



IS HIP-HOP CUT OUT FOR POLITICS? THE AUTHOR ARGUES THAT THE ANSWER LIES IN CONVERTING THE COMMERCIALISM OF HIP-HOP INTO URBAN-YOUTH POLITICS. LET'S JUST DO IT, SHE SAYS.

by lisa sullivan

As this nation nears its first election of the new millennium, journalists of the hip-hop generation and their entrepreneurial counterparts, like Sean "Puffy" Combs, have begun announcing the arrival of 21st-century hip-hop political power. Hip-hop industry leaders, artists, and activists are "spinning" a new message: Translating celebrity status, market influence, and cultural power into political might is hip-hop's future.

But that message raises some serious questions. Can hip-hop culture significantly influence electoral politics by pushing voter registration and participation among post-civil rights urban youth? Can it sell politics as well as it does Nike, Hilfiger, FUBU, and Sprite? Do hip-hop leaders have what it takes to build a national campaign to increase the civic and political activity of their 18- to 24-year-old constituents?



HIP-HOP AT A CROSSROADS

The world of hip-hop, like America in general, is suffering from a crisis in leadership at both the industry and creative levels. As leadership guru **John Gardner** has observed, leaders play a significant role in creating a society's state of mind. Effective leaders conceive and break down goals that lift people out of petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear communities apart, and unite them toward objectives worthy of their best efforts. Yet, even as hip-hop culture matures, moving into its third decade of existence, no significant leader with national influence has emerged as a

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credible political voice.

The truth is, hip-hop hasn't had a unifying purpose since the global profit motive took over the culture in the 1980s. And Sean "Puffy" Combs is quite possibly the hip-hop artist/entrepreneur most responsible for the excessive promotion of the "ghetto-fabulous" state of mind that currently consumes too many poor urban youth of color. In the world of "Benjamins," playa haters, Cristal, limousines, and designer gear, civic engagement and political participation don't seem to stand a chance.

But in every crisis, darkness and despair inevitably lead to light. Hip-hop has great potential to once again serve as the vehicle for the dissemination of political messages among poor urban youth in particular, and all youth in general. For this to occur, however, hip-hop culture must:

- **identify political leaders worthy of hip-hop's support**
- **provide political education for the hip-hop community — its artists, entrepreneurs, and consumers**
- **mobilize hip-hop artists, journalists, entrepreneurs and political activists**
- **supply the resources for the hip-hop community to demonstrate its leadership ability and potential for political influence**



THE POLITICS OF SUBSTANCE

In trying to become hip-hop's first entertainment mogul, Sean Combs has been inspired by multimillionaire music producer David Geffen. To date, Combs and his comrades have focused on amassing power and wealth within the entertainment industry. It is, however, Geffen's influence beyond New York and Hollywood that provides hip-hop entrepreneurs with the most important clues about what they really need to lead the political transformation of hip-hop culture in the 21st century.

INTO THE NEXT
CENTURY,
THE CENTRAL
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FACING HIP-HOP
WILL INVOLVE

Geffen's role as a philanthropist and fundraiser for AIDS research and other important political issues offers the most relevance for hip-hop's political aspirations. Serving on the boards of numerous nonprofits, giving strategically to state and national political campaigns, and identifying issues that he cares about passionately, Geffen's power

ITS LEGACY:
WILL HIP-HOP
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extends well beyond the arts-and-entertainment sphere into substantive politics. This is precisely the lesson that hip-hop culture has yet to learn, model or cultivate.

Most hip-hop entrepreneurs give to charities, and many have formed some type of foundation or community-based nonprofit. But they have yet to figure out the social impact they could have on their generation if they were to consciously target their philanthropy. Into the next century, the central question facing hip-hop will involve its legacy: Will hip-hop entrepreneurs help finance a social movement – as Harry Belafonte helped finance the civil rights movement? Will they endow Historically Black Institutions? Will they finance political campaigns or speak out on critical political issues like Muhammad Ali?



HIP-HOP'S CROSS TO BEAR

As Franz Fanon wrote, "Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it." Nearly half a century ago, a generation of young African Americans determined that their mission was to tear down the walls of legally sanctioned racial segregation in the American South. They decided to do so with full force, initiating nonviolent, direct-action protests and voter-registration and education campaigns.

Moving into the 21st century, hip-hop must look inside its soul and determine whether it's capable of transcending the bottom-line driving force of profit and sales to come up with a message and set of values conducive to building civic engagement and political participation. Once the soul-searching is over, the hip-hop community should get to work on an urgent political agenda that reflects hip-hop's constituency and addresses four critical issues:

- the criminalization of poor urban youth, including police brutality and misconduct, and the incarceration epidemic
- the absolute failure of public education in urban communities
- the loss of voting rights by poor, young urban males due to their status as felons
- the need for living-wage employment opportunities

Thinking about rising above the seductive power of global capital and its consumer-driven values leaves me daunted.

While I am sobered by the complexity and enormity of the cross the hip-hop generation must bear, I am hopeful – and optimistic that our political organizing efforts will be as successful as previous generations’. But we’re not there yet. At the moment, the lack of an organizational vehicle dedicated to the marriage of hip-hop culture and politics will continue to undermine hip-hop's quest for political power and a conscious political agenda.

Lisa Sullivan is founder and president of Listen, a nonprofit youth development/youth leadership organization in Washington, D.C.

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