



Salt 'N Pepa is one of many rap groups whose philosophical beats have translated into gold or platinum

they could be considered musical Pablo Picassos and Leonardo Di Vincis.

Rap is also expression. As Russell Simmons, CEO of Def Jam records attests, "Rap is an expression of the attitude of the performers and their audience. This probably explains why hardcore rappers have so much appeal — because there is a certain anger and rebellion to their music."

When rap first started, it spoke about, partying, sexual conquests, cars, "fly gear and fly girls and guys." It was just music to have fun and dance to. There was no need to classify it or carve it into genres. But the music has evolved, because of the differing personalities of rappers, and because of the politics of the music business.

Rapper Kool Moe Dee defined four types of rap in last December's edition of *Billboard*: "Pop/commercial: Hammer, Vanilla Ice, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince;

street, which is N.W.A, Geto Boys, 2 Live Crew; somewhere in the middle is Heavy D, Queen Latifah, myself; and political which is Public Enemy, KRS-One."

The Importance of rap

"Black or White, left or right they tell lies in the books that your readin' it's knowledge of yourself that you're needin'."

•Public Enemy "Prophets of Rage"

Public Enemy's Chuck D has referred to rap as "a CNN for Black people." What Chuck is saying is that rap is an important source of information.

Whether rappers are discussing police violence or the effect of drugs and alcohol in their communities, they are always entertaining and informing and current. When was the last time any one heard Luther Vandross or Phil Collins sing about the evils of crack or the necessity of unity and knowledge of self in the Black community? Though they are often maligned, groups like Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions and Ice Cube can be seen as trying to promote positive social change through their music.

One person who has his eyes open is Marc Emery. Emery, a white bookstore owner in London, Ontario who was charged in 1990 for selling copies of the banned Two Live Crew album *As Nasty as they Wanna Be*, says he stopped eating meat after listening to KRS-One's song "Beef," in which the rapper described the unsanitary ways meat is prepared for consumption by the general public. Emery said he began to read more about the philosophies of Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X as a result of listening to rap.

Apparently rap is also a CNN for white people, especially white kids, who are among the biggest consumers

of rap. Emery thinks that the rap appeals to white kids because of its honesty.

"Today's white kids are a lost generation," Emery says. "They look at today's society — racism, worsening economic conditions — and see all the lies and hypocrisy that their parents have told them and they're restless. Rap is the only form of music trying to address the problems through revolutionary social change in a non-European way."

Emery's vision is honourable — but will rap really change white attitudes?

Journalist John Adams doesn't think so. "White kids will still grow up earning more money and living better on average in this society," he says.

Adams' point is well taken because racism still exists today, even though a generation of white kids grew up listening to Bo Diddley and Little Richard.

Tellin' it like it is

Because of Rap's increasing popularity it has come under scrutiny from many corners. One obvious criticism pertains to lyrical content. Many hardcore songs contain blatant sexism, many songs refer to Black females as "hoes" and "bitches," and Black people are referred to as "niggas." Many songs also speak of murder and robbery.

For example, on "One Less Bitch", NWA's Dr. Dre raps about being a pimp and killing hookers who try to doublecross him, while band mate MC Ren Raps about gangbanging a fourteen year old "ho." Rap is art yes, but clearly some lyrics strain the limits of good taste, common sense and decency.

Do these lyrics influence people? Rapper Ice T says no. He has repeatedly stressed: "Just because you go to see Terminator or Rambo that doesn't make you want to get a gun and shoot people."

Bushwick Bill of the Geto Boys adds, "Real life isn't censored," while his partner, Willie D, raps "It's on the news every hour, why can't I talk about it."

NWA has often said "they're just tellin it like it is." Telling it like it is not a crime but many people feel that groups like NWA tend to glorify the decadence. As female rapper Harmony asserts: "Just because we're in filth doesn't mean that we have to stay there."

Whatever one's opinion is on this subject, it is important to note that the role of art in the Black community has always been hotly debated. In the 1920s, during the Harlem Renaissance and the age of the "New Negro" (the

compiled by John Bronski of Street Sound

"If people really wanna know rap music, they got to go back to the roots. We're new school, we're new booties in a gang. There's been people who's been in it for 15 years. I've only been in it three-four years, so you know we definitely new booties. So if you wanna know rap music you got to step back. You get to know where we got our inspiration from. If not, you'll just go by what's on top."

Ice Cube: Artist/Actor, his strong "Boyz In The Hood" inspired John Singleton to make the movie of the same name.

"I don't know if it was straight up B-boyish even in the beginning, and I'm talking about going back to the days of Kurtis Blow, Jekyll and Hyde and Whoodini, who were the first kind of hitmakers before Run-DMC hit. I think there was more variety in it than people in the music at that time gave it credit for."

Bal Adler: Author of *RAP-Portraits and Lyrics of a Generation of Black Rockers*, former head of *Rush Management* publicists *Rhyme & Reason*.

"The reason why the rap Identity is getting broader has to do with two things. First, the inevitable mainstream decision to pay attention to hip hop, as well as the broadening of the Black community in terms of class and education. Once Black folks get exposed to different things, these things are going to work their way on how we're going to express ourselves culturally."

Scott Poulson-Bryant: Spin writer and columnist for the Source.

"Just because a fad is out, that don't mean everybody's got to follow that fad. For me, example, I still be wearing my sweats and Nikes for the longest and I still got a 'fro on top of my head. Music and fad don't have to join together. Whatever comes along, whatever generation takes to it, they'll just go for it."

Red Alert: DJ on WRKS 97, New York

"Rap means to us a very strong medium of communication that has evolved. It's taken all course of angles. Our angle is an Afrocentric one, and we want to speak about the issues affecting not only Afro-Americans but the African community which, of course, is all connected."

Zimbabwe Legit: African rap duo from Zimbabwe, signed to Hollywood Basic.

"The rap identity comes from us being ourselves. The music that we do, like 'Hanging Out', is about things that we do. We hang out with our friends." "Everything that we talk about or touch on is about everyday life. It's about what we go through. We don't write about things that don't relate to us."

K-Kut and Sir Scratch from *Main Source*, with debut LP *Breakin' Atoms*, on *Wild Pitch*.



Controversial rappers like Ice Cube can be seen as trying to promote positive social change through their music