

How did rappers respond to events like 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina?



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Four men were sitting under an umbrella thorn tree; one of them was holding a crude drum and the others were empty handed. Then the oldest man started chanting while the man with the drum started rhythmically beating it. Several hundred years later forty-seven slaves in a church service were singing a song with a call and response method. The pastor would call out and then the congregation would yell it back. Six rappers from Southside Atlanta meet in a studio and start freestyling. Rap immediately created gifted teenagers with plenty of imagination but little cash and they began to forge a new style from spare parts. Hip-hop, when it was first developed out of a long lasting tradition of call and response, mixed in backbeats, with a rhyme to accompany obscene words of anger about the conditions of their past and/or their present. Impoverished kids from the ghetto began to rap; this in turn also created a new art form known as "graffiti art" that surfaced along with hip-hop in poor neighborhoods. The New York subway trains were and still are covered in this new spray can art form. New DJs would paint their names or a symbol known as tagging in order to get more recognition. Socially conscious rap artists have responded to many events such as the attacks of September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina with lyrics that are meant to raise interest and critique the government.

Rap's evolution is tied mainly in style and rhythm. Rap's idea was based off of two big influences: Griots and slaves singing in churches in the eighteenth-century. Griots are any of a class of musician-entertainers of Western Africa whose performances include tribal histories and genealogies. The reason they affected rap was that they sang in a very rhythmic way, actually singing the stories. In the eighteenth-century slaves would hold their own church services weekly on sundays, how they did this was the pastor would call out in song out the sermon for the week and the congregation would yell it back to the pastor (call and response).

The form of rap that is known as "gangster rap" was and is the most criticised genre of rap. Well known religious leaders, presidents, and congressmen have all accused the genre of "promoting crime, serial killing, violence, profanity, sex addiction, homophobia, racism, promiscuity, misogyny, rape, street gangs, drive-by shootings, vandalism, thievery, drug dealing, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, disregarding law enforcement, materialism,

and narcissism.” (Wikipedia)

Rap’s evolution has turned it into a huge target of complaints and insults. People like the White House administrators of both George Bush Senior and Bill Clinton criticized the genre “hip-hop is the devil’s music,” however it is now one of the most popular genres of music.

"Many black rappers--including Ice-T and Sister Souljah--contend that they are being unfairly singled out because their music reflects deep changes in society not being addressed anywhere else in the public forum. The white politicians, the artists complain, neither understand the music nor desire to hear what's going on in the devastated communities that gave birth to the art form," Chuck Philips, a reporter wrote about the battle between the Establishment and defenders of rap music. "The reason why rap is under attack is because it exposes all the contradictions of American culture ...what started out as an underground art form has become a vehicle to expose a lot of critical issues that are not usually discussed in American politics. The problem here is that the white House and wanna-bees like Bill Clinton represent a political system that never intends to deal with inner city urban chaos," Sister Souljah told Philips. (Wikipedia)

The Bronx was a major part of making rap as popular as it is. “From the housing projects hip-hop poured onto the streets and subways, taking root in Bronx clubs like the Savoy Manor Ballroom, Ecstasy Garage, Club 371, The Disco Fever, and the T-Connection. From there it spread downtown to the Renaissance Ballroom, Hotel Diplomat, the Roxy, and The Fun House. It migrated to Los Angeles, where a whole west Coast hip-hop scene developed, sporting its own musical idiosyncrasies, its own wild style. It quickly spread from one major urban center to another where there was a large population of black people. Music on early rap records sounded like the black music of the day, which was heavy funk or more than often disco music. The basic function of rap music was to serve as dance music as did the Jamaican toasting music from which it originated.” (Crayone)

Through television shows on MTV including BET’S Rap City, YO, and Hollywood movies rap exploded out of its home town of the Bronx and went to places such as the rest

of America, Europe, Asia, and Africa and on almost every other continent and country on earth.

Henry Adaso helps distinguish socially conscious rap and politically conscious rap. In present day rap one of the most vibrant and popular genres. “Conscious hip-hop is often confused with its musical cousin, political hip-hop, possibly because they both speak to social turmoil. A disdain for commercialism is another common thread that weaves the two styles together. Politically charged songs by the likes of Dead Prez and Public Enemy are usually delivered in a militant fashion. The conscious message, on the other hand, empowers by uplifting the listener. Close your eyes and pick any album from The Coup's catalog and you will have walked in on a crash course on political hip-hop.” (Crayone)

Socially Conscious Rap

When Kurtis Blow helped introduce socially conscious rap he became and always will be a mouthpiece for the underclass. Socially conscious rap is a large enterprise. Many rappers such as Lil Wayne, Kendrick Lamar and Public Enemy have made a lot of money rapping about social issues. A good example of under privileged rappers is Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's “*The Message*” that they wrote about their living conditions. “The Message” was the first socially conscious rap song to go mainstream, peaking at No. 62 on the Billboard 100 in 1982. “Broken glass everywhere/People pissin' on the stairs” In the Bronx in 1983 housing projects where notoriously under cared for and abused. It was a regular thing to see a man urinate on the front door step of the building he and many others lived in to show his disdain. “You know they just don't care I can't take the smell” Referring to the smell of urine that reeked in and around the building. “Can't take the noise/Got no money to move out,” this line refers to the total disregard for any neighbors wishes for silence and to the failing economy and mass poverty of the time. “I guess I got no choice rats in the front room, roaches in the back,” this line is mentioning the terrible house up keeping by both tenants and landlord that made rats and roaches a fact of life. “Junkies in the alley with a baseball bat I tried to get away but I couldn't get far/Cause a man with a tow truck repossessed my car,” “junkies” were also a fact of life in the poverty and filth crime went rampant with only minimal challenge. *The Message* by Grandmaster Flash and the

Furious Five is a perfect example of the grim picture socially conscious rap can depict.

Many people think the socially conscious rapper as we once knew it is dead. And everyone can blame Jay Z. In 2003, on “Moment of Clarity,” when he released “Truthfully I wanna rhyme like Common Sense/But I did 5 mill’, I ain’t been rhyming like Common since,” he made it clear as sheer—if you want to be really successful in hip-hop, kicking knowledge just won’t cut it. “So despite the fact that righteous lyricists like Talib Kweli, Common, Yasiin Bey (Mos Def) and dead prez kept the flame burning for conscious rap, the millennial generation realized that diluting intellectual soap boxing with carefree bravado could reach even more fertile minds. If they were to truly carry the torch, they needed to be revolutionary but gangsta, for real.”

The Socially Conscious Rapper/Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 have drawn the attention of many rappers who have then thoroughly “cussed out” the governments because of blatant racism. Rapper Kanye West sums it all up when he said, “George Bush doesn’t care about black people,” on a Hurricane Katrina telethon. In the disaster of New Orleans (Hurricane Katrina) many rappers started rapping about the government’s seeming lack of interest, an example of this is *Tie My Hands* by Lil Wayne featuring Robin Thicke. Specifically this verse of the song shows Lil Wayne’s opinion of the mayor and the president’s help to his drowning city.

*“I, knock on the door, hope isn’t home
Fate’s not around the lucks all gone
Don’t ask me what’s wrong ask me what’s right
And I’m a tell you what’s life, and did you know?
I lost everything, but I ain’t the only the one
First came the hurricane, then the morning sun
Excuse me if I’m on one
And don’t trip if I light one, I walk a tight one*

*They try tell me keep my eyes open
My whole city underwater, some people still floatin'
And they wonder why black people still voting
'Cause your president still choking
Take away the football team, the basketball team
And all we got is me to represent New Orleans, shit
No governor, no help from the mayor
Just a steady beating heart and a wish and a prayer."*

People expect swearing and references to violence, sex, and crime in rap, but in many socially conscious raps the rappers are generally sincere. Example, Lil Wayne is from New Orleans and just donated \$200,000 to build a skate park so that the kids could have something to do. The park also held many famous skateboarders that were there collecting money for the rebuilding of the neighborhoods that were devastated by Hurricane Katrina. "I just wanted to help out my city, help out the people and the kids and give them something to do, something they haven't done before. It is always good to learn something new." Lil Wayne explained.

Lupe Fiasco 9/11

Lupe Fiasco is a rapper from Chicago. Lupe went out of his city's socially conscious problems to rap about 9/11. Lupe Fiasco is a Muslim rapper who prefers nonviolent video games to consumption of alcohol. The name of his first album is *Food & Liquor* as a reference to good (food) and evil (liquor). Even though the album was well-liked by hip-hop heads, it was not commercially popular. The topics in his raps vary from giant robots and gangster zombies to mocking widespread stereotypes. While steering away from topics such as misogyny and violence, he emphasizes the beauty of black culture and family.

The song *American Terrorist*, which came out in 2006, addresses 9/11 in a subtle but recognizable way which seems to be the way of socially conscious rappers: subtly mentioning the issue among other lyrics and then repeating it again.

"We came through the storm nooses on our necks

*and a smallpox blanket to keep us warm
on a 747 on the pentagon lawn
wake up the alarm clock is connected to a bomb
anthrax lab on a Virginia farm
shorty ain't learned to walk already heavily armed
civilians and little children is especially harmed
camouflaged Torahs, Bibles and glorious Qurans
the books that take you to heaven and let you meet the Lord there
have become misinterpreted, reasons for warfare
we read 'em with blind eyes I guarantee you there's more there
the rich must be blind because they didn't see the poor there
need to open up a park, just close 10 schools"*

(Verse three of American Terrorist)

In this verse, Lupe connects “a 747 on the pentagon lawn” with “camouflaged Torahs, Bibles and glorious Qurans” referring to the widespread panic after 9/11 towards Muslims worldwide and Muslim Americans like himself. He goes on to say that, “The books that take you to heaven and let you meet the Lord there/ have become misinterpreted, reasons for warfare,” indicating President Bush’s hasty decision to invade Afghanistan and, not long after, Iraq.

Repercussions

One downside of socially conscious rap is that the rappers get less publicity. Socially aware rappers often dissect the attitude and ideals propagated in mainstream culture, but the approach is not without its limitations. Since they often create music for headphones, and not necessarily for mass radio, socially conscious rappers are generally less accomplished than their mainstream counterparts. With the exception of a few (Nas and Kanye West, for example) socially conscious artists typically get pummeled on the charts by their more popular mainstream peers.

9/11

Remo Conscious raps about 9/11 in his song *Lies*. He has written many songs on the subject that the buildings were blown up along with being crashed into a plane. “My music is a response to the brutal political, military, and financial machine which continues to oppress, separate, and dominate free people all over the world. My intention is to awaken, inspire, and influence positive change.” -Remo Conscious

*“We saw the towers fall to ashes like they were laced with bombs
Are you sure only 2 planes did that harm?
You told us flight 77 hit the Pentagon
But there’s no photo of parts man plus the science is wrong
You let it happen, like FDR did Pearl Harbor
So you could profit from war just like your father
Taking lives and oil in the name of freedom
while innocent are either tortured, left homeless or bleeding
Death to America — is what they scream
while you preach freedom and the American dream
Troops dying, mother crying, still to trying to cope
while you’re denying, that the dangers from Iraq was a hoax
You’re not a man of the people just a product of evil
Greed, Power and God, a combination that’s lethal
So deceitful it’s criminal but soon the truth will rise
Lies”*

Socially conscious rap does not have to be nice. The rappers will still swear, they might even make a misogynistic comment or two, but what socially conscious rap does is tell the story in a way that is not censored or sugarcoated at all. Rappers are usually rapping about what happens in their city when they spit a socially conscious rhyme. That is why this form of rap is usually supported by people that have gone through tough times such as growing up dirt poor and knowing they could not do anything about it. That is why

socially conscious rap talks about the poor and working class while attacking the government with a good dose of vehemence.

Have you ever felt a subject was not thoroughly talked about? Have you ever felt that you were at the hands of injustice? Socially conscious rap is a style where the rappers express their feelings about a subject that is going on in the world or has occurred in the world such as 9/11. Socially conscious rappers usually have the mentality of "I just wanted to help out my city"(Lil Wayne)

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