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Final Paper

Is There a Need for “White” Hip Hop? Vanilla Ice and Eminem: A Contrast.

The hip hop culture first rose to prominence in the late nineteen seventies in New York City as a movement that was for blacks, by blacks. As the culture progressed and became more mainstream, African Americans still dominated each of the five main aspects of it. The five themes involved with hip hop include graffiti art, visual fashion, break-dancing, emceeing, and knowledge of the past. One frequently posed question is which of these themes is most important to hip hop. Although many arguments can be made about the importance of each of these, it turns out that all five are equally important. If a hip hop artist tries to rap without understanding the background, can he be considered real? What if he wears collared shirts and ties to perform, and his name is not Sean Combs? Is he real? This is not hip hop. The classic hip hop artist is a black male who understands all the elements of the culture. Can there be a classic, white, hip hop artist then? If someone recognizes all the hip hop elements and uses them every day, does the color of his skin matter? Vanilla Ice and Eminem are two white rappers who have tested this question, and both had remarkably different results.

According to Tricia Rose in Black Noise, “Rap music is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America” (Rose 2). Nowhere in this definition does it say that the marginalized Americans have to be black though, the music just gives them priority. Compare this to Ernest Allen Jr.’s idea of message rap in Making the Strong Survive: The Contours and Contradictions of Message Rap, “Core values articulated in a given rap message... tend to be socially rooted in the

daily lives of marginalized African American youth” (Allen 162). The ideas are similar in that both quotes refer to rap being primarily an African American concept. Interestingly though, neither Rose nor Allen says that it *must* be for black people. This seems to leave an opening for rappers such as Vanilla Ice and Eminem. Both of these rappers attempted to make it big in a predominantly black field. Surprisingly, both artists made a huge impact on the culture. There is a major difference between the successes of the two though. Vanilla Ice was big for about eight months. Eminem has been a success for over five years. By comparing the careers of the two rappers it is easy to understand why Vanilla Ice fizzled so quickly and why Eminem has lasted so long.

Robert Van Winkle, known as Vanilla Ice, had his first big hit in 1990 with the acclaimed “Ice Ice Baby.” The song was an immediate hit when it aired on the radio and it launched his album *To the Extreme* to the top of the billboard charts. This album sold over seven million copies. As William Perkins wrote in The Rap Attack, this proved to be his initial downfall, “His album, *To the Extreme* sold seven million copies, making it the biggest selling rap album in history and alienating him from the rap mainstream” (Perkins 37). This raises an interesting question. Why would selling millions of records alienate Vanilla Ice from rap? The answer to this is that most of these albums were purchased by fans of pop music, not rap. There is rap mainstream and then there is general mainstream. Vanilla Ice entered that general mainstream by selling a rap song to pop audiences. *To the Extreme* became a “bubblegum rap record,” as explained by Nelson George in Hip Hop America. “To hard-core purists almost all the records on my list [*Ice Ice Baby* included] are crossover crap and not ‘true hip hop’ ... Bubblegum rap records, often made by one- (or perhaps two-) hit wonders, were just one angle of intersection between hip hop and

white buyers” (George 65). Does this mean that any rapper who sells several million records will be known as a “bubblegum rapper?” No, and Eminem proved this with his first album.

When Marshall Mathers, known as Slim Shady or Eminem, released his first album *The Slim Shady LP* in 1999, it was an immediate success. Sure, it was eight full years after Vanilla Ice had disappeared, but there was something different about this album. His first big hit, “My Name Is” was successful on the pop charts like Vanilla Ice’s first single, but the difference with Eminem is that the other songs on the album were not pop music. In fact, most of the songs on the album were too hardcore and controversial for the pop scene. This controversy can definitely be attributed to a lot of Eminem’s success. *The Slim Shady LP* sold three million albums in the first six months after its release. This is not nearly the same number of albums sold by Vanilla Ice, but Eminem sold his records primarily to rap/hip hop fans. In other words, Vanilla Ice went commercial and Eminem did not. This might seem a little strange now, seeing as how many hip hop artists today are very mainstream, and some, such as Nelly and Ja Rule, are criticized for wavering between rap and pop. Does this mean that commercializing oneself in hip hop precludes the artist from being considered a real part of the culture?

There are two ways to look at this question. First, consider the fashion of many hip hop artists. The styles today, as cited in a New Yorker Magazine article by Michael Specter are, “The type of t-Shirts and baggy jeans that characterize hip hop clothing brands like FUBU and Ecko” (Specter 118). Add five-hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds to that outfit and it becomes the standard for mainstream hip hop fashion. Back when Vanilla Ice was performing, the style was definitely not as extreme, but Flava Flav

used to wear a big clock around his neck and LL Cool J was known for large gold rope chains. Vanilla Ice did not wear the standard hip hop outfit. He was known to wear an American Flag suit or baggy parachute pants with a jacket that had some quote on the back. He is not exactly wearing anything that represents himself. Wearing one's own style is very important to hip hop, "A true hip hop spirit doesn't need – or want – a designer label on his jeans. His own name, or tag, is the only commodity to promote, and it's borne proudly on the backs of denim jackets, huge nameplate necklaces, and belt buckles" (George 157). Eminem wears exactly this style. He wears his own clothing line with "Shady Ltd" printed on the clothing. It is not extravagant though which is important though, because his persona is to be a poor white boy from Detroit. Wearing a lot of extravagant ice would definitely damage this image. To be mainstream rap the artist must follow hip hop fashion trends while maintaining his true image. Eminem does this, Vanilla Ice did not.

The second way to look at commercialization is to consider the actions of the artist aside from their rap videos. The best method to do this is to look at the movies in which they have starred. Although not many rappers attempt acting, some of those who do act in a movie make a significant contribution to their careers by doing so. "There is no question that even in their most ridiculous roles Ice Cube, Ice-T, and the late Tupac Shakur brought a street hardened verisimilitude to the screen" (George 109). Both Vanilla Ice and Eminem played leading roles in films. Vanilla Ice played the lead in Cool as Ice as a James Dean type character in a love story. This movie was made in 1991, and by this time Vanilla Ice was already losing all rap credibility. The movie flopped and was out of the box office in only three weeks. In this film Vanilla Ice did not play a character

that represented him. This is something that the previously mentioned rappers did do in their movies. If a rapper decides to make the move to Hollywood, he needs to play a character representative of himself in order to further his career. When Eminem played himself in 8 Mile, it immediately made the movie a success. The film is based on the life of Eminem growing up in Detroit. The fact that he did a movie pushes the line of mainstream rap towards general mainstream, but just like it helped Tupac, the movie made Eminem an even bigger success. It had the opposite effect on Vanilla Ice.

Vanilla Ice and Eminem both share the idea of misogyny in their lyrics. This is something that has been prominent within hip hop since its beginning. Tricia Rose cites a possible reason for this misogyny, “the way in which masculinity is constructed by (them)...especially in their narrative about sexual relationships. ‘Bringing home the bacon’ is no longer a measure of manhood; instead, heterosexual conquest free of commitment is prized more than marriage, which in some cases is even viewed as emasculating” (Rose 171). To summarize this, the male rappers want to have sex with as many women as possible without any responsibility because relationships decrease their masculinity. Vanilla Ice shows his misogynistic side in his song “Ice Cold.”

“Lickin’ your lips, I’m ridin’ your hips/ V.i.p. posse and we’re pimps/ Be on the lookout in your vicinity/ I’m robbin’ virgins of their virginity/ Like robin hood gave to the poor/ I rock kashla and now she wants more/ She calls everyday, it’s gettin’ kinda’ silly/ But she rides my saddle like bronco billy/ In a rodeo somewhere out west/ She screams out vanilla ice, you’re the best!/ Echoing out, can you hear?/ She screams out everywhere/ Just a pimp and you know/ Snatchin’ women, so, yo!/ You can beg, plead and tell me you love me/ But there’s no way I’d put a girl above me/ Unless it’s sex and you wanna’ ride/ Jump on my saddle, baby, and get live”

This is obviously a misogynistic verse. Vanilla Ice is claiming that he takes the virginity of many women and then they all come back for more. Notice the lack of any relationship with the women or any mention of anything other than sex. Robin D. G.

Kelley in Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los

Angeles comments on how these rappers create idealized misogynistic views, “by

constructing scenes of uncontested domination and acts of violence against women for which the perpetrators are never held accountable” (Kelley 143). The song “Kim,” by Eminem portrays this idea to an extreme.

“See it all makes sense, doesn't it?/ You and your husband have a fight/ One of you tries to grab a knife/ And during the struggle he accidentally gets his Adam's apple sliced/ (No!)/ And while this is goin' on/ His son just woke up and he just walks in/ She panics and he gets his throat cut/ (Oh my God!)/ So now they both dead and you slash your own throat/ So now it's double homicide and suicide with no note/ I should have known better when you started to act weird/ We could've...HEY! Where you going? Get back here!/ You can't run from me Kim/ It's just us, nobody else!/ You're only making this harder on yourself/ Ha! Ha! Got'cha!/ (Ahh!)/ Ha! Go ahead yell!/ Here I'll scream with you! AH SOMEBODY HELP!/ Don't you get it bitch, no one can hear you?/ Now shut the fuck up and get what's comin to you/ You were supposed to love me/ { *Kim choking* }/ NOW BLEED! BITCH BLEED!/ BLEED! BITCH BLEED! BLEED!”

This is just a small portion of this song, but the dominance quoted by Kelley is obvious. Eminem kills his wife for cheating on him, but also kills the man she cheated with and his son. He makes it look like a suicide at the same time, hence making sure that he is not held accountable for the murder. So, both Vanilla Ice and Eminem can be misogynistic in their lyrics. Then why is one rapper held in such a much higher regard than the other?

The answer to this question is very straightforward and it should be obvious from the differences noted previously. Eminem is real. Vanilla Ice is not. This is the foundation for being “permitted” in rap as a white artist. When Vanilla Ice made it big in hip hop for a short time, it was because of his fake background. He claimed to be involved with gangs and to be from Miami—a location that had started to gain fame in the hip hop world. In his one hit, “Ice Ice Baby,” he writes,

“Shay with a gauge and vanilla with a nine/ Reading for the chumps on the wall/ The chumps acting ill because they're so full of eight balls/ Gunshots ranged out like a bell/ I grabbed my nine -- all I heard were shells/ Falling on the concrete real fast/ Jumped in my car, slammed on the gas/ Bumper to bumper the avenue's packed/ I'm trying to get away before the jackers jack/ Police on the scene, you know what I mean”

There is no evidence that Vanilla Ice was ever in a gunfight and most critics doubt that he even carried a gun. This is not being real. The fact that he had to fake an

image in order to make in it the rap world proves that he did not belong there in the first place. Does that mean that the only way for a white rapper to make it is to lie about his true background?

Eminem is a lower class white male from Detroit. What is great about Eminem is that he tells everyone about his upbringing. He is honest in his lyrics and uses this image of “white trash” to his advantage in his raps. These lyrics, from “Yellow Brick Road” off his new album Encore talk about his struggles growing up in Detroit.

“Let's rewind it to 89 when I was a boy on the east side of Detroit/ Crossin 8 Mile in the border in the hate territory/ I'd like to share a story, this is my story and cant no body tell it for me/ You will well inform me, I am well aware that I don't belong here/ You've made that perfectly clear/ I get my ass kicked damn near everywhere/ From Bel-Air shopping center just for stopping in there/ From the black side all the way to the white side”

The difference in the two songs is remarkable. Eminem is not bragging about anything in these lyrics. Instead, he talks about how he was never accepted growing up because of his color. By telling his story the way it really is, as opposed to Vanilla Ice, he gains respect from the black hip hop crowd. Eminem does not use his color to get respect or to sell records. He even talks about being white in several of his songs on both *The Marshall Mathers LP* and *The Eminem Show*. Eminem does not try to be black; he just acknowledges the fact that he acquired fame from being the first white rapper to be fully accepted into the hip hop culture without using his color to his advantage.

Eminem is proof that a white rapper can make it in the hip hop world, but will he be the only one ever to do so? Armond White, in Who Wants to see Ten Niggers play Basketball? comments on how a white rapper can acquire this acceptance into the predominantly black hip hop world, “When white artists give Black pop its proper homage, there is still a limit to how far they can take their appreciation. This isn’t determined by the artists’ ability... but by the artists’ own imagination. They must be

able to borrow without losing sight of themselves as borrowers” (White 194). The problem with a rapper like Vanilla Ice is that he used his race to gain advantage in the pop world. This is not the rap/hip hop world, “Racial preference is central to his existence and explains why he got TV and radio airplay...It is a perfect coincidence that what Vanilla Ice has to say—nothing—leaves his representation of whiteness his only point” (White 199). Vanilla Ice committed the cardinal sin, as it is, of rap by selling out to the pop world. This only strengthened the ideas African Americans felt about white artists performing rap.

Vanilla Ice stated in a later interview with David Peisner on Well-Rounded.com that, “I actually saw checks for like \$1.5 million to make me change my mind. So I did, I sold out, I'm a sell-out. I took the money and let it influence the direction that I was heading...So I sold myself out and I had a huge price to pay for it which was getting thrown into this novelty-type category.” Andrew Ross in “Hip, and the Long Front of Color,” comments on the reason why only white musicians are considered at times to be sell outs, “In fact, the choice, of selling out or not, is one that had seldom been historically available to black musicians in the same way as for white performers, for whom alternative ways of earning a living were generally available” (Ross 72). This makes it seem that white rappers had an advantage in the music industry because they had alternative ways of making a living that black people did not. This is where the idea of commercializing music comes from. Whereas African American music began as a form of expression, white forms of that same music genre were used solely to make money. Whites were selling out the industry of rap music. This is how the terms imitation, theft, and commercialization of primarily black music became synonymous

with white forms of the same. “Because of the fundamental contribution of Afro-American music to popular taste, any cultural historian of that relationship cannot avoid commenting on the ways in which a discourse about color (‘whitened’ music) is spliced with a discourse about commercialization (‘alienated’ music)” (Ross 69). It takes an artist like Eminem to change the image of whiteness in rap. He pays this “homage” to the roots of hip hop and does not use his color to get ahead in the industry.

One final question must be asked to summarize these ideas. Is it possible to label a new form of music white hip hop? If Vanilla Ice and Eminem are both compared to this new category of music, would they both be considered successes? The answer to this question is no. There is no reason to label a new form of music white hip hop. Eminem has changed the hip hop world with his accomplishments within a black-dominated movement. The reason why Eminem succeeded and Vanilla Ice did not is because Vanilla Ice was never really a part of hip hop. There is no place for a pop star within the culture. This is what causes the confusion. “Miles Davis asked, ‘When you say “pop,” that’s white, isn’t it?’” (White 198). The reason why so many African Americans have a problem with whites in hip hop is because of the effect “pop rappers” like Vanilla Ice have had on it. Hip hop began as an expressive movement for blacks, by blacks, and in the underground it is still just that. Whites can become very influential in its progress if it continues to become more mainstream in the future though. To answer the initial question of what is most important in hip hop, it is being real. The five elements follow directly from this idea. As long as upcoming white rappers continue to be real like Eminem and not fake like Vanilla Ice, there will be a significant white impact on hip hop culture.

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