

A dream come true

The ascendancy of rap music to the point where it has taken over the entire pop music industry is the most demoralizing cultural narrative of my lifetime, if not the dreariest event ever to occur in the history of the known universe. Rap began as a niche phenomenon, giving expression to an authentic, albeit debased, black sensibility – or, rather, to the sensibility of a subculture of young black violence-worshiping misogynistic alpha males plus their admirers among the girls and the omega males. The original rappers knew how to "keep it real" – they glorified the criminal life in their songs, and then committed serious felonies, up to and including murder. But, disastrously, hip-hop was adopted by white boys who envied the possessors of this authenticity and liked to ape the macho posturing. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. First they listened to rap, then they co-opted it and domesticated it. (Given the choice between the rotgut aural assault of gangsta rap and the easy listening of vanilla rap, it is truly hard to say which is worse; I can only beg for more options.)

White college professors fawning over black rap played no role in this development. They no more matter than the other dead white males in the curriculum and on the faculty. Wait, did I just imply that the professors too are already dead? That was not a slip of the keyboard – they still meet their classes but the brain dies

first. Well, what about the white male intellectuals who review rap music for *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* as if it were Beethoven? No, they just want what the rappers want – "honor, power, riches, fame, and the love of women," to quote Freud. If the rapper can score all that without a scintilla of talent, why can't they?

Today, hip-hop has taken over the entire pop music industry. Coming to the end of the second decade of the 21st century, almost every song by almost every best-selling pop star, whatever its racial, sexual, or ethnic politics, includes a rap and is entirely beholden to hip-hop for its musical ethos. From occupying its small but admittedly vibrant corner of the musical firmament – vibrant in terms of the intensity with which performers, audiences, and eventually the white nerd-boy reviewers took it – rap has become entirely mainstream, altogether conformist, and utterly predictable. Now it wouldn't hurt a fly. Even grrl singers rap.

The ubiquity of hip-hop has a simple explanation – one having nothing to do with its expression of black culture or its crossover into white environs, and *certainly* nothing to do with its musical value. Its triumph is owing entirely to its consummate vapidly – to its total lack of quality, its relentless banality, its all-pervading mediocrity. As a result, the rap masterpiece and the rap knock-off lie so close together on the aesthetic continuum as to be indistinguishable. The notion of a scale of values is hilarious. The commodifiers (the producers, not the singers) have achieved their dream: a style so empty and devoid of worth that the guesswork has been taken out of promotion and publicity. They no longer have to judge artistic merit – there isn't any. As music, the product is garbage, but no worse than the rival company's product; as poetry, it is . . . unspeakable. Literally. But since *all* of it is, the commodifiers can go straight to what

they understand best, which is how to package a sexy performer for the prepubescent and adolescent market place – including adults who exhibit arrested development – and rake in the millions that can be generated by everything but talent. When it does not matter in the least what Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, and Miley Cyrus actually sing and play – when the words can be anything and the music will be nothing – the inessentials have been completely purged: the pros can deliver the merchandise without the distraction of having to worry over either the tune or the lyrics. Star quality can be manufactured directly by the hucksters, without having to pass through artistic quality. The schlockmeisters have a value-world they can finally understand and fully master – one where the hair stylist is paid more than the composer.

Only picture how frustrating the money men must have found it back in the day when they were expected to evaluate the quality of a chord progression. They had no taste and would have been happy to admit it if they could have done so safely; but they had to make judgments based on musical competence and sometimes even defend them. All the variables have now been removed from the equation. What is selling the "song" is neither the music nor the words. The old joke about a great salesman was that he could sell a refrigerator to an Eskimo. Even so, he had to deliver an actual refrigerator. No more. "Packaging" was once an in-house term of art, honoring the ability of the Madison Avenue con-men to foist a shoddy product on the consumer by means of a pretty container. Today the container *is* the product: the customer wants to spend his money on the latest package, simply because it *is* the latest. The virtuoso of spiel has it easy: his job is merely to publicize the package for several weeks ahead of its release date. To bring this metaphor back to the subject at hand: The singer/

songwriter/celebrity/superstar is the commodity, rather than his or her "art." And commodifying these pretty people and making immense amounts of money by pimping them to consumers of soft-core celebrity-porn is what the money mongers do best.

Appendix

No one can take the full measure of rap's toxicity without engaging with the lyrics of at least one rap song from beginning to end.

The music of "Magnolia," by Playboi Carti – "one of the year's most mesmerizing songs" according to Chris Richards, white male reviewer for the *Washington Post* – is unendurable, even to those hardened aesthetes whose preferred genre is '80s Satanic heavy metal. Here are the lyrics, which, Richards says, will make your life "feel wider, deeper and a little closer to the unknowable."

[Intro]

Yo Pi'erre, you wanna come out here?
In New York I Milly Rock, hide it in my sock
Running from an opp, and I shoot at opp (what)
And I'm on the block (what, what, what)
And I'm on the block (what)
In New York I Milly Rock (hello?) hide it in my sock (what)
Hide it in my sock (what) selling that rerock (what, what, what, what)

[Hook]

In New York I Milly Rock, hide it in my sock
Used to sell rerock, running from the cops
Shooting at the opps (*Yo Pi'erre, you wanna come out here?*)
Shooting at the opps, cause I run they block
Gimme top (top) in my drop-top
All these hoes gon' flock (flock, flock) when I drop (drop, drop)
All these hoes gon' flock (flock, flock) when I drop (drop, drop)
All these hoes gon' flock (flock, flock) when I drop (drop, drop)

[Verse]

Woo, woo, woo, woo
Woo, woo, woo, woo
All these hoes want cash, all these hoes want bags
Fucking on yo' bitch, uh, I'm her dad
All these niggas sound like cash (sound like cash)
I'm a soldier, damn, I thought I told you
Shootin' like a soldier, like I'm from Magnolia
All these, niggas, always, fold
Big, bank, never, fold
Sippin, Act', fill that shit slowly
Bitches, on me, say she like my clothing
I'm in London, Young Carti global
Designer is on me, call it dirty laundry
All these bitches want Young Carti, Young Carti (yeah)
Ay, Young Carti, Young Carti (what)
Young Carti, Young Carti (yeah)
All of your bitches they loose
All of your bitches they loose
All of my bitches they rich
And they stay rockin' that Rick
What, what, huh, what, what, huh
Rich, rich, Cash Carti, bitch
Rich, bitch, got a rich clique
I'm suckin' on the clit, she suckin' on the dick
Give that hoe a tip, told her "Buy some kicks"
Then I brush my teeth, pop up in a whip
Glocky in the whip, glocky in the whip
And I'm cocky, fuckin' on a thotty
She just wanna plot me, bitch can't stop me
I'm riding in a Mazi, this ain't even my Mazi
Oh, that's not yo' thottie, yo' bitch look like a aunty
Walked in with Ashanti, damn, that look like Shanti
Damn, that look like Carti, I think dat be Young Carti
Heard he spent a hunnid on a fucking watch piece, that's filthy

[Hook]

In New York I Milly Rock, hide it in my sock
Running from an opp, then I shoot at opp
And I'm on the block
And I'm on the block
In New York I Milly Rock, hide it in my sock
Hide in my sock, selling that rerock
What, what, what, what
In New York I Milly Rock, hide it in my sock

Use to sell rerock, running from the cops
Shooting at the opps, you know what I'm sayin'?

[Outro]
Yo Pi'erre, you wanna come out here?
Bitch ass nigga, fuck that nigga man!

One more for the road? Musically, female rapper Cardi B's "Bodak Yellow (Money Moves)" is less than zero, but according to Jon Caramanica, white male reviewer for *The New York Times*, this song is "on its way to becoming perhaps the most impactful and meaningful hip-hop hit of 2017." Here are the lyrics:

[Intro]
It's Cardi, ayy
Said, "I'm the shit, they can't fuck with me if they wanted to"

[Chorus]
Said, "Lil bitch, you can't fuck with me
If you wanted to"
These expensive, these is red bottoms
These is bloody shoes
Hit the store, I can get 'em both
I don't wanna choose
And I'm quick, cut a nigga hustle
Don't get comfortable
Look, I don't dance now
I make money moves
Say I don't gotta dance
I make money move
If I see you and I don't speak
That means I don't fuck with you
I'm a boss, you a worker bitch
I make bloody moves

Now she says she gon' do what to who?
Let's find out and see, Cardi B
You know where I'm at
You know where I be
You in the club just to party
I'm there, I get paid a fee

I be in and out them banks so much
I know they're tired of me
Honestly, don't give a fuck
'Bout who ain't fond of me
Dropped two mixtapes in six months
What bitch working as hard as me?
I don't bother with these hoes
Don't let these hoes bother me
They see pictures, they say goals
Bitch, I'm who they tryna be
Look, I might just chill in some Bape
I might just chill with your boo
I might just feel on your babe
My pussy feel like a lake
He wanna swim with his face
I'm like okay
I'll let him do what he want
He buy me Yves Saint Laurent
And the new whip
When I go fast as a horse
I got the trunk in the front
I'm the hottest in the street
Know you prolly heard of me
Got a bag and fixed my teeth
Hope you hoes know it ain't cheap
And I pay my mama bills
I ain't got no time to chill
Think these hoes be mad at me
Their baby father want a bill

[Chorus]

If you a pussy you get popped
You a groupie, you a opp
Bet you come around my way
You can't hang around my block
And I just checked my accounts
Turns out, I'm rich, I'm rich, I'm rich
I put my hand above my hip
I bet, you dip, he dip, she dip
I say, I get the money and go
This shit is hot like a stove
My pussy glitter as gold
Tell that lil bitch play her role
I just drove off in a Rolls

I just came up in a Wraith
I need to fill up the tank
No, I need to fill up the safe
I need to let all these hoes know
That none of them niggas is safe

I go to dinner and steak
Only the real can relate
I used to live in the P's
Now it's a crib with a gate
Rollie got charms, look like frosted flakes
Had to let these bitches know
Just in case these hoes forgot
I just run and check the mail
Another check from Mona Scott

[Chorus]

For anyone who cares, Pi'erre is Pi'erre Bourne, the producer of "Magnolia"; Mona Scott-Young is the producer of Cardi B's television venue *Love & Hip Hop*. Both songs, then, boast about the money the singers make. Or as Playboi Carti put it in "Flex":

All of these bitches, they're mad, ooh
All of these niggas, they're mad, ooh
All of these bitches, they're mad, ooh
All of these niggas, they're mad, ooh
I walk in the bank and I laugh, ooh
I walk in the bank and I laugh, ooh
I walk in the bank and I laugh, ooh
Ooh, ooh, walk with a bag, ooh
Sad, ooh, sad, ooh, mad, ooh
All of these niggas, they're mad, ooh
All of these niggas, they're mad, ooh
Walk in the buildin', I flex on that boy
I flex on that boy with the bag, ooh
Ice on my neck and my mama like, "Boy
Where you get all of that cash?"