

Spring 5-12-2016

The Influence of “Dead Presidents” in Hip-Hop

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Recommended Citation

Cohen, Joseph K. `, "The Influence of “Dead Presidents” in Hip-Hop" (2016). *Honors Theses AY 15/16*. 81.
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Senior Capstone Honors Project

Title: The Influence of “Dead Presidents” in Hip-hop

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Date: 3/20/16

W Number: W07062918

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The Influence of “Dead Presidents” in Hip-hop

“I think I'm actually quite a materialistic person, I value what it takes to make a car or build a nice house. Money does change things, but how it changes people depends on how they react to it.” This quote by Roland Gift, a British musician, explains how money influences everyone on an individual basis and that reactions to the same economic force can be diverse. Coming from different socioeconomic classes, earning money in different ways, ones spending and saving habits, or any other personal history with money impact how someone can be shaped by it. However, society’s perceptions of hip-hop artists contradict this ideology by suggesting that all the artists from this genre are materialistic and their financial success defines them in the same way. Questlove discusses this contradiction between perception and reality in his article “Mo’ Money, Mo’ Problems: How Hip-hop Failed Black America, Part Two.” He explains, “I’d argue that when people think of hip-hop, pretty quickly they think of bling, of watches or cars or jewels or private jets. They think of success and its fruits, and the triumphant figures who are picking that fruit” (Questlove). It is clear that hip-hop is becoming, or has already become, known for its materialistic emphasis and money propelled persona.

With hip-hop’s popularity, its influence is stretching across the entire world and this perception of the genre continues to get stronger. One of the strongest influences in early hip-hop was found in the song “Dead Presidents” created by Jay-Z. The title of the song, “Dead Presidents”, represents the dead presidents that are often found on United States currency. This slang for money quickly became popular and is a term that is still prevalent in the hip-hop community. The context of this expression is that the U.S. government was not representing the

black community, so it was only money that could give them any real power. This led many hip-hop artists in the last 20 years to embrace the power of money and material possessions, which has greatly contributed to the materialist stereotype found in the genre. The effect money has on these artists is a major theme found in modern hip-hop and there are multiple reactions to its influence, however hip-hop is largely seen as a materialist genre. This viewpoint, however, may not be the only one and through the analysis of songs and actions by artists like Kanye West, Jay-Z, Macklemore, Kendrick Lamar, and more, it can be fairly determined if this stereotype is accurate or if the influence of money is purely based on the individual. How these artists address the theme of money or material can be interpreted in different ways but this analysis interprets the concrete lyrics and actions of the artists in an effort to simplify the examination.

Nice cars, expensive clothes, jewelry, and money are themes commonly talked about in the hip-hop genre. The influence of money plays a major role in many of the genre's popular artists' lyrics, and some key players in the genre explain money as a sense of power. In Kanye West and Jay-Z's album "Watch The Throne," the two artists continually expand on the concept of money being the main dynamic of power. Even the album title sends the message that the two perceive themselves as royalty because of their material success. If one of these artists did not have so much money then the sense of their power would be revoked. "Owning things was a way of proving that you existed — and so, by extension, owning many things was a way of proving that you existed emphatically," (Questlove). In his article, "When the People Cheer: How Hip-hop Failed Black America", Questlove helps to explain how there is a direct correlation in the hip-hop world between material and power. Kanye West and Jay-Z fall victims into this way of thinking in their song "Gotta Have It." The song supports a materialistic philosophy in the sense that because they have a lot of money, they have a lot of power. The lyrics "What you need/

what, what you need/ I got what you need” allude the message that because these artists have money, they have gained supremacy over others. This is the type of impression that multiple artists in this genre are portraying and they are contributing to the materialistic stereotype that this genre has.

The power that these artist have to influence listeners is enormous and from songs “Gotta Have It”, they are putting themselves on their “throne” and the listeners see that they are walking on steps of money to get there. Some artists even invented a style that reflects those who have the money and the power called swagger. “The particularity of swagger’s performance lies in its combination of material signifiers of wealth, particularly designer-brand clothing or jewelry, with bodily gestures or attitudes of defiance, as in the strut or the sneer” (Gabriel). This quote from Ben Gabriel’s article “Toward a Reading of Post- Kanye Hip-hop” helps to demonstrate the relationship between swagger and materialism in the hip-hop culture. An entire style and attitude is created with a message that if you don’t have swagger, if you don't have wealth, then one cannot obtain the desired persona which is highly sought after. This concept of swagger is a major factor that separates the generations of hip-hop and it establishes the way this genre is seen in our society today. In the album “Watch The Throne”, Jay-Z states in the very first line of the first song, “I invented swag”. These major artists are not only acknowledging swagger as a sensible lifestyle but they are manipulating this concept to increase their own value. Because artists such as Jay-Z and Kanye have such a large influence in this genre, the concept of swagger is infusing materialism in the hip-hop culture. However, this is just one way money influences those associated with the genre and does not reflect all the different angles it impacts.

Individual reactions to the influence of money have not all been the same. While Kanye West and Jay-Z credit money and wealth with providing them social supremacy and importance,

artists like Macklemore respond to money as a secondary influence to a greater fundamental value. In Macklemore's song "Wings" the artist talks about the negative power of materialism and its destructive consequences. "We want what we can't have/ commodity makes us want it/ So expensive, damn/ I just got to flaunt it/ Got to show 'em/ so exclusive...They told me to just do it/ I listened to what that swoosh said". The lyrics in the song explain society's assessment that material consumption is what contributes worth to a person and it is through the value of that consumption which defines an individual's significance. Additionally, Macklemore addresses a popular, yet harmful perception in consumerism with the lyrics "We want what we can't have." This statement alludes that our society has constructed the impression that material possessions can provide a sense of supremacy over others. Later in the song Macklemore condemns this philosophy and contradicts the whole notion of swagger as a source power. "Nah, this is what I am/ what I wore, this is the source of my youth... And now I see it's just another pair of shoes." This song conveys the message that it isn't material goods that make a person. Furthermore, the artist expands on this concept in his song "Make the Money." In this song Macklemore describes his belief that it is actually the actions and personality that makes someone who they are, not the things they have. "Make the money/ don't let the money make you/ Change the game/ don't let the game change you/ I'll forever remain faithful/ All my people stay true." These lyrics in Macklemore's song present almost an opposite opinion to Kanye West and Jay-Z's, sharing the philosophy to stay true to oneself and money should not affect you; certainly money should not make your whole person.

In the movie *8 Mile* directed by Curtis Hanson, the main character Jimmy "B-Rabbit" Smith Jr., learns a similar lesson to the belief system presented in Macklemore's music: that money should not change one's thought, opinions, or dreams. Jimmy Smith Jr., a young and

talented aspiring rapper, lives in the ghetto of Detroit known as 8 Mile. 8 Mile represents the separation between the lower and upper class, divided by the 8 Mile Road. From the beginning of *8 Mile*, Jimmy struggles financially and blames most of his problems on this. While working at a low paying, dead end job, Jimmy works to save every penny to create a demo. He believes that his dream to make it big in hip-hop may be a lost cause because of his financial situation. This shakes his confidence as an artist and even causes Jimmy to choke during a rap battle early on in the film. However, through his development as a character, Jimmy's passion for hip-hop triumphs over the financial burden. In Jimmy's final rap battle against his rivals, it is shown that he has the talent to make something of himself, however, his true test of character happens after. In the end of the film Jimmy turns down a hosting position at The Shelter (the local rap battle venue) because, despite his need for income, he believes in himself enough to find success on his own. It is seen through both Macklemore's songs "Wings" and "Make the Money" and through the path Jimmy took in the movie *8 Mile* that money does not have to have a negative influence on a person. These examples further prove that the influence money has in hip-hop is individual and the genre as a whole takes many different positions on the matter.

One artist whose fame and fortune has come quickly is Kendrick Lamar, who has not let the influence of money change him but actually the absence of money is what motivated him and kept him humble throughout his career. Questlove expands on the influence Kendrick Lamar has concerning the concept of materialism in hip-hop culture:

"The winners, the top dogs, make art mostly about their own victories and the victory of their genre, but that triumphalist pose leaves little room for anything else. Meaninglessness takes hold because meaninglessness is addictive. People who want to challenge this theory point to Kendrick Lamar, and the way that his music, at least so far, has some sense of the social contract, some sense of character." (Questlove)

Questlove captures something about who Lamar is as an artist. Questlove points out that Lamar is a bright spot in what he believes to be the complete darkness in which hip-hop has evolved. What makes Lamar so special is the humility that he possesses, despite his talent and popularity. One sees this humility in the song “Black Boy Fly”, where artist talks about how his poverty and horrible living situation pushed him to make something of himself. His success is attributed to his hard work and determination, as he had nothing else. Instead of boasting his accomplishments, Lamar shares the story of his hardships to inspire others to follow in his footsteps toward success. “I wasn’t jealous cause of the talents they got/ I was terrified they’d be the last black boys to fly... out of Compton/ Thank God... Black boy fly/ watch that black boy fly”. Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics suggest that the great achievements in his life once seemed doubtful because of his living situation. It clear that he did not want the life that Compton (Lamar’s hometown) had for him and he overcame this obstacle in a big way. This song shows who Lamar is as an artist by explaining his past and how this motivated him to make something of himself. Lamar challenges the entire genre by recognizing his rise to fame and fortune was not easy and expressing his gratitude for his outcome instead of sharing vain lyrics about his success.

It is obvious why Lamar stood out to Questlove so much, and he is not the only one who notices the artist’s unique philosophy in the hip-hop genre.

“It’s hard to imagine him ever dropping a song about his jewelry or creeping towards itemized-receipt rap... (Kendrick Lamar) is the closest thing to a “conscience” that hip hop has, but he’s still unique amongst previous would-be rap saviors” (Hopper).

In this passage by Jessica Hopper in her article “Kendrick Lamar: Not Your Average Everyday Rap Savior”, Hopper recognizes that Lamar is not the artist to write with a materialistic viewpoint. Kendrick Lamar breaks away for the genre’s stereotype these artists are all about money. One of the “would-be rap saviors” Hopper refers to in her article is Jay-Z, as he too came

out of a hard situation much like Lamar, however money influenced Jay-z in a different way. The biggest difference between Jay-Z and Kendrick Lamar is how Lamar chose to focus on the gratitude of his triumph while Jay-Z chose to exploit his success to gain a sense of supremacy. Lamar's humility in regards to money is seen not only in his lyrics but also in his actions. After his big bonus from his first album, Lamar worked to get his family out of Compton. His story shows the deficiency of money in his life inspired him and kept him modest in his career. The effect money has on Kendrick Lamar is different than Kanye, Jay-Z, and Macklemore's or any other hip-hop artist because of the unique way each artist reacts to it.

Individuals in hip-hop are all influenced by money and material goods, however they are all unique in how they respond to it and the genre should not be associated with only one reaction to it. In the example of Kanye West and Jay-Z album "Watch the Throne", the reaction to money was one that took a materialistic take on it and influences the listeners that money is what creates power and everyone should do anything to obtain it. In both the songs included on Macklemore's album "The Heist" and actions taken by the movie character Jimmy in 8 Mile, a perspective of not letting money influence one's character is shared with the hip-hop community. The last example of the diverse ways money can shape an individual is through Kendrick Lamar's songs in his album "Good Kid M.A.A.D City", in which he used his childhood poverty to inspire him and stay humble in his young career in hip-hop. These examples represent just a small spectrum of reactions but they demonstrate that hip-hop is much more complex genre than given credit for, and money can and does impact everyone in the genre on an individual level. While some of the artists in hip-hop do take a materialistic reaction to the money they have, many do not and hip-hop should no longer be identified with this stereotype.

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Songs from:

Kanye West and Jay-Z "Watch The Throne"

Macklemore "The Heist"

Kendrick Lamar- "Good Kid M.A.A.D City"