

Politics, Publicity and the Hip Hop Generation

A month after US President Barack Obama's inauguration, Michael Steele, the first black chairman of the Republican National Committee, announced a public relations initiative to attract young black and Hispanic voters. Steele told *The Washington Times* of plans to update the party image by applying conservative principles to "urban-suburban hip-hop settings."

This call for a "hip-hop makeover" revealed Steele's awareness of the importance of popular culture in the context of US politics and of the particular influence of rap music on the nation's youngest voting demographic. This awareness was surely heightened by Obama's references to the genre during his election campaign and by the support and publicity he received from prominent hip hop artists, including Jay-Z and rapper-turned-Hollywood star Will Smith. The then-senator even stated that he would choose Smith to play him in a film. This comfortable affiliation with popular culture has afforded the president an unprecedented level of credibility among young voters.

In a speech to the College Democrats of America, cultural commentator and sociologist Michael Eric Dyson argued that Obama had adapted the "guerilla warfare of hip-hop" in using the internet to rally support and aligned himself with the root motivation of hip hop by presenting himself as an "agent of change." Dyson emphasized the political significance of the music style, calling it "a movement that allows people to express their outrage at the erosion of their own citizenship rights" and to fight back against the Bush administration, which he described as "nothing short of an assault on democracy."

This concept of change as a common theme uniting the Obama campaign with hip hop ideology is clearly expressed in an impassioned public letter released in 2008 by Q-Tip, an influential rap veteran from the group A Tribe Called Quest: "*Hip-hop continues to be a mighty voice for the disenfranchised, the disillusioned, and poor. Senator Obama offers the best opportunities for all of us who fit these descriptions [...] We can change our economy. We can change the course of the Iraq war. The only way we can have this renaissance is with the Senator from Illinois as President [...] We are on the brink of moving past our stigmas and preconceived thoughts to make a substantive decision for change [...] the change is Barack Obama.*"

In 2008, American linguist and conservative political commentator John McWhorter published *All About the Beat: Why Hip-Hop Can't Save Black America*, which criticized the political significance attributed to hip hop by sociologists like Dyson as exaggerated and unfounded. Arguing that the music is typified by narcissism rather than altruism and more focused on issues like police brutality than critical issues like HIV/AIDS, McWhorter attributes a culture of complaint rather than creative solution to hip hop activism.

Nevertheless, politicians outside the US are catching on to the PR power of hip hop. Last November Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin appeared on *Fight for Respect*, a rap competition hosted by national music channel *Muz-TV*. Having watched a performance from among a crowd of young, dancing hip hop fans, Putin took to the stage for a speech praising local rappers for adding some Russian charm to a western cultural import and arguing that breakdancing was incompatible with alcohol and drug abuse. Calling hip hop an inevitable consequence of globalization, he added that although it was “kind of rough,” rap music conveyed a “social message dealing with the problems of the young”. Despite a Kremlin spokesman telling *The St Petersburg Times* that Putin’s intention was solely to promote a healthier lifestyle for young people, a cynical piece in the *Kommersant* newspaper called his appearance a “desperate step” to boost ratings in the wake of sagging opinion polls. Hip hop artists at the event nonetheless praised the prime minister, calling him “a legendary man” and an “icon,” a view unanimously confirmed by the studio audience’s ecstatic response.

The roots of hip hop are found in African music, and it is here that the political significance of this music is most evident. The *griots* of West Africa are a group of travelling singers and poets who have passed down their oral tradition for centuries and whose vocal style is strikingly similar to American rap. Griots would accompany noble families and were said to have deep connections to the social, spiritual and political powers associated with music. They were seen primarily as praise-singers but would also use their vocal abilities for gossip, satire and political comment.

Griot-influenced performances of poetry and music were used by artists like Gil Scott-Heron in post-civil rights era New York City to convey fierce political messages. Scott-Heron is often referred to as the 'Godfather of Hip Hop' and his work is associated with black militant activism, as epitomized by his 1971 composition *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*. By the late 1980s, acts like Public Enemy had fused this beat-poetry with the aggression of punk to produce powerful anti-establishment “edutainment” with mass commercial appeal.

Since then, hip hop has been widely embraced in Senegal, where it has become a dominant social and political movement. The country has a particularly young demographic, with 45 percent of the population under the age of 15, which combined with a strong griot tradition may account for the huge popularity of hip hop there. A 2007 documentary film released online followed rappers, DJs, journalists, academics and people on the street around the time of the controversial presidential election. *Democracy in Dakar* subsequently won a string of awards for its portrayal of youth and musical activism in the democratic process of a country where rappers are among the most vocal political commentators.

In Morocco, popular rap artists got together in 2009 to record *Nodo Tsawo (Go Vote)*. The song was aimed at motivating younger voters after a poor turnout in previous elections and was broadcast as part of the *Your Vote, Your Voice, Your Victory* campaign organized by Casablanca’s *Hit Radio* station. The campaign website provided a free download of the song alongside detailed information on voting registration requirements and the polling process. The year also saw the son of the late president of Gabon boost his own election campaign by rapping onstage in front of thousands at the Gabao Hip Hop Festival. Ali Bongo had released an LP and toured West Africa with his band in the 1970s and is now the new president after a decisive victory.

Despite the potential for hip hop to mobilize younger, less privileged voters, a paradox has emerged within the genre since it became commercially viable. What began as a vehicle of empowerment for the marginalized has, in its most mainstream form, evolved into a big-business model driven by profit that represents the same establishment it once opposed. Republican ideals of individualism and capitalism now have increasing representation in the world of commercial US hip hop, and this may lend a shred of credibility to Steele's unlikely makeover. It is in poorer African nations, where commercial success is more limited, that the original message of hip hop has found its strongest voice.

By Will Edmunds

Will Edmunds holds a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Wales and is an intern at the ISN.

1.1 Resources

1.1.1 Media

Hip Hop for Obama

A privately maintained website, Hip Hop for Obama chronicles the support of the hip hop community for Obama in the 2008 presidential election.

Democracy in Dakar

This website provides information on and access to the 2007 documentary film about the relationship between hip hop and politics in Africa.

African Hip-Hop

This website aims to unify those inspired by the blending of hip hop and African culture.

Hip-Hop Republicans

This website is a political/music blog based in New York City. It is led by a group of young moderate Republican and Libertarian bloggers (and independent conservatives) of all racial, economic and social backgrounds.

Steele: GOP needs 'hip-hop makeover', by the *Washington Times*

This is an interview with Republican National Committee Chairman Michael S Steele.

Putin Joins Hip Hop Acts to Promote Healthy Life, by the *St.Petersburg Times*

This article chronicles Putin's involvement in a hip hop event for young people.

Moroccan Music Starts Mobilise Young Voters with 'Nodo Tsawto' Song, by *Magharebia*

This article explores the efforts of Moroccan hip hop artists to mobilize young voters in the 2009 election.