

Mastery or Murder in Rap Music

What's really behind the message?

By Jon Michael Spencer
Ink Contributor

White supremacist discourse and demeanor do not go unreplicated by African Americans, though our responses sometimes go unnoticed. Our retorts and liberational intentions generally go unnoticed when masked behind discourse and demeanor that appear un-threatening, even accommodative.

On the other hand, our retorts and liberational intentions are generally alarming to whites when we speak or act explicitly against their supremacist intentions and inventions.

In Houston Baker's words, these two types of African-American responses to white supremacist discourse and demeanor are the "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery."

The "mastery of form" is a viable strategy for some African Americans because what the guardians of our oppression hear and see in our discourse and demeanor is not what they get.

They hear certain stereotypes, sounds they anticipate coming from unenlightened black mouths; sounds ranging from blues-like complaintiveness to rap-like playfulness.

But what they get—what really sounds from behind the minstrel mask when the "form" is mastered—is noise, noise that begins to confront and disrupt white "mastery."

The television show "In Living Color," produced and hosted by Keenan Ivory Wayans, is an excellent example of the "mastery of form."

The actors on the comedic variety show articulate the familiar stereotypical sounds of minstrelsy, but they are actually "signifyin'" by sounding deeply subversive critiques of white culture.

The paradigm of the show's "mastery of form" appears in the character of Homey the Clown.

Homey is a black parolee forced by "the system" to wear a clown suit and face and entertain children, but his appearing as a clown allows

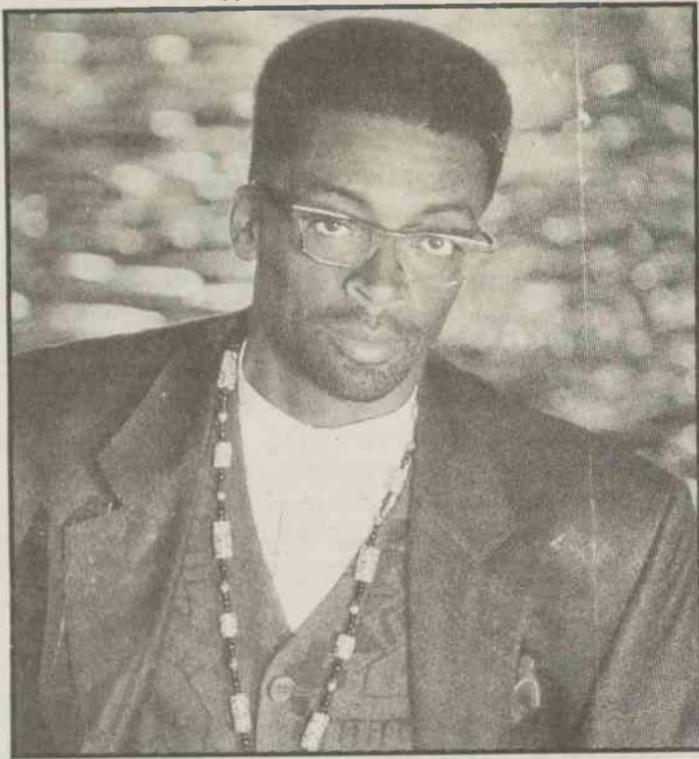
ment is secure, removes his minstrel whiteface: Uncle Thomas is about to commence his terroristic reign of legalistically bopping "the man."

Whenever the "form" is worn to mask what is really reproach to white supremacist discourse and demeanor, the result is the "mastery of form."

This strategy has its roots during slavery in the behavior called "puttin' on ole master."

The attempt to call out and unmask someone suspected of the "mastery of form" can leave the thief vulnerable to the verbiage and gesture of signifyin', which is intended to reestablish the stolen equilibrium.

Such thieves are



Spike Lee exhibits "mastery of form."

him to go unnoticed when his discourse and demeanor are actually critical of "the system" of "the man."

The epitome of the Homey the Clown skits is when Homey, still in clown-face, dons a three-piece suit because he is becoming wealthy from advertising a children's cereal.

Homey is presumed to have sold out to the "the man" when he says of the black motorist brutally beaten by Los Angeles police, "Rodney King was way out of line."

But when Homey meets "the man" at a social establishment called Chez Whitey, he hones in on the man's head and bops him, just as he had always bopped the children who disrespected him.

That the "mastery of form" is the strategy behind "In Living Color" was implied in the show's portrayal of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

In a skit on the newly appointed Justice Thomas, once he becomes certain that his lifetime appoint-

ment is secure, removes his minstrel whiteface: Uncle Thomas is about to commence his terroristic reign of legalistically bopping "the man."

The title of the article, written by a Jewish woman named Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, is "Spike Lee Hates Your Cracker Ass."

The magazine cover, a photo of Lee with closed fists and crossed arms forming an X, has the caption "Spike Lee strikes a pose behind Malcolm."

The title and caption of the ar-

ticle hint of the intent of the author to unmask Lee, behind which facade she presumes to see a little black man who "hates your cracker ass" and is using the larger persona of Malcolm (the mystique of the X) and the powerful medium of film as his mouthpiece for articulating "noise" rather than "harmony."

Lee's pose and the magazine's caption, both signaling his movie about Malcolm X, together infer that the article will comprise a dialectic between "master" and masked man.

Lee, however, maintains his poise, his "mastery of form," which unhinges his interviewer, Barbara Harrison.

This is the way I propose we understand black music.

Contrary to Houston Baker, who suggests that the spirituals and the blues are instances of the "deformation of mastery," I contend that all forms of black music, from the spirituals to rap, can be understood better as the "mastery of form."

Bebob, for instance, is not simply the musical expression of the

makes one too weary to kill. Rap, like bop, may provoke "the riot," as many whites fear, but it simultaneously absorbs violence by exhausting the body.

Despite its aspect of intellectual insurgency, rap is first and foremost exhausting to the body; for it is the body, not the rational understanding, that is the absorber of rap's rhythms.

Violent aggressivity—the "scratching" of rap DJs giving sound to blades ready to slit throats—is physiologically canalized, transformed and exorcised.

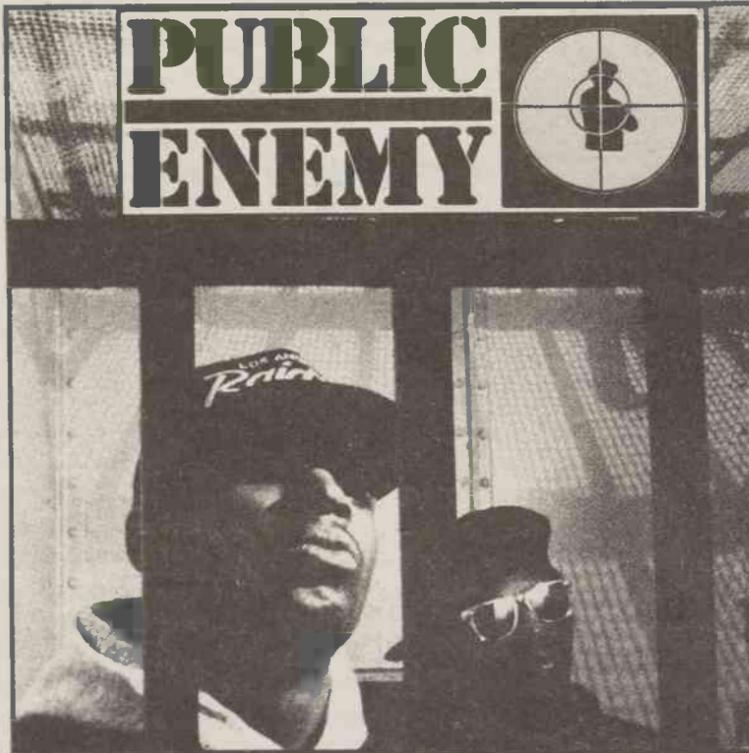
Symbolic murders, such as Public Enemy's "By the Time I Get to Arizona," Ice T's "Cop Killer" and Johnie Battle's "Ultimate Drive By," are brought out into the open so that the accumulated libido can be dissolved on the very border that crosses over into outright violence.

"Civilization," esteemed in the master's discourse about the advantages of western rationalism, is itself but a mask.

One of its false faces is religion, which, if unmasked, would reveal

the possibility of murder, police brutality. "You say you believe in the necessity of religion," says Nietzsche. "Be sincere! You believe in the necessity of police!"

And you say you believe in the cultural and economic necessity of black music, television and film; of Public Enemy, Homey the Clown and Spike Lee promoting them and capitaliz-



Public Enemy uses symbolic murders in raps.

bopping of black heads; it is "the riot," the whomping back of white heads; wop! bop! be-bop!

Rap, in its "mastery of form," similarly absorbs violence in that it

ing upon them, despite the warnings that you unmask these "angry black men." Be sincere! You believe in the necessity of ritual violence!