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The Crack Epidemic and the Transformation of Hip Hop: A Bronx Tale

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The Crack Epidemic had a profound impact on inner city communities throughout the country. It vastly increased levels of community violence, created profound generational tensions as young people with guns became the wealthiest people in economically depressed communities, shattered families, and led to overwhelming pressures for an expanded police presence, resulting in mass incarceration on a level never before seen in the 20th Century, with over 2 million people in jail and prison in the year 2000, as compared to 330,000 in 1980.

Jay Z provides a vivid portrait of this transformation in the first part of his book "Decoded," but many of his songs, along with those of other great artists of this era (Wu Tang Clan, Biggie, Nas, Tupac, Gang Starr, Cypress Hill, Ghetto Boys, NWA, Ice Cube) tell this story just as well in sometimes heart rending, sometimes defiant fashion. There are also movies from the era which tell this story such as "Boyz in the Hood," and "Juice," but I want to give you a statistic which highlights just how traumatic this era- roughly lasting from 1985-1995, actually was. In 2020, which was considered a bad year by current standards there were 477 murders in New York City. In 1992, there were 2,225!

In terms of Hip Hop, the onset of crack inspired two very different types of musical messages, each of them fiercely anti-authoritarian and anti-government. The first was a message of Black Unity and Afrocentrism pioneered by a group called Public Enemy. They tried to call upon the legacy of leaders like Malcolm X to get Black people to rise up against growing police violence as well as the violence of local drug dealers. Their songs, using beats that often drew upon heavy metal, had great commercial success in the late 80's and were featured in Spike Lee's epic Movie "Do the Right Thing" Other politically conscious groups warned of the dangers of complete immersion in the underground economy as did Gang Starr in their legendary track "Just to Get A Rep".

But as it turned out, another response to crack era violence and the rapidly growing police response came in the form of a musical message which made the street hustler and people in the underground economy the major reference point of resistance rather than the political activist. The artists who pioneered this approach came from the West Coast and the South, and they would permanently change the language, and imagery of hip hop. Of these groups, the most important was N.W.A -Niggas With Attitude- coming out of Compton, A collection of brilliant beat makers and lyricists, spearheaded by Dr Dre and Ice Cube, they issued tracks that created public outrage in both the Black community and mainstream white society, but were commercially incredibly successful, epitomized by their much protested and played song "Fuck Tha Police." Soon, a group from Houston, the Geto Boys, started producing equally powerful tracks showing what the world looked like to young men in the underground economies that crack had suddenly made prominent in inner city communities throughout the nation.

Unfortunately, one of the byproducts of a Hip Hop ethos that made the street hustler both hero and anti-hero-- but always the major character- was the promotion of a bitter image of women as dangerous and, untrustworthy that was to sweep through much of male hip hop. Whereas hip hop artists of the past had boasted of their sexual prowess, but with some level of affection, crack era artists threw out any vestige of admiration or romance and treated women as objects to be consumed and discarded with little emotion, or enemies trying to separate men from their money.

Two examples of this, from the East Coast, were Slick Rick's "Treat her Like A Prostitute" and Big Daddy Kane's "Pimping Ain't Easy" But the single most damaging track came from the brilliant beat maker, Dr Dre, who helped launch NWA, entitled "Bitches Ain't Shit".

As the most talented and most commercially successful male artists started promoting this cynical and insulting view of women, it quickly wove itself into the fabric of male hip hop discourse. By the early 90's the "B word" had become the chosen vehicle for describing women in scores of hip hop tracks, some of them issued by artists with real talent. No better example of this is a track where the brilliant beat maker Dr Dre introduces a soon to be legendary rapper who called himself "Snoop Dogg" whose flow was hypnotic, backed by Dre's carefully crafted studio made sounds, in a song called "Nothing by a G Thang". Casual misogyny pervades the video as well as the lyrics.

Women artists in hip hop, who were just starting to achieve traction, developed several different strategies to deal with this toxic atmosphere, which many felt promoted violence against women and undermined community solidarity. The first of these was pioneered by Queen Latifah, who tried to build on the Afrocentric traditions of late 80's hip hop to denounce those using the B word as undermining Black unity and destroying families and communities. In 1993, she came out with this legendary track to challenge the emerging male ethos--U.N.I.T.Y.

But though Queen Latifah remained a revered figure, a Brooklyn based artist, Lil Kim closely linked to P Diddy and Biggie Smalls, created an entirely different persona, one in which women appropriated and claimed the hustler ethos, with all its cynicism, took the label "Bitch" as a mark of pride and urged women to exploit and discard men the way men did women. No better example of this is the song "Queen Bitch" from Kim's debut album. In this, she unleashed the immortal line "I've got buffoons, eating my p...y while I watch cartoons". In song after song, epitomized by "Not Tonight," Kim creates a new image of women's power resting in the quest of sexual satisfaction and material wealth at the expense of men. Another artist who took this appropriation of "Bitch" as a mark of woman's power and agency to great commercial success was Foxy Brown, doing so with a Brooklyn/Jamaican flair in songs like "Oh Yeah."

However, there was a third approach, unveiled in the mid-90s by a brilliant lyricist and singer named Lauryn Hill who made her debut as part of a rap trio called "The Fugees".

Hill refused to even dignify misogynist discourse with a response and instead created a persona of a woman who was so far above the debate as to render it irrelevant. No one had ever heard anything like the lyrics she unleashed in the Fugees Track "Ready or Not" which invoked African American music history in creating one of the most powerful dis tracks of all time, including the line. "While you be imitating Al Capone, I'll be Nina Simone and defecating on your microphone."

Ever since, right up to today, Hip Hop is contending with the same linguistic challenges and fighting the same battles.