

Cultural collision

Rap bares realities of inner-city life

By Shelley Biggs

Rap's roots stretch back to Jamaica and West Africa, but through the years the music has evolved into a new sound salted with thoughts, experiences and lifestyles that are distinctly American.

Rap has developed its own culture. African-Americans, Hispanics, Latinos, Asian Americans — these are some of the groups contributing to rap today, each blending their culture into rap by telling their side of the American experience.

For the last 15 years, rap music has been a way for inner-city youths who feel displaced by society to talk back to mainstream America. Rap artists often relate both the painful and the positive lessons they experience as the result of oppression and overt discrimination.

As lower classes in the United States slowly emerge from under the thumb of the Reagan era, so, too, do rap artists. Musicians from all walks of life are rapping rhythms designed to expose the injustices of life behind the fragile candy shell of the U.S. Constitution.

Craig Werner, a professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, found these messages important — important enough to warrant a class devoted to their study.

Werner describes rap as "the only voice crying out from the inner cities."

"Rap reflects the reality behind our democratic rhetoric," Werner said.

"In a country where the main message is 'work hard and make it,' rap is giving you a direct rapport where that is not true."

New language

Greg Tate, staff writer for the Village Voice in New York City and an authority on rap music, said rap was the most contemporary experience of African-American music thus far.

Tate, a cultural journalist and author of a collection of essays on hip-hop, titled "Flyboy in the Buttermilk," said rap music had defined new areas of language, dress, beauty, visual art and dance.

Rap music gives rappers a voice to talk about the concerns of young African-Americans in society today.

"It's kind of like a battle cry," he said. "It can be of a rebellious nature."

Werner said he was drawn to rap music and its messages in the 1970s. The idea of teaching a college course on the theory of rap came to him when he saw the American form of rap music begin to gain popularity during the early '80s.

Werner looks at rap as a collage of individuality. He also sees each class as individual, with unique interests and feelings.

He uses the artists' messages to set the theme of the class. By balancing the messages relayed through rap and by choosing distinctly individual rap artists, Werner said he could highlight most of

the immediate cultural backgrounds of students in his classroom.

"It depends on the class," Werner said. "Right now it's a good energy time in my classes, so I'm playing a lot of Ice-Cube, Yo-Yo and Public Enemy."

Werner said he tried to create a cultural mix of messages on his syllabus by choosing rappers from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. This allows him to introduce a more subtle version of ethnocentrism to which the class might not be attuned.

Tension

The contrast in the course sometimes creates tension, but Werner said that tension was the key to opening up discussion to the true message of each.

"In the beginning of the class, I highlight the tension in the most obnoxious way I can find; partly to get people out who can't handle it and to introduce controversy," Werner said.

Werner accomplishes this by playing hard-core rap, which is a "rawer" form of rap that initially is extremely insulting to people who take it too literally.

"Students sometimes get at each other's throats because they don't like each other's attitudes," he said.

But, Werner said, "When people are in a mood to accept the process, it can be a very positive experience."

Accepting and understanding rap music calls for an open mind and the ability to see all sides of the message — even if the message is insulting to a person's particular race, class or gender.

Opening up to rap's messages can be painful and uncomfortable, Werner said, and people have been known to walk out of the class — himself included.

Werner has walked out on classes before, he said, because he didn't think the students were being serious enough about the subject matter.

"Sometimes I don't like their attitudes," he said.

"Once every two years I get a class that is a pain in the ass to go to," he said. "Rap takes us past the polite surface and forces us to clarify what is being said."

"Our job as a class is to get beyond the abstract."

Message

The process of communication within the class isn't always easy because each student, based on his or her background, has a different response to messages. At times, those responses create tension that lasts through the whole semester, he said.

Werner gave the example of a Korean student who refused to listen to a cut called "Black Korea" from Ice-Cube's album "Death Certificate," in which Ice-Cube has a line that talks about burning down the businesses of Korean grocers.

"The student would not listen to the rest of the song; he refused to hear it," Werner said. "Instead of trying to figure out the message behind the song and why Ice-Cube wrote it, he wouldn't open up and listen."

Werner searches for the differences in the rap artists he teaches. Differences in race and social class usually present good topics for discussion, he said.

Public Enemy and Run-DMC are considered middle-class rappers because they are college-educated rappers, while rappers from the lower class such as Naughty By Nature and NWA rap messages exclusive to life in the ghetto.

"Ice-T raps a 'street-smart message,' the X-Clan's message is mainly Afrocentric, KRS-1 is humanist, and Schooly D is 'hard core,'" Werner said.

By mixing the artists that he teaches in his course, Werner creates a stark contrast between rappers and highlights the experiences of different races,

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Craig Werner

classes and genders. Afterward, Werner encourages further thought about the music's message.

Werner discusses the content of rap to help students understand the controversy the lyrics can generate. He explores the sociological beginnings and tries to make his students aware of the changing demographics in society today, such as the isolation of young black males.

"Poor black men are portrayed in a stereotypical fashion by the media," he said. "It's either in drugs or violence; but never in any context that they are feeling human beings."

Social niches

To dispel this media myth, Werner said, he explains the people behind rap and the impact that separations of race and class within the city have on them.

The city brings diverse cultural groups into contact with one another, Werner said, and this creates "willing and unwilling social niches."

"The inner cities create a broader, cross-cultural context within the races," Werner said. "Cities radically increase conflict — and the contrast fuels the conflict."

"Cities in the United States are multicultural, not just black and white."

Rap music often is viewed as specifically black music, but Werner said the true experience of many rap artists in the United States showed that they came from different backgrounds, and their talents and messages weren't specific to one race or class.

"Music is music," Werner said. "I resist the premise that rap is just black music. If you want to take the argument that rap derives from a specific African position,

for example, West African tradition, you have to study the culture."

Werner said hundreds of years of prejudice and oppression experienced by African-Americans conditioned rap messages and created a stage for rap in the United States.

"West African cultural conditions are not cultural-specific, they don't draw boundaries. That is, they encourage you to learn from all the different energies around you," Werner said.

When discussing issues of race and social class with his students, Werner, who is a white male, said it was important for his students to realize rap music wasn't targeted solely at whites.

Many white students are offended by the direct, negative implications of some rap music and think the music always is directed at white people, he said.

"Rap artists aren't quite as concerned with white people as we people think they are," he said.

Black and white

The problem, Werner said, is that white students don't identify immediately with some of the cultural aspects fueling rap's messages. Also, the low number of white rappers makes white people think they have no say in rap.

White people who are interested in becoming rappers should rap what they know, Werner said. He used the example of what he saw as two effective white rap groups, 3rd Bass and House of Pain, who stick primarily to their own social conditioning.

"The question comes up in class, 'Can white people sing the blues?' My answer is: 'Of course they can sing the blues — but not the black blues,'" Werner said.

"White rappers should not try to be black," he said. "The Beastie Boys sound like idiots and Vanilla Ice ought to drown himself, he sounds so lame."

Special circumstances sometimes enable white rappers to talk about experiences usually particular to blacks, he said, for example, if the white rapper is raised in a black community.

"If you come from the hood, sound like you do — if you come from the suburbs, sound like you do," Werner said.

Where rappers grow up plays an important role in how their rap messages come across. Artists don't just specify differences in class between blacks and whites, he said. They also examine the class differences within their own community.

"There is a lot of calling out of middle-class blacks," he said.

These divisions usually come in the form of social class, but also can pertain to different religions or to regions of the country.

Ghetto life

Werner said class differences created a sharp contrast in the messages of different rappers. He repeated a line from Naughty By Nature's "Ghetto Bastard" as an example of messages about class: "If you ain't ever been to the ghetto/don't



Kangol: a brand of hat

Knockin' boots: sexual intercourse

Knot: fat wad of money

Large: doing well

Loc: Loco, crazy

Louie: dollar, money

Mackin': a flamboyant lifestyle supported by women; or being in control of a situation with one's wit as the chief tool

Mad: used to describe an abundance of something

Makin' g's: earning thousands of dollars

M.C. (emcee): originally master of ceremonies; now mike controller, pertaining to a rapper

Miss Thang: a conceited woman

New Jack: a person new to a situation making an attempt at being the best

New school: the state of mind and action of people making hip-hop music

Oaktown: Oakland, California

Old School: hip-hop style of music in the late '70s and early '80s