

Partying, Politics and Getting Paid - hip hop and national identity in Australia

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Nowadays, you don't have to look very hard to find alternative music. If you walk in to any commercial music store like Brashs or HMV, you will know the alternative music because it's labelled 'alternative'. The commodification of music has penetrated beyond 'pop' music and into other musical styles that were not so intimately connected with the market even five years ago.

In the context of this commodification, some musicians are still providing a progressive social commentary on Australian society. In fact, we can find an example of this kind of music in the last place many people would expect to look - rap music and hip hop culture. Although there is some continuity with radical music of the past Australian hip hop is helping to establish new terms for producing radical music in contemporary Australia.

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Bush ballads and the artists who wrote and performed them continue to provide an example of radical music often celebrated by the left. There are a number of features of bush ballads that lend them to being considered as a form of radical nationalism.

The lyrical project of many bush ballads was to help construct a new Australian national identity, one in which the traditions and culture developed by the Australian working class were celebrated and embraced rather than repressed and denied. This was particularly important at a time when the Australian ruling class and Australia's identity were still bound closely to mother England. Bush balladeers formed links with the organised labour movement in the first half of this century, and their songs were tied up with both working class struggle and working class fun. Performances were promoted in the working class public sphere through word of mouth and other labour movement media.

The second half of the century has seen the decline of this kind of music *and* politics. The growing mass market in music associated with the rise of youth and consumer culture has bumped-off bush ballads in favour of other musical forms. In any case, the labour movement institutions and the working class public sphere that supported bush ballads have been in decline since the Second World War. There have been significant changes in the nature of Australia's class structure, including increasing cultural diversity resulting from post-war immigration.

The left's reaction to the emergence of youth culture in the 1950s was largely one of dismay; historically it has been suspicious of the new musical forms associated with youth cultures. Radicals have often treated Australian youth culture as the unhappy consequence of dominant American-style consumerism. The organised labour movement often joined in on attacks against the Bodgie and Widgie "cults" of the 1950s. When these attacks began to blame working class parents for letting their children run riot, the left sought some distance, recognising the classed nature of both youth cultures and their opponents. But they still blamed American cultural imperialism for undermining parental influence rather than defending the behaviour.

For a brief moment in the late 1960s and early 1970s was there a kind of reconnection of radical politics and music. But this period seemed only to confirm the left's suspicions that any radical potential in youth culture and music is fundamentally compromised by links with market consumerism. Youth rebellion appeared to be simply sold to young people as a commodity. The protest music of the sixties was quickly repackaged and marketed as 'the protest music of the sixties'.

But this kind of approach short-changes youth culture. Youth cultures have consistently made space for critique and rebellion by exploiting contradictions inherent in market capitalism. We should not dismiss the

politics of music and youth culture by simply establishing its links to consumerism, or by tracing its origins to places outside Australia. Harking back for a music that maintains some kind of magical purity from the forces of global consumerism ignores the lessons that youth culture has for us.

Australian hip hop provides one example of the potential for youth culture to exploit contradictions in market relations to radical cultural and political effect. Without the mass consumer market in music, there would be no rap in Australia. When Brethren, a rap act from Sydney, open their CD *Big Brother* with the dedication track "It all points back to the old", they are not referring to Australian bush ballads, or folk singers of the 1960s. The 'old' music that they are talking about is 'old school' rap music, and the track is a name check of some important figures in rap history which emphasises their continuing legacy. Most of these names are American.

In one important respect there is continuity between bush ballads and rap. Australian hip hop is, like the ballads, engaged in challenging dominant visions of our national identity and building an alternative agenda. This alternative vision is a more genuine form of Australian multiculturalism. But here is where the similarities end. In particular, the commodification of music and changes to Australia's class structure which heralded the decline of bush ballads are closely connected with the development of Australian hip hop.

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Hip hop is more than just rap music, it is a culture which revolves around rap, graffiti, breakdancing, and DJing. These cultural tools were developed primarily by African and Hispanic Americans in socially and economically oppressed areas of New York in the late 1970s. Hip hop's cultural tools are a means to both make life livable in highly segregated American cities, and challenge the structures which enforce this segregation. Three aspects of hip hop are fundamental to this project.

Firstly, hip hop provides is a vehicle of political and self expression. Rap music's focus on lyrics, rather than melody or chord structure, allow a complex message to be delivered in a short space of time. Hip hop also assists oppressed people to establish a presence in segregated and heavily policed cities through graffiti and sonic invasion of space, using bass heavy rap music broadcast from boom boxes or car stereos.

Secondly, hip hop culture provides the basics for a good party, in a context where expensive musical equipment was not available to the communities in question. Hip hop DJing takes old records and 'mixes' them up simultaneously on two or more turntables to turn them into something new, a feat which takes a lot of skill. Rapping emerged as a way of livening this up even more, with rappers or 'MCs' rhyming percussively over the beats created by the DJ.

Finally, 'getting paid' has always been a part of hip hop culture, with rapping, breakdancing, DJing, and even graffiti providing a means for economically disadvantaged people to make some money. This link between hip hop culture and the market does not necessarily compromise the politics of hip hop. In fact, these links are actually an inherent part of the culture, and they are not surprising given the poverty of the communities in which hip hop originated.

Of course, a happy balance between politics, partying and getting paid is not always achieved. Some argue that there is a tendency in much present-day hip hop to sacrifice other elements of the culture if they get in the way of getting paid. Hip hop activists like New York writer Greg Tate have lamented the way in which the involvement of major record labels has formularised rap music to some extent, eroding innovation and political activism. It seems that too much emphasis on getting paid can upset the balance. But this process is not all-encompassing. For every 'sucker MC' out there rapping about gun-slinging and calling women bitches, there's another tearing apart American racism and sexism in three minutes over some dope beats.

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The roots of hip hop lie in conditions in New York, but the life experiences of many young people in Australia have led them to find the tools of hip hop culture useful in their own cultural production. The support of hip hop by major multinational record labels does not solely account for hip hop's appeal to Australian young people. For one thing, hip hop culture was in Australia long before the multinational record companies realised that they had a new market to exploit. So what are the material conditions that led to hip hop's appeal in Australia?

To answer this question, we must examine the process of Australian youth cultural production. Youth cultures are developed and adopted by young people as a means to both *cope with* and *react to* their life experiences. Of course, this process is influenced by the media and the market, both of which promote youth cultures to young people for profit-driven purposes. But along with the media and the market, young people have to contend with their family, with other young people, with being grouped together in educational institutions by the state, with having limited means to secure an income, with their use of public space being heavily regulated.

Music has been an important resource for youth cultural production for some time now. Australia has always produced its own musical heroes, from Johnny O'Keefe to Cold Chisel, Midnight Oil and most recently groups like silverchair. These acts have sustained various youth cultures in Australia over the years. We are often proud of the achievements of 'Oz Rock' in taking-on the dominance of American and British music. But most successful Australian bands have one thing in common that makes them pretty irrelevant to increasing number of young people in Australia - they're all very white.

The cultural and racial diversity of the Australian youth population has continued to increase throughout the post-war period. Australian racism ensures that ethnic and indigenous young people experience a range of disadvantages on top of their youth - in particular, they are disadvantaged in terms of educational and employment outcomes, they are disproportionately victimised by the police in their day-to-day lives, and their communities are often concentrated in parts of Australian cities that are locationally disadvantaged. 'Home-grown' (read white) Australian music is simply not a relevant tool for cultural production by ethnic (and indigenous) young people, because it does not address these experiences.

However, ethnic young people seeking out tools for cultural production do not necessarily find them in the cultures of their parents either. For their parents, maintaining these cultures may help to maintain links with their lives before they came to Australia. But many ethnic young people may have spent more of their lives in Australia than elsewhere. Traditional cultures from other countries are not necessarily easy to live within in Australia.

Young people in this position have been forced to seek out the materials to develop a culture that is relevant to their cross-cultural experiences. In hip hop, some found a culture which has the means to fight back against the experience of racism, by addressing the segregation and victimisation experienced by people of colour. Rap talks about racism, and other elements of the culture like graffiti and hip hop style provide the means to make space in segregated Australian cities for cultural production. The appeal of hip hop to ethnic and indigenous young people in Australia lies significantly in its valuing of that which isn't white in a white racist society. We can see the roots of hip hop culture's appeal to Australian young people reflected in the rap music produced by Australian groups.

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Rap music produced by Australian artists explicitly seeks to establish and celebrate the cultural connections that are experienced by people from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. In the rhymes of some Australian rap artists, we can see an attempt to both engage in a meaningful cultural dialogue, and to expose the shortcomings of some brands of Australian 'multiculturalism'. For MetaBass 'n' Breath, this project is summed up in the chorus to their song *Dialogue*:

This is the Dialogue, a co-op of culture

Not an entree for an ethnic culture.

MetaBass are not simply interested in pointing out difference, but also in establishing the connections and common ground between cultures and people. They emphasise that these connections require the acceptance of diversity on more than a surface level. In *I Am*, they expand on this point by reflecting on Australians' ability to embrace exotic foods while remaining suspicious of the foreign cultures they come from:

A mass fast might be nice

But I sure like your bowls of rice

Faces of wonder at shops from the people that they plunder

While the white bread looks for the delicious, exotic tasty sauce

Packed and prepared

Ready made and bought

Not commonly shared

The specific issues involved in the cross-cultural experiences of ethnic-Australian young people are also the subject of Australian hip hop. Sleek the Elite's rhymes are directly addressed at promoting political and cultural awareness for Lebanese young people in Australia:

Your culture, given from Allah

Remember your history 'cause it helps you work harder

Helps you respect more your mother and your father

Your parents or grandparents came from another land

You might be Australian now, but it's not your motherland.

He promotes to Lebanese young people the value of maintaining and knowing their culture, in order to understand their family's place in Australia. But he does so in the context of hip hop rather than traditional musical forms. Sleek's latest tunes also attack the activities of multinationals like Shell and McDonald's for their exploitative practices in other parts of the world. Brethren, in their song *Pasa la Cuchara*, tell the story of one family's migration from Pinochet's Chile to Whitlam's Australia - in Spanish.

The actual form of rap makes this kind of multicultural lyrical project possible, in a way that other less flexible musical forms cannot. The beat forming the backdrop for rap can be constructed in an infinite number of ways. Other musical forms are often sampled, from jazz and funk to more traditional music. Appropriately for the lyrics, MetaBass's *Dialogue* makes use of traditional instruments from Australia, Asia and South America to provide the beats. DJ Soup mixes in traditional Arabic music with hip hop beats to provide the backdrop for Sleek's rhymes. Brethren's use of Spanish instead of English is another example of the kind of flexibility that can be achieved.

One of the strengths of hip hop is that it is simultaneously global and local nature. The music made by the acts discussed above *sounds* Australian at the same time as being representative of a global style. Australian accents and slang are one important part of this local sound. As one of the rappers from MetaBass says in *I Am*:

So what if you say I sound like a white guy

That's what I am...

In *2 The Streets*, Brethren provide us with a name-check of suburbs in their neighbourhood in the inner west of Sydney, via a sample of the unmistakable voice of the State Rail platform announcer. Once again, hip hop's collage approach to musical construction makes this kind reference to local places possible.

The lyrical project of these rappers is reflected in their relationship to their audience. The flexibility of hip hop creates the potential for interplay between audience and performer. "Freestyling" is an important part of the art form - that is, simply creating rhymes on the spot. Most hip hop performances include freestyling by members of the audience. Local hip hop groups are part of a community of people who support the culture, many of whom are active in the scene in other ways. Hip hop events are as much about establishing that community as they are about the particular performer. Members of MetaBass and others were even recently involved in the production of a play called *The Bridge*, which celebrated all aspects of hip hop in Australia.

This community is supported by its own media. Publicity about events is often spread by word of mouth, and local hip hop by no means avoids using 'the media' point blank - it just utilises different parts of 'the media'. Outlets such as the street press and community radio serve to promote many events. Fliers are produced and distributed at other events, often produced with the assistance of graffiti artists.

Of course, this community is not an organised political movement. Other artists such as the bush

balladeers of the past had more direct links to organised political movements. While rap music allows for more focus on lyrics than other musical forms, the message or politics of the lyrics do not over-ride musical concerns. For this reason, focusing solely on the lyrics might give a false impression of the politics of hip hop. The beats and music are much more than vehicles for lyrics, but are just as important as a means to 'rock the house'. If a rapper has no flow, the message of their lyrics will be inconsequential, because no one will be listening. This seems in direct contrast to the music we continue to hear performed at labour movement events such as the mass rally in Canberra last year. Entertainment seems to be chosen more for its political lyrical content than for its potential to rock the crowd, and the musicians come across more like another of the speakers.

But the kind of progressive self-expression and cultural dialogue that the local hip hop community promotes has resulted in some interesting connections between the hip hop community and activist youth organisations. In 1995, a number of youth organisations in Sydney banded together to organise a project called Hip Hopera. Two large-scale events involving a range of performers were held, and established local hip hop groups acted as mentors and headline performers for the young people engaged in the project. MetaBass 'n' Breath were one group to emerge from this process, and they continue to perform at youth centres. Graffiti artists have also been involved in youth campaigns. For example, Mistery, one of the rappers from Brethren, conducts graffiti programs at youth centres in the inner west of Sydney. For the artists, this kind of community involvement is about more than politics, it is also about promoting hip hop culture. Alliances are formed because this culture is a useful tool for youth organisations promoting youth empowerment, self-expression and cultural exchange.

These kind of hip hop projects are often indirectly sponsored by the state. Various government agencies provide small-scale funding for projects that support youth arts and culture, usually with the instrumentalist end of reducing youth crime, improving youth self-esteem and health, or some such happy outcome. These funds are occasionally used to organise events like Hip Hopera, or to provide avenues for developing graffiti (a.k.a. "aerosol art") skills. However, the kind of young people involved in state-funded projects like Hip Hopera are simultaneously berated as gangsters in other political settings. When Bob Carr chose to make an issue out of the fictitious youth crime wave in the last NSW election, his infamous depiction of gangs as "youths with their baseball caps back to front" singled out hip hop culture as a threat. He could have chosen 'gangs of youths with bleach-blond hair and a good tan', after all, he does live near the beach. The racism inherent in these kind of actions only serves to reinforce the very racism which makes hip hop relevant to many young people in Australia.

The relationship between local hip hop acts and the music industry is also complex. The mainstream music industry is not a free market but rather is dominated by a small number of multi-national record labels. These record labels have seen fit to invest in American hip hop acts because they are hugely profitable. And if they can sell these acts in Australia, why bother investing in local talent? The Australian music market simply isn't big enough to provide the same returns on an investment as the huge US market. This has had an impact on the market for Australian hip hop. For many hip hop fans, the measure of authenticity is whether or not the rapper is black and American.

Indeed, the market has now become heavily involved in making hip hop culture available to Australian young people. Even though you still don't really hear that much hip hop on Australian radio, you'll see plenty of it on Video Hits and other assorted music video programs, and there will be a well labelled 'rap and dance' section in your local record shop. What's more, you can buy your 'streetwear' at Grace Bros. There is agency in this kind of consumption. The market for commercial hip hop in Australia is still predominantly ethnic, and the consumption of hip hop rather than other styles reflects the same material factors that were outlined earlier in this article.

However, Australian hip hop groups distinguish themselves from commercial hip hop of this variety. The market saturation by American product undermines the ability of hip hop to achieve its simultaneous *global and local* status. The local hip hop acts are part of a more 'underground' hip hop community where the measure of authenticity is more sophisticated and linked to local conditions. This makes room for the lyrical content outlined above, and can also challenge other negative aspects of some commercial hip hop, such as misogyny. For example, Sydney's community radio hip hop show 'The Mothership Connection' features all female-programming once a month, involving female rappers, DJs and artists.

While the underground wages a battle against commercial hip hop, it certainly does not exist in complete isolation to any market relations. There is simply an emphasis on maintaining the balance between politics, partying and getting paid. In some ways, underground hip hop relies on the success of mainstream dance music and hip hop to survive. The profits that nightclubs make playing the major label

dance music on Friday and Saturday night are able to sustain smaller events featuring local music during the week that might be less profitable. As Miguel D'Souza, a Sydney street-press hip hop columnist once observed, "the bigger the overground, the bigger the underground." And he should know - D'Souza's underground hip hop column is printed in the street paper *3D World*, which largely survives on the advertising revenue provided by mainstream clubs, clothing labels, alcohol brands and the like.

Further, there is occasionally some solidarity among touring and local hip hop performers. Some big acts like US group Spearhead insist, usually against the wishes of their record companies, that their support artists are local hip hop groups. This gives the local acts valuable exposure with hip hop fans who may only have been exposed to American product through the mass media. In another example of this kind of solidarity, the Fugees, whose album *The Score* has enjoyed mainstream commercial success in Australia, recently took time out of their Australian tour schedule to perform a benefit for Koori radio at a hall in Eveleigh St., Redfern.

In the absence of mainstream music industry support, a range of local community radio stations, record shops and independent record labels provide outlets for local hip hop performers. The underground does not pursue profits at the expense of other elements of hip hop culture, but it is still a market nonetheless.

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A progressive multicultural lyrical project is made possible and reinforced by hip hop as a musical and cultural form. The way that this is achieved provides us with some lessons for the production of radical music in Australia.

Any contemporary radical musical form not only has to negotiate with the life and political experiences of its audience: it is inevitably drawn into certain relationships with various parts of the state and the music industry, particularly as the commodification of cultural forms continues apace. In the case of hip hop, this is not without its problems. Many people who would consider themselves hip hop fans may never have heard of MetaBass or Sleek the Elite, due to the lack of mainstream record industry support for local hip hop product. But I think that in hip hop we have one model for how a contemporary radical music might exploit the contradictions inherent in this commodification, surviving at once because of and outside of the music industry and the state. And far from representing the loss of Australian national identity in the face of global capitalism, Australian hip hop artists are engaged in the project of attempting to build a multicultural national identity in place of a racist monocultural model that is now regaining strength in Australian national politics.

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