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MSNBC

Hip hop forever

Many popular rap music videos promote greed, hedonism and violence. Why is it OK that the most popular rap features young black men, for the most part, celebrating the "thug life" and "keeping it real"? With all the different forms of rap music out there, why is this version so popular, particularly with white kids?

Black men put black women in videos and call them 'bitches and hos,' promote drugs, sex, drinking and high-priced luxury items. If they were 'keeping it real,' they wouldn't be able to afford these things, at least not in the St. Louis neighborhood where I grew up.

Why were blacks willing to raise a ruckus and boycott a company that sold the game Ghettopoly (created by a Asian-American) because it "promoted negative images," but not protest when record companies and rappers promote the same negative images the board game touts?

These are tremendously important questions, and they must be examined and answered.

Hip hop has changed America forever. It has influenced nearly every aspect of American cultural life. You can't turn on the TV and not see the trappings of hip hop - dress, language and attitude - in everything from commercials to news shows to sports.

Black American music has been the heartbeat of our country. Our music gives America its groove. It has been tossed, turned, co-opted and stolen by others. There was even a time when blacks rarely got credit from the media - or the proceeds from sales and royalties.

Now, it's happening again. Our culture is being stolen again, only this time it's by young black men who are promoting racist stereotypes of our people simply to make money.

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Following our lead

White kids historically have followed black culture's lead and they continue to do so, not surprisingly. Because of the theme of gangsta rap, what is troubling now is the almost voyeuristic, horror movie feel to it. Let's be realistic. If a group of white kids saw 50 Cent and his G-unit walking behind them on a street, those kids would be as scared as if it was Jason wearing a hockey mask and carrying a chainsaw.

Even I provoke fear in white people when I walk down the streets of Seattle. And certainly none of these brothers, acting and dressing as they do in their videos, would be welcome in white neighborhoods.

So rappers offer white people a safe look at how young black men think, feel and behave. Then whites take that behavior and imitate it. They never have to venture out of their neighborhoods to meet a real "thug."

Black kids actually see themselves in these rappers. What is so frightening to me is that black children are imitating and emulating these negative role models. The anti-social behavior they glorify is one of the reasons why more black men are in prisons than in colleges.

In reality, what we actually get from popular rappers is cartoon characters behaving badly and living down to the expectations of what mainstream society perceives blacks to be.

Chuck D once called rap the CNN of the streets. It still is, but the mainstream is only seeing the make-believe, seedy side of rap music. And it seems that the music industry and the media are only interested in making money by pushing trash to our kids.

Enough's enough

Great rappers tell stories - Tupac, Biggie, Mos Def, Common, Chuck D and Naz. Jay Z was "Big Pimping" but he also told us "it's a hard knock life."

At this point in the pop rap business, all you need is a great producer - Dr. Dre, Jermaine Dupri, Pharrell. They come up with the phat beats, you drop the "f" bombs, say the "n" word, talk about jackin' people up, screwing women, how much money you have, cars, diamonds, mug for the camera, grab your crotch and there you have it - an instant hit.

If popular rappers really want to "keep it real," they need to tell the truth. Nobody parties 24/7 - try talking about real experiences, love, pain, sorrow, happiness.

And black people have to stand up and say we have had enough with popular rap music. It has gone too far. I'm not the only person saying this. Spike Lee said at a college recently: "We buy all this stuff (rap music), not even thinking about what's behind it. ... Think about the power that we have. We can't just sit back and think it doesn't affect us. We have to do something about it. We have to be more choosy about the types of stuff we support."

USA Today once called Eminem the new Bob Dylan. Well, I want to know where the Curtis Mayfield of popular rap music is? And why isn't he getting a Grammy?