

The State of Hip-Hop

Dead Art-Form or an Evolving Genre?

by Matt Campbell
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After perusing through reviews from this summer's hip-hop releases, the familiar debate has risen yet again: *Is hip-hop dead?*

That depends on who you ask. Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter IV* and the Jay-Z and Kanye West collaboration, *Watch the Throne*, were this season's most hyped and anticipated albums, yet a significant amount of listeners had mixed feelings after hearing both.

It seems many fans, young and old, are tired of the irrelevant, uninspired music that passes for hip-hop these days. DeAndre Brabham, sophomore, confirms the sentiment. "Back in the day it was more soul that was put into the music, more thought. Now it's all about creating a dance or fighting somebody, and it ain't even about that. It's about love and soul."

What's not arguable is that the quality of hip-hop during the past ten years has strayed far from its roots of the protest music that came out of New York in the mid-1970s. Sure, you can still find socially and politically conscious artists out there, but you have to really look. Industry heavy-weights aren't banking on most of them.

The big names that come to mind during discussions on "conscious rap" are Mos Def, Common, Dead Prez, and the Roots. There are also underground artists like Little Brother, who hail from North Carolina's own Durham.

In an interview by Walter Dawkins of Davey D's Hip-Hop Corner, Bill Stephney, co-creator of the pioneering Public Enemy, said, "There is an over-representation of the criminal aspects of black youth culture from the videos and the records." He continued, "Not all black

kids out here are slinging cocaine, crack and heroin, and shooting at one another. What about the black kid who works at Haagen-Dazs in Brooklyn? He or she is not represented. What about the black kid who just goes to church with his grandmother on Sunday? I don't hear their story in any of these records! All I hear is bang, bang, shoot 'em up."

Perhaps their stories are not being heard (or played on the radio) because that's not what sells. It's obvious; industry insiders know this, but they're not willing to offer an alternative because they know that's not what's good for business.

In that same Walter Dawkins interview, Common chimed in, "When you look at the state that (rap) is in, it's very corporate and that's what takes away a lot of the purity of it. But I think it's starting to change as people such as myself, The Roots, Talib Kweli and Mos Def are getting more exposure (and) balancing out some of the other hip-

hop that lacks the love for the art and the effort of innovation."

Some will say it's simply the evolution of the genre. But when the genre "evolves" so much that it practically turns into something else, can it still be called hip-hop?

There's a rock-doc that was just released chronicling the ups and downs of alternative hip-hop group, A Tribe Called Quest. Directed by actor Michael Rapaport, the documentary is titled *Beats, Rhymes & Life: The Travels of A Tribe Called Quest*. It details an era when hip-hop knew authenticity.

And for the sake of hip-hop, it's time to get back to the Roots (pun intended).

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