

2009

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Recommended Citation

Longmire, Bianca (2009) "What's With *The Love Below*?" *The Corinthian*: Vol. 10, Article 19.

Available at: <http://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol10/iss1/19>

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What's With *The Love Below*?

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Is hip hop dead? We began to ask ourselves this question many years after the hip hop culture emerged. Due to the sudden shift in function from social protest and community building to gross commercialism, the images of black masculinity within the hip hop world began to change, and people began to wonder about the viability of hip hop's existence. But how can an entire culture that is ever changing and constantly shifting be cast to an eternity of non-existence? The question in itself would imply that those who critique the hip hop cultural form have the power to give it life or death. On the contrary, the very reason hip hop lives today is because of the artists and their critiques on society. Only when the two stop working in conjunction with each other will hip hop "die" so-to-speak.

According to hip hop scholar Tricia Rose, "Hip hop is a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community" (Rose 21). At the start of the hip hop movement rap lyrics were subliminally political and full of protest. This was the start of much confrontation between society and those excluded from the hip hop community. Members of this community wanted change, and they wanted it now. The messages within the early stages of hip hop were often overtly political. Hip hop mogul Grandmaster Flash set the precedent for this cultural movement of protest (George 46). His hit song "The Message" is the headliner of hip hop lyrical protests, and is known for its famous line "Don't push me, cause I'm close to the edge/ I'm trying not to lose my head." There were other artists who were associated with a more serious side of hip hop, such as the Zulu Nation. Although the reputation of hip hop has moved toward the negative side, this group was interested in attempting to produce a movement for positive identification of Africans (George 45).

Rap music is the most marketable component in hip hop culture, which as a result has produced job opportunities within urban communities in a post-industrial economy. As an art form it is "situated at the crossroads of lack and desire, so that hip hop emerges from the deindustrialization meltdown where social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect" (Rose 21). Unfortunately, contemporary rap music is linked to negative traits, such as materialism, sexism, and misleading images of African-American men. These images eventually lead to the divisions of commercial artist and political

rappers. But, to be consistent with the ideal function of hip hop culture, rap music should balance the realities of commercialism and protest.

Defining Commercial Black Masculinity

As the hip hop culture evolved, the audience expanded from a predominantly African-American/Latino audience to include a larger segment of suburban whites. In the book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Bakari Kitwana argues that “hip hop videos packaged Blackness into a three-minute snap shot” and “were critical cogs in the wheel that moved hip hop from the margins to the center of American youth culture” (Kitwana 41). Rap music provided an appealing attitude of defiance to youth audiences looking for an escape. The image of black men became attractive to suburban youth because of the unique qualities of “cool” commonly associated with them.

In his essay on the sociological construction of African-American men, Robin Kelley describes the tendency to define, “being ‘cool’... as a peculiarly black expression of masculinity” (Kelley 123). Sociologists argue that black “cool” is solely about men and how they cope with their disempowerment in racial and economic hierarchies. In this construction, “cool” is defined as possessing money and being sexually dominant. Within this construction men are able to obtain their “coolness” by being criminals and sexually exploitive. According to Kelley’s argument, those who accept this definition of black male culture as “cool” culture erase black diversity, ignore other kinds of agency, and, completely remove the idea of pleasure within black male culture. However, this simplified image of “cool” appeals to youth because of its ability to fit in with assumptions of black identity. Due to the high rate of consumption of hip hop products and images credited to youth, this interpretation of black masculinity circulates widely throughout society.

Within the hip hop world the “cool” aesthetic is manifested in the image of a thug and has spilled over into media representations as well as black male youth self-perception. The “cool” image has become a staple symbol amongst men in hip hop culture. Whether it’s demonstrated by who can buy the most cars, sell the most drugs, or get the most girls, the outside appearance of masculine authority matters the most. The media promotes this image by primarily portraying black males as villainous, emotionally calloused, and misogynistic. Popular hip hop channels MTV and BET only help to further support this image by their countless music video images of flashy, baggy-clothes-wearing male thugs who disrespect women.

The focus on sexual domination reveals another criterion in defining black masculinity. In historical terms, “masculinity is associated with the use of the body, not the mind” (Collins 176). The harder the man looks and the more “thugged” out he appears, the more a man he is seen to be. As a

consequence, well respected women are absent from hip hop imagery because of their supposed domestic responsibility to society. While real men are thugs, real women are hyper-sexualized objects whose duties are to cook and clean. There is no room for men acting in the woman's role for "hip hop culture is homophobic; and real men 'dog women'" (Prince 60). This homophobia and misogyny are built upon the idea that black men in the arena of hip hop have worked many years to protect their identity as men.

Within society in order for a male to display his authoritative power he must gain acceptance by way of materialism. As result, within hip hop, masculinity conforms to the mold of the commercialized image. The artist flaunting his material possessions serves as external sign to the rest of society that he too can achieve the "Power Dream." Hip hop has always been a patriarchal culture that is geared to men more than women. The media as a whole is charged with defining the image black masculinity. "Images matter, and just as those of black femininity changed in tandem with societal changes, those of Black masculinity are undergoing a similar process" (Collins 151). By way of outward appearance and "flossing" their material items, they prove that they, too, may climb the social ladder. With this flashy lifestyle set as the foundation, early artists contributed to the trend amongst contemporary rappers. This lifestyle also began to establish a particular type of physical image within the black community.

Although it is seen negatively, this image helps bring black males to a common ground with one another on terms they set for themselves. Patricia Hill Collins demonstrates that these terms are class specific. She states, "... The depiction of thug life in hip hop remains one of the few places Black poor and working-class men can share their view of the world in public" (Collins 159). Lacking access to other forms of economic power and social esteem, to be a "gangsta" or thug shows power and helps them gain respect amongst the community. Hip hop artists have been afraid to step outside this image in fear that they would lose respect; but artist Andre Benjamin's soft core image contradicts the stereotypes of the hip hop man.

Who is this Andre 3000?

Hip Hop artist Andre Benjamin, also known as Andre 3000, is a rebel rapper who steps outside the physical cast of black masculinity to market his music. Stylistically, Andre 3000 has a quirky, unique, old school type of image. From the moment we step into the album we hear a one of a kind classical ballad, reminiscent of Frank Sinatra, which immediately establishes an expanded version of hip hop masculinity. Accompanying this introduction we get a second taste of Andre with a mixed melody of Sinatra alongside an unexpected psychedelic guitar segment. Through his music, he steps

outside of the box with a one of a kind style. The absence of vibrating bass beats and thoughtful lyricism separates him from the others within the rap genre. Although Andre 3000 has stepped outside the norms of the hip hop image, his lyrical concepts share some of the same thematic concerns of his fellow rappers. The self-produced album *The Love Below* (counterpart album to OutKast duo member Big Boi's *Speakerboxxx*) delves into the complex structure of black masculinity as it illustrates how sexuality and gender roles are enlaced into the multiple facets of hip hop culture. *The Love Below* represents how both creative musical structure and social and commercial context are pieced together to construct the identity of the hip hop culture.

As the album unfolds, Andre 3000 presents two models of masculinity, one being the hyper-masculine type of hip hop culture and the other exhibiting totally unfamiliar behaviors and attitudes of black masculinity. The first persona, "Ice Cold," represents the typical commercialized, "hard," male that is most often displayed throughout hip hop. The other persona, Andre 3000, displays a more idealized image that includes the exalting of women (in the excerpt "God," he discovers God is a woman), as well as seeking a true partner, which contradicts the normal characteristics of using a woman solely for sexual purposes.

Symbolic Sex

Sex has become the staple symbol of hip hop culture. Commercial hip hop culture has been geared toward "masculine perspectives" more than feminine. Typically, the narratives emphasize men's power—especially sexual power—over women's. From this perspective women must rely on sexual manipulation and self-objectification in relationships with men. Additionally, while women are presented primarily as sexual objects, they are also subject to denigration for the same sexual behaviors that men are praised for.

Both the bad girl image and the denigrating portrayal of women taking advantage of men are seen in the song "Roses." In this song, a gold-digging woman, Caroline, is put on "Front Street" for her mistreatment of men. The irony of the situation is that women who use sex as a route to gain economic power are looked at negatively, while the men are praised for their ability to attract women because of their money. Although in this song, Caroline is physically attractive, her outward traits do not give her power over men because at the end of the day she is only woman, whose main value is as sexual object. In the following lyrics from "Roses," Andre 3000 signifies that girls who are after guys only for money are perceived as tramps or "hoes."

"Well she's got a hottie's body, but her attitude is potty
When I met her at a party, she was hardly acting snotty
I said shorty would you call me

She said "Pardon me, are you ballin'?"
I said "Darling, you sound like a prostitute pausing"
Oh so you one of them freaks
Get geeked at the sight of an ATM receipt"

As the lyrics convey, women who overstep the passive roles assigned to them through the social construction of femininity will risk being cast aside. This double standard constrains women's sexual agency while reinforcing the social construction of masculinity by emphasizing the idea that women are sexual beings meant for the pleasure of men.

Women continue to be objectified through men's emotional disconnection. From the "thug" male perspective power is displayed through sexual conquest and the accumulation of material possessions rather than through emotionally fulfilling relationships. In his autobiographical novel, From Pieces to Weight, Curtis Jackson, aka 50 Cent, explains this unequal relationship to a friend: "You wanna be in love, you can go ahead and be in love. I'd rather be in money" (75). 50 Cent states this in reference to a girl he was dating and his sense that his hustle was far more important than any girl who could show him affection.

Illustrating the male perspective common in commercial hip hop, the hit song "Hey Ya," describes a hit and run type of love. Andre 3000, in his "Ice Cold" persona, declares that "separate's always better/ when there's feelings involved." Although there are no problems in their relationship and his "baby don't mess around/ because she loves [him] so," being single is still a far better alternative to the potential emasculation of a committed relationship. So he continues to "fight the feelin" which seems to complicate relationships between men and women. Getting involved is not his intention, as he proclaims that he "don't want to meet your daddy/ just want you in my caddy/ don't want to meet your momma/ just want to make you cumma." Furthermore, the vulgarity at the end of this rhyme reiterates that sex is the primary reason for being with women.

Another song, "Spread," displays this same view of women, stating:
"I'm too young to be
Settling down
Quick to change my mind tomorrow
so now can I borrow your timid torso
more so than your soul
And this beat gotta be how I roll
f**k the rhythm
Tuck the rhythm
Under you bosom
You're the prism"

In these lyrics the persona publicly states that he is “too young to be/ settling down” and that he can easily move from one woman to another. The focus on the torso reduces the whole woman to a part, an object that he can appropriate to demonstrate his own sexual power. On the other hand, the last lines “tuck the rhythm/ under the bosom,/ you’re the prism” seems to present an alternative perspective that calls on the audience to reflect on the many dimensions of emotional positions available to men.

A Woman’s Worth

If we examine those songs on *The Love Below*, that are written from the perspective of the Andre persona, one finds that they reflect an expanded view of the designated roles of men and women in hip hop. In them men recognize that women are an asset to the man’s existence and they are seen as sources of emotional pleasure rather than just sexual objects. For example, “Behold a Lady” is a song that shows this respect for the woman who upholds herself in the streets. Honoring the woman as a lady contrasts with the typical identities associated with women in the hip hop world. As the title implies, the song recognizes the lady as a counterpart to the man, describing her as “the yin to [his] yang.”

Finally, “Prototype,” a ballad track, is a lyrical ode to women that displays a more inclusive notion of black masculinity. In contrast to the song “Spread,” which displays a more physical attraction to women, in this slow jam, the Andre 3000 persona constructs the idea of a man willing to be emotionally involved. The song provides a counter to the representation of sex used to signify power rather than for emotional satisfaction. With the lyrics, “I think I’m in love again/ today must be my lucky day baby/ you are the prototype,” he reiterates his love and desire for a pleasurable intimate experience not meant to do anything but comfort the two engaged in it. The fact that sexual pleasure is not the primary goal of rappers is important because it counteracts the image that sex is the driving force within the hip hop community.

So what’s really with *The Love Below*?

Andre 3000’s work on *The Love Below* clearly illustrates how sexuality and gender roles continue to impact the images associated with the hip hop world. The dual connotations of the title—the physical “love” which resides below the belt versus the emotional expression of love hidden below the surface of hip hop masculinity—implies that the concerns of the hip hop world will continue to focus on sexuality but not be defined by sexuality alone. As the culture continues to flourish, the styles will continue to evolve, but thematic concerns will always “reflect and speak to the political and social world of inner city communities” (Kelley 131). At the same time, by asking us to rethink

the social construction of masculinity, the work shows that "...expressive cultures are not simply mirrors of social life or expressions of conflicts, pathos, and anxieties"; they may also shape it (Kelley 131). With his diamond-selling album, Andre Benjamin has proven that audiences are ready to embrace the hip hop culture's many layers and complex representations of masculinity that are deeper than drug dealing, theft, and promiscuous sexuality common in rap music shown by the media.

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