

Creating Peace Through Hip-Hop Music
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Is the attempt to foster peace through hip-hop a flip-flop in better judgment?

The notion of hip-hop music as a catalyst for higher consciousness was the focal point of a panel discussion during Anti-Violence Awareness Day. Many participants arrived with the common perception of hip-hop as the delinquent son of rap music — an angst-ridden, violent mutation of the funk-infused, more jovial mother-genre.

Guest speaker and hip-hop artist Manny Martinez (a.k.a. T.G.I.), whose music contains self-empowering, positive messages, invited attendees to develop an expansive view of hip-hop. He advised them to go beyond the surface image of wilding boys blasting radios in subway cars. What seems like adolescent shenanigans is really a desperate cry for help and one of the few means of self-expression these youngsters have.

“Like graffiti, hip-hop is the voice of the people in its rawest form, a true cry of the ghetto,” he said.

Another attempt to demystify the form came from Reggie Osse, a performing arts lawyer who represents hip-hop artists. He said that the music is a byproduct of the harsh inner-city life, nurtured by continuing discrimination and political apathy.

“The problem is not the music, it’s society,” he said. “These kids are acting out because they’re mirroring the violent world they face every day. If we help to change their experience, the music will follow. Hip-hop is an effect, not a cause.”

Reactions from the audience were emotionally charged: “I’m listening to what you’re saying, but there’s no way around my feelings,” said one young woman. “I hate hip-hop! I cannot endorse any music that labels women bitches and whores.”

Mr. Osse acknowledged the misogyny in the music and maintained that these lyrics would not exist if they were not lived. “Sexism is one societal evil prevalent in these kids’ lives,” he said. “They’re just mirroring their environment.”

A young man saw hip-hop as a means to validate his day-in-the-life: “It’s reassuring to hear about others’ experiences of poverty and the grind in New York. I listen to one of these tunes and think, ‘Hey, it’s OK that I have to pluck roaches out of my cereal box sometimes.’”

Many young men stood up with sober expressions to pay tribute to friends who had died in gang-related incidences. They said the music provided a solace that helped keep their memories of loved ones alive.

Deeply felt comments also came from people with tear-stained faces whose negative viewpoint of hip-hop had changed during the discussion. In between sobs, a woman waxed contrite about harshly judging her nephew’s interest in the music: “Now I see it’s so much more than violence for its own sake. I really get it now.”

Several resolutions to mitigating violence were offered by the audience and speakers alike at the close of the discussion. Most important, it was agreed that hip-hop artists should persist in bringing awareness to the forefront of society, as too often people ignore this music so they can remain in denial about the ugly truths of urban life. “People need to hear the lyrics precisely because they’re so discomfoting,” someone said.

Other suggestions were on the importance of owning one’s power to create desired changes in the environment, sharing verbal messages of peace and honoring the integrity of the individual. Many participants left with a new-found empathy for this musical genre, and the resolve to keep — and maybe even spread — the faith.

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Title: Creating Peace Through Hip Hop Music
Subject: World Tribune 07/18/97 n.3148 p.5 WT970718p05 New York, New York
Author: Gabrielle Wise
Keywords: Anti-Violence Awards Creating Events Exchanges Feature Honors Meetings Music Peace
President Through York