



Public Enemy's Chuck D refers to rap as "a CNN for Black people" — an important source of information

stronger, more assertive Black man), the debate existed. People like historian W.E.B. Dubois wanted art that reflected only the positive attributes of the race and its advancements, because it would show whites "we were civilized," thereby fostering better race relations.

Other, younger artists such as writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston didn't care about any positive messages. Their stories often reflected the lifestyles and speech of country folk and people in the ghettos. To them it was "art for art's sake."

Another important Harlem Renaissance figure, Alain Locke, agreed with Dubois but said "Artists like Hurston and Hughes take their material objectively. They have no thought of their racy folk types as typical of anything but themselves or of their being taken or mistaken as racially representative... they were being racial for the sake of art."

The funny thing is these aforementioned artists are today celebrated within the Black literary world; sixty years ago they were the NWAs' and Two Live Crews' of their day.

This 'art for art's sake' approach doesn't suit Ajamu Nangwaya of the Ujamaa Afrikan Peoples Organization. Like Dubois, Nangwaya feels that art should be political. Nangwaya asks: "What empowerment do the sisters get from being called bitches or hoes?"

Since rappers are an important voice that kids listen to, they have to be held accountable. But in condemning rappers one falls into a difficult area. Luther Campbell, the leader of the Two Live Crew, is well known for his sexist lyrics, but what about the thousands of dollars he has invested in community development and education funds in the Miami Ghetto of Liberty City? It doesn't make him a saint but at least he is socially responsible.

Also, all this talk of censorship is hypocritical.

In "One in a Million" Guns and Roses sing: "Police and niggers get out of my way / don't need your guns or gold

chains today." All they got was a minimal slap on the wrist in public response, while everybody calls Ice Cube and Chuck D racists and wants them banned.

The simple truth is that when rap was confined to the Black ghettos, white society didn't care about what was being said. However, since middle-class white kids are eating up rap in droves, there is suddenly protest and calls for censorship.

I put this together to...

Another important issue in a discussion of rap is sampling. Sampling means using bits and pieces of a song without asking permission, or without compensating the original artist in many cases. When rap was young most songs contained sampled material but sampling was not an issue. Since rap is big time now, older artists complain about thievery of their music.

Rappers don't see this as theft. They feel that they are doing the older artist a favour by exposing their music to a younger generation. As Daddy O of Stetsasonic rapped on "Talking all That Jazz": "Hip Hop brings back old r&b/ If it wasn't for us people would've forgot." Indeed, rap has helped to revive old careers: Run DMC rejuvenated Aerosmith's career.

Today I have a greater appreciation for the music of James Brown because of artists like Eric B and Rakim and Public Enemy. And it was because of my love for NWA's version of "Express Yourself" that I learned the original was done by Charles Wright in 1970.

Whatever one's perspective on the subject, sampling without paying is now illegal. Last year in an unprecedented move, a judge in New York ordered copies of Biz Markie's album *I Need A Haircut* removed from the shelves because a song on the album contained the illegally sampled 1972 hit "Alone Again Naturally" by Gilbert

O'Sullivan.

The last issue to be raised — and arguably the most important — concerns the very future of rap. It is the issue of commercialization, of artists going "pop" to appeal to a mainstream white audience. This issue was never more debated than when white rapper Vanilla Ice came on the scene. He was accepted for a while, but then the backlash started. It wasn't because he was white — it was because of his blatant lack of talent.

Rappers speaking out may have prevented a white audience from adopting Vanilla Ice as the new King of Rap but what about all the originators of rap? They will fade into obscurity. Last year this Vanilla Ice reportedly made over 18 million dollars. How much money has Afrika Bambaataa, Kurtis Blow or Grandmaster Flash made?

In the nineties, executives are going to be the death of rap. In their constant pursuit of profit they disregard and disrespect the message behind rap and go for the most commercially viable "product."

No matter how much we are disgusted by NWA, Geto Boys and Public Enemy, we can't dis them totally because they are "real" hip hop. If we abandon them we'll lose rap just like we lost jazz and rock and roll.

The worst-case scenario? Twenty years from now kids will think that rap started with Vanilla Ice and Hammer — just as they think today that rock is white music that started with Elvis and the Beatles. Heed the word of the brother, Ice Cube: "Pretty soon hip hop won't be so nice / no Ice Cube just Vanilla Ice."

"There's too much product on the market right now, so it's time for people to start causing waves again like in the beginning. People who play it safe are going to fall off, people who take chances will either hit real hard or miss, and those are the ones I'm gonna pay attention to."

Funken-Klein: President, Hollywood Basic, "Gangsta Limpin" column in The Source

"I rate rap by skills and am just hoping that with all the commercialism coming into rap the audience stays in tune and pays attention to more underground artists that are dropping more skills musically and lyrically."

"We rap street knowledge, intellectual knowledge and spiritual knowledge combined into one."

Guru and DJ Premier from Gang Starr: Artists with second LP, Step into the Arena, on Chrysalis.

"Right now, the identity of rap is like a homeless man, 'cause it's so much about having no sight of where he's going to be tomorrow. It's like he had a former life, possibly even a great former life, but right now his identity is lost. I feel that people just need to be more of themselves on records, and portray the people that they're tryin' to be, some of the fears they have or some of their hopes or ambitions. Instead, it's caught up in 'I wanna be like this because so-and-so is like this and works for so-and-so.' It's like some man sitting on the side of the street and wishing he had somebody's else's bowl of soup."

Black Sheep: Artists with debut LP Wolf in Sheep's Clothing, On Mercury

"Rap has become commercialized, it's something that was being created and people liked. It started to reach a wider audience and, as more and more people got involved, the base broadened and allowed room for new things to develop."

David Mays: Publisher of The Source

"If the beat is flavor and the MC can flip it in terms of cadence of intonation or the words he selects to use in a rhythm, or if there's certain different topics he talks about — if it's got flavor — I consider it rap music: that's hip hop. Hip hop can be defined more as culture which is made of a lot of different things like breakdancing, graffiti, smokin' a blunt, whatever it means to you... It's something from the heart: not everyone can feel hip hop or understand rap."

Bobby Garcia: A&R Promo Rep, RAL/Def Jam records.

"Aside from being rappers, we're into the business side of it. We also have a responsibility to our families and the young generation coming up. It's not just about making more money and selling records, it's about making money and selling records while you have the power that people want to hear what you have to say."

EPMD: Artists signed to Def Jam