

Cuban Rap: The Tough Sound of Going Against the Grain

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As part of the hip-hop movement, rap music is one of the fastest growing sectors of the global music industry. Because it offers youth musical, linguistic, and physical tools with which to reflect upon everyday problems like poverty, exclusion, discrimination, and intolerance, it serves as a transnational network and instrument for mobilization and the formation of identity. Rap creates cultural symbols that circulate around the globe; it is a site of exchange, a space for multicultural interaction whose pioneers are young African Americans, Puerto Ricans and Caribbeans from New York's marginalized neighborhoods.

This music style was literally born in the dangerous urban ghettos of big cities. It not only offers a sense of collective community but also creates alternative spaces in which to comfortably inhabit the city. Rap is not only a battle cry against silence; it is a mechanism for cultural affirmation and collective identity that brings down barriers because it operates like a medium for rebellion and recovering or affirming one's dignity.

Conservative Cuban culture has incorporated hip-hop into its catalogue with some resistance, distrust, and distancing. Revolutionary policy has a long history of intolerance towards forms of cultural expression that criticize the revolutionary process, or are seen as inappropriate when considered against the image of Cuba the government prefers. The interest in rap by some Cuban musicians is still tentative and somewhat limited; rap's dissemination by the Cuban mass media is still quite limited and circum-

scribed. There is barely any dialogue at all between rap and other form of Cuban music. This deficiency can be understood to embolden prejudices like racism and discrimination, which limit the ability of hearing the proposals that are being set forth by young rap MCs, DJs, composers, and arrangers who have successfully appropriated a particular part of the musical and cultural universe.

The image of Cuban hip-hop culture is not well known enough in circles beyond those of the people who create and enjoy it. Yet, outside the island, beyond the sea, there exist myriad audiovisual materials about island produced hip-hop. These play a crucial role in drawing foreign attention to the phenomenon and legitimating our underground culture. This is an enormous challenge and dubious issue for those who control cultural policy.

The presence and evolution of Cuban hip-hop was influenced by the economic, social and cultural transformations that started to take place in the early nineties, in the so-called Special Period. Topics like inequality, prostitution, domestic violence, marginality, poverty, the dollarization of the economy, neoracism, drug consumption, corruption, disenchantment, a crisis in values, police violence, tourist apartheid, as well as immigration and a renaissance of religious faith as a form of salvation, became part of an everyday questioning of reality and a way to critically evaluate the situation from any possible perspective.

Hip-hop's development began in a 'rough n' tough' Havana neighborhood called Alamar, a

modern "tenement" community on the city's border populated by extremely marginalized people. Rap was born in the midst of *camello* culture [a *camello* is a massive, trucklike bus; by extension, those who have no choice but to ride it, all working poor, have created a culture all their own]. This means it came about under certain tough conditions in which aggressive language is the norm. It got onto the international and national scene's radar because of the Primer Festival de Rap [First Rap Festival], in Havana, although it got no press coverage whatsoever in Cuba.

The music guerrillas broke the silence on racial discrimination from this communicative platform. They became the most visible spokespersons on the subject, denouncing the attitude of government officials and law enforcement personnel who enjoy indiscriminately stopping young black and *mestizo* men and asking them for identification papers. They also condemn their cultural confrontations with members of urban tribes, which driven by the fact that they don't really know this city or its different ways of expressing itself, which are reflected in the aesthetics of the way certain people dress and establish relationships. Automatically, this became a matter of political commitment for these young people. They took stock of the moment in which they were living. Their cultural rebellion became uncomfortable for the dominant order. Hip-hop contributes to the aesthetic pride of blacks and affirms their dignity in a country where it is hard to feel this way. This is accomplished in the space for negotiation, meetings, dialogues, and cultural synthesis that rap's creators craft through their music and culture.

Rap also operates under difficult conditions, despite the creation of the Agencia Cuban de Rap [Cuban Rap Agency], after the cultural commissars dismantled the booming movement and its festival. Its media and political manipulation made it dangerous. As a direct link to ideological propaganda machines, Cuban Television does its part to exert its corrosive effect on authentic hip-hop rhetoric. The official press,

too, contributes to its marginalization. "Officialdom" never accepted hip-hop as a manifestation of an artistic avant garde. Aware of its social influence, executives, producers, and other top people created *fear about rap*, just as they did with other expressions of popular culture, which were mostly ghettoized.

Raciality is a discursive topic in rap, and linguistic evidence that it is associated with socioeconomic and political changes. Cuban rap presents a crude image of reality, establishes a new, contemporary, musical narrative, and acquires social value: the site for a new consciousness and the exchange of ideas.

Rappers elevate their position as creators of socially committed art with a version of the truth and social reality that delves into complex topics like social classes and politics. They also directly question the legitimacy of the country's leaders, political exclusion, censorship, and the inability of the authorities to solve problems. In Cuba, rap is a tool for communication that promotes the emergence of new social subjects and actors. Their artistic consciousness defines them as underground rappers.

More than just music, rap is poetry and thought. It generates its own, independent rhetoric; it is an agent of change that creates communicative vessels with society. Even so, rappers continue being marginalized by the sharp nature of their critical discourse, the repertoire of their political demands, and the liberating will with which they question many structures, concepts, and prejudices in Cuban society. In their makeshift studios, recording projects like those of *Real 70* and *la Fabri_K*, the Cuban hip-hop movement's principal representatives, continue recording music that responds to the country's basic problems, despite the indifference of recording companies and media. This attitude can be attributed to the fact that part of society has rejected rap, perhaps fearful that it will recognize its own defects in these songs' lyrics.

This movement generates political suspicion, but its greatest exponents continue work-

ing against the grain in order to take forward today's burning Cuba. As evidence of this, we have the chronicles of *Los Aldeanos*, *Eskudrón Patriota*, *Silvito el Libre*, *Obsesión*, *Doble Filo*, *Anónimo Consejo*, *Hermanos de Causa*, *Papa Humbertico*, etc. Underground hip-hop inherited the legacy of urban poetry's codes, which are extremely far from being material that could be commercialized. It supports a Cuba presided over by an ethics of freedom and diversity.

"I Have" (Excerpts)

Hermanos de Causa

*I have a flag a coat of arms a tocororo bird
I also have a palm tree and a map without a treasure*

*I have disturbances with having what I need
I have more or less the right amount
Chronicle that compacts polemic that impacts
Years go by and the situation remains intact
Time does not forgive just ask Havana
Right now it's down on the mat, nobody cares about nothin'*

*I have a dark and discriminated race
I have a Job that makes demands of me and gives nothing back*

*I have so many things that I can't even touch them
I have facilities that I cannot even visit
I have freedom between parentheses of iron
I have so many rights without benefit that I lock myself up
I have what I have without having what I had
I have to reflect and soak up the content
I have a conduct that is fractured by people
I have the people's culture in me, I have a conscience
I have substance without having antecedents.
I have my talent and that is more than enough (...)*

*There are those who have a lot and yet they are nobodies
Yet no one helps those with very little
Many speculating what they are and the first*



Hermanos de Causa

*Thing a man needs is to have is discretion.
I am "El Pelón" sure of my constitution
The fact that you have something does not make you better than me
Resources create possibilities
Don't confuse having more with having qualities
Such as those that I typically have.
Which are concepts, so many who don't reason
So many who have nothing and say they have it all
It is now in style to act this way*

*The dregs are changing people's minds
Needs begin to modify faculties
Difficulties that are so harmful
That sometimes make you forget the most essential things (...)*

*More than enough you feel you don't have anymore
More than many, you have, but you have more and more
The more you have you will always want more and more
The more you have the more ridiculous you'll be
You'll never understand that having is not about being
But rather about a process that has its own level
I don't have so much but I place faith in my actions
Because I have what I had to have.*