

Rebel Poets Reloaded

Tom Jennings

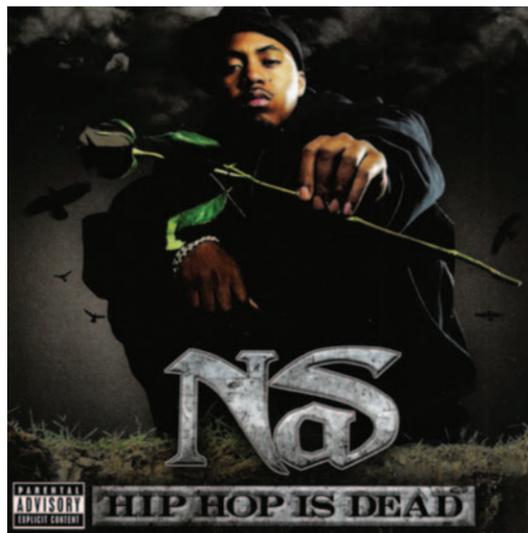
On April 4th this year, nationally-syndicated US radio shock-jock Don Imus had a good laugh trading misogynist racial slurs about the Rutgers University women's basketball team – par for the course, perhaps, for such malicious specimens paid to foster ratings through prejudicial hatred at the expense of the powerless and anyone to the left of Genghis Khan. This time, though, a massive outcry spearheaded by the lofty liberal guardians of public taste left him fired a week later by CBS.¹ So far, so Jade Goody – except that Imus' whinge that he only parroted the language and attitudes of commercial rap music was taken up and validated by all sides of the argument. In a twinkle of the jaundiced media eye, gatekeepers of Black opinion like Oprah Winfrey (convening one of her televised 'town hall meetings'), old-school leaders like the Reverend Al Sharpton, and hip-hop movers-and-shakers such as Russell Simmons concurred – the lyrics and videos were damaging the moral fabric of the nation, and must be cleaned up.²

A closer look at mainstream rap's production, distribution and reception, naturally, tells a different story. Corporate tactics cashing in on the cultural cachet, colonising and canalising it to suit the bottom line, are running out of steam as sales decline and targeted demographics jump ship.³ Ironically, the multilayered conflictual diversity of voice, position and musical expression – freely articulated and negotiated in public and private among generations of urban youth – drove hip-hop's growth. In a classic case of late capitalism's toxic stupidity, precisely this dynamic human vitality has been suffocated by superficial fantasy and celebrity worship⁴ – so that 50 Cent is now virtually interchangeable with Britney Spears. But away from the chattering classes' disciplinary agendas, cycles of renewal in US hip-hop always juggle pleasure and pain, intelligence, artistry and entertainment. The grass-roots political implications of such shifting sands are still central concerns – whether or not MTV or monopoly radio pay attention – and what follows scratches the surfaces of today's descendants of Grandmaster Flash and Melle Mel's 1982 'The Message'.⁵

Death Certificate

It's no surprise, of course, that the usual suspects – moral majorities, high-minded aesthetes, racists, and all the assorted hip-hop hating hypocrites – relish sticking the boot in yet again. You'd almost worry if they didn't. But now, twelve years after *Illmatic* – his definitive new-school debut – the eighth Nas release also declares the party over. *Hip Hop Is Dead* finds the genre's pre-eminent wordsmith maintaining the consistent output of ghetto-centric quality that has attracted faithful support despite persistent cluelessness among subcultural tourists deaf to its effective musical marriage of rap tradition and cutting-edge populism and blind to the vision's integrity in mobilising observation and personal resonance to chronicle and critique the anguish and aspirations of the contemporary US inner-city Black poor. Now mature enough to question the evolutionary status of a profoundly influential cultural movement, Nas challenges its adherents to transcend self-importance in response.

The album opens with no-nonsense potted summaries of rap's 'hoodrats clawing their way to fame and fortune, couched in the favoured gangsta condensation of capitalism-as-crime, before the bravado segues into admitting its protagonists' culpability for the artistic price paid. Then the title track nails it – "Everybody sound the same / Commercialized the game / Reminiscent when it wasn't all business / They forgot where it started / So we all gather here for the dearly departed" –



before the pivotal 'Black Republican' juggles Jay-Z: "I feel like a black republican, money keep comin' in" and Nas: "I feel like a black militant, takin' over the government", followed by the refrain: "Can't turn my back on the 'hood, too much love for them / Can't clean my act up for good, too much thug in 'em / Probably end up back in the 'hood; I'm, like, 'fuck it then'."

Implicitly recognising that individual advancement neither resolves class contradictions nor fulfils hip-hop's emancipatory potential leaves the set oscillating between honouring the Black traditions which nourish struggle, and reasserting underclass self-confidence in developing agendas expressed in their terms. With intricate wordplay literate in urban provenance, Black Arts and contemporary reference, Nas echoes Rakim's cool philosophical cadence and 2-Pac's passionate arrogance grounded in Panther politics. Beyond their mystical paranoia, though, he senses that the project is constitutionally incapable of breaking on through – despite the muscular, sensuous beats and brooding intelligence here representing living disproof of the title.

Alongside tiresomely predictable 'I-told-you-so' music press taste parades, insider critiques of Nas' obituary cite the rude health of southern states 'crunk' – whose synthetic sonic minimalism re-energises grass-roots dance credentials yet rarely showcases lyrical craft or consciousness. Even then, the manic passions of the dancehall never fully suppress the nightmares outside⁶ – however candy-coated the corporate airbrushing and blinged-out overcompensation – so that current southern variants of urban narcissism and nihilism may just be more honest than the slickly-processed cartoon commercialisations prevalent elsewhere. Moreover, the Dirty South also boasts Atlanta's Ludacris – the genre's greatest ever humourist – and sophisticated reverse-colonisations of pop such as Outkast and Cee-lo Green (ex-Goodie Mob; now Gnarls Barkley), along with some awesomely-skilled anti-hero MCs.⁷

Across America the picture is comparably far from monochrome. Studio-gangsta fashion icons, sex-symbols and pop-wannabes conceal a scattering of progressive rap poets and producers who persist in courting recuperation on major labels, trading reluctant legitimisation of the latter's lost kudos for radio airplay. Others regroup under corporate radar, combining strategic intrusions in mainstream glare with tactical retreats into relative autonomous obscurity, where those of a more activist bent nourish audiences for outspoken radicalism with modest, collectively-oriented niche production and distribution. The incendiary trailblazers of such approaches review their stances and re-enter the fray, whereas newcomers impatiently cut through tired pretension and sectarianism to cross-fertilise in unprecedented alliances. In short, whether underground or thoroughly mediated,

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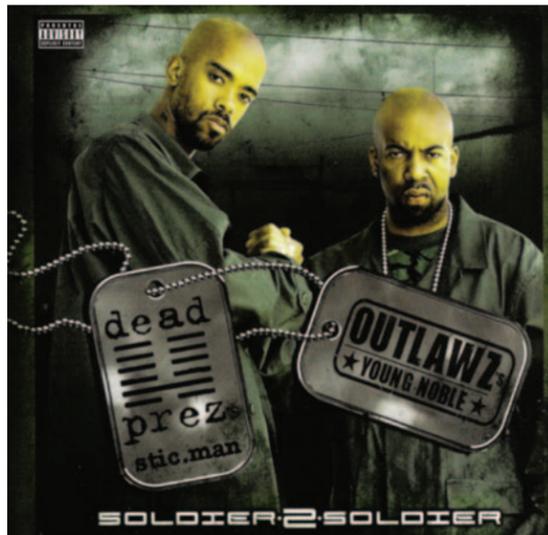
1. Despite the plague of reactionary cockroaches crawling from the woodwork in his support – see the detailed account of the affair given by Ishmael Reed, 'Imus Said Publicly What Many Media Elites Say Privately: How Imus' Media Collaborators Almost Rescued Their Chief', *CounterPunch*, 24 April, 2007.
2. Not quite explicitly 'by any means necessary', though censorship was obviously a subtext; whereas dealing with the material conditions of dispossessed groups whose cultures include such forms of expression was not – as in the regular UK correlations between youth music and crime in misguided but ominous anti-sociality bandwagons. Adisa Banjoko succinctly highlights the perspectival chasm between the US civil rights and hip-hop generations, dismissing the focus on the use of language in 'NAACP: Is That All You Got?' (www.daveyd.com).
3. The myth of rap's primary appeal to white kids is debunked in Davey D, 'Is Hip Hop's Audience Really 80% White?' *San Jose Mercury News*, 17 August, 2006 (also on www.daveyd.com). It has shaped major record company marketing strategy – including the careful fostering of controversy exploited by political opportunists of all stripes – and fooled well-meaning hip-hop critics making simplistic equations of gangsta rappers and modern day minstrels (as well as hostile radical elitists; for example in the otherwise on-point *News From Everywhere* and BM Blob, 'James Carr, the Black Panthers and All That: On the General Context and Some of the Hidden Connections Between Then and Now', new afterword to *BAD: the Autobiography of James Carr*, Pelagian Press, 1995; at www.endangeredphoenix.com). Davey D lays out some of the implications in 'Is Hip Hop Really Dead?' *San Jose Mercury News*, 3 March, 2007 (www.alternet.org/mediaculture/48693/).
4. See Gwendolyn A. Foster, *Class-Passing: Social Mobility in Film and Popular Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2005) for an interesting, if limited, discussion.
5. Although, sadly – for reasons of space – lyrical illustrations are kept to an absolute minimum here. But then rap is musical poetry, not literature, and the beats are intrinsic to the rhymes.
6. An alternative genealogy of urban dance music can be found in 'Dancehall Dreams', *Variant*, No. 20, June, 2004.
7. Such as Mississippi's David Banner, who only the most determinedly ignorant could construe as unequivocally 'ign'ant'. His furious response to the demonisation of hip-hop by old-guard Black 'leaders', 'Stop Attacking the Kids', can be found on www.allhiphop.com. For more on rap negativity's hidden transcripts, see 'Br(other) Rabbit's Tale', *Variant*, No. 17, May, 2003.
8. Liner notes, *Hard Truth Soldiers*, Vol. 1.
9. Greg Tate, 'Hip Hop Turns 30: Whatcha Celebratin' For?', *Village Voice*, 4 January, 2005.
10. Discussed in 'At the Crossroads', *Variant*, No. 25, February, 2006.
11. On 'Say Something', Talib Kweli, *Ear Drum*.
12. Which followed its bootstrap economic formulae far more scrupulously and profitably – see Nuthin' But a 'G' Thang: *The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* by Eithne Quinn (Columbia University Press, 2005) for an excellent analysis of the subgenre. Chuck D's most enduring legacy is probably his long-term personal mentoring in countless underground hip-hop scenes outside America, while at home KRS-One has kept the outreach flame of Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation rainbow coalition alive in his 'Temple of Hip-Hop'. Breathless accounts of these and other US developments can be found in journalist Jeff Chang's excellent *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York, Ebury Press, 2005; including 'The Message: 1984-1992', pp.215-353).
13. Paris, liner notes, *Hard Truth Soldiers*, Vol. 1.
14. Reviewed in *Freedom*, Vol. 65, No. 10, May, 2004 (also at www.tomjennings.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/).
15. As in the Black August programme showcased in comedian Dave Chappelle's free concert in New York, filmed for cinema release as *Dave Chappelle's Block Party* (2005) by music video maestro Michel Gondry.
16. Who *Finding Forever* commemorates after his death from lupus, and whose majestically haunting midtempo production (as on many other outstanding hip-hop releases) for 2001's *Like Water for Chocolate* coincided with Common's most forthright political opinions yet – compared to far safer (enough to appear on Oprah), if still worthy, seams mined since.

this is one hell of a hyperactive corpse – and, with characteristic hyperbole, Paris proclaims today’s as “the most prolific period of protest song-writing in history”.⁸

In a *Village Voice* piece interrogating glossy celebrations of hip-hop’s thirtieth birthday, Greg Tate⁹ contextualises the apparent conundrum, assessing the political implications of its capitalisation. First infiltrating American youth, rap’s viral spread via industrial dissemination abroad decisively shifted the conditions of possibility for a global lower-class discourse on poverty and powerlessness which can no longer simply be silenced by repression and fragmentation. On the downside, merged media’s cultural pincers package Black style for middle-class fashionistas while hypnotising local core communities with hyperreal fantasies of superhuman prowess to conceal the intensifying subhuman treatment meted out by the state. Such tactics require the active collusion of urban aristocrats in exchange for egos bloated with pieces of silver, encouraging a copycat gold-rush whose rate of profit now plummets in correlation with the hollowing-out of authenticity and innovation in ‘rhythm and bullshit’ and ‘hip-pop’.¹⁰ Nevertheless, such uneasy, conflicted recuperations are inherently prone to rupture, no matter how often they tell us there’s no alternative. The historical fault lines here trace US race reform, with the classic liberal compromise of civil rights the palliative for a working-class generation of revolutionary Black militants framed and massacred by the Fed’s COINTELPRO. The meritocratic mystification of dual spiritual/worldly uplift seemed viable as residual resistance was mopped-up in narcotic flood and economic drought, but street dreams of respectability unravelled with Rodney King, O.J. Simpson, 9/11, Iraq and New Orleans – with voting Democrat as inconsequential as Million Man Marches and millionaire MCs. Tate rhetorically specifies: “If enough folks from the ‘hood get rich, does that suffice for all the rest who will die tryin?” Clearly not, but hip-hop’s vernacular could unify a movement to dismantle structural dispossession, and present ideological and organisational realignments in the ‘CNN of the ghetto’ hint at just such a renaissance. As Jean Grae puts it: “Hip hop’s not dead, it was on vacation / We back, we bask in the confrontation”.¹¹

Critical Conditions

If Nas and Jay-Z settled their once-vituperative personal feud in a provocative statement of present dialectics, legendary hip-hop elders MC KRS-One & DJ Marley Marl were bitter adversaries in a much earlier battle of lyrical content, cultural consciousness and populist orientation. Their joint history lesson rejoinder, *Hip-Hop Lives*, recapitulates the compositional genius of sampling in heightening verbose charisma, but its fundamentalist stasis mistakes necessity for sufficiency in both cultural and political conditions for the genre’s enduring relevance. More forward-looking in spotting incipient convergences, California raptivist Paris has produced a slew of collaborative projects on his independent Guerilla Funk imprint. Somewhat bizarrely, he provided all the music and lyrics (apart from some Chuck D verses) for Public Enemy’s *Rebirth of a Nation*. Unfortunately, despite stentorian tones reminiscent of their halcyon days, the lacklustre bass thump squanders the trump card of NWA’s MC Ren guesting in symbolic reconciliation after the early 1990s US ghetto-centric rejection of cross-class Black nationalism.¹²



The *Hard Truth Soldiers, Vol. 1* compilation is more successful, both musically and in addressing “subjects ranging from war and police brutality to black on black crime and domestic violence, the recent reduction of civil liberties, increased injustice and racism everywhere, and a rise in self-censoring corporate media monopolies hell-bent on stifling dissent and flooding our communities with negative and escapist entertainment ... we represent a united front against bigotry, misogyny and the exploitation and misrepresentation of our communities and culture”¹³ What really marks it out, though, is gathering together past-masters of agit-prop and hardcore hip-hop with underground stalwarts and younger voices, representing successive generations of social conscience – including a host of gangsta rappers scarcely famed for ideological acumen – where an unmistakable common political denominator is class war, as consistently advocated by participants like The Coup.

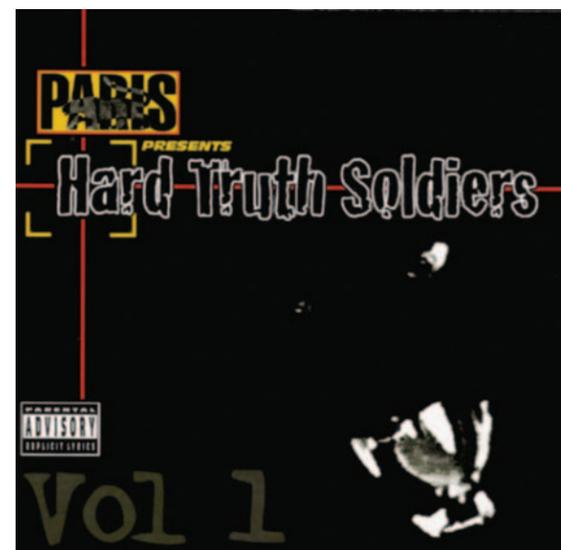
Their fifth album, *Pick a Bigger Weapon*, continues The Coup’s evolution from underground West Coast US rabble-rousers into international recognition and acclaim. The early-2001 cover design for *Party Music* – a metaphor for the revolutionary destruction of capitalism featuring DJ Pam the Funktress and MC Boots Riley brandishing drumsticks and guitar tuner with the World Trade Center exploding in the background – was hastily withdrawn by their record label after 9/11. The resulting publicity gave Boots an unanticipated mainstream media platform from which to air the insurrectionary class-struggle views familiar from the lyrics of *Kill My Landlord* (1993), *Genocide and Juice* (1994) and *Steal This Album* (1998). As in the new release, such views are conveyed via pithy, witty tales of woe, frustration, anger, humour and hope in everyday life on the mean streets of Oakland, drenched in 1970s soulful funkadelia and the whole gamut of hip-hop referentiality. Whereas, if The Coup’s compelling beats ever more pleasingly integrate their musical antecedents with present political demands, *Pick A Bigger Weapon* refers to the failure of our tactics thus far, with its contents reiterating the grass-roots grounds of any worthwhile future movement.

Preceding his music career, Riley spent four years on the central committee of a Leninist group before rejecting such instrumentalist forms of organisation. Since then he’s emphasised the potential of the lower classes to overcome their situation – which art has the capacity to engage with, share in, crystallise and facilitate rather than summon up or dictate. Avoiding the superior preaching traditional among rap’s self-appointed intelligentsia, his ghetto-centric storytelling foregrounds the potential for individuals to interpret their lives in terms of collective understanding. So, lyrics of street hustler soul-searching, drudge work subversion, or sexual yearning reflect the painful intransigence of daily struggles gradually morphing into rebellious class pride – and the poetic balance of the opening metaphor, “I’m a walking contradiction / Like bullets and love mixin”, finally culminates in military mutiny in ‘Captain Sterling’s Little Problem’.

Bay Area activist and KPFA radio host T-Kash (‘keep a steady hustle’) himself turned from shady street business to guesting at Coup gigs before hooking up with journalist and webmaster Davey D; now inspiring Paris to provide his

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17. And moving to Jay-Z’s Def Jam may have helped in both respects. The Roots and their impresario percussionist-producer ?uestlove are also notable for helping birth the Black Lilies performance crucible and nurturing countless talented newcomers, including many of neo-soul’s most important figures.
18. From whence he previously blessed Mos Def and Talib Kweli with the magical beats for *Black Star* and *Reflection Eternal*.
19. After writing West’s most successful flirtation with messianic naftness yet, 2006’s Grammy-winning ‘Jesus Walks’, Rhymefest now extracts reparations with some of the production wizard’s best for his own album.
20. While still permitting strategic deals with the majors on his terms (and those of labelmates) – but as mere conveniences for distribution rather than millstones more trouble than their monetary worth. Thematically, Kweli stresses that his approach “focuses on black self-love, black self esteem, black self worth. That translates to other communities because if you’re a human being, it doesn’t matter what color you’re talking about. You’ve been through some sort of struggle and you can apply it to your own life”. Its effectiveness is described in more detail in ‘Beautiful Struggles and Gangsta Blues’, *Variant*, No. 22, February, 2005.
21. Including the late-1990s Black August visits to Cuba with the likes of Common and DJ Tony Touch, and, after the NYPD murder of Amadou Diallo, initiating the *Hip-Hop for Respect* (2000) project. The latter recording was acknowledged by many as among the most sublime music and inspiring lyrics of the period, yet was curiously censored from the airwaves – an open media secret susceptible only to corporate-scale payola (cf. The Roots and Erykah Badu’s 1999 ‘You Got Me’) or the dumbing down of lyrics deemed ‘too intelligent’ (which Little Brother refused to do with 2005’s *The Minstrel Show*).
22. Over the UTP/Juvenile (from New Orleans) beat for ‘Nola Clap’. Again weaving together cultural, media and political critique, Mos Def was arrested on his flatbed soundsystem arriving to play ‘Dollar Day’ outside the 2006 Video Music Awards at Radio City, NY. The furore around Katrina’s aftermath manifests clearly enough the neon primitive accumulation agenda – in the landgrab after the dispossession’s brutal enforcement, and also in hounding all manner of altruists flooding into Louisiana to help. These included southern rap royalty David Banner, Nelly and Young Jeezy donating millions – only to find the IRS and federal prosecutors in their and recipients’ faces for a cut. See also Slavoj Žižek’s invaluable observations on the conventional discourses overdetermining the all-round obscenity, ‘The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape: Reality and Fantasy in New Orleans’, *In These Times*, 20 October, 2005. Finally, further depths of Louisiana’s current reality surface in the school students persecuted for refusing to wear Jim Crow’s new-millennial clothes – see Jordan Flaherty, ‘Racism and Resistance: The Struggle to Free the Jena 6’, *CounterPunch*, 15 August, 2007.
23. And, although a fascinating and enjoyable listen, this vastly ambitious enterprise overreaches itself in fragmented pacing and thematic and wildly uneven lyricism, albeit with considerable talent and imagination on show.



most varied G-funk hi-jinks so far for *Turf War Syndrome*. Declaiming authoritatively on wider forces of political economy refracting into ghetto hopelessness and destructive criminality, his direct street-corner pedagogy ‘thinks globally; acts locally’ in conversation with neighbourhood peers. Straightforward, effective metaphors engage populism without risking patronisation, particularly in the R&B loverman double-meanings in tracks like ‘Liberty Mutual’ (unrequited love; but for the Statue thereof) and ‘How To Get Ass’ (i.e. assassinated by the state). And whether puncturing hero and anti-hero pretensions through humour or honest realism, the heart of the album is to motivate and inspire the poverty-stricken to turn their ‘American Nightmare’ into one for the status quo.

A similar message of revolt has been developed by far-left duo Dead Prez, who ended a two-year hiatus following 2004’s landmark *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta*¹⁴ with several new projects. Despite endorsement from rap mogul Jay-Z, Sony dropped them after swallowing Loud Records, so independent moves now yield M-1’s solo debut, two mixtapes with the Outlawz, and Stic.man’s *The Art of Emcee-ing* how-to book+CD. Their trajectory reinforces the cross-pollination of post-Panther politics with street-level music and class-based ‘reality’ rap, with M-1 branching out to produce for other artists (including David Banner), establishing publishing company ‘War of Art’ (punning on Sun-Tzu), touring with Wu-Tang Clan’s Ghostface, and signing with jazz guitarist/producer Fabrizio Sotti for *Confidential*.

The resulting melange of R&B melodies and hooks (sweetly rendered by veteran soulstress Cassandra Wilson and initiate Raye) mixes current NY, west coast, and southern club sonics in a successful lyrical-musical synthesis with MCs like Styles P (ex-The Lox) on ‘Comrade’s Call’, ATCQ’s Q-Tip on the sexual politics tip (‘Love You Can’t Borrow’), and rising star Somalian refugee K’naan (soulful lead single ‘Til We Get There’) – as well as M-1’s own mother (fresh from 12 years inside for drugs offences) on the thoughtfully downbeat ‘Land, Bread & Housing’. These strategies dovetail with thematic subterfuge, thinly-veiling revolutionary rhetoric in everyday stories ‘making sense’ rather than ‘intellectualising’. The title track links repression in the past and present while celebrating contemporary resistance. And, resuscitating 2-Pac’s stillborn ‘conscious thug’ project, ‘Don’t Put Down Your Flag’ explicitly preaches gang unity in the wider struggle.

With M-1 positioned as a remotely radio-friendly quasi-mainstream rapper, Stic.man and California’s Outlawz explore inner-city Black youth options in two albums. *Soldier 2 Soldier* fruitfully deploys military tropes and metaphors in crosscutting between the failed promises of both ghetto strife and armed forces careers; whereas *Can’t Sell Dope Forever* is more fully accomplished in dissecting the deadly fascination with the drugs game. The subject has intimate resonance with all concerned – several of the Outlawz are former dealers, including Young Noble whose mother and brother were both addicts. Also involved are Stormey, Kastro and Edi Don (ex-members include Napoleon and Fatal, with 2-Pac and Khadafi both murdered), the group being most famous for *Still I Rise* (1999). They have a long-standing collaborative ethic, though previously stressing the ‘gangsta’ side of the equation.

Can’t Sell’s opener, ‘1Nation’, straightforwardly frames the problem as gang versus class war, while the title track sympathetically fleshes out the cold-hearted reality. Later, ‘Like a Window’ has Stic.man agonising over his junkie brother, musing on the interests ultimately served, and ‘Believe’s comparative critique of consumerism decisively reconnects the political-economic analysis to daily life: “You ain’t gotta smoke crack to be a fiend / A fiend is just somebody who’s addicted, it could be anything / Too many of us addicted to the American Dream / We’re high from the lies on the TV screen / We’re drunk from the poison that



they’re teachin’ in school / And we’re junkies from the chemicals they put in the food”. This thematic integration of all dimensions of everyday reality itself reflects another hip-hop rapprochement supported by Dead Prez, bringing cultural politics, art and lifestyle back to an unapologetically vulgar lower class grass-roots.¹⁵

Vital Signs

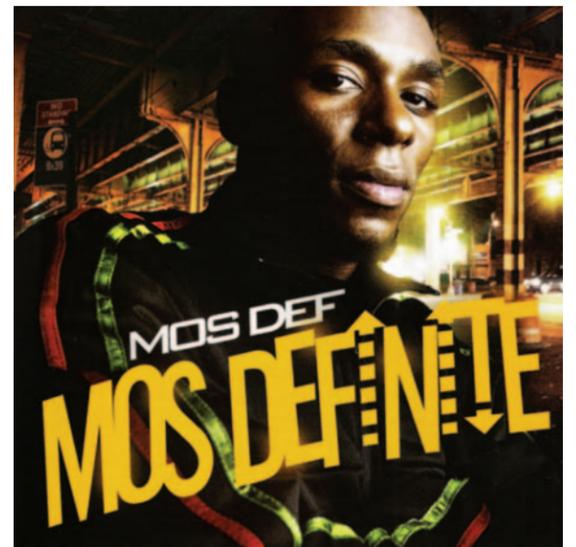
The original ‘Native Tongues’ trajectory of De La Soul, Jungle Brothers and A Tribe Called Quest self-consciously embraced sonic breadth far beyond hip-hop’s early disco, funk and rock borrowings, nourishing a 1990s blend of jazz, blues and soul which helped facilitate the hyper-commercialisation of R&B crossovers. The philosophies espoused also mixed a heady countercultural brew from 1960s psychedelia to Afrocentrism and the Black avant garde, and although these purportedly bourgeois overtones were drowned out by reality rap’s relentless rise, the production innovators flourished – especially in alternative regional scenes in the midwest and Atlanta, which were responsible for considerable musical progression in both independent and mainstream sectors. The tradition’s MCs were always already left-of-centre, but have moved steadily away from identity politics to explicit class-consciousness, condemning them to the margins despite widespread respect for their integrity.

Several of the best have raised their profiles in alliance with industry heavyweights, however, and the results are mixed. *Finding Forever* finds Common melliflously commenting on communal hardship and love’s complexity, though Kanye West’s competent cod-spiritual backing holds no candle to J-Dilla’s transcendental genius.¹⁶ Philly live-band specialists The Roots’ *Game Theory* is far tighter than occasionally lumbering, meandering previous output, and the album’s outspoken solidaristic voices avoid the lazy, hectoring patronisation of which they’re sometimes guilty.¹⁷ Pharoahe Monch has collaborated with pop icons like P. Diddy to leverage clout, and *Desire* brings marvellously smooth gospel-funk to diverse topical themes tackled with his usual tenacity and flair, especially in the harshly anti-war ‘Agent Orange’. Conversely, Hi-Tek travels in the opposite direction, having recently produced in-house at 50 Cent’s G-Unit, with the classic truculence of *Hi-Teknology 2* anchored back in the edgily creative independent realm.¹⁸

In the ebb and flow of mid-careers ducking and diving around the majors, two notable midwest debuts dip toes in the mainstream. Lupe Fiasco’s bohemian proletarian diaries in the superb *Food and Liquor* echo convincingly as an off-kilter latterday Slick Rick, with dizzying soundscapes and profound wordplay juggling wordly pleasure and pain through subcultural scholarship, social realism and acute oppositionality. Kanye West’s former sidekick Rhymefest¹⁹ is less subtle in the magnificent *Blue Collar*, inflecting impressions of sundry charismatic Black figureheads with a battle-rapper’s bragging overkill. This comic masterstroke exposes both the pretensions of power and its fragility, simultaneously clarifying the recipes for all the false cures sold to ordinary folk in his music-hall crowd. Unfortunately, though,

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24. As well as being proof positive, if such were needed, of the possibilities hip-hop’s worldwide embrace offers those suffering. K’Naan has performed at various international conference junkets and is always outspoken in disrespecting the UN et al. He was equally realistic about his inclusion as token African in last year’s Live8 extravaganza – rejecting its patronising ethos while relishing the opportunity to represent the dignity of his people despite abject circumstances.
25. See my appreciation in ‘Beautiful Struggles’ (see note 20).
26. From the intro: “Came to pass in the days of glorifying everything wrong / That the standard for girls became a bra and a thong / Wholesome values like curling up with a good book and a bong / Went out the window along with making a good song / ... So I say to you now, the Rebellion is urgent / Stand before you not as queen, but as your humble servant / Fake leaders claim thrones without building kingdoms / Same as the music business in Kingston / We need to fight for the future for our daughters and sons / Instead you’re tripping your brothers, fighting for crumbs / But we will not be deterred by knives or guns / Go tell it on the mountain, the Rebellion has come” – see a full review in *Freedom*, Vol. 68, No. 14, July, 2007 (at www.starandshadow.org.uk/).
27. Including those hopeful souls nevertheless persisting in established campaign networks and mainstream electoral politics (covered in depth by Yvonne Bynoe in *Stand and Deliver: Political Activism, Leadership and Hip Hop Culture*, Soft Skull Press, NY, 2004); and the more cynical, realistic, determined, and increasingly numerous who recognise that movement from the bottom up has to be the first principle (sketched in Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop*, Ch.19, ‘New World Order’, pp.437-465; see note 12).
28. With the notorious refrain on 2006 single ‘Bin Laden’ (featuring Chuck D and KRS-One): “Bush knocked down the towers!” (not to be taken literally, of course ...) The depth, breadth and integrity of his political orientation and its fearless public expression have earned the trust and respect of, for example, framed political prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal, who tape-recorded on Death Row an intro and interludes for his album. IT’s many fascinating and forthright interviews include: ‘Essence of Revolution’, *Latin Rapper* magazine, 6 October, 2004 (www.latinrapper.com), and Brendan Frederick, ‘Rock The Boat’, *XXL* magazine, 4-5 April, 2006.
29. Including producing and guesting, as in ‘Treason’s disgust at bourgeois (and other) sellouts: “Immortal Technique, Indian Chief, Lord Sovereign / Bear claw necklace and the puma moccasins / Legal money motherfucker, you can bring the coppers in / ‘Cause I’m a take a shit on them, without Johnny Cochran / spittin’ Prometheus fire, when I speak to a liar / I’m the last of the Essenes that will teach a Messiah / Rip your heart out with the technique of a Maya / ‘Cause only snitches and Kanye speak through a wire.”
30. The legacy is laid out first in ‘Initiation’ by Abiodun Oyewole of the Last Poets: “We got high on Blackness / Held our black fists up / Told the devil to suck / And made a commitment to disrupt the world / Kill a cop a day / Give white girls no play / Make America pay for all her wicked ways / The shit was on! / Then it was gone / Just like an episode on TV / It got cancelled, and there was nothing to see / Panthers were turned into little pussycats / Revolution was commercialized / And had nothing to do with Black / ... But we never stopped making babies / They came out breathing the vapors of our aborted revolution.” Then ‘Mood Music’s cultural focus has Akir wryly referencing more immediate precursors: ‘First things first, I never tried to be like Nas / See, I’m my own man; respect to that nigga, though, Paw / It’s the same thing they used to do to him with Ra / take it as a compliment, and nod as I hit the top.”



such sincere and effective deployments of rap's cornucopia (like West's soul concoctions) still resemble novelty acts, passing nostrums rather than lasting remedies for society's ills.

Probably the most gifted conscious rapper of them all is Talib Kweli, whose sojourns through the range of underground, independent and corporate production paradigms never dampen his anger at the state of the world or enthusiasm for beats and rhymes as expressive tools for the articulation of personal and collective visions of struggle and change. The sheer brilliance of the writing crafts densities of allusion with a knack for rendering complexity into narrative to rival anyone. Added to a willingness to immerse these profound talents in the most crowd-pleasing entertainment and cutting-edge sonic styles, you'd have a complete 'package' – except for contradicting accepted sales and subcultural wisdoms, where neither niche-marketers nor their fanboy mirror-images can handle his refusal to kowtow to stratifying imperatives. Shunning such straitjackets meant a reluctant retreat to petit-bourgeois discipline and the running of a small label, but advance to more purist practices of collaborative experimental musicianship while allowing full furious flow for lyrics saturated with exuberance, analytical rigour and positivity.²⁰ As a consequence, *Liberation* (free-download album with Cali's villainous lo-fi beatsmith Madlib), the *Blacksmith* sampler showcasing signees Jean Grae and west coast posse Strong Arm Steady, and new solo triumph Ear Drum all overflow with thrilling skill and poignancy.

Like Kweli, Mos Def has a history of engagement in radical causes²¹ and no truck at all with the political establishment, but even less patience with music industry bullshit. Mixtape CD *Mos-Definite's* energetic envelope-pushing, eclectic populism and newly-rediscovered lyrical playfulness and ferocity perhaps reflect both the influence of and relief from the regimented rigours of growing Hollywood stardom. Somewhat ironically, given this dream factory provenance, 'Beef' is a meaty lambasting of commercial rappers' abdication from reality, wherein (after Talib Kweli's historical contextualisation) he punctures their pumped-up ego dramas:

Yo, Beef is not what Jay said to Nas / Beef is when working niggas can't find jobs / So they try to find niggas to rob / Try to find bigger guns so they can finish the job / Beef is when a crack-kid can't find moms / 'cause they in a pine box, or locked behind bars / Beef ain't the summer jam on Hot Ninety-Seven / Beef is the cocaine and AIDS epidemics / Beef don't come with a radio edit / Beef is when the judge's callin' you defendant / Beef, it come with a long jail sentence / Beef is high blood pressure and bad credit / Need a loan for your home and you're too broke to get it ... / Beef is not what these famous niggas do on the mic / Beef is what George Bush would do in a fight (that's right) / Beef is not what Ja said to Fifty / Beef is the world and earth not being here with me / When a soldier ends his life with his own gun / Beef is trying to figure out what to tell his son / Beef is oil prices and geopolitics / Beef is Iraq, the West Bank and Gaza Strip / Some beef is big, and some beef is small / But what y'all call beef is no beef at all / Beef is real life, happenin' every day / And its real-er than the songs you gave to K-Slay.

His subsequent third studio album, *True Magic*, mixes fervent blues-ridden yearning and laconic excoriations of media complacency and corporate collusion in a sick political and social system, diagnosing with great subtlety the symptoms of its corrupting fallout – all oriented squarely but empathetically towards listeners who lack material means and comforts but have untold cultural riches at their fingertips. Halfway through, the blistering 'Dollar Day' is dedicated to "the streets everywhere, the streets affected by the storm called America", signifying Katrina with the punchline "Quit bein' cheap, nigga, freedom ain't free ..."²²:

It's Dollar Day in New Orleans / It's water, water

everywhere and people dead in the streets / And Mr President, he 'bout that cash / He got a policy for handlin' the niggaz and trash / And if you poor or you black / I laugh a laugh: they won't give when you ask / You better off on crack / Dead or in jail, or with a gun in Iraq / And it's as simple as that / No opinion, my man, it's mathematical fact / Listen, a million poor since 2004 / And they got illions and killions to waste on the war / And make you question what the taxes is for / Or the cost to reinforce the broke levee wall ... / It's Dollar Day in New Orleans / It's water, water everywhere and babies dead in the streets / It's enough to make you holler out / Like where the fuck is Sir Bono and his famous friends now / Don't get it twisted, man, I dig U2 / But if you ain't about the ghetto, then fuck you too.

A plethora of alternative urban therapies stray further from established conventions, drawing on diverse models of musical innovation to riff on and mull over experience and prognosticate on prospects for transformation. For example, Portland's Lifesavas crew twist 1970s blaxploitation into concept album *Gutterfly*, with updated classic soul and funk cleverly mobilised to illuminate the present state of exploitation of the hip-hop arts as well as of its grass-roots audiences.

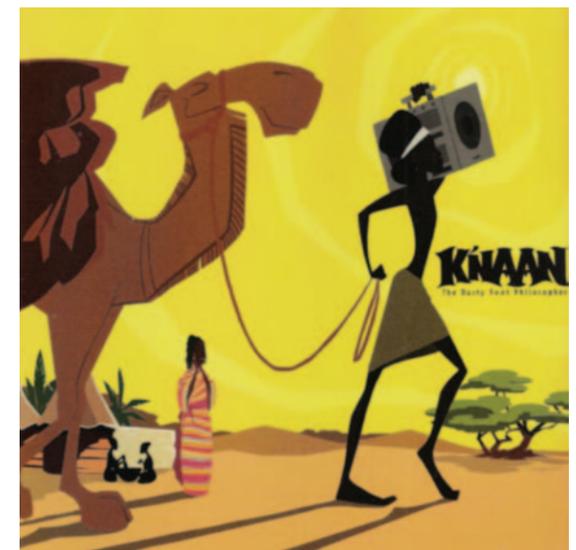
On the opposite coast, new collective The Reavers (with eleven 'revolutionary emcees advocating views [on] everyday reality struggles') marry the avant garde symphonics of the Def Jux label with a sense of cold menace courtesy of the Wu-Tang Clan. Rather than the latter's apocalyptic visions of Staten Island as the psychotic kung-fu dystopia of Shaolin, however, *Terror Firma's* parallel universe condenses the entire global village into their own home neighbourhoods, matching imperialist colonisation with the oppositional armoury of hip-hop elements.²³

Reflecting rap's worldwide influence more readily, Toronto's Somali ex-pat K'Naan's *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* swirls hi-tech synthetics around organic samples and African drums, strings and chants behind accomplished poetic jeremiads about coming-of-age in Mogadishu's cataclysm. Quite apart from searing imagery, magnificent accompaniments and unique verbal style, his takes on questions of criminality and 'What's Hardcore' "make 50 Cent sound like Limp Bizkit" while crumbling the New World Order's institutional thuggery.²⁴ Meanwhile, Tanya Stephens continues her de facto ambassadorial role for hip-hop's older Caribbean sibling. 2004's *Gangsta Blues* transformed reggae with its critical (and self-critical) intelligence and hatred of all oppression and in combining the passionate lower-class patter and panache of the ragga dancehall with roots, Lovers Rock, and lighter, singer-songwriter instrumentation.²⁵ Now, *Rebellion* articulates a clear agenda for present conditions in culture and politics.²⁶

Stephens' strident street-level soap-box pronouncements are placed pithily in the history of Black struggle, with other tracks amplifying the implications of prejudice in weaving together the baleful power of dominative discrimination. Then, having scathingly critiqued organised religion's mystifications, 'Warn Dem' muses furiously on ghetto desperation, with its video showing a young carjacker robbing a pharmacy and using the proceeds (an oxygen mask) to save an asthmatic baby's life. The epilogue reiterates the artist's trademark humility seasoning her most trenchant insights: "You know what? Me can't promise you say the youths dem a go drop the Beretta / Hell, me can't even promise you say ME a go act better / But one thing's for sure, we can mek a effort / And that a the least we can do before we lef earth". Her early career yielded some of the most pleasurable barbed highlights of the obscene 'slackness' subgenre, and several tracks here explore personal intimacy and the pragmatics of sexual relations, emphasising womanist strength and autonomy and emotional and sensual directness and honesty – with no PC pieties and arguably the sharpest tongue and most hilarious

Notes continued...

31. For example, the high-profile, high-handed Black August debacle in South Africa in 2001 (described in Jeff Chang, 'New World Order', see note 27); or the Fugees' Wyclef Jean's symptomatic superstar posturing in his native Haiti (justifiably attracting Anthony Iles' ire in 'Haiti Special: Introduction', Mute, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2006, pp.32-39; also at www.metamute.org).
32. Such as Black Autonomy founder Lorenzo Kombo Ervin, some of whose writings appear in www.libcom.org's race thread, including 'Black Autonomy: Civil Rights, the Panthers and Today' (with JoNina Abron) from *Do Or Die*, No. 9, 2001, and 'Black Capitalism' (2001). See also, *News From Everywhere* and BM Blob's insightful discussion of BAD: the Autobiography of James Carr (see note 3). In terms of broader reference, www.illegalvoices.org, the US Anarchist People of Color network's important online resource, has unfortunately been hijacked. However, part of its immensely useful archive can still be found at www.illvox.org.



wit ever put on wax on the subject. Throughout, her personal narratives reliably correlate – naturally, unpretentiously and effortlessly – with wider levels of analysis too, in a rare appreciation of the complexities of class, gender and race with recourse neither to righteous mysticism nor simplistic faith in better leaders. And such meldings of class-conscious ethics with collective effort are exactly what resonate widely among younger generations of hip-hop affiliates – both within the musical arena, and as DIY activists outside²⁷ – aware of the hypocrisy of orthodox political forums, and no longer pandering to egotistical, self-righteous power.

Recovery Plans

Among many younger musicians, these trends are exemplified in the work of producer/MCs Immortal Technique and Akir ('always keeping it real'), whose uncompromising politics are clearly manifest in praxis as performing and recording artists. IT's chaotic early days included escaping Peruvian civil war to refugee status in Harlem, violence, crime and prison time – before passion for hip-hop channelled rage into battle-rapping and a virulent blend of bare-knuckle inventiveness and insurrectionary propaganda. Gangsta and underground hip-hop heads alike recognised the prodigious skills in *Revolutionary, Vols. 1 and 2*, morphing doses of bitter street paranoia into the common lore realism of Black and Hispanic ghettos concerning US government and corporate responsibility for the heinous horrors across the hemisphere.²⁸ Having maintained a punishing pace of concert tours and guerilla distribution, he has hooked up independent deals for the Viper label, delaying his own new album for the sake of Akir's debut.²⁹

Swerving between Washington and NY, the latter's early mixtape hustles catapulted him to cognoscenti attention with the 'Unsigned Hype' accolade in *The Source* magazine. Fulfilling the promise, *Legacy*'s astonishingly accomplished achievement marries music and message in intense introspection and wise social awareness with perfectly pitched production overseen by partner Southpaw (relieved from providing superior beats for P. Diddy to call his own). The MC's relaxed style is equally on beat tackling personal ('Rite of Passage', 'Change of the Seasons') or interpersonal growth ('No Longer My Home', 'Tropical Fantasy') with warmth and wistfulness, while demonstrating hard-hitting appreciation of past and present constraints on communality ('Treason', 'Kunta Kinte'). Yet the interrelationships among diverse levels of analysis emerge without pretension from an intoxicating brew of ambience, rhythm and lyricism so that – though exasperated by apt comparisons with Nas – Akir actually transcends the circular arguments new-school rap in general has remained hypnotised by, gesturing towards a future with far fewer illusions.³⁰

In particular, economic and social struggles repeatedly overlap, for example in 'Grind', 'This Is Your Life', 'Resurrect' and 'Ride 2 It' meditating on questions of getting by, getting ahead, and leaving behind authenticity and one's past and people. Deploying both African and proletarian traditions forces the implications for the satisfaction of spiritual and material needs of egotism, moralism and greed to be balanced against grass-roots criteria for welfare and horizontal social-power relations. Leavening



the twin sorceries of the griot's and postmodern entertainer's charismas with revolutionary understanding allows aspirations to realise American Dreams to be acknowledged, but their baleful global payoff is too painfully centre-stage to succumb to fantasy. The alienated hubris of celebrity, fooling artists (and politicians, in their sphere) into forgetting that the context and manner of their rise to prominence inherently contradict lower-class collectivity – inevitably yielding embarrassing and damaging errors of judgement³¹ – is no option.

Finally, Akir's legacies dovetail to devastating effect in more explicitly political tracks connecting historical, cultural and structural dots, such as 'Apocalypse', 'Pedigree' and 'Homeward Bound', and 'The Louisiana Purchase's timely pinpointing of the general significance of Katrina. The centrepiece of the album's ideological assault, 'Politricks', most satisfyingly signals a decisive advance beyond both vanguard arrogance and tepid reform – conceiving healthy radical movement in terms of the mutualism, individual strength and implacable resistance to domination emphasised by the libertarian heirs of Black Liberation³²:

"Politicians that be gargling that garbage shit / Bargain with anonymous officers of opposite / Doctrines for the legal tender documents / Pocketin' the profits off of rockets / While they kick us out the projects / Logic, surprising common sense / Risin' occupants up out environments / Survive and then they got you doin' five to ten / ...

I don't follow the news, they just add to my blues / Politicians and they big feat could never fill my shoes / They don't care, think we all live off welfare / It's hell here, why should I vote, like it's ever been fair?"

Discography

Akir: *Legacy* (Viper/Babygrande, 2006)
 Common: *Finding Forever* (Geffen, 2007)
 The Coup: *Pick a Bigger Weapon* (Epitaph, 2006)
 Dead Prez & Outlawz: *Can't Sell Dope Forever* (Affluent, 2006); *Soldier 2 Soldier* (Real Talk, 2007)
 Hi-Tek: Hi-Tekology 2: *The Chip* (Babygrande, 2006)
 Immortal Technique: *Revolutionary, Vols. 1 and 2* (Viper/Babygrande, 2005); *The Middle Passage* (forthcoming).
 K'Naan: *The Dusty Foot Philosopher* (BMG, 2006)
 KRS-One & Marley Marl: *Hip Hop Lives* (Koch, 2007)
 Talib Kweli: *Blacksmith: The Movement* (featuring Jean Grae & Strong Arm Steady, Blacksmith, 2006); *Liberation* (with Madlib, Blacksmith 2007); *Ear Drum* (Warner, 2007)
 Lifesavas: *Gutterfly: The Original Soundtrack* (Quannum, 2007)
 Lupe Fiasco: *Food & Liquor* (Atlantic, 2006)
 M-1: *Confidential* (Koch, 2006)
 Mos Def: *Mos Definite* (FMG, 2006); *True Magic* (Geffen, 2007)
 Nas: *Hip Hop Is Dead* (Def Jam, 2006)
 Paris: *Hard Truth Soldiers, Vol. 1* (Guerilla Funk, 2006)
 Pharoahe Monch: *Desire* (Universal, 2007)
 Public Enemy, featuring Paris: *Rebirth of A Nation* (Guerilla Funk, 2006)
 The Roots: *Terror Firma* (Babygrande, 2005)
 Rhymefest: *Blue Collar* (Sony, 2006)
 The Roots: *Game Theory* (Def Jam, 2006)
 Tanya Stephens: *Rebellion* (VP, 2006)
 T-Kash: *Turf War Syndrome* (Guerilla Funk, 2006)