

The Influence of Hip Hop on Zimbabwe's Urban Culture

Shingirayi Sabeta aka Mau Mau

Shingirayi Sabeta aka Mau Mau is one of the pioneers of Hip Hop in Zimbabwe. His debut single "Mau Mau" was released in 1997 and he followed his success with two albums, *Mfecane* (2001) and *Coup D'Etat* (2002). His early recordings defined Shona rap and was acclaimed for its politically conscious lyrics. Today, Shingirayi produces Gospel Hip Hop and his latest album appeared in 2010. The following piece is a transcription of his presentation at the Hiphop Symposium that took place at the University of Zimbabwe on February 27th, 2013, which is a personal reflection about the Zimbabwean Hip Hop scene, its beginnings in the 1980s and the directions it is currently taking.

We live in a world that is dominated and heavily influenced by one thing that none of us can escape: mass media.

If you live in a city or town in Zimbabwe it means that on a daily basis you will be exposed to what is going on globally through newspapers, magazines, radio, television, the computer and now – your mobile phone. So you effectively have the world on tap: just a click away. And just as Western culture as a whole filters to us here in Zimbabwe through mass media, so does the sub-culture of Hip Hop.

Most of us know Hip Hop as a type of music, a dance, a style of dress, a way of speaking, an attitude. These I would say are the most obvious indicators of the sub-culture. So just how much influence does the global phenomenon of Hip Hop have on Zimbabwe's urban youth?

Well, before I get into the NOW, let's go back to the beginning of Hip Hop .

Hip Hop was birthed in the mid 1970s in the US, and as a culture it first appeared in Zimbabwe around 1980, driven primarily by rap music, which was fresh, new and sounded like nothing else that had been heard before. I'm talking about "rapping", continuous, rhythmic rhyming over a syncopated beat, which was more often than not a "sample" of a mainstream song – The Sugar Hill Gang, for example, performing " A Rappers Delight" which sampled "Good times" by Chic – and scratching a record back and forth on a turntable to create new sounds. Imagine having grown up to Thomas Mapfumo's *Chimurenga* music, *sungura* music, church music – and now THIS?

Of course, with the music came the fashion, the attitude and the dance moves – for a kid growing up in 1983 in Zimbabwe, there was no escaping the break-dance craze: movies like "Beatstreet" showing on Kine 1 & 2 cinemas, and seeing Ollie and Jerry's "There's No stopping us" video on ZTV, "Sounds on Saturday" was all you needed to get you popping and breaking. There were b-boy dance crews with their boomboxes battling on the streets of Harare, spinning on their heads just like you saw them doing on the streets of New York. We knew what graffiti was, and appreciated it, even though most of us didn't live in inner city slums or ride the subway. So instead of tagging a wall, you did it on your book cover or your bookcase!

Despite being thousands of miles away from New York, nothing was more desirable to a Zimbabwean youth in the mid 1980s than a pair of fresh new Nike or Puma sneakers – that’s what we learned to call them – sneakers, not *takkies* from Bata – “*takkies*” was a played out, local, post-Rhodesian word. So if you had a cousin or uncle who could afford to fly to London or better yet, *lived there*, you were considered a higher form of life species by your peers, because you could get your people to hook you up with a pair of BLACK & WHITE shell-toe, Run-DMC Adidas high-tops! When our favourite rappers in the US rocked pushback hairstyles, we did too. When they had Jheri Curls... unfortunately, we did too. Well, some of us who are willing to admit it anyway! Whodini, LL Cool J, Dougie Fresh: enterprising local DJs were pumping their 12” mixes on radio and at the house parties. There was no escaping Hip Hop. Parents would just shake their heads in confusion and bewilderment: Why? *Cuz* “Parents just don’t understand”! Just as TIME magazine and mainstream media was predicting the death of Hip Hop in 1988, calling it a flash in the pan, not even music really, DJ Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince won the first ever Hip Hop Grammy. Wow! I was excited! And in Zimbabwe we were starting to get our own rappers, actually coming out and being played on radio: the Hitman Hosiah Sengende and even African pop singers like Themba Ndlovu had rap in their songs! Hip Hop was here to stay. Thank God.

As the 1990s rolled in, Hip Hop became focused on Afrocentricity: Afro and Black Americans became African-Americans: the child was returning to the mother, and the culture was openly embracing and celebrating its African heritage. There was Eric B & Rakim, A Tribe Called Quest and KRS One rocking black medallions and dashikis. Here in Zimbabwe we too re-learned to appreciate our African-ness - somehow we had lost it growing up in post-colonial Zimbabwe: just like our parents, we too were still caught up in the cultural schizophrenia that defines the modern African. It became cool to use your African name, and we in Africa felt more authentic than our cousins in the Diaspora – for once, WE were ahead of the curve. Hip Hop was about positivity, knowledge, wisdom, awareness, honesty and building the community. “Each One teach One” as the Nation of Islam taught. In Zimbabwe we had our very own Peaces of Ebony representing us. Once again we were a mirror of our counterparts across the seas.

But by the mid-1990s the tide was turning and Hip Hop was more aggressive, more gangster-oriented. Baggy jeans and Timberland boots, dungarees. We in Zimbabwe adjusted accordingly: urban youth could easily identify with the angry lyrics of Tupac Shakur – we saw an assault on black youth in the States as an assault on black youth worldwide, including ourselves. Then a young man called Sean Combs came and changed it all up: Hip Hop became more about style over substance, balling over consciousness. This was the dawn of the Bad Boy era that brought in the shiny suits, the diamond watches, the diamond earrings, Cristal bottle-poppin’ and the Bentleys, Beemers and Escalades. You would walk into Circus Night Club in Harare and see our own Puff Daddy, Foxy Brown, Lil Kim, Ja Rule Mini-Mes. Cornrows. Wife-beaters. Blasting hard-core Hip Hop out of your speakers with a “don’t give a F---” attitude”. Urban culture is always about belonging to something: once again, Hip Hop provided this global gang that you could be a part of. By the late 90s, a new word crept into the

lexicon: BLING! The word became so popular and mainstream it came to be personified with by rich, New York socialites like Paris Hilton, who was now also part of Hip Hop! That's how cool it became to be DOWN with Hip Hop.

A decade or two later, where are we? Hip Hop is still the dominant urban culture, and just as it dominates youth culture in America, it does so here in Zimbabwe. Hip Hop has become a multi-billion dollar juggernaut that is constantly re-inventing itself, because those that benefit from it cannot allow it to die. But I hardly recognize this animal at all: to me, it's become an empty shell, a ghost, a hardly recognizable shadow of its former self. It is now a highly commercialized money-making machine driven more by Hollywood than the hood. And the values it now represents reflect those of the greater beast behind it: capitalism. And capitalism eats its young, to borrow a phrase. You now have multi-tiered entertainment companies that own record companies that own prominent rappers who front as if they are independent and are in control of their own destinies, but they are not. The names of their cliques and record labels alone tell you what they are about: Young Money, Cash Money, Rockafella, Maybach. In Zimbabwe we have our own Tazoita Cash Records.¹

If you listen and watch closely, you will see that MTV Base, Channel O, and our local radio stations pump and push a certain roster of Hip Hop artists only, a certain type of Hip Hop, in keeping with what the US charts dictate: whatever the American chart shows say is hot, then THAT is what is hot. So now the mostly sexual, misogynistic, material worshipping, egotistical and me-ism lyrics and attitudes of such rappers like Lil Wayne, Kanye West, 2 Chainz, Rick Ross and Nicki Minaj serve as the point-of-reference for today's Zimbabwean youth. And if that doesn't scare you, I don't know what does. There are some positive things going on in Hip Hop: rappers such as Talib Kweli, Immortal Technique and even gospel artists such as Da TRUTH and Lecrae, but you won't hear them on mainstream radio. They are largely kept underground. It's not lucrative enough, too niche, it doesn't sell, so you won't hear it. Consciousness and positivity are played out

The message coming through mainstream music videos, the lifestyles splashed out on fake reality TV shows, the magazines, on the iPod and smartphone headphones of our young boys and girls – and I'm talking from as young as 6 years old – to the twenty-something, is that it's ok to do whatever you gotta do to get yours; get paid by all means; get that Range Rover; get the minks; the Manolo Blaniks and Chanel; whatever your age have sex with who you want to, whenever you want to, there are no consequences; a real man gets any woman he wants; as many as he wants; a real WOMAN (a bad bitch) gets any man she wants; as many as she wants (just like a man); LOOK OUT for number ONE, look out for yourself only; EFF this and EFF that. And on local radio, our own rappers follow suit accordingly: the majority of what you hear are caricatures and shallow imitations of the latest, hottest American rapper, kids rhyming about stuff they don't even know about or have even seen, except maybe in a Jay-Z video. I've got friends with

¹ Tazoita Cash is the record label of urban-grooves rapper Stunner and means 'We make Cash' Records (note by the editors).

teenage kids – and they tell me they are out of control, undisciplined, no respect for authority, their own African culture, or their elders.

Now is Hip Hop entirely to blame for this situation? OF COURSE NOT. But when you start to consider how much you and I are being exposed to today's' so-called Hip Hop culture on radio, on TV, magazine on your computer, on your smartphone in ONE SINGLE DAY, you start to appreciate the significance and influence that it has. And you have to ask: should Hip Hop be aiding and abetting the cultural destruction and corrosion of our youth, and allow itself to be PIMPED by the system? Is this the foundation Hip Hop was built upon? Are these the true values of the culture? ABSOLUTELY NOT!

Hip Hop grew out of a need for self-expression, for pride, for significance for urban youth worldwide. Hip Hop has never been a helpless VICTIM; Hip Hop has always been a FIGHTER, a FORCE THAT CREATES, BUT DOES NOT DESTROY. Hip Hop is influencing our youth this very minute, this very second. But its values have become perverted. And as such, it perverts whomever and whatever it touches. The question is, between those in the Americas, in Europe, in Asia, and us here in Africa: WHO WILL SAVE HIP HOP FROM ITSELF?