

The Persistence of Ethnicity in African American Popular Music: A Theology of Rap Music

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The racial oppression of black people in many ways has fueled and shaped black musical forms in America. One example is the blues which originated in the rural South among poor, nonliterate, agrarian African Americans.¹ In the North the music became more formalized, and singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Ida Cox, and Sarah Martin became known as the queens of the “classic blues.” Another musical genre is jazz, which was largely based on the twelve-bar blues harmonic structure and phrasing. It was more “polished” than the earlier New Orleans jazz at the turn of the century, and its major influences came from New York City, Chicago, and Kansas City. Finally, on the religious front, gospel music was in its early stages of development around the time early blues was evolving. Influenced by blues and jazz, gospel was revolutionary (and controversial) in its combination of drums and fast, rocking rhythms.

As evidenced in jazz, blues, and gospel of the early twenties and thirties, black musicians borrowed heavily from other black musical forms to (re)create new forms. As the decades progressed, this “borrowing” resulted in such new genres as rhythm and blues, soul, and contemporary gospel; and jazz progressed into swing, bebop, cool, funky/hard bop, third stream, and free form. The unifying values found in each of these African American musical forms comprise a black music aesthetic which includes artistic sincerity (conviction), improvisation, innovation, percussiveness, rhythm and syncopation, dynamic spirituality, and the spoken word. Additionally, each of these forms is an interpretation of the historical experience of blacks in American society, and therefore can be read as history. More recently, a new black musical form called “rap,” or hip hop, has evolved from the contemporary urban descendants of southern blacks of the Great Migration. Like its black musical precursors, rap music also describes black American experience, but from an entirely new perspective: the perspective of late twentieth-century urban black youths.

Rap music is an expressive style which emerged in New York City in the late seventies and early eighties. The leading figures of rap music were young black men who were making a living spinning records for local clubs and house parties. "Disc jockeying," or "deejaying," became an important source of income for these men; therefore, intense competition for jobs among deejays resulted in their having to find new ways to defeat their opponents while trying to win the admiration of the crowd. In this attempt, deejays began making percussive instruments out of audio equipment like the record turntable. One technique called "scratching" involved spinning a record backwards and forwards very fast while the needle was in the groove.²

As deejays found it more difficult to operate the records and rap at the same time, "M-Cs," or rappers, were employed. MCs would put on a show for the crowd, dancing in front of the deejays and bouncing lines off of each other. MCs further created new percussive sounds by vocalizing on a microphone, while deejays continued to (re)create new songs by "cutting and mixing" older popular songs. The poetical vocal dubbing by the MCs with a microphone over pre-recorded music evolved into rap music.³

In addition to artistic sincerity, improvisation, innovation, percussiveness, the power of the word, rhythm and syncopation, and spirituality, another aspect of the black music aesthetic is its theology. Black music, in general, tends to be naturally theological, says black theologian James Cone, because in black music a people's deepest aspirations and beliefs are manifested as the divine Spirit moves them toward unity and self-determination.⁴ My intent is to show that a theology of contemporary black experience is both implicit and explicit in a portion of rap. This will be done by examining the historical and thematic relationship between rap and blues and the social contexts of both forms in view of the theological connections that have already been shown between the spirituals and the blues. When I refer to a theology of rap, I am speaking of *theology* as the rational (and partly subjective) discourse reflecting on human encounter with Ultimate Reality (or God) and the interpretation of that experience in faith and practice, which includes the study of religious beliefs of individuals and groups in historical and contemporary life.⁵ In this respect, the theological themes that will be examined include concrete truth, self-affirmation, social and political liberation, (the burden of) freedom, and knowledge and education. My search for the theological themes in rap will consist largely of a comparative analysis of the blues in order to disclose these core concerns as primarily expressed in the lyrics of two contemporary rap artists, Public Enemy and Kool Moe Dee.

Early blues, the true foundation of all secular black musical forms in America, was representative of, and created by and for, poor male and female ex-slaves in southern rural communities. In African American musical history we actually come full circle in rap which, though dating back only to the mid-seventies in its current form, is also representative of a culturally specific group: poor African American adolescents and young adults in northern urban

communities. In spite of the obvious differences, the historical, political, social, theological, and cultural frameworks are similar to that of its progenitor, the blues. Whether crooning the blues or rapping the blues, the secular mode of black musical expression has been an effective means by which blacks have voiced their highest concerns regarding the inequities in American life.

The blues, in contrast with the spirituals, express conditions associated with what James Cone refers to as the “burden of freedom.”⁶ Ex-slaves had to cope with the intersection of racism and its side effects of poor housing, inadequate education, and limited job opportunities. Many of the early communities of former slaves revolved around the sharecropping system, an arrangement that kept black men and women in debt to their white employers virtually all year around. Such conditions were ripe for the “ghettoization” of freedpersons in the South and the creation of the blues. Although the circumstances are not exactly alike, ghettoization still persists today amidst “inner city” housing in large urban areas. Sylvester Monroe, in his book about growing up in the Robert B. Taylor Homes in Chicago during the 1960s, tells of living conditions somewhat similar to those of the southern exslaves. The themes of despair and poverty, and being caged in, predominate. It is out of this environment that rap music and its expression of “inner city” black reality emerges:

Trey-nine was shorthand for 3919 South Federal Street, the northernmost in a two-mile Stonehenge of red-and-cream brick high rises called the Robert Taylor Homes in memory of the first black director of the Chicago Housing Authority. Mayor Richard Daley had cut the ribbon in 1962, with a homily on the great liberal dream of public housing; it was still thought, in that innocent time, that you could deliver the poor from their desperation by heaping up great piles of bricks and mortar around them. . . .

But for too many of the newcomers, it turned out to be a place where hope died. Projects like the Taylors, in Chicago and elsewhere, were built by design in those parts of town where black people already lived and were intended to keep them there. Rather than break up the ghetto, the planners rebuilt it, straight up, with all its poverty and all its debilities piled sixteen stories high in crowded vertical neighborhoods. Other projects rose to the north and south of the Taylors, and an expressway was routed past them, effectively cutting them off from the surviving white neighborhoods nearby. The twenty-eight buildings that made up the Taylor Homes became a city within a city, poor, black, insular, dependent, and dangerous. . . .⁷

Burden of Freedom

Even though the meaning of “freedom” to blacks of the 1870s was somewhat different to blacks of the 1980s, rap musicians (like the creators of the blues) are commenting on the “burden of freedom.” The Taylor Homes residents of the sixties, seventies and even today are “free”—in abstract terms—but they are not fully free, to choose the kinds of schools they want to attend, in what neighborhoods and homes they wish to live, or the occupations they would like to pursue. “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five further depicts the same burden of freedom described above in a story about young black people and the decisions they make because of ghetto life:

A child is born with no state of mind
Blind to the ways of mankind
God’s smiling on you and he’s frowning too
‘Cause only God knows what you go through
Now you grow up in the ghetto livin’ second rate
And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate . . .
You’ll admire all the number booktakers, thugs,
pimps and
pushers, and the big money makers
Driving big cars, spending twenties and tens
And you want to grow up to be just like them
Smugglers, scrappers, burglars, gamblers, pick pocket
peddlers, even pan handlers
And you want to grow up to be just like them
You say I’m cool, I’m no fool, and you wind up
dropping
out of high school
Now you unemployed, all nonvoid, walkin’ round
like you
Pretty Boy Floyd
Turn stick up kid, look what you done did
Got sent up for an eight year bid
Now your manhood is took and you’re name tag
Spent the next few years as an undercover fag
Being used and abused to serve like hell
Till one day you were found hung dead in a cell.⁸

The kind of freedom very much on the minds of Grandmaster Flash and “inner city” black youths who live in projects like the Taylor Homes is identical in spirit to the “freedom” explored by rapper Kool Moe Dee in “Pump Your Fist.” In this rap, Kool Moe Dee not only recognizes that blacks live in a racist society which represses their human potentiality, he also recognizes that a “slave mentality”⁹ is not entirely the “fault” of white oppressors. Liberation, which largely involves a psychological mindset of determination, is the responsibility of the oppressed. When Kool Moe Dee says that drugs are a “weak man’s game,” the bottom line is that crack and cocaine kill people regardless of race:

We feel the wrath/From what happened in the past
 Has made us walk a path
 Made by slavery/No bravery
 We lost/Our unity our source
 Of power and we lost/All race pride/In our Holocaust
 Now it's my creed/I'm from a stronger breed
 My ancestors indeed had to bleed
 Whipped "till they were freed"
 And now/I look back and say
 How did we allow/Physical slavery
 I just don't ever again/See it now I vow
 But are we free/In actuality
 Let's talk reality?Can't you see/The slave mentality
 It's a sickness
 That eats you up like cancer/And money's not the
 answer
 Won't advance ya
 Don't take a chance you/Lame
 Selling drugs for fame/That's the weak man's game
 It's a shame/You got the chains on your brain.¹⁰

Concrete Truth

As evidenced in Kool Moe Dee's lyric, the burden of freedom is a central concern of late twentieth-century rappers just as it was to early twentieth-century bluespeople. In Cone's theological analysis of the blues, he notes that blues is an "artistic response to the chaos of life," the experience of being black in a racist, sexist, and oppressive society: "No black person can escape the blues, because the blues are an inherent part of black existence in America."¹¹ Rap music falls into this lineage because it too is a music created by a societal constituency that cannot escape "the blues." Just as Cone comments that "the blues and truth are one reality of the black experience,"¹² so are rap and truth a unified reality in today's black experience. Cone further notes that the "blues are not abstract; they are concrete. They are intense and direct responses to the reality of the black experience."¹³ So, blues truth was concrete truth just as is the case with rap music today. The rap group Public Enemy illustrates this regard for concrete truth-telling in their rap "911 is a Joke." The tone of the rap is sarcastic and sardonic, but it addresses a serious problem in "inner cities"—the emergency public services not responding to calls in black and Hispanic neighborhoods:

Now I dialed 911 a long time ago
 Don't you see how late they're reactin'
 They only come and they come when they wanna
 So get the morgue truck embalm the goner
 They don't care 'cause they stay paid anyway
 They teach ya like an ace they can't be betrayed
 I know you stumble with no use people

If you life is on the line then you're dead today
 Late comings with the late comin' stretcher
 That's a body bag in disguise y'all I betcha
 I call 'em body snatchers quick they come to fetch
 ya?
 With an autopsy ambulance just to dissect ya
 They are the kings 'cause they swing amputation
 Lose your arms, your legs to them its compilation
 I can prove it to you watch the rotation
 It all adds up to a funky situation.¹⁴

In Jon Spencer's theomusicological analysis of blues, he notes that the "religion of the blues was not morally opaque as critics have claimed; it was oppugnant."¹⁵ He suggests that one form of "evil" blues radically oppugned was Jim Crow ethics: the ethics of discrimination and oppression based on race. This concrete truth is the historical reality of African Americans. Public Enemy, in their rap "Pollywanacraka," comment on the hypocrisy of this "system" including white supremacy and the fear of miscegenation ("mixing of the races"):

I try to tell my people
 There should not be any hatred
 For a brother or sister
 Whose opposite race they've mated
 No man is God
 And God put us all here
 But this system has no wisdom
 The devil split us in pairs
 And taught us White is good, Black is bad
 And Black and White is still too bad. . . .¹⁶

Self-affirmation

Contemporary rappers, like early bluespeople, are responding to the "burden of freedom," in part by relaying portrayals of reality, or concrete truths, to their audiences through their personal experiences. They also relay positive portrayals of themselves as a means of affirming their personhood (and vicariously the personhood of their people) in a world that is constantly telling them they are "nobodies." The affirmation of "black somebodiness" is perhaps best illustrated in boasting. The epitome of boasting in rap is making merit of one's ability to rap, to control and manipulate "the word." A good example is Special Ed's "I'm the Magnificent":

I'm the magnificent, with the sensational style
 And I can go on and on for like a mile
 A minute, 'cause I get in it like a car and drive
 And if the record is a smash I can still survive
 'Cause I'm the man of steel on the wheel that you're
 steerin'
 Or rather playing on the record that you're hearin'.¹⁷

Another rapper, MC Lyte, not only boasts of her own creative ingenuity, she also complains that “sucker MCs” want to copy her style:

The dope, def rhyme that is always being taken
By a sucker MC who wants to be like me
No trait of originality . . .

So like I said before go for yours sucker.¹⁸

Kool Moe Dee, in his rap “I Go to Work,” perhaps outboasts them all regarding his ability to rap. He likens himself to an architect who “builds rhymes” that are so tall “skyscrapers look like atoms.” His “rhymes,” he boasts, “built a nation of rappers” and that is is the “daddy” of them all:

Daddy’s home/Start the race
I’m coming in first/With each verse/ I build a curse
So rappers can’t capture Moe Dee’s rapture/After I
got ya
I have to slap ya/Senseless with
Endless rhymes don’t pretend this
Is anything short of stupendous/And when this rhyme
is done
Your mind will become/So trapped in the rap.¹⁹

Knowledge and Education

Boasting is one of the primary ways rappers affirm their “somebodiness” in a society that is constantly telling them they are nobody. Using explicitly religious language, Kool Moe Dee advocates another means to self-affirmation, and this is the acquiring of knowledge and a spiritual foundation:

Knowledge and wisdom/And understanding
Possessed by gods/Transferred to man in
A script or a book/A scripture that looks
Like a Biblical writing/Inviting a hook
Of a song sing along with a strong
Subliminal/Message divesting all men from
Criminal/Acts of the Devil
Revealed and reveled
Designed to recline the mind to a lower level
With no spiritual level
Read the Holy Koran/Or the Bible
Because it’s liable/To be a revival
For the weak who seek power it’ll bring
Infallible power/Knowledge is king.²⁰

Kool Moe Dee suggests that knowledge and wisdom from sacred scripture will send subliminal messages to black people to divest themselves from the “acts of the Devil,” which are the divine evils of drug pushing, emotional abuse, physical violence, hypocrisy, and greed. He claims that knowledge will give power to the dispossessed of society because evil feeds off of an apathetic mind:

Evil feeds/Off a source of apathy
Weak in the mind/And of course you have to be

Less than a man/More like a thing
 No knowledge your nothin'/Knowledge is king.²¹
 He also states strongly in "Pump Your Fist" that "knowledge is the danger zone"
 of power that causes "liars, bigots and hypocrites to panic":
 Knowledge is the danger zone
 Liars and bigots and hypocrites start to panic
 They get frantic
 Power generated by the truth
 Time to educate the youth
 The lust of money
 Is out of control. . . .²²

In short, Kool Moe Dee believes scriptural knowledge (self-empowerment and self-affirmation) inspired by God is the answer to doing battle with the "acts of the Devil." He also views the love of empty fame and fortune as "evil," and he tells his people that they can transcend such temptations through knowledge, because where "knowledge is king" it is a "spiritual thing." With "knowledge as king," he says, the souls of black people cannot be bought:

All praise fame/Positions
 Wants to be a star/Drive a big car
 Live bourgeois/And won't know who ya are
 Lost in the source/And praising the dollar
 Whether your faith is/Christ or Allah
 The knowledge of God/Will teach one thing
 The dollar is moot/Knowledge is the king.²³

Social and Political Liberation

In comparison to Kool Moe Dee, Public Enemy has always been controversial in its handling of issues in the black community. They too rap about liberation from oppression, but their manner of discourse—honest and sarcastic—intimidates most conservative-minded people. Their spirituality is, as Cornel West would say, "combative." They tell the "truth" as they have witnessed it, and their conclusive advice to their people is that, with the weapon of knowledge, they must "fight the powers that be":

Now that you've realized the prides arrived
 We got to pump the stuff to make us tough
 From the heart/It's a start, a work of art
 To revolutionize make a change nothin's strange
 People, people we are the same/No we're not the same
 Cause we don't know the game
 What we need is awareness, we can't get careless
 My beloved lets get down to business
 Mental self defensive fitness
 (Yo) bum rush the show/You gotta go for what you know

Make everybody see, in order to fight the powers that be.²⁴

The “powers that be” are what Kool Moe Dee called the “acts of the devil”: the white supremacist ideology that has kept black people subjugated and forced “the blues” to be reincarnated as rap. But the prerequisite to “going for what you know” in order to revolutionize black reality in America is “awareness.” Public Enemy is *aware*; they clearly see the state of affairs in America, and they tell the truth—the blues truth—regardless of who is listening.

Public Enemy also speak out specifically about the social and political liberation of men in the black community. In their “Brothers Gonna Work It Out,” Public Enemy prophesy that “one day” black men are going to learn how to serve as role models for each other, and by acting as role models they will work out the problems that plague black men:

Brothers that try to work it out
They get mad, revolt, revise, realize
They’re super bad
Small chance a smart brother’s
Gonna be a victim of his own circumstance
Sabotaged, Shellshocked, rocked and rules
Day in the life of a fool
Like I said before to live it low
Life take your time, time ya go slow
Look here, not a thing to fear
Brother to brother not another as sincere
Teach a man how to be a father
To never tell a woman he can’t bother
You can’t say you don’t know
What I’m talkin’ ‘bout
But one day . . . brothers gonna work it out.²⁵

Whether is is with the more direct religious language of Kool Moe Dee or with the “combative spirituality” of Public Enemy, rappers through their boasting affirm black personhood and through their truth-telling address matters of theological concern in the black community, the nation, and the world. As we are confronted with Kool Moe Dee’s teaching and Public Enemy’s “combative spirituality,” we can hear the profound theological reflection of a generation, if we listen!

Notes

¹William Barlow, *“Looking Up at Down”: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 1989), 4-5.

²Madeline Slovenz, “Rock the House,” *New York Folklore* 14 (1988): 151-63.

³Dick Hebdige, *Cut ‘n’ Mix* (London: Comedia Books, 1987), 138.

⁴James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1980), 6-7.

⁵*Webster's New World Dictionary of American English*, 3rd college edition, 1988.

⁶Cone, 112.

⁷Sylvester Monroe and Peter Goldman, *Brothers: Black and Poor* (New York: William Morrow, 1988), 35-37.

⁸Grandmaster Flash and The Furious Five, "The Message," *Hip Hop Greats: Twelve Classic Raps* (Roulette Records, 1986).

⁹The phrase "slave mentality" is discussed in Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) *Bluespeople* (New York: Morrow Quill, 1963), 57: "[T]he post-slave black society in America was a completely unique thing to the ex-slaves as well as to the rest of America. There was also such a thing as the "slave mentality," which had a large part in shaping the new black society. By "slave mentality" I mean what had been the most socially unfortunate psychic adjustments that the slave had made during two hundred years of slavery. The very speed with which the white South dealt with the ex-slave's formal aspirations to complete freedom and social and economic autonomy can be attributed to the negative influence of the slave mentality upon the great mass of Negroes. Two hundred years of bending to the will of the white man had to leave its mark. And that mark was indelibly on the very foundations of the new separate black society."

¹⁰Kool Moe Dee, "Knowledge is King," *Knowledge is King* (Zomba Records, 1989).

¹¹Cone, 114-15.

¹²Cone, 114.

¹³Cone, 120.

¹⁴Public Enemy, "911 is a Joke," *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam, 1990).

¹⁵Jon Michael Spencer, *Protest and Praise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 115.

¹⁶Public Enemy, "Pollywanacraka."

¹⁷Special Ed, "I'm the Magnificent," *Youngest in Charge* (Profile, 1989).

¹⁸MC Lyte, “Stop, Look, Listen,” *Eyes on This* (Atlantic, 1989).

¹⁹Kool Moe Dee, “I Go to Work.”

²⁰Kool Moe Dee, “Knowledge is King.”

²¹Kool Moe Dee, “Pump Your Fist.”

²²Kool Moe Dee, “Knowledge is King.”

²³Kool Moe Dee, “Knowledge is King.”

²⁴Public Enemy, “Fight the Powers that Be.”

²⁵Public Enemy, “Brothers Gonna Work It Out.”