: Subway Painters of New York City*.

Carlos Alfredo Miranda is a graduate student at New York University in the Program of American Studies. A Ford fellow and a graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, he studies nineteenth-century Afro-Cuban insurgent-writers.

Brenda Marie Osbey is a native of New Orleans and the author of four collections of poems. *ALL SAINTS: New & Selected Poems* was awarded the 1998 American Book Award. Most recently she is the recipient of a 2004 Camargo