

The Silent Listener

by Nicholas P. Christy III

In 2006, rapper Nas controversially asserted, "Hip-hop is dead," through the title track of his eighth original album. When he coined the phrase, which has now become a slogan for many in certain sections of the hip-hop community, Nas aimed his statement at the people in control of the music industry. When he rapped, "Everybody sounds the same / Commercialize the game / Reminiscing when it wasn't all business / It forgot where it started / So we all gather here for the dearly departed," he suggested that industry big shots and record companies had lost sight of the artistic side of hip-hop and viewed it solely as another lucrative media. Consequently, the artists at the top of the game were not necessarily the ones with the most talent, but instead the ones who would be most marketable for record label owners. This mentality leads to a "formula" for the type of artist record labels should seek to promote, thus perpetuating a cycle of similar hip-hop acts. As someone who considers music to be his most deeply rooted passion, I constantly find myself questioning the music industry and the messages of its artists. However, this time I caught myself blindly following Nas's words thinking, "If he says it, it's true."

Despite my initial agreement with Nas, my opinion on the matter shifted after reading an article published in an online forum for *XXL Magazine*, which has served as a monthly almanac for all things hip-hop for over a decade. When Nas stated that hip-hop was dead, he was referring to the artists and business executives at the forefront of the culture. However, the author of the online article disagreed with Nas. Although the two agree that the state of Hip-Hop is in decline, the author says it is "far from dead." As the article continues, the author points out an interesting, new perspective: "It's not the artists that are the lifeblood of hip-hop, but the masses that demand the art," contrary to Nas's claims. "[H]ip-hop is dead because its viewers have become cowards who are too scared to demand hip-hop programming....Hip-hop can still be a force for good, but only if it remains in the hands of the bravehearts and courageous" ("Hip-Hop Is Not Dead"). After first reading the article, I was very intrigued by the assertion that the consumer was actually more powerful than the artist or even the record company, but as I thought more about it, I realized how true it was. Although the industry executives seem to be in control, it is ultimately the public who either embraces or rejects what is broadcast. If the majority of the people who were listening to the music were more concerned with the content, the record companies would be too, but that is not the case.

In the 2006 documentary *Before the Music Dies*, Andrew Shapter investigates the music industry, interviewing artists and executives to find out more about the business side of mainstream music and the ways record companies promote their artists. In the documentary, an anonymous Clear Channel executive gives insight into the corporate rationale behind radio programming. The executive points out that the music industry is a business in which the primary concern for each label is to make as much money as possible off their artists, and they can only do so with positive support from the fans. The Clear Channel official states that record labels and radio stations "constantly want to hit the listener with things that are familiar [to them]" (*Before the Music Dies*). The anonymous spokesperson goes on to sum up the industry's mentality by saying, "If the masses are staying, we're winning." This shows that the industry's big players are not concerned with the content, but instead with the profit, leaving it up to the listener to sort out what is relevant and what is not. An example of this, as Associated Press music writer Nekesa Mumbi Moody explains, is DJ Webstar and Young B's "Chicken Noodle Soup." The catchy tune--accompanied by a convulsive, limb-flailing dance--which features Young B's seemingly nonsensical repetition of the words "chicken noodle soup, chicken noodle soup, chicken noodle soup with a soda on the side" reached number forty-five on the Billboard Charts in 2006. Despite the success of the song, Moody cites music critic Rashod D. Ollison of the *Baltimore Sun* as accusing it of adding to the "growing minstrelization of rap music" (Moody). While many complain that popular hip-hop is not the music that best represents the culture, I realized that the issue is not a matter of record companies "killing" hip-hop, but rather that the true fans are not doing enough to promote what once stood at the core of the genre.

Hip-hop was originally created in the mid 1970s in the South Bronx of New York City as a means of expression within the black and Hispanic community. Rappers' lyrics aimed to describe certain communal or individual situations, often relating to social oppression or the harsh circumstances emblematic of the "hood." In his legendary six-and a-half minute track, "The Message," hip-hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash depicted his surroundings by rapping,

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder / How I keep from going under / Broken glass everywhere / People pissing on the stairs, you know they just don't care / I can't take the smell, can't take the noise / Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice / Rats in the front room, roaches in the back / Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat.

This verse reflects typical 1970s hip-hop lyrics. While hip-hop gained popularity between then and the early 1990s, the main consumers of hip-hop music were the black and Hispanic members of urban communities, for they felt the music reflected stories relevant to their life experiences. According to Davey D, a widely respected hip-hop expert and music columnist for the *San Jose Mercury News*, by the mid to late 90s, rap music had become nationally popular through radio and television broadcasting, and young suburban whites accounted for about seventy percent of hip-hop album sales. This demographic shift, which still remains in force today, has had an obvious effect on the industry. As a result, much of the popular hip-hop of today contains the overwhelmingly repetitive message of violence and glamorization of criminal lifestyles. Moody argues that the lack of creativity amongst artists--or at least the lack of creative, non-violent artists in the mainstream--has been the leading factor in the demise of hip-hop. Moody writes,

In the '70s, groups may have rapped about drug dealing and street violence, but rap stars weren't the embodiment of criminals themselves. Today, the most popular and successful rappers boast about who has murdered more foes and rhyme about dealing drugs as breezily as other artists sing about love.

Hip-hop has changed into something new; today's fan is different from those of old. Those on the vanguard of hip-hop were very much a part of the culture by virtue of living what many of the rappers talked about, but the new demographic of hip-hop is once removed from the subject matter. That is to say that most consumers of hip-hop music cannot relate to much of what is portrayed in the songs, which has made it less important for artists to convey a pertinent message to their audience.

This brings us to today; the hip-hop industry is at a crossroads. Examples like "Chicken Noodle Soup" and the words of record company executives have made me realize that in order to change what we listen to, we have to change the way we listen. Via blogs and independent record labels, active followers will seek out the underground hip-hop that has stayed truer to its origins but that has little impact on what is heavily publicized. Although there is no immediate or easy solution, hip-hop's disciples must now choose whether they are content with what modern hip-hop has become, or if there needs to be some sort of rejuvenation. It goes back to the closing line of the *XXL* article: "Hip-hop can still be a force for good, but only if it remains in the hands of the bravehearts and courageous." We have allowed popular culture to redefine hip-hop culture and have not done enough to seek the changes we want to see made. The dedicated listener has thrown in the proverbial towel. When Nas rapped that hip-hop was dead, I took his word for it. Now, after much thought and research, I have come to the conclusion that it is not a matter of hip-hop being dead, but of the true fan being silent.

Works Cited

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