

BET Deserves Credit for "Hip Hop vs. America"

Contributed by Leethaniel Brumfield - Black College Wire
Wednesday, 24 October 2007

Hip hop didn't invent sexism, violence

With the release of its "Hip Hop vs. America" series, which began airing in late Sept. 2007, Black Entertainment Television (BET) began to creatively address the highly debatable topic of hip hop and its influence on contemporary America.

For all the criticism it receives, BET deserves credit for tackling this topic and broadcasting it as a special prime-time event during the first big week of the new television season. The first part of the three-part series was taped as a town hall meeting last June in Los Angeles as a response to the nationwide discussion that catapulted after the Don Imus scandal.

It was a full day's discussion broken up into segments of lively and long overdue conversation about sexism, violence, homophobia, and materialism in hip hop. The show, hosted by Touré and Jeff Johnson, features Nelly, T.I., Master P, Chuck D, the Rev. Al Sharpton, Michael Eric Dyson, NPR's Farai Chideya, former Essence magazine editor Diane Weathers, commentator Stanley Crouch, author Karrine Steffans, and gay activist Keith Boykin.

While I know a discussion is needed on the negative influence of hip hop, and stations such as BET that support it, the real problem here is not just hip hop or BET. The real problem is broader than any one TV network or cultural phenomenon.

Hip hop didn't invent sexism, violence, homophobia or materialism. If you listen to the language used by President Bush, you'll realize that all those things are as much a part of America as baseball and apple pie. Who's more sexist, violent, homophobic and materialistic than the president of the United States? He's the guy who wants to take away a woman's right to choose and a gay couple's right to marry. He's the guy who wants to arm the nation with hand guns and has started two wars in his first term alone. He's the guy who promotes unchecked capitalism at the expense of workers' rights. And most importantly, he's the guy with the power to do something about those things!

Still, that shouldn't let hip hop off the hook. Hip hop may not have started any of those things, but it has amplified, and in many cases, glorified the images of violence, materialism, sexism and homophobia. Some people pick on hip hop just because they don't like it. But many of us pick on hip hop because we want it to do better. We remember when the music of hip hop was connected to the streets and was powerful, political, and entertaining at the same time.

Now we worry that much of today's hip hop has descended into something meaningless, produced by people of color but largely consumed by young white guys in the suburbs. And no matter how much we talk about hip hop, the White and Black executives in the music industry don't look like they're ready to change its formula anytime soon. Nor, for that matter, is the consumer changing. Unless and until consumer outrage spurs action, the industry won't be doing much about it.

Leethaniel Brumfield, a student at Langston University, writes for the student newspaper, the Gazette. To comment, please e-mail Black College Wire.

Posted Oct. 22, 2007

