

HIP HOP AS A MIRROR OF OUR TIMES

The popular culture has always been a mirror of the streets. Some impressive scholarship claims that even before Shakespeare, the language of those struggling to succeed in unequal society worked its way into literature, art, and music. Grotesque and salacious art was found on the island of Crete and in the jungles of India long before sexual organs were publicly displayed in the west.

Crude humor, sometimes bordering on racist, has been part of the pantheon of comedians and social icons for millennia.

Now that we are preoccupied with the language of Don Imus, the question arises naturally as to whether he is any worse than other media entertainers pushing the outer limits of civilized discourse. The answer is that he is not but does that exonerate him from good taste and decency? Should we be striving for better than sexism and racism in our mass media? Does it make any difference if the messenger is simply repeating what the victim's of hate and derision say about themselves?

Anybody who ever heard a "borscht belt" comedian in the Catskill Mountains know that no one was harder on the Jewish people than the comedians who crisscrossed "the mountains" in the 50's and 60's. Yet, Borat, who professes to be Jewish, has gone beyond humor to a self deprecating hatred that would make anybody with reasonable sensibility sick to their stomach. His movie presents the question as to how crude and offensive can a person be about his own culture in order to make the point that people are bigots.

We must ask ourselves whether it is okay for a rich white man to talk about African Americans and women using the words of the Ghetto? Do hip hop musicians strip away the immunity of civility by selling the majority of their records to white kids? Is it a tribute to the Black community that its

cultural norms have been so widely accepted by middle school kids and Don Imus or is it embarrassing because the minority community has so much more to offer America? The African Americans that I know who sit on important government bodies and serve in elected office are every bit as repulsed by the speech of the streets as they are by Don Imus. My parents were not happy about the language of the gangs in Hells Kitchen when it began to reach the junior high schools in suburban Long Island.

We should not and cannot censor music, literature or the arts when it repeats the language and advances the mores of a particular class of people and makes us uncomfortable. I almost left the theatre when I went to see the ThreePenny Opera in New York City, the great work of Kurt Weill which was filled with simulated sex, bad language and tasteless homophobic behavior. The real shock was that sitting two rows in front of me was Paul Simon who obviously thought that this particular piece of Broadway trash was worth seeing. Maybe he was just embarrassed to leave, as I was.

When my kids reached “teenage-hood” I started to listen to the lyrics of the songs they love. I was thunderstruck. I could not believe the dark, angry and sometimes sinister words written by young people who are influential to other young people. We live in a day and age, not like some other periods in our world’s history, when the limits of behavior are being severely tested. The answer is not to ban the popular culture but rather to understand where those values come from.

The argument was once made in Sparta that a society constantly at war was likely to spread values of violence among its people. Perhaps we have become a culture used to spewing out hatred, violence and machoism without teaching our children the values of respect and refinement. If the streets are a reflection of our society, then what are we going to do to improve the street culture?

When politicians need to survive by raising money from every scoundrel under the sun, it is no surprise that voices for positive change are stilled. Don

Imus is not a villain but he is the unresponsive mirror of a civilization which has drifted away from its moorings.

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